Exploring EFL Students' Speaking Anxiety and the Strategies They Employ During Peer-to-Peer Interaction in Iranian English Language Classrooms

Hossein Rezaee

Farhangian University, Arak, Iran

hosseinrezaee8236@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study examines the speaking anxiety experienced by EFL students when interacting in English with their Indonesian peers, as well as the strategies they use to alleviate it. This study employed a qualitative descriptive design involving semi-structured interviews with six Indonesian EFL undergraduates. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed four main factors causing anxiety: fear of negative evaluation from peers (including the proximity paradox, whereby students are actually more anxious around close friends), situational speaking pressure, linguistic insecurity, and internal psychological pressure (including professional identity threat). To manage their anxiety, students employed strategies such as independent practice (including self-recording and ChatGPT), emotional regulation, cognitive reframing of mistakes, and mindful communication (code-switching and language simplification). However, no participant reported that their anxiety had disappeared entirely. This study provides qualitative insight that enhances our understanding of foreign language anxiety in the context of peer interaction. It also offers practical recommendations for developing a more supportive environment for EFL speaking in Indonesian universities.

Keywords*: coping strategies, EFL students, peer interaction, speaking anxiety*

Introduction

Speaking is the language skill that is most immediately noticeable in social situations. Compared to reading or writing, speaking requires real-time language production, making learners more susceptible to hesitation, a lack of confidence, and social judgment (Ali et al., 2025). In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), speaking opportunities are largely confined to classroom interactions, as students have minimal exposure to English outside the classroom. In Iran, the use of English in everyday communication is limited and is mainly restricted to formal educational settings (Winnie et al., 2023), meaning students rely solely on classroom activities to practice speaking (Ali et al., 2025). Consequently, when students are

asked to speak English with peers who share the same native language and cultural background, the situation does not always feel supportive. On the contrary, it can trigger feelings of embarrassment, anxiety about social comparison, and fear of being judged (Arifin et al., 2025).

The basis of this study is in accordance with the theory on Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLA) from Horwitz et al. (1986) and the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky (1978). With the concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffolding, which Vygotsky indicated related to the learning process that becomes more effective if individuals interact with people who have good abilities, including peers. Whereas the FLA framework shows relationships in the classroom that give rise to fear of negative judgments, demands to speak perfectly, and fear of the social response of the surrounding environment (Özdemir & Seçkin, 2025). In the context of this study, peers play a dual role: as a source of support (scaffolding) and simultaneously as a source of evaluative pressure that can trigger anxiety.

Although previous studies have made significant contributions, there are still several gaps that need to be addressed. Firstly, most research on speaking anxiety in an Iran context still focuses on broad general factors or at the secondary school level, whilst research specifically examining the dynamics of peer interaction at the university level remains limited. Secondly, the paradoxical phenomenon whereby students actually feel more anxious speaking in front of close friends than strangers. This study adopts and redefines this condition as the 'proximity paradox'. Although the fields of social psychology and innovation have used this term, this study applies it in different contexts. The term refers to the finding that emotional closeness actually increases the burden of peer judgement, rather than reducing it. This idea extends the concept of fear-negative evaluation in the context of peer interactions proposed by Horwitz et al. (1986). Thirdly, the professional identity crisis is rarely examined by researchers as a potential cause of speaking anxiety among EFL students training to become English teachers. According to research on pre-service teachers' identities, a professional identity crisis is a common experience during the transition from being students to being teachers (Cuadra-Martínez et al., 2023). This tension is felt more acutely by trainee teachers who are non-native speakers. They often experience deep anxiety and linguistic insecurity regarding their language proficiency and teaching skills (Wijaya, 2022). Furthermore, various studies have found that EFL trainee teachers experience significant emotional pressure during their teaching placements. These struggles include anxiety, self-doubt, and a fear of making mistakes. These issues can hinder the development of their professional identity (Pravitasari et al., 2025). This emotional pressure may subside or intensify as a result of interactions with mentor teachers and the school community. Tensions related to identity are often triggered by heavy workloads, unfair treatment, and a lack of supervision among trainee teachers (Daud et al., 2025). Fourthly, although some studies have mentioned strategies for overcoming anxiety, research that comprehensively documents contemporary strategies such as the use of self-recordings and artificial intelligence (AI) for self-directed practice remains very limited.

