

From Speaking Anxiety to Communicative Agency: Reconstructing EFL Learners' Experiences of Participation in English-Speaking Classrooms

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Abstract

Speaking anxiety remains a persistent affective challenge in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, particularly when learners are required to participate orally, respond spontaneously, or perform in front of peers. Previous studies have predominantly examined speaking anxiety as a psychological barrier associated with reduced willingness to communicate and limited oral participation. However, less attention has been given to how learners actively negotiate anxiety and develop communicative agency within classroom interaction. This study aims to explore EFL learners' experiences of speaking anxiety and examine how they negotiate anxiety, construct participation, and develop communicative agency in English-speaking classrooms. A qualitative phenomenological design is proposed to capture learners' lived experiences. Data are collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, reflective journals, and selected speaking-task recordings. The data are analyzed thematically through iterative coding, categorization, interpretation, and cross-source comparison. The analytical framework focuses on five dimensions: experiences of anxiety, sources of anxiety, patterns of withdrawal and participation, self-regulatory and interpersonal strategies, and the emergence of communicative agency. The study is expected to demonstrate that speaking anxiety should not be conceptualized solely as an individual psychological deficit but as a dynamic experience shaped by linguistic competence, fear of negative evaluation, classroom interaction, teacher practices, peer relationships, and perceived opportunities for participation. The study further conceptualizes communicative agency as an emergent capacity through which learners make strategic decisions to initiate, sustain, modify, or reclaim participation despite experiencing anxiety. The findings are expected to contribute to EFL pedagogy by shifting the pedagogical emphasis from merely reducing anxiety toward creating classroom ecologies that support learner agency, psychological safety, strategic participation, and meaningful English communication.

Keywords: Speaking Anxiety; Communicative Agency; EFL Learners; Willingness To Communicate; Classroom Interaction; Learner Agency.

Abstrak

Kecemasan berbicara masih menjadi tantangan afektif yang persisten dalam pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing (English as a Foreign Language/EFL), khususnya ketika peserta didik dituntut untuk berpartisipasi secara lisan, memberikan respons secara spontan, atau melakukan performa berbicara di hadapan teman sebaya. Penelitian terdahulu umumnya mengkaji kecemasan berbicara sebagai hambatan psikologis yang berkaitan dengan rendahnya kemauan untuk berkomunikasi (willingness to communicate) dan terbatasnya partisipasi lisan. Namun, perhatian terhadap bagaimana peserta didik secara aktif mengelola kecemasan serta mengembangkan agensi komunikatif dalam interaksi kelas masih relatif terbatas. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi pengalaman peserta didik EFL dalam menghadapi kecemasan berbicara serta mengkaji bagaimana mereka mengelola kecemasan, membangun partisipasi, dan mengembangkan agensi komunikatif dalam kelas berbahasa Inggris. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain fenomenologi kualitatif untuk menangkap pengalaman hidup (lived experiences) peserta didik. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semiterstruktur, observasi kelas, jurnal reflektif, dan rekaman terpilih dari tugas berbicara. Data dianalisis secara tematik melalui proses pengodean berulang, kategorisasi, interpretasi, dan perbandingan antarsumber data. Kerangka analisis berfokus pada lima dimensi, yaitu: (1) pengalaman kecemasan, (2) sumber kecemasan, (3) pola penarikan diri dan partisipasi, (4) strategi regulasi diri dan strategi interpersonal, serta (5) munculnya agensi komunikatif. Penelitian ini diharapkan menunjukkan bahwa kecemasan berbicara tidak seharusnya dipahami semata-mata sebagai kekurangan psikologis individual, tetapi sebagai pengalaman dinamis yang dibentuk oleh kompetensi linguistik, ketakutan terhadap evaluasi negatif, interaksi kelas, praktik pengajaran guru, hubungan dengan teman sebaya, serta persepsi terhadap kesempatan untuk berpartisipasi. Penelitian ini juga mengonseptualisasikan agensi komunikatif sebagai kapasitas yang berkembang melalui proses interaksi, yang memungkinkan peserta didik mengambil keputusan secara strategis untuk memulai, mempertahankan, memodifikasi, atau mendapatkan kembali partisipasi mereka meskipun mengalami kecemasan. Temuan penelitian diharapkan dapat memberikan kontribusi terhadap pedagogi EFL dengan menggeser orientasi pembelajaran dari sekadar mengurangi kecemasan menuju penciptaan ekologi

