

Analyzing Public Speaking Anxiety Among Students at SMA Tri Sukses Natar: Levels, Factors, and Coping Strategies

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ABSTRACT

Public speaking anxiety is still a common problem in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, especially among high school students. This study aims to analyze the levels of public speaking anxiety, the factors that influence it, and the coping strategies used by students in a boarding school environment where English is used in daily communication. This study used a qualitative descriptive approach involving six second-grade students selected through purposive sampling based on several criteria, such as regular exposure to English and experience in public speaking activities. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings show that students experience three levels of anxiety: high, moderate, and low. Each level affects students' speaking performance differently. Students with high anxiety often experience serious nervousness that disturbs their communication performance. Students with moderate anxiety still feel nervous and sometimes experience difficulties while speaking, but they are still able to continue their performance. Meanwhile, students with low anxiety are generally more confident and able to control their emotions better during public speaking activities. This study also found that internal factors such as low self-confidence, overthinking, fear of making mistakes, and limited language control become the main causes of anxiety. Besides that, external factors such as fear of negative evaluation, peer pressure, and performance demands also increase students' anxiety. Although students are exposed to English every day, anxiety still appears in formal speaking situations. This indicates that language proficiency alone cannot fully reduce public speaking anxiety. In addition, students use several coping strategies such as repeated practice, positive self-talk, and managing their focus during performances. The findings suggest that public speaking anxiety is influenced not only by language ability but also by psychological and social factors. Therefore, teachers are expected to create supportive learning environments and help students build confidence in public speaking activities.

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INTRODUCTION

Public speaking is widely recognized as an essential skill in academic settings, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. However, speaking in front of an audience is often associated with feelings of anxiety. Lucas (2019) explains that nervousness when delivering

a speech is a common experience, indicating that anxiety is a natural response in public speaking situations. In school contexts, this becomes more significant as students are expected to present ideas, participate in discussions, and demonstrate their understanding through oral performance. Despite these expectations, many students struggle to perform effectively due to anxiety, which can limit their ability to communicate clearly and confidently.

From a theoretical perspective, Horwitz et al. (1986) define foreign language anxiety as a feelings, beliefs, and behaviors experienced by learners that emerge during language learning. They identify three main components: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. These components are particularly relevant in public speaking contexts, where students are required not only to use a foreign language but also to perform in front of an audience. As a result, students may experience nervousness, avoidance, and difficulty expressing ideas, which can affect both their confidence and performance.

Previous studies have shown that anxiety is a common issue in language learning. McCroskey (1977) states that although speech anxiety is a natural reaction, high levels of anxiety can negatively affect communication performance. Similarly, Zhu (2025) found that students often experience psychological barriers such as fear of making mistakes and low self-confidence during speaking activities. In the context of high school education, public speaking anxiety has been identified as a common problem that influences students' confidence and speaking performance (Tarbani et al., 2024). These findings suggest that anxiety plays a significant role in shaping students' ability to perform in public speaking situations.

In EFL learning, public speaking is not only about language use but also about the ability to deliver ideas effectively in front of an audience. Activities such as presentations and speeches require students to organize their thoughts, use appropriate language, and engage listeners. Doniyorova (2025) highlights that oral presentations can improve students' communicative competence, while Lucas (2019) emphasizes the importance of confidence and audience engagement in successful public speaking. Therefore, the ability to perform well in public speaking can be seen as an important indicator of students' communicative competence.

This study is conducted in a boarding school context where students are required to use English in their daily communication. Such an environment provides frequent exposure to the target language, which ideally supports the development of students' speaking skills and confidence. Students are accustomed to using English not only in classroom activities but also in their daily interactions, creating an immersive language learning environment.

However, frequent exposure to English does not necessarily eliminate anxiety, particularly in formal public speaking situations. While students may feel comfortable using English in everyday communication, they often experience different challenges when required to speak in front of an audience. This indicates that public speaking anxiety is not solely influenced by language proficiency or exposure, but also by psychological and social factors such as self-confidence, fear of negative evaluation, and performance pressure.