Therefore, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. *What factors cause speaking anxiety among EFL students when speaking English with Indonesian peers?*
2. *What strategies do EFL students use to reduce speaking anxiety?*

2. Literature Review

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) was first systematically defined by Horwitz et al. (1986) as a combination of self-perception, beliefs, feelings and behaviours that arise during the language learning process at school. Unlike general anxiety, FLA is situational and specific to the context of language learning. Horwitz et al. (1986) identified three main components of FLA: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. These three components are highly relevant in the context of peer interaction because, when students speak in front of their peers, they are susceptible to social evaluation that may trigger anxiety (Özdemir & Seçkin, 2025). Further research indicates that FLA has a negative impact on student participation and engagement. According to Akkuş (2021), a systematic review, the majority of EFL learners experience moderate levels of anxiety, and speaking is the skill that most frequently causes anxiety. Wang et al. (2025) also reported that over 97% of participants in their study experienced moderate to high levels of anxiety, indicating that speaking anxiety is a chronic challenge in EFL teaching.

In the Indonesian context, Arifin et al. (2025) categorise anxiety factors as either internal (limited comprehension, lack of self-confidence, tendency to create problems, and linguistic factors) or external (negative evaluation and an unsupportive learning environment). Ali et al. (2025) state that Indonesian EFL learners face three main types of difficulty: linguistic (limited vocabulary, grammatical and pronunciation errors), psychological (anxiety, lack of self-confidence and fear of being judged) and sociolinguistic (lack of exposure to English, unsupportive peers and teachercentred teaching). Speaking anxiety is a specific type of FLA closely linked to language performance (Özdemir & Seçkin, 2025). Unlike receptive skills, speaking requires direct language production in the presence of others, making it more likely to trigger anxiety, as explained by Ali et al. (2025). The causes of speaking anxiety are highly varied. Özdemir & Seçkin (2025) identified the most common factors as fear of pronunciation errors, speaking in front of others, limited vocabulary, lack of self-confidence, and minimal exposure to the language. Alamri & Qasem (2024) also identified fear of comments and laughter from classmates, lack of preparation, and lack of speaking practice as significant factors. In an Indonesian context, Mare et al. (2026) conducted research using a narrative approach, which revealed that students experience speaking anxiety due to fear of being judged, not wanting to cause problems and a lack of self-confidence. Similarly, Montano et al. (2022) found that students in the Philippines (in a context similar to Indonesia) experience speaking anxiety due to communication factors, negative evaluation and lack of preparation. Maher & King (2022) suggest that silence in the classroom may indicate speaking anxiety, especially when students are not evaluated by their peers.

Peer interaction is vital for language learning. According to Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, effective learning occurs through social interaction with individuals who are more capable, within what is known as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Peers can provide scaffolding and a supportive environment to help students overcome obstacles they cannot surmount alone. However, research also suggests that interaction with peers is not always positive. Burhanuddin et al. (2023) found that the fear of being judged by peers was the most significant psychological factor causing difficulties in speaking English among Indonesian students. Mare et al. (2026) found that peer feedback can initially cause discomfort. However, supportive and encouraging interactions can help students to boost their self-esteem, reduce anxiety and build self-confidence. In the Indonesian context, Ali et al. (2025) identified rejection by peers as a significant socio-environmental barrier. Many strategies have been identified to help students overcome speaking anxiety. Özdemir & Seçkin (2025) found that students tend to use strategies such as preparation, sufficient pronunciation practice, and improvements in listening and grammar. Conversely, teachers focus more on providing positive feedback and praising students' achievements, as well as on group and pair work. Mare et al. (2026) found that peer feedback, when provided thoughtfully and supportively, can gradually reduce anxiety and boost students' self-confidence. Archbell & Coplan's (2022) research indicates that social inactivity is negatively correlated with academic communication and student learning in upper secondary schools. Strategies for managing emotions, such as selfaffirmation, positive thinking and breathing exercises, can help students to cope with anxiety. Furthermore, one participant in the study by Mare et al. (2026) reported using ChatGPT and their own recordings to communicate, suggesting that the use of technology such as self-recording may emerge as a personal practice strategy.