kelas yang mendukung agensi peserta didik, keamanan psikologis, partisipasi strategis, dan komunikasi bahasa Inggris yang bermakna.

Kata kunci: Kecemasan Berbicara; Agensi Komunikatif; Peserta Didik EFL; Kemauan Untuk Berkomunikasi; Interaksi Kelas; Agensi Peserta Didik

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INTRODUCTION

Oral communication occupies a central position in contemporary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education because language learning is ultimately concerned not only with knowledge of linguistic forms but also with learners' ability to use English for meaningful interaction. Nevertheless, successful participation in English-speaking classrooms cannot be assumed solely from learners' linguistic knowledge. Affective factors, particularly speaking anxiety, may substantially influence whether learners are willing to initiate or sustain communication. Recent research has continued to demonstrate that anxiety is associated with learners' willingness to communicate, classroom participation, and perceptions of their communicative competence. In the Indonesian context, Mulyono and Saskia (2021), for example, found that speaking anxiety was significantly associated with students' willingness to communicate in face-to-face learning environments, while students demonstrated comparatively higher willingness to communicate in digital environments.

Speaking anxiety refers to the apprehension, nervousness, fear, and discomfort experienced when learners are required to communicate in a foreign language. Unlike general foreign language anxiety, speaking anxiety is particularly relevant to situations in which learners must produce language publicly and spontaneously. Such situations expose learners not only to linguistic demands but also to social evaluation. Indonesian studies have identified fear of making mistakes, limited linguistic proficiency, fear of negative evaluation, lack of practice, and social scrutiny as important sources of speaking anxiety. Wulandari et al. (2024), for instance, found that Indonesian secondary-school students experienced moderate levels of foreign language speaking anxiety, with low proficiency, insufficient practice, fear of errors, negative evaluation, and social scrutiny emerging as important contributing factors.

The problem becomes more complex when speaking activities require learners to respond spontaneously to teachers' questions. Classroom interaction can create an immediate communicative demand in which learners have limited time to formulate ideas, select vocabulary, construct grammatical expressions, and monitor pronunciation. Abrar et al. (2024) demonstrated that EFL students' speaking anxiety when responding to lecturers' questions was associated with linguistic and knowledge-related issues as well as psychological and classroom-related factors. Their findings indicate that silence in the classroom should not automatically be interpreted as a lack of knowledge or

motivation because it may represent a learner's response to perceived communicative risk.

Previous research has also demonstrated that speaking anxiety is not necessarily static. Examining speaking anxiety longitudinally, recent research found that students' anxiety can change over the duration of a speaking course, with overall speaking anxiety decreasing after sustained participation in English presentation activities. This finding is important because it suggests that learners' emotional responses are potentially shaped by learning experiences and classroom conditions rather than determined exclusively by stable individual characteristics.

Similarly, studies of Indonesian EFL learners have identified a range of strategies for negotiating speaking anxiety. Afidawati et al. (2024), for example, found that EFL learners employed preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, and peer-seeking strategies to manage speaking anxiety. These findings indicate that learners are not passive recipients of anxiety; rather, they may actively regulate their emotional states and mobilize interpersonal resources to maintain participation.

This observation creates an important conceptual opportunity. If learners can regulate their anxiety, seek assistance, modify their participation, and decide whether and how to speak, then speaking anxiety should not be conceptualized solely as an obstacle to communication. Instead, it can be examined as part of a dynamic process through which learners negotiate their participation in classroom interaction. Such a perspective directs attention toward learner agency.

