



Language Anxiety and Its Impact on Speaking Fluency: A Psycholinguistic Perspective on EFL Students

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ABSTRACT

Language anxiety has become a central focus in understanding the challenges faced by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, particularly in speaking activities that require rapid cognitive processing. From a psycholinguistic perspective, anxiety is viewed not only as an emotional reaction but also as a factor that interferes with the mental mechanisms essential for fluent speech production. When learners experience anxiety, their working memory capacity is reduced, making it more difficult to retrieve vocabulary, organize ideas, and construct sentences smoothly in real time. As a result, their speaking fluency is negatively affected, demonstrated through increased hesitations, pauses, self-corrections, and reduced speech rate. Anxiety also heightens self-monitoring, causing learners to focus excessively on potential errors rather than on effective communication. Furthermore, fear of negative evaluation often leads students to avoid speaking tasks, limiting exposure to meaningful interaction and hindering fluency development. Understanding how anxiety disrupts cognitive processing provides important insights for educators in designing supportive, low-stress learning environments. This psycholinguistic perspective highlights the need for instructional strategies that reduce anxiety and promote confidence to improve EFL learners' oral fluency.

Keywords: Language Anxiety, Speaking Fluency, Psycholinguistics, EFL Learners, Cognitive Processing

INTRODUCTION

Language anxiety has emerged as one of the most significant affective variables influencing the success of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, particularly in oral communication, where performance requires rapid cognitive processing and immediate linguistic retrieval. Speaking in a foreign language demands simultaneous coordination of vocabulary access, syntactic structuring, idea formulation, and articulation, all occurring under conditions that often involve social pressure and fear of negative evaluation. When anxiety is activated, these linguistic processes become disrupted, leading to performance breakdowns that affect learners' fluency, confidence, and communicative willingness. Numerous empirical studies have demonstrated that EFL learners frequently report speaking as the most anxiety-provoking language skill because it exposes them to public judgment and immediate

feedback. Understanding the roots and manifestations of this anxiety is essential for uncovering the factors that hinder speaking fluency in various learning contexts and for developing strategies to support learners' emotional well-being and linguistic competence (Anggraeny, 2020).

In recent years, psycholinguistic research has provided deeper insight into how emotional states such as anxiety interact with cognitive systems during language production. Speaking requires a high level of automaticity, yet anxiety disrupts automatic processing by overloading working memory, reducing attentional control, and causing learners to focus on potential errors rather than on the flow of communication. This cognitive interference results in slower lexical retrieval, increased hesitations, fragmented speech, and frequent self-corrections—features that hinder speaking fluency. Scholars argue that anxiety not only lowers performance but also shapes the learner's long-term relationship with the language, influencing motivation and willingness to engage in speaking tasks. For EFL learners, whose exposure to the language may already be limited, the cognitive impact of anxiety further restricts opportunities to practice fluency in authentic settings. Thus, from a psycholinguistic standpoint, anxiety functions as both an immediate and long-term barrier to oral proficiency development (Arifin, 2025).

The learning environment plays a major role in shaping the degree of speaking anxiety experienced by EFL students. Classroom dynamics, teacher behavior, peer interaction patterns, and assessment practices all contribute to learners' emotional responses during speaking activities. When students perceive the environment as highly evaluative or competitive, their anxiety tends to increase, resulting in avoidance behaviors and reduced participation. Students who internalize negative classroom experiences often generalize this fear to future speaking tasks, reinforcing a cycle of anxiety and low performance. Qualitative studies reveal that learners frequently describe speaking classes as stressful due to fear of making mistakes, concern about pronunciation accuracy, and apprehension about teacher feedback. These environmental triggers operate alongside individual psychological factors, producing a complex emotional landscape that influences speaking behavior. Understanding these classroom-based contributors is essential for designing interventions that foster a supportive, low-anxiety environment that promotes meaningful engagement in oral communication (Arrahmani, 2025).