Although previous research has made significant contributions, several issues remain to be addressed. Firstly, although research on public speaking anxiety in Indonesia has predominantly been conducted at the secondary school level (Marlia et al., 2023; Burhanuddin et al., 2023; Ali et al., 2025), studies that specifically examine the role of peer interactions as a source of speaking anxiety among university-level EFL learners remain scarce. Unlike previous studies that focused on general classroom anxiety at the school level (Marlia et al., 2023), the present study distinctly focuses on Indonesian undergraduate EFL students in a university setting, where peer evaluation and social comparison among adult learners play a more prominent role in shaping speaking anxiety. This study, therefore, addresses an underexplored gap in the Indonesian EFL research landscape. Secondly, there has been little research into the paradoxical phenomenon whereby students feel more anxious speaking in front of close friends than strangers (referred to in this study as the 'proximity paradox'). Thirdly, the threat to professional identity, or the 'English teacher' identity, is a serious issue for EFL learners. This study aims to investigate the factors contributing to speaking anxiety and develop strategies to address it within the context of Indonesian culture.

3. **Research Methods**

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive approach. This design was chosen because the study aims to investigate and describe EFL students' perceptions, strategies, and views regarding their speaking anxiety when interacting with their Iranian peers, and how such interactions affect their anxiety. A qualitative descriptive approach enables the researcher to analyse findings that explain the phenomenon under study in a natural context, without manipulating variables (Creswell, 2009). This approach allows researchers to rigorously research subjective characteristics in participants that cannot be measured using quantitative methods.

3.2 Participants

The participants in this study were six Iranian EFL undergraduate students from the English Education Study Program in Farhangian university of Iran. They were selected using purposive sampling, a method based on specific criteria relevant to the research focus (Patton, 2022). The screening procedure was conducted through Google Forms questionnaires distributed to potential participants. According to the results, they were chosen based on the following criteria: (1) they were active undergraduate students majoring an English education at Farhangian university ; (2) they had participated in English-language classroom speaking activities such as pair work, group discussions, presentations or oral responses; and (3) they had experienced anxiety, nervousness or discomfort when speaking English with their Iranian peers about Iran. To maintain confidentiality, each participant was assigned the initials A, B, C, D, E or F.

3.3 Instruments

The primary instrument in this study is the researcher themselves (the human instrument). As the processes of data collection, interpretation and analysis are quite complex, the researcher serves as a key instrument in qualitative research (Creswell, 2009). In answering questions, conducting interviews, analysing participants' responses, and presenting findings regarding anxiety about speaking in interactions among Iranian peers, the researchers actively engaged in the collection, interpretation, and analysis of the data.

Furthermore, this study also employed a semi-structured interview guide as a tool. The researchers created 10 open-ended questions for this interview guide because they followed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety framework (Horwitz et al., 1986) along with previous research about speaking anxiety within peer interactions (Özdemir & Seçkin, 2025; Alamri & Qasem, 2024; Mare et al., 2026). This inquiry encompasses three primary domains: (1) participants' overall experiences conversing in English with Iranian peers, (2) factors that trigger speaking anxiety, and (3) strategies to cope with anxiety. The accuracy of this guide has been evaluated by two experts in qualitative research, and it has been pilot-tested orally with an EFL learner who did not take part in this study. The interview guide was flexible, allowing the researchers to ask follow-up questions based on participants' responses. In addition, audio recording equipment (using a smartphone) was used to record every step of the interview process with participants to ensure data accuracy. Field notes, or brief notes, were also taken during the process to record non-verbal aspects

such as pauses, hesitations, or participants' responses to specific ideas that could aid in data interpretation.