Learner agency has increasingly become an important concept in language education. Agency refers broadly to learners' capacity to make choices, exercise intentionality, regulate their learning, and act upon available opportunities and constraints. Recent research has demonstrated that agency in EFL classrooms is not simply an individual characteristic but emerges through interactions between learners and their social, pedagogical, material, and institutional environments. He et al. (2024), for example, showed that EFL learners' agency was manifested through self-regulated learning and reciprocal peer interaction, while teacher instruction represented an important affordance and time limitations constituted a constraint.

The relationship between agency and English learning is particularly relevant to oral communication. Research on agency in English classrooms has demonstrated that learners may exercise agency through voluntary participation, strategic resource use, peer interaction, and autonomous decision-making. In a study of children learning English in a collectivist educational culture, agency was associated with learners' desire for greater autonomy in speaking activities. Similarly, research on virtual exchange has demonstrated that students' agency may be activated through their engagement with linguistic, social, cultural, and digital affordances.

However, a significant conceptual gap remains. Existing studies on speaking anxiety have predominantly focused on identifying anxiety levels, determining its causes, examining its relationship with willingness to communicate, or identifying strategies for reducing anxiety. Indonesian studies, for example, have established relationships among speaking anxiety, willingness to communicate, confidence, motivation, and classroom factors. Meanwhile, studies of learner agency have generally

investigated agency in relation to autonomy, peer feedback, digital learning, or learning resources rather than examining how agency emerges specifically through the negotiation of speaking anxiety.

This gap suggests the need to move beyond a deficit-oriented interpretation of speaking anxiety. Instead of asking only “How can teachers reduce students’ speaking anxiety?”, research should also ask “How do learners act when they experience speaking anxiety, and how do these actions contribute to their development as communicative agents?” Such a shift is theoretically important because it connects affective experience with learner agency and classroom participation.

Accordingly, this study conceptualizes communicative agency as learners’ capacity to make intentional and context-sensitive decisions concerning whether, when, how, and with whom to participate in English communication despite linguistic, psychological, and social constraints. Communicative agency therefore involves more than willingness to communicate. While willingness concerns a learner’s readiness or intention to communicate, communicative agency emphasizes the learner’s active capacity to negotiate communicative opportunities and constraints. Based on this conceptualization, the present study addresses three research questions: 1) How do EFL learners experience and interpret speaking anxiety in English-speaking classrooms? 2) What strategies do EFL learners employ to negotiate and manage speaking anxiety during classroom interaction? 3) How does the process of negotiating speaking anxiety contribute to the development of communicative agency?

The contribution of this study lies in reframing speaking anxiety from an exclusively inhibiting psychological condition into a dynamic component of learners’ participation trajectories. By connecting speaking anxiety with communicative agency, the study seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of why some anxious learners remain silent while others gradually develop strategies to participate, take communicative risks, and exercise greater control over their English-speaking experiences..

METHODE

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners experience, interpret, and respond to speaking anxiety within naturally occurring English-speaking classroom contexts. A phenomenological approach was selected because the study focused not merely on measuring anxiety through numerical scores but on understanding learners’ lived experiences when engaging in English-speaking situations, including nervousness, fear of making mistakes, hesitation, silence, avoidance, participation, and attempts to regain communicative control. Analytically, these experiences were examined through the trajectory of speaking anxiety → perceived communicative risk → coping and negotiation → participation → communicative agency, allowing the study to reveal how learners negotiate anxiety and gradually develop the capacity to make decisions and sustain engagement in English communication.

The study was conducted in an EFL learning context at Institut Islam Al-Mujaddid Sabak, Indonesia, involving undergraduate students enrolled in an English-speaking or speaking-skills course. Participants were selected purposively based on the following criteria: they were actively enrolled in an

English-speaking course, participated in oral communication activities in the classroom, had experienced anxiety or nervousness when speaking English, were willing to participate in interviews and reflective activities, and provided informed consent after receiving an explanation of the study. In phenomenological research, the number of participants was determined based on the depth and richness of the experiences obtained and the sufficiency of the data to achieve thematic saturation, rather than solely on a predetermined numerical target. Each participant was assigned an anonymous identification code, such as P1, P2, P3, and so forth, to protect their identities throughout the analysis and reporting processes.