Although many studies have discussed foreign language anxiety, most previous studies focused on university students. Research discussing public speaking anxiety among high school students, especially in boarding school contexts where students use English daily, is still limited. In addition, previous studies often focus only on anxiety factors without discussing anxiety levels and coping strategies together. Therefore, this study tries to provide a more complete understanding of students' public speaking anxiety experiences.

Based on these conditions, this study focuses on students' public speaking anxiety in classroom speaking activities. This study not only analyzes the factors causing anxiety but also examines students' anxiety levels and the strategies they use to cope with anxiety. Therefore, this study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the levels of public speaking anxiety experienced by students at SMA Tri Sukses Natar?
2. What factors contribute to students' public speaking anxiety?

3. What strategies do students use to cope with public speaking anxiety?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Public speaking anxiety has been widely discussed in the field of language learning, particularly in EFL contexts. It is generally understood as a psychological condition that can interfere with students' ability to communicate effectively in front of an audience. Lucas (2019) refers to this condition as stage fright, which is a common and natural response; however, in academic settings, it can become a barrier that limits students' participation and performance.

The concept of foreign language anxiety introduced by Horwitz et al. (1986) provides a foundational framework for understanding this issue. They define anxiety as a combination of learners' feelings, beliefs, and behaviors that arise in language learning situations. According to this framework, anxiety consists of three main components: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. These components are closely related to public speaking activities, where students are required to express ideas, perform in front of others, and deal with evaluative situations at the same time.

In addition to emotional responses, anxiety also affects cognitive processes. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) argue that anxiety can interfere with learners' ability to process language, particularly in retrieving vocabulary and organizing speech. As a result, students may experience hesitation, forgetfulness, or difficulty expressing their ideas during public speaking tasks. While Horwitz et al. (1986) emphasize the emotional dimension of anxiety, MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) highlight its cognitive impact, indicating that public speaking anxiety involves both emotional and mental challenges.

Anxiety can also be understood in terms of its intensity. It exists on a continuum ranging from low to high levels, and each level affects students' performance differently. A low level of anxiety may help students stay focused and motivated, while a moderate level still allows participation despite some difficulties. In contrast, a high level of anxiety tends to disrupt cognitive processing and speaking performance more significantly. This perspective helps explain why students respond differently to public speaking situations and provides a useful framework for analyzing variations in anxiety levels.

Public speaking anxiety is influenced by both internal and external factors. Internal factors include psychological and linguistic aspects such as low self-confidence, fear of making mistakes, overthinking, and limited vocabulary. These factors often lead students to doubt their abilities and feel insecure when speaking in front of others. Zhu (2025) explains that negative self-perception can increase anxiety, particularly in performance situations. Similarly, Pontillas and Rodrigo (2024) found that low self-confidence and limited language ability are strongly associated with higher levels of public speaking anxiety among high school students.

External factors also play an important role. Classroom environment, peer reactions, and teacher expectations can either reduce or intensify anxiety. Young (1991) emphasizes that a supportive environment can lower anxiety, while negative evaluation and peer pressure may increase students' fear of participation. This indicates that public speaking anxiety is not only an individual issue but also influenced by social interaction and learning context (Price, 1991).

In contexts where students are frequently exposed to the target language, such as boarding schools, anxiety may still persist despite regular language use. Although continuous exposure is expected to improve fluency and confidence, it does not automatically eliminate anxiety, especially in formal public speaking situations. Students may feel more comfortable in informal communication but still experience pressure when performing in front of an audience. This suggests that language exposure alone is not sufficient to reduce anxiety, and that psychological readiness and social evaluation play a more significant role.

To cope with anxiety, students employ various strategies to manage both their emotions and performance. Kondo and Yang (2004) categorize these strategies into preparation, cognitive, and behavioral strategies. Preparation strategies involve practicing and organizing materials before

speaking, cognitive strategies focus on managing thoughts and emotions, and behavioral strategies include actions taken during performance, such as controlling breathing or focusing attention. These strategies reflect students' active efforts to regulate anxiety and improve their public speaking performance.