3.4 Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis, in accordance with the methodology outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006). The aim of this approach is to enable researchers to systematically identify, analyse and examine patterns (or themes) that emerge within the data. The analysis process was carried out in six stages. First, the researcher gained an initial understanding of the data by reading the interview transcripts several times. Second, the researcher identified the most important and relevant components of the data in relation to the research questions and assigned codes to them. The third stage involved identifying themes by grouping the codes, and the researchers organized the original codes into potential themes. For instance, codes such as "fear of being laughed at", "fear of being judged", "intellectual judgement" were combined into a general theme called "fear of negative evaluation from peers". Eight final themes were produced by applying the same process to the other codes: four themes relating to the causes of anxiety and four themes relating to strategies for coping with anxiety. The fourth stage involved examining and validating the selected themes to ensure they were coherent and consistent with the data. The fifth stage was theme definition and naming, where the researcher clearly defined each theme, identified its essence, and assigned an appropriate name. Sixthly, the researchers wrote a final essay that discussed the research material descriptively and interpretatively. This is done with the assistance of participants to strengthen the research material. Throughout the analysis process, the context and findings emerging from the data are carefully examined.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, the researchers conduct member checking, asking participants to confirm their interpretations. Following the formulation of the initial themes, the researcher sent a summary of the interview results to each participant via WhatsApp, asking them to verify that the interpretations made appropriately represented their experiences. Additionally, participants were given the opportunity to clarify or add any points they believed were unclear or missing. Since every participant confirmed that the summaries accurately reflected their experiences, no significant changes were made to the interpretations.

4. Results

This section presents the research findings based on semi-structured data obtained from six participants (A, B, C, D, E, and F). A thematic analysis of the interview transcripts revealed four main themes contributing to speaking anxiety, as well as four main themes used by the students to cope with this anxiety. Each topic is presented objectively with the help of the participants to illustrate these themes.

4.1 Factors Causing Speaking Anxiety

This section addresses the first research question (RQ1) regarding the factors contributing to speaking anxiety among EFL students when interacting with their Iranian peers.

4.1.1 Fear of Negative Evaluation from Peers

Four of the six participants (A, B, C, and D) agreed with this theme. This fear appears as a form of fear of being laughed at or judged based on intellectual ability, or becoming a stronger feeling of shame when in the presence of close friends, compared to strangers.

An alarming sense associated with speaking in front of a stranger was conveyed to Participant A.

"If I say something like this, will they judge me? Will they laugh at me?"

Participant B has highlighted the long-term psychological impact with a detailed and in-depth analysis.

"One time I mispronounced a word and my friends laughed. I keep thinking about it for a long time."

One of the interesting results is indicated by the existence of a closeness that has a paradoxical nature. This has been conveyed by Participant B:

"It is harder because I am more afraid of being judged by people I know."

A subtle but still equally intense form of anxiety was indicated by Participant C, when she claimed:

"I am terrified of intellectual judgment... they may think I am pretentious."

Participant D also explained that the fear was reinforced by experiences that occurred directly in real life:

"Sometimes they laugh when I pronounce words incorrectly."

4.1.2 Situational Speaking Pressure

The second theme explains that speaking anxiety does not remain constant in all situations, but rather increases sharply in certain contexts, such as formal classroom settings, unplanned interactions, public speaking and situations involving a lecturer.

Participant E explained the cognitive load they experienced when speaking without preparation:

"If I am suddenly asked to speak... if there is no preparation, I keep thinking about grammar, word choice, and pronunciation," and that pressure caused them to experience a mental block.