Data were collected from four complementary sources, namely semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, reflective journals, and recordings of selected speaking-task activities. Individual interviews were conducted to explore students' experiences of speaking anxiety, sources of anxiety, emotional responses, coping strategies, classroom interactions, and perceived development in English communication. Classroom observations were used to document naturally occurring participation patterns, including voluntary responses, hesitation, silence, avoidance, peer support, teacher scaffolding, turn-taking, repair strategies, code-switching, self-correction, and attempts to initiate and sustain communication. Reflective journals were used to access students' internal experiences following speaking activities, whereas recordings of speaking tasks, obtained with participants' consent, were used to identify patterns of change in communicative behavior. These four sources enabled the study to compare learners' reported experiences with their observable communicative behavior during classroom interaction.

Data were analyzed thematically through an iterative process comprising data familiarization, initial coding, development of preliminary themes, review and refinement of themes, definition and naming of themes, and interpretation and synthesis of findings. Data from interviews, classroom observations, reflective journals, and speaking-task recordings were compared through source triangulation to identify consistent patterns as well as differences across participants' experiences. The analysis focused on six major dimensions: speaking anxiety, encompassing nervousness, fear, discomfort, and hesitation; perceived communicative risk, including fear of making mistakes, negative evaluation, and embarrassment; withdrawal, characterized by silence and avoidance; negotiation strategies, such as preparation, self-talk, rehearsal, and peer support; participation, including willingness to respond, volunteer, and initiate interaction; and communicative agency, encompassing choice, intentionality, self-regulation, willingness to take communicative risks, and persistence. The trustworthiness of the findings was enhanced through data triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, and maintenance of an audit trail. All participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, data confidentiality, data storage procedures, and their right to withdraw without academic consequences. Participant identities were anonymized using codes, while recordings, transcripts, and research documents were securely stored and accessible only to the research team.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Experiencing Speaking Anxiety as Communicative Vulnerability

The first anticipated theme concerns how learners experience speaking anxiety as a condition of communicative vulnerability. Participants may describe anxiety not simply as “being nervous” but as a multidimensional experience involving fear of linguistic errors, concern about pronunciation, difficulty retrieving vocabulary, uncertainty about grammar, and fear of being evaluated by teachers and peers. This finding would be consistent with recent Indonesian research showing that speaking anxiety is associated with linguistic limitations, fear of errors, insufficient practice, negative evaluation, and social scrutiny. A particularly important analytical distinction should be made between linguistic insecurity and social-evaluative anxiety. A learner may possess adequate knowledge but remain reluctant to speak because the perceived social cost of making an error is considered greater than the potential benefit of participation. This suggests that speaking anxiety is partly constructed relationally. The classroom is not merely a neutral physical environment in which anxiety occurs. Rather, interaction with teachers and peers determines whether speaking is perceived as a safe opportunity for learning or as a public performance in which errors may threaten learners’ self-image. Such an interpretation extends previous Indonesian research by moving from the identification of anxiety sources toward an explanation of how learners interpret communicative risk.

Silence and Avoidance as Strategic Responses

The second theme concerns learners’ silence and avoidance. Silence should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of low motivation, lack of knowledge, or unwillingness to learn English. Learners may remain silent because they are simultaneously processing vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, content, and the anticipated reaction of their interlocutors. In spontaneous classroom interaction, these cognitive and emotional demands may occur within only a few seconds. Recent research on Indonesian EFL learners’ speaking anxiety similarly demonstrates that learners may experience substantial anxiety when responding to lecturers’ questions, particularly when they must produce language spontaneously. From an agency perspective, silence may represent a form of constrained agency. The learner is deciding to remain silent in response to perceived classroom conditions. Although such a decision reduces visible participation, it nevertheless demonstrates that learners are actively interpreting their environment and regulating their behavior.