Despite the growing number of studies on foreign language anxiety, several gaps remain. Most research has focused on university students, while studies on high school students, particularly in specific contexts such as boarding schools, are still limited. In addition, previous studies often examine anxiety factors separately without clearly linking anxiety levels, contributing factors, and coping strategies. Therefore, this study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding by examining these aspects simultaneously in the context of high school students with regular exposure to English.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore students' experiences of public speaking anxiety and the factors influencing it. This approach is considered appropriate because it allows researchers to provide a clear and detailed description of participants' experiences, focusing on their perceptions, feelings, and perspectives within a specific context (Sandelowski, 2000). In addition, qualitative descriptive research is useful for understanding real-life phenomena as they occur naturally without manipulation (Creswell, 2013).

In this study, students' experiences were examined not only from an individual perspective but also in relation to their learning environment, particularly their exposure to English in a boarding school context.

The participants of this study were second-grade senior high school students selected through purposive sampling. This technique was used to ensure that participants met specific criteria relevant to the focus of the study. This technique was chosen because the study required participants who had direct experience with public speaking activities and were familiar with English communication in daily school life. The criteria included: (a) students who have daily exposure to the English language in a boarding school environment, (b) students who have experience in delivering speeches or presentations in English, (c) students who perceive themselves as experiencing anxiety in public speaking situations, and (d) students who are willing to participate in the study. A total of six students were selected, which is appropriate for qualitative research that focuses on gaining in-depth understanding rather than generalization (Creswell, 2013). Although the study only involved six participants, the number was sufficient because the data had reached saturation. Similar themes and responses repeatedly emerged during the interviews, particularly regarding fear of negative evaluation, low self-confidence, overthinking, and coping strategies. According to Creswell (2013), data saturation occurs when no new important information is obtained from additional participants. These criteria were designed to ensure that participants had sufficient experience with both English use and public speaking, allowing the study to focus on anxiety beyond basic language difficulties.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The primary instrument was an interview guide developed based on the Foreign Language Anxiety framework proposed by Horwitz et al. (1986), which includes communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Additional probing questions were adapted to explore factors influencing anxiety as well as students' coping strategies in public speaking situations. The interviews were designed to capture students' experiences, emotional responses, physical reactions, and challenges during public speaking activities.

The data collection process was conducted through face-to-face interviews in a classroom setting. Each interview lasted approximately 20–30 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed for analysis. In addition, relevant documents related to students' speaking activities were reviewed to support and enrich the data.

Data analysis was carried out using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006), which involves six phases: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. This method enabled the researcher to identify patterns and themes related to students' anxiety levels, contributing factors, and coping strategies in public speaking contexts.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, credibility strategies were applied. Member checking was conducted by confirming the interview results with participants to ensure the accuracy of interpretations. In addition, data triangulation was used by comparing interview findings with supporting documents. Ethical considerations were also maintained throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and provided their consent prior to participation. Their identities were kept confidential, and all data were used solely for research purposes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Levels of Public Speaking Anxiety

To provide a clearer interpretation of students' anxiety experiences, the participants were categorized into three anxiety levels based on the intensity and frequency of emotional, cognitive, and physical symptoms expressed during the interviews. The categorization was adapted from Horwitz et al. (1986) dimensions of foreign language anxiety, namely communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety.

Students were categorized as having high anxiety when they showed intense nervousness, mental blocking, fear of judgment, and strong physical reactions that significantly interfered with speaking performance. Students were categorized as having moderate anxiety when they experienced nervousness and hesitation but were still able to continue and complete speaking tasks. Meanwhile, students with low anxiety demonstrated better emotional control, confidence, and the ability to manage nervousness without major disruption to performance.