Additionally, Participant C illustrated the mental burden of processing a lot of things at once by expressing.

"I have to process content, speech, and language structure at the same time," and describes speaking as a highly effective form of multitasking, particularly in spontaneous situations.

Participant C described the formal and public aspects of speaking in class using a metaphor. She said:

"Speaking in English feels like we are on a stage."

Participant D specifically mentioned that the lecturer's presence exacerbated their anxiety when arguing:

"Discussion in English... watched by the lecturers."

Participant A also confirmed that their anxiety increased when they were in a formal situation. This is indicated by his statement, namely, "I worry more in class, during presentation or Q&A." Meanwhile, Participant B also indicated that he felt "more anxious during presentation or group discussion."

4.1.3 Linguistic Insecurity

The third theme indicates that low confidence in language skills, especially in mastery of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, is a factor that greatly affects the emergence of anxiety when speaking.

Participant E stated: "My vocabulary is still very limited."

The form of uncertainty that has changed is indicated by Participant A with his statement "The vocabulary in my head disappears," This statement indicates that the language skills that are already possessed can become difficult to access when the individual is under pressure.

There are two forms of worrying feelings expressed by Participant D, namely not only from fear in saying words but also from worrying about the words conveyed that cannot be analyzed by others. This is indicated in his statements, namely "I am afraid that I pronounce some words wrongly" and "I am afraid that they do not understand what I am saying."

The habit that has been embedded to do a grammar check before speaking is analyzed from Participant C with the statement "I am always checking my grammar before I speak," This behavior actually does not provide a sense of calm but can actually increase the burden of the mind when someone wants to speak.

This is even more important where Participant C has also indicated that with a lack of confidence, he can use strategies as a substitute which can also reduce the depth of communication. This is indicated by his statement, namely, "I simplify my ideas and vocabulary."

4.1.4 Internal Psychological Pressure

The fourth theme indicates that anxiety when speaking can also be caused by psychological pressure from within the self that has absolutely no connection with social triggers from the mainstream. The most clearly indicated form of pressure in this regard is perfectionism.

The desire to appear perfectly is indicated by Participant D by his statement is "I want to be perfect." This pressure is also reinforced by her identity as an English major, as seen in her statement, "Because our class is the English department... we are expected to speak correctly."

The anxiety that arises is caused by the distance between the current state of self and the ideal self-image indicated by Participant C with the statement, 'The gap between my reality and my ideal
self creates huge anxiety.' In addition, the anxiety is also supported by the tendency to make selfcomparisons, as indicated in the statement 'I compare myself to others."

The strongest internal pressure is related to the existence of a professional identity as expressed by Participant C, where "As a future English teacher, my identity is on the line." This statement indicates that speech anxiety is also influenced by a form of concern for his identity as an aspiring English teacher.

The impact of this pressure is evident in the participants' behavior. Participant B gave an expression where "I become hesitant and sometimes choose to stay quiet," while Participant E indicated that "the biggest cause is lack of confidence." This has been an indication that the pressure they feel makes them more hesitant to speak up and lowers their confidence.

4.2 Strategies to Reduce Speaking Anxiety

The strategies that EFL learners have implemented in reducing speech anxiety are discussed in this section as an answer to the second research question (RQ2).

4.2.1 Independent Practice and Preparation

The first strategy identified self-directed practice and deliberate preparation as the most common strategies used by participants to manage their anxiety about speaking.

Participant F carried out targeted practice before interacting with friends: "I practice before I talk to them."

Participant D used the most technologically advanced approach: "I practice on my own... record myself... use ChatGPT.'"

By practising without an audience, participants were able to reduce the feeling of unpreparedness identified in Theme 4.2 as the primary trigger for situational anxiety.

4.2.2 Emotional Regulation and Breathing

Another strategy employed by participants was participants used physiological and emotional regulation techniques to reduce anxiety whilst speaking.

Participant B described a conscious routine before speaking: "I calm myself down first and take a deep breath."