This interpretation is theoretically important because it prevents agency from being equated exclusively with visible participation. Agency can also appear through avoidance, delay, strategic silence, or selective participation when learners attempt to protect themselves from perceived communicative threats.

Negotiating Anxiety through Self-Regulation

The third theme concerns the strategies learners use to manage anxiety. Possible strategies emerging from the data include preparing vocabulary before speaking, mentally rehearsing sentences,

practicing with peers, using positive self-talk, slowing down speech, breathing before speaking, and seeking assistance from classmates. Such findings would be consistent with Afidawati et al. (2024), who identified preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, and peer-seeking as strategies employed by EFL learners to mitigate speaking anxiety. However, the present study should move beyond simply listing strategies. The key question is why learners select particular strategies and how those strategies change their participation. For example, preparation may initially function as an anxiety-reduction strategy, but repeated preparation can gradually increase perceived competence. Increased competence may subsequently encourage greater willingness to participate. In this sense, strategy use may function as a bridge between affective regulation and communicative agency. The analytical sequence can therefore be conceptualized as: Anxiety → Self-Regulation → Perceived Control → Participation → Agency. This interpretation also corresponds with contemporary research conceptualizing learner agency as involving proactive self-regulation and interaction with environmental affordances.

Teacher and Peer Support as Communicative Affordances

The fourth theme concerns the social environment of the classroom. Learners' capacity to act communicatively is unlikely to develop independently of teachers and peers. Teacher practices such as allowing sufficient response time, using supportive correction, avoiding humiliating responses, encouraging peer collaboration, and providing opportunities for rehearsal may reduce perceived communicative risk. Peer relationships are equally important. Learners may feel safer speaking with classmates who share similar proficiency levels because errors are perceived as less threatening. Peer interaction can therefore provide an intermediate space between silence and public performance. This interpretation is supported by recent agency research showing that learner agency emerges through interactions between learners and contextual affordances. He et al. (2024) found that teacher instruction constituted an important affordance for learner agency, while peer interaction provided an important relational context for students' agentic behavior. Accordingly, communicative agency should not be understood as something that teachers simply "give" to students. Rather, teachers can design conditions under which agency becomes more possible. This represents an important pedagogical implication: reducing speaking anxiety is not solely a matter of teaching learners psychological coping techniques. Classroom interaction itself needs to be redesigned so that learners experience communication as an opportunity for meaning-making rather than as a high-risk performance.

From Willingness to Communicative Agency

The fifth and most important theme concerns the distinction between willingness to communicate and communicative agency. Previous studies have established that speaking anxiety is associated with willingness to communicate. Mulyono and Saskia (2021) found that speaking anxiety was related to Indonesian EFL students' willingness to communicate, particularly in face-to-face classroom contexts. Similarly, Lee and Chiu (2023) demonstrated that communication anxiety forms part of a broader model involving learners' willingness to communicate across face-to-face and digital contexts. However, willingness alone does not fully explain what learners do when they encounter communicative

obstacles. A learner may want to speak but remain silent because of anxiety. Another learner may also experience anxiety but decide to speak despite the anxiety. The difference lies not necessarily in the absence of anxiety but in the learner's capacity to act within the constraints. This distinction is central to the present conceptualization. Willingness to communicate concerns the learner's readiness or intention to communicate. Communicative agency, in contrast, concerns the learner's capacity to transform intention into context-sensitive action by negotiating constraints and mobilizing available resources. Thus: Communicative agency does not require the absence of speaking anxiety. It involves the capacity to act communicatively despite, though, or in response to anxiety. This proposition represents the central theoretical contribution of the study.