Table 1. Levels of Public Speaking Anxiety

Anxiety Level	Participant	Main Characteristics
High	S1, S2	Strong nervousness, overthinking, fear of judgment, blanking during performance, trembling, difficulty controlling emotions
Moderate Anxiety	S3, S4, S5	Nervous but still able to continue speaking, fear of mistakes, occasional hesitation, moderate self-control
Low Anxiety	S6	Better confidence, positive mindset, able to manage nervousness and focus on message delivery

The categorization above demonstrates that public speaking anxiety does not appear in the same way for all students. Even within the same learning environment, students responded differently to evaluative speaking situations depending on their emotional regulation, self-confidence, and perception of audience judgment.

The findings reveal that students at SMA Tri Sukses Natar experience varying levels of public speaking anxiety, namely high, moderate, and low anxiety. These differences were reflected in students' emotional reactions, cognitive responses, physical symptoms, and speaking performance during public speaking activities. The findings support Horwitz et al. (1986) argument that foreign language anxiety involves communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety simultaneously. Students categorized as having high levels of anxiety (S1 and S2) demonstrated strong emotional and physical reactions that significantly interfered with their performance. They expressed fear, embarrassment, and low self-confidence, often triggered by social comparison with peers who were perceived as more proficient. One student stated:

“I feel afraid, embarrassed, and lack self-confidence because I think others are more capable

than me... so whenever I want to perform, I immediately start thinking, 'What if I make mistakes? Will people laugh at me?' and in the end, I often forget vocabulary even though I have actually studied it beforehand" (S1).

Another students explained:

"I had practiced many times, but when performing I still felt extremely nervous... my mind went blank, as if everything I had learned disappeared, and then I became even more panicked because I felt that everyone was watching and judging me" (S2).

These responses indicate not only communication apprehension but also a strong fear of negative evaluation, where students are highly sensitive to how they are perceived by others. In a boarding school environment, where students interact frequently, social comparison becomes more intense, which may amplify anxiety. This suggests that anxiety is not solely caused by limited language ability but also by heightened self-awareness and perceived judgment from peers. The presence of physical symptoms such as trembling and mental blocking further reflects test anxiety, particularly in formal speaking situations. This finding is consistent with McCroskey (1977), who states that high levels of anxiety can significantly disrupt communication performance.

In addition, the experience of "blanking" during performance suggests that anxiety interferes with cognitive processing. Students who had already prepared their material still experienced difficulty retrieving vocabulary and organizing ideas when standing in front of an audience. This finding supports MacIntyre and Gardner (1994), who argue that anxiety disrupts language processing and memory retrieval during communication. The boarding school environment may also intensify anxiety because students interact with the same peers every day. Continuous interaction can increase social comparison and make students more sensitive to peer judgment. As a result, anxiety becomes not only a linguistic issue but also a social and psychological challenge.

Moderate Anxiety Level Students with moderate levels of anxiety (S3, S4, and S5) experienced noticeable nervousness but were still able to complete their speaking tasks. Their anxiety was mainly associated with fear of making mistakes, being judged, and limited language control. For example:

"I am afraid of speaking incorrectly, nervous, and sometimes blank. Especially when speaking in English, I worry that my grammar will be wrong and that my friends will judge me" (S3).

Another student stated:

"Sometimes I forget what I want to say, but I still continue speaking. Even if it is not perfect, the important thing is to finish first, and later I can improve it" (S4).

These responses demonstrate that moderate anxiety affects students' fluency and confidence, although it does not completely stop communication. Students still experienced hesitation, pauses, and fear of making mistakes, yet they attempted to maintain their performance. This condition can be interpreted as facilitative anxiety, where a moderate level of pressure encourages students to remain alert and continue participating. Although anxiety still interfered with cognitive processing, students were able to regulate themselves sufficiently to complete their speaking tasks. This finding aligns with MacIntyre and Gardner's (1994) explanation that anxiety affects language processing differently depending on its intensity.

Interestingly, several students reported feeling more anxious when speaking in front of familiar audiences such as classmates rather than strangers. This finding suggests that anxiety is

strongly connected to social relationships and peer evaluation. In the boarding school environment, where social interaction is intensive, students become more concerned about maintaining their social image and avoiding embarrassment.