Participant F used breathing as a quick response in spontaneous situations: "If it is spontaneous, I breathe in and out and think positively.'"

Participant E used verbal self-regulation through internal dialogue: "I tell myself "it will pass".

4.2.3 Cognitive Reframing of Mistakes

This theme indicates that some participants actively changed their attitudes towards speech errors as a strategy for overcoming the perfectionist tendencies observed in Theme 4.4.

Participant D stated: "Making mistakes is not a bad thing... it is part of the process.'"

Participant B reminded themselves: "Making mistakes is normal."

Participant F expanded on this to adopt a more proactive approach by saying, "think positively."

4.2.4 Mindful Communication and Language Adjustment

The last strategy employed by participants identified the most diverse group of strategies, including mindfulness, strategic pauses, code-switching and linguistic simplification as direct responses to speaking anxiety.

Participant C described a fundamental shift in their approach to communication: "I use mindfulness... communication is the key, not perfection."

Participant A used pauses as a processing strategy: "I stay silent and think carefully'" before speaking.

When the linguistic pressure becomes overwhelming, Participant A also uses code-switching: "Then I start speaking in Indonesian.'"

Participant C uses linguistic simplification as an adaptive approach: "I simplify my ideas and vocabulary."

5. Discussion

The study aims to determine the factors that cause speaking anxiety among EFL students when they interact with Iranian peers and how they reduce the anxiety. The following discussion session links the findings with relevant theory and previous research.

The first finding suggests that speech anxiety is most often triggered by concerns about peer judgment. Participants felt afraid of being considered less capable or becoming a laughing stock. Interestingly, anxiety is greater when speaking in front of close friends than strangers because their opinions are considered more important. This condition is able to give birth to new friends in the form of the proximity paradox, which is a closeness relationship, with which it turns out that it can increase psychological pressure when receiving assessments. In contrast to the concept of fear of

negative evaluation from Horwitz et al. (1986), which focuses only on fear of negative evaluation, this study indicates that the identity of the evaluator also affects the level of anxiety. These results still support the Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) framework of Horwitz et al. (1986) and are in line with Burhanuddin et al.(2023) and Alamri & Qasem (2024), who in their findings stated that ridicule, comments, and peer judgments are the main causes of speech anxiety.

The second finding has indicated that anxiety in speaking is higher when participants are in certain situations, such as public speaking, participating in formal classroom learning, interacting spontaneously without preparation, or when dealing with lecturers. Participants reported that when they had to process content, pronunciation and their peers' reactions simultaneously, they experienced a heavy cognitive load. They stated that this led to a 'blank mind'. These findings align with research conducted by Özdemir & Seçkin (2025), who found that speaking in front of others and speaking without preparation are the two factors most frequently associated with anxiety. Maher & King (2022) added that silence in the classroom can lead to speaking anxiety. This is particularly true when students feel unprepared or worry they will be criticised by their peers. Situational pressure, such as being asked to speak unexpectedly, can increase anxiety in Iran, according to Ali et al. (2025). These findings also support Horwitz et al.'s (1986) theory of communication anxiety, which states that people experience communication anxiety when they have to speak in front of others in structured and evaluated situations.

The third finding indicates that speaking anxiety is reinforced by a loss of confidence in linguistic abilities, particularly vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. Participants reported that this increases cognitive load as they tend to check their grammar before speaking, and that vocabulary often 'disappears' when under pressure. These results are consistent with Arifin et al.(2025), who demonstrated that linguistic elements, such as pronunciation, vocabulary, and a lack of vocabulary, are internal factors causing anxiety. According to Ali et al. (2025), the three main challenges faced by Iranian EFL learners include pronunciation, grammatical errors, and limited vocabulary. The most frequently reported anxiety, according to Özdemir & Seçkin (2025), is a limited vocabulary and fear of pronunciation errors. Although it does not list words that "disappear" under pressure, Teimouri et al.(2019) refer to this as cognitive interference caused by anxiety. A similar principle is also found in the literature on language anxiety.