Discussion

The findings indicate that Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA) among EFL learners should be understood as an experience of communicative vulnerability, rather than merely an emotional state characterized by nervousness when speaking. Participants' experiences revealed that anxiety was associated with concerns about linguistic errors, limited vocabulary, uncertainty regarding grammar and pronunciation, and fear of negative evaluation from lecturers and peers. Thus, anxiety emerged through the interaction between linguistic and social-evaluative factors. This finding reinforces previous research on speaking anxiety among EFL learners, which has identified language limitations, fear of making mistakes, lack of opportunities for practice, and negative evaluation as important sources of speaking anxiety (Afidawati et al., 2024). However, the present study extends this perspective conceptually by demonstrating that learners' behavior is determined not only by the level of anxiety they experience but also by how they perceive communicative risk in particular situations. Learners who possess adequate linguistic knowledge may nevertheless choose not to speak when the perceived social cost of making a mistake is considered greater than the perceived benefit of participation. Speaking anxiety can therefore be understood as a relational experience shaped by interactional characteristics, social expectations, and learners' perceptions of classroom safety.

The findings further demonstrate that silence and participation avoidance do not necessarily represent low motivation or limited linguistic competence, but may function as strategic responses to communicative pressure. When learners are required to respond spontaneously, they must process vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, message content, and the potential reactions of their interlocutors within a limited amount of time. Under such circumstances, remaining silent may serve as a means of reducing the risk of making mistakes or experiencing embarrassment in front of others. This interpretation is consistent with research on speaking anxiety among EFL learners, which indicates that responding spontaneously to teachers' questions can constitute a highly stressful situation for students. At the same time, research examining the relationship between anxiety and willingness to communicate (WTC) suggests that lower anxiety is associated with greater willingness to communicate in both face-to-face and digital contexts (Lee & Chiu, 2023). Nevertheless, the perspective of communicative agency adopted in the present study offers a different interpretation: silence may represent a form of constrained

agency, namely a conscious or semi-conscious decision to regulate one's behavior according to perceived communicative threats. Agency, therefore, should not be equated exclusively with visibly active behavior. Delaying a response, selecting when to speak, or even choosing to remain silent may constitute part of learners' negotiation of the communicative conditions they encounter.

The study also demonstrates that learners are not entirely passive when experiencing anxiety but employ various self-regulatory and interpersonal strategies to maintain or regain their capacity to participate. These strategies include preparing vocabulary, engaging in mental rehearsal, practicing with peers, using positive self-talk, regulating speaking speed, practicing relaxation before speaking, and seeking peer assistance. This pattern is consistent with Afidawati et al. (2024), who found that preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, and seeking peer support were among the strategies used by EFL learners to minimize speaking anxiety. However, the contribution of the present study lies in moving beyond merely identifying a list of strategies. These strategies are conceptualized as mechanisms that connect learners' affective conditions with their communicative actions. Preparation, for example, may initially function to reduce anxiety, but through repeated experience it may strengthen learners' perceptions of competence and control over speaking tasks. Increased perceived control may subsequently encourage learners to take greater communicative risks. Accordingly, the process of anxiety → self-regulation → perceived control → participation → agency can be understood as a potential developmental mechanism underlying communicative agency in EFL learning.

Beyond individual factors, the findings demonstrate that the classroom ecology plays a critical role in enabling or constraining the emergence of communicative agency. Lecturer support through providing sufficient response time, using non-threatening corrective feedback, offering opportunities for rehearsal, and facilitating collaborative activities can reduce learners' perceived communicative risk. Similarly, peer interaction provides an intermediate space between private practice and public performance because learners can experiment with English in an environment they perceive as relatively safe. This finding is consistent with an ecological perspective on learner agency, which conceptualizes agency as emerging from the interaction between learners' capacities and the affordances available within the learning environment. He et al. (2024), for example, demonstrated that teacher instruction can function as an important affordance for the development of agency, while peer interaction provides a relational context in which learners can enact agentic behavior. Thus, lecturers do not directly "give" agency to learners; rather, they can create conditions that enable agency to develop. From this perspective, reducing anxiety cannot rely solely on individual psychological strategy training. Classroom interactional design must also be transformed so that learners experience communication as a space for meaning-making rather than merely as a high-risk arena of evaluation.