Low Anxiety Level

Students with low anxiety (S6) demonstrated better emotional control and confidence. Although they still experienced mild nervousness, it did not significantly affect their performance:

“Feeling afraid of making mistakes is normal, but I think mistakes are part of learning. I try not to think about them too much and focus more on the message I want to deliver” (S6).

This response reflects a more positive interpretation of public speaking situations. Instead of focusing excessively on mistakes or audience judgment, the participant concentrated on communicating ideas effectively. The participant’s response also indicates stronger self-regulation and lower fear of negative evaluation. Anxiety was still present, but it was perceived as manageable rather than threatening. This finding supports Lucas (2019), who emphasizes that confidence and mindset are essential factors in successful public speaking. Compared with highly anxious students, the low-anxiety participant appeared more capable of controlling emotional reactions and maintaining concentration during performance. This suggests that the ability to regulate emotions plays an important role in reducing the negative impact of anxiety.

Factors Affecting Public Speaking Anxiety

The findings reveal that students’ public speaking anxiety is influenced by both internal and external factors, with internal factors being more dominant. This supports the view that language anxiety is shaped by the interaction between psychological and environmental aspects (Gapo et al., 2025). Internal factors include limited vocabulary, grammatical difficulties, low self-confidence, overthinking, and fear of making mistakes. Many students reported that limited vocabulary caused them to hesitate and lose confidence:

“Sometimes I actually know what I want to say, but it is difficult to arrange the words. Then I stop in the middle of speaking and become even more nervous because people are watching me” (S2).

Another student expressed:

“I often overthink before performing. I keep imagining what will happen if I make mistakes or if my performance is not good enough, and eventually I lose confidence” (S1). “

These responses indicate that anxiety is strongly connected to students’ cognitive processes and self-perception. Students tended to focus excessively on possible mistakes and negative outcomes before speaking. As a result, anxiety emerged even before the actual performance began. The findings support MacIntyre and Gardner’s (1994) argument that anxiety interferes with language processing, particularly in retrieving vocabulary and constructing sentences. Students’ fear of making mistakes also reflects perfectionistic thinking, where they expect themselves to perform flawlessly in front of others.

In addition, low self-confidence appeared to intensify anxiety significantly. Students who doubted their abilities became more sensitive to errors and audience reactions. This finding is consistent with Zhu (2025), who explains that negative self-perception increases psychological pressure during public speaking.

External factors include fear of negative evaluation, peer reactions, and performance pressure. Students reported feeling anxious when being observed or judged:

“When my friends are watching me, I feel more nervous because I am afraid they will laugh or comment if I say something incorrectly” (S5).

Interestingly, one student mentioned:

“When I speak in front of people I do not know well, I actually feel more relaxed because I do not think too much about” (S3).

This suggests that familiarity with the audience can increase anxiety due to stronger social pressure. In a boarding school environment, where students interact intensively, peer judgment becomes more meaningful, which may heighten fear of negative evaluation. This finding supports Young (1991), who highlights the importance of classroom environment in shaping anxiety.

Importantly, despite students’ daily exposure to English in the boarding school, anxiety still persists. This indicates that frequent language use does not automatically reduce anxiety, as psychological and social factors play a more dominant role in public speaking situations.

The findings demonstrate that psychological factors were more dominant than linguistic limitations. Although students frequently used English in daily communication, anxiety continued to emerge in evaluative speaking situations. This indicates that students’ emotional responses and perceptions of social judgment contributed more significantly to anxiety than language exposure itself.

Coping Strategies for Public Speaking Anxiety

The findings show that students actively employ various strategies to cope with public speaking anxiety. These strategies can be categorized into preparation, cognitive, and behavioral strategies, in line with Kondo and Yang (2004). Preparation strategies were the most frequently used by participants. Students believed that repeated practice helped them become more confident and reduced nervousness before performing. Students emphasized repeated practice as a way to build confidence:

“Practicing repeatedly is very important. The more often I perform, the more familiar I become with speaking in front of people, so I am not too afraid anymore” (S2).