The fourth finding suggests that internal psychological pressures, particularly perfectionism, also play a role. The participants felt pressured to speak correctly due to their status as English Language students. They were also concerned about the gap between their current situation and their ideal selves. The results relating to professional identity threat, also known as professional identity threat, among participants who were prospective English teachers were the most interesting. They believed that speaking errors represented a threat to their professional identity rather than simply a communication error. These findings extend the research conducted by Arifin et al. (2025), who found that internal factors responsible for low self-confidence and fear of making mistakes were low, but did not examine aspects of professional identity. According to Özdemir &

Seçkin (2025), low self-confidence and perfectionism are causes of speaking anxiety. According to Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, this professional identity pressure stems from high social expectations of prospective English teachers as 'those who know better' (others who know better), which makes mistakes even harder to tolerate. Studies on the identity of pre-service teachers note that professional identity conflict often arises when pre-service teachers transition from the role of students into educators (Raharjo & Iswandari, 2021).

Pre-service teachers who are non-native speakers of English experience this conflict more intensely. They often feel anxious and lack confidence in their own English language abilities (Sutarno et al., 2025). Other research indicates that EFL pre-service teachers experience intense emotional pressure during their teaching practice. This pressure includes anxiety, self-doubt, and a fear of making mistakes in front of students. These conditions inhibit the development of their professional identity as pre-service teachers (Daud et al., 2025). On the other hand, pre-service teachers also face the challenge of managing two competing roles at once, as students and as educators. The pressure to meet the expectations of both roles at the same time increases the stress they face (Ji et al., 2022).

The fifth finding is that most of the participants chose independent exercise to increase speech readiness. They practiced at home, prepared themselves before interacting with friends, and made use of self-recordings and ChatGPT as a training medium. This strategy is most often used because it can help reduce feelings of inadequacy without having to face direct judgments from others. Each of these tools works through different psychological mechanisms to reduce speaking anxiety. Self-recordings allow users to observe their performance objectively. They can compare their actual performance with the negative expectations they had previously imagined. This process helps correct inaccurate self-perceptions of how they appear to others. Listening to the recording repeatedly can help in reducing negative emotions while speaking because it makes the participant more familiar with the situation as well as the principle of exposure therapy. Meanwhile, ChatGPT provides a safe supply of practice rooms with immediate responses without any pressure from judgment from others. Kishimoto et al. (2025) in their findings indicate that empathic feedback from ChatGPT can reduce physiological responses due to the onset of anxiety, while Celik et al. (2025) describe how ChatGPT is a virtual tutor that is able to create an increase in self-efficacy in speaking. Its ease of access and anonymity also make this technology attractive for individuals to be able to avoid face-to-face exercises.

Behind the benefits, self-recording and ChatGPT still have limitations. Self-recordings can be an excessive trigger for self-criticism because users often focus on minor mistakes, while their effectiveness depends on the ability to assess themselves objectively, which is difficult for individuals with high social anxiety to do. Noe et al. (2025) in their findings explained that although ChatGPT is able to reduce the fear of negative judgments and speech anxiety, this technology is not optimal in providing pronunciation feedback. About 40% of participants also rated the feedback

on intonation and rhythm to be inadequate, while the responses tended to be formal and less natural for everyday conversations.

Despite its limitations, ChatGPT and self-recording are still judged to be able to create a psychologically safe learning environment. These findings support the concept of affective filters proposed by Krashen (1985) that language learning is more effective when learners feel comfortable, and also in line with Özdemir & Seçkin (2025) by mentioning that preparation is a form of strategy in handling speech anxiety. In addition to indicating the use of digital technology, this research also fills the limitations of studies in Iran regarding technology-based strategies. However, ChatGPT should be used as a support rather than a substitute for direct interaction or professional help (Celik et al., 2025). Therefore, Noe et al. (2025) provide recommendations for a hybrid approach that combines AI-assisted training with human interaction to optimise learning.