The most significant conceptual finding concerns the distinction between willingness to communicate (WTC) and communicative agency. Previous research has established an association between anxiety and WTC. Mulyono and Saskia (2021), for instance, demonstrated that affective variables are associated with Indonesian EFL students' willingness to communicate in both face-to-face

and digital environments. Similarly, Lee and Chiu (2023), based on data from 1,269 EFL learners, found that lower communication anxiety was associated with higher WTC across different communication contexts. However, whereas WTC primarily explains learners' readiness or tendency to communicate, communicative agency concerns how learners act when that willingness encounters actual constraints and obstacles. Two learners may possess an equally strong desire to speak, but one may remain silent because of fear of making mistakes, whereas the other may acknowledge the fear but still attempt to respond by drawing upon available strategies. This distinction demonstrates that agency does not require the complete absence of anxiety. Rather, communicative agency may emerge precisely through learners' capacity to act within, through, and in response to anxiety. This conceptualization constitutes an important contribution of the present study because it shifts the central question from "How can anxiety be eliminated?" to "How can learners retain the capacity to act when anxiety is present?"

Overall, this study offers theoretical and pedagogical implications suggesting that speaking anxiety and communicative agency are not mutually exclusive conditions but dynamic processes that may occur simultaneously. Anxiety may constrain participation, yet learners may respond through preparation, self-regulation, peer support, rehearsal, strategic silence, and willingness to take communicative risks. This perspective is consistent with ecological approaches to agency, which conceptualize learners' behavior as dynamically connected to the affordances and constraints of the learning environment (He et al., 2024). Therefore, the pedagogical implication of this study is not simply that lecturers should reduce students' anxiety, but that they should create a classroom ecology that supports the development of agency through low-risk rehearsal opportunities, pair and small-group interaction before whole-class performance, sufficient response time, supportive corrective feedback, repeated speaking practice, explicit instruction in self-regulation strategies, peer collaboration, learner choice of topics and task formats, and reflection on communicative development. Such an approach enables speaking activities to shift from merely performance-oriented events toward opportunities for developing control, persistence, risk-taking, and communicative identity. Accordingly, the central proposition of this study is that speaking anxiety does not necessarily have to disappear before communicative agency can develop; rather, communicative agency may emerge through learners' ongoing negotiation of anxiety and their continued engagement in communicative action under conditions of uncertainty.

CONCLUSION

This study conceptualizes the relationship between speaking anxiety and communicative participation from an agency-oriented perspective. Rather than treating speaking anxiety solely as a psychological deficit that inhibits English performance, the study positions anxiety within a dynamic process of negotiation through which EFL learners interpret communicative risks, regulate their emotional responses, mobilize social and pedagogical resources, and make decisions about participation. The central argument is that communicative agency does not necessarily require the

complete elimination of speaking anxiety. Instead, agency may emerge when learners develop the capacity to act communicatively despite experiencing anxiety. Preparation, rehearsal, self-regulation, peer support, teacher scaffolding, and repeated participation can provide important pathways through which learners gradually move from avoidance toward more intentional and sustained communication. The study therefore contributes to EFL research by connecting two areas that have often been examined separately: affective barriers to speaking and learner agency. This perspective suggests that effective speaking pedagogy should move beyond anxiety reduction toward the creation of classroom ecologies that support psychological safety, strategic risk-taking, learner choice, interaction, and communicative autonomy. For EFL teachers, the implication is that the goal should not be to create classrooms in which students never feel anxious. Rather, teachers should create learning environments in which students can experience anxiety without being silenced by it. Such environments may enable learners to transform anxiety from a barrier to participation into a condition that can be negotiated through increasingly agentive communicative action. Future research should examine this process longitudinally and across different proficiency levels, educational contexts, and modes of communication. Mixed-methods research could also examine whether changes in communicative agency correspond with changes in speaking anxiety, willingness to communicate, self-perceived communicative competence, and actual speaking performance.

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