This finding shows that repeated practice helped students feel more prepared before speaking. When students practiced several times, they became more familiar with the material and felt more confident during the performance. Practice also helped them reduce fear because they became more used to speaking in front of other people.

Besides preparation strategies, students also used cognitive strategies to control their thoughts and emotions. These strategies were related to how students encouraged themselves and tried to think more positively before performing. One participant explained:

“Do not feel insecure first... convince yourself that you can do it. Do not focus on mistakes, but focus on the effort that has already been made” (S1).

This response shows that students tried to reduce anxiety by changing negative thoughts into more positive thinking. Instead of focusing too much on mistakes or failure, they tried to focus on their effort and preparation. This positive thinking helped students feel calmer and more confident during public speaking activities.

Behavioral strategies were also used during the performance. Some students tried to control their nervousness by managing their focus and physical reactions while speaking. One student stated:

“When I feel too nervous, I usually avoid looking directly into the audience’s eyes at first... I look somewhere else to calm myself down and focus on the points I want to deliver” (S4).

This strategy helped students reduce pressure from the audience and stay focused on their presentation. By controlling their attention, students were able to continue speaking even when they still felt nervous. Some students also tried to face their fear directly by continuing to participate in speaking activities even though they felt anxious. One participant said:

“Even though I am afraid, I still try to participate in speaking performances because if I do not force myself, I will never get used to it” (S3).

This response shows that students understood the importance of practice and experience in reducing anxiety. Even though they still felt afraid, they kept trying to speak in front of others because they believed that repeated experience could help them become more confident over time.

Interestingly, students with lower anxiety levels usually used simpler but more effective strategies. They focused more on staying calm, practicing regularly, and thinking positively. Meanwhile, students with higher anxiety often found it more difficult to control negative thoughts and nervousness, even after practicing several times. This finding suggests that the success of coping strategies is also influenced by students’ emotional control and self-confidence.

Overall, the findings show that public speaking anxiety is influenced not only by language ability but also by psychological and social factors. Although students used English in daily communication at school, anxiety still appeared in formal speaking situations. This means that language exposure alone is not enough to remove anxiety completely. Students also need emotional support, confidence, and a supportive learning environment.

Therefore, teachers should not only focus on improving students’ speaking skills, but also help students feel more comfortable and confident during speaking activities. Creating a positive classroom atmosphere, reducing fear of negative judgment, and encouraging students to practice regularly may help students manage anxiety better and improve their public speaking performance.

CONCLUSIONS

This study indicates that public speaking anxiety remains a challenge for students even though they use English in their daily communication at school. Anxiety tends to appear more strongly in formal speaking situations, particularly when students have to speak in front of an audience and feel evaluated by others. The findings show that students experienced different levels of anxiety, including high, moderate, and low anxiety. Students with high anxiety showed intense nervousness, fear of making mistakes, overthinking, and difficulty managing their emotions during speaking performances. In contrast, students with moderate anxiety were still able to continue speaking despite feeling nervous or occasionally forgetting their ideas, while students with low anxiety demonstrated greater confidence and better emotional control. These findings suggest that public speaking anxiety is not only related to language ability but also shaped by psychological and social factors.

The study also found that internal factors, such as low self-confidence, fear of mistakes, overthinking, limited vocabulary, and difficulty organizing sentences, were the main causes of anxiety. External factors, including fear of negative evaluation, peer reactions, and performance pressure, also contributed to students’ anxiety in public speaking activities. To cope with these challenges, students used strategies such as repeated practice, positive self-talk, focusing during performances, and continuing to participate even when they felt nervous. Therefore, teachers and schools are encouraged to create supportive learning environments, provide regular speaking practice, give positive feedback, and help students build confidence. Students should also view

mistakes as part of learning and prepare themselves carefully before speaking. Future researchers are suggested to involve more participants from different educational contexts and examine other aspects, such as teachers' roles, gender differences, and the effectiveness of specific anxiety-reduction strategies.

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