The sixth finding indicates that participants reduced speech anxiety with the presence of emotion regulation and breathing techniques. When facing situations that trigger anxiety, they calm down by taking deep breaths, thinking positively, and doing self-talk like "it will pass". This result is in line with Archbell & Coplan (2022), with the explanation that emotion regulation can help students in controlling anxiety, while social anxiety has a negative relationship with academic communication. However, these strategies are more often used as a form of response when anxiety arises than as a preventive measure.

The eighth finding indicated that participants managed to deal with speech anxiety through mindfulness, short pauses, code-switching, and language simplification. They put more trust in the delivery of messages than in the form of linguistic perfection. When pressure increases, participants take advantage of pauses or switch to Iranian so that communication can continue. These findings are in line with Sameen et al. (2021) by stating that code-switching can reduce anxiety in foreign languages and create increased participation, and are supported by Yangın-Ersanlı & Ünal (2022), who, in their findings, explain that mindfulness is effective in reducing speech anxiety. This is a clue that the strategy is adaptive because it is applied before or during communication.

Various efforts have been made, but have not been able to eliminate the anxiety of all participants. They still experience doubts about their abilities, are sometimes reluctant to speak, and feel emotional tension. This has indicated that strategies implemented are more effective for managing anxiety than eliminating it. Therefore, support with a more structured institution is needed through the teaching of clear strategies, a classroom atmosphere that accepts mistakes, and speaking activities that reduce the pressure of assessment. Recommendations made by Horwitz et al. (1986) and reinforced by Ali et al. (2025). Furthermore, this study found that several internal (e.g., linguistic, psychological, and identity-related) and external (e.g., situational, social, and evaluative) factors influence speaking anxiety in interactions with Iranian peers. The causes cannot be understood in a linear way. The main focus of this study is to identify the paradox of closeness and the threat to professional identity as causes of anxiety, which have not been extensively discussed in the Iranian EFL literature.

6. Conclusion

This study identified four main factors contributing to speaking anxiety among EFL learners when interacting with Iranian peers. The most dominant factor was the fear of negative evaluation by peers; this included the fear of being laughed at, the fear of being judged intellectually, and the 'proximity paradox', where learners experience greater anxiety speaking in front of close friends than strangers. Furthermore, it has been shown that anxiety is intensified by situational speaking pressure, such as a formal classroom atmosphere, speaking spontaneously without preparation, the presence of a teacher, and the cognitive load associated with processing content, pronunciation, and peers' reactions simultaneously. Furthermore, lack of confidence in language , particularly regarding limitations in vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, is exacerbated by a tendency to oversimplify ideas and the habit of checking grammar before speaking. Finally, internal psychological pressure, also known as internal psychological pressure, including perfectionism, social comparison, and fear of professional identity, affects participants who are prospective English teachers.

Students employed four strategies to cope with this anxiety. Preparation strategies included practice and self-directed preparation, emotional and breathing regulation, and reframing of the perception of mistakes. However, real-time strategies encompass language adjustment and mindful communication. These include mindful communication, strategic pauses, code-switching to Iranian, and linguistic simplification. However, not a single participant stated that their anxiety had completely disappeared; these strategies are merely tools for managing, not for eliminating, anxiety.

This study extends the theoretical framework of foreign language anxiety with two new findings: the proximity paradox and the threat to professional identity as sources of anxiety in peer interactions (Horwitz et al., 1986). Practically, where this research has indicated that the classroom atmosphere needs to be made more error-friendly, anxiety management strategies need to be taught clearly, and speaking activities need to be designed so that the stress caused by assessments can be minimized. This study was limited because it was only conducted in one university with six participants. Therefore, the next research is given suggestions to be able to include participants with more diversity, the use of mixed methods, and to test the long-term effectiveness of technology based strategies such as artificial intelligence.

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