Individual learner differences also significantly influence the level and impact of speaking anxiety. Factors such as gender, self-confidence, prior learning experiences, linguistic background, and personal coping strategies shape how learners perceive and respond to speaking challenges. Some students experience debilitating anxiety that severely limits their speaking output, while others are able to manage their emotions and perform more effectively despite the presence of anxiety. Meta-analytical findings highlight consistent correlations between high anxiety levels and low oral performance, suggesting that anxiety is not merely a situational response but a stable emotional tendency for many learners. This emotional disposition affects how learners allocate attention, process language, and regulate their speech. Furthermore, students with low self-efficacy or negative self-perceptions are more vulnerable to anxiety in speaking contexts, which in turn affects their communicative participation and fluency development. Exploring these individual differences deepens our understanding of how anxiety shapes oral proficiency outcomes (Dikmen, 2022).

Speaking anxiety has been shown to influence not only the quantity of speech produced by learners but also the qualitative features of fluency, including pacing, coherence, and rhythm. Learners experiencing high anxiety often produce speech that is slower, less organized, and marked by long pauses or fillers. These disruptions stem from the reduced efficiency of cognitive processes responsible for planning and articulation. Psycholinguistic models suggest that anxiety weakens the coordination between conceptualization, formulation, and articulation stages of speech production, resulting in breakdowns in fluency. In EFL contexts where practice opportunities may already be limited, these disruptions have compounding effects on learners' ability to internalize fluent speech patterns. Studies indicate that learners with high anxiety often avoid speaking altogether, further restricting the development of automaticity required for fluent performance. Thus, examining fluency through a psycholinguistic lens provides a detailed understanding of how emotional and cognitive systems interact during oral production (Yuliana, 2023).

Given the strong connection between language anxiety and speaking fluency, researchers and educators have increasingly emphasized the need for pedagogical solutions that address both emotional and cognitive demands of oral communication. Strategies such as supportive feedback, gradual exposure to speaking tasks, collaborative learning, and anxiety-reducing classroom practices have been identified as effective in creating positive speaking experiences. Interventions grounded in psycholinguistic theory aim to strengthen working memory, enhance automaticity, and reduce cognitive load so that learners can focus on meaning rather than fear of errors. Reducing anxiety not only improves immediate speaking performance but also encourages sustained engagement in communicative activities, leading to long-term fluency growth. Considering the complexity of speaking anxiety, instructional approaches must be holistic, addressing both psychological and linguistic dimensions of learning. This integrated perspective underscores the importance of understanding anxiety's multifaceted impact to support EFL learners more effectively (Rahmadani & Etfita, 2022).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language anxiety is widely understood as a crucial affective variable that directly interferes with the cognitive and emotional processes required for effective speaking performance in EFL contexts. Psycholinguistic theories explain that speaking fluency depends on the smooth interaction between working memory, lexical retrieval, syntactic planning, and attentional control. When anxiety is present, these processes lose efficiency, resulting in hesitations, fragmented sentences, and difficulty maintaining coherence. Learners experiencing anxiety often focus more on avoiding errors than communicating meaning, which disrupts the automaticity needed for fluent speech. This theoretical perspective shows that fluency cannot be separated from emotional regulation, as learners must manage both linguistic demands and internal psychological pressures. Therefore, understanding language anxiety is essential for identifying barriers to oral proficiency and designing instructional strategies that reduce emotional strain while strengthening cognitive readiness for speaking.

1. The Concept of Language Anxiety in Second Language Acquisition

Language anxiety is widely recognized in second language acquisition theory as a specific form of performance-related apprehension that arises when learners are

required to use the target language in academic or social settings. Distinguished from general anxiety, language anxiety occurs when learners perceive linguistic tasks as threatening to their self-concept or communicative competence. Theoretical models categorize it into communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation, each influencing different aspects of language performance. Communication apprehension particularly affects oral production because speaking demands spontaneous processing, leaving learners vulnerable to mistakes. When anxiety levels rise, learners experience physiological and cognitive symptoms, such as increased heart rate, mental blocking, and difficulty retrieving vocabulary. These reactions hinder their ability to express ideas clearly or confidently. Therefore, language anxiety is considered a central affective barrier that shapes learners' engagement, participation, and linguistic development across diverse learning environments.

2. Psycholinguistic Foundations of Speaking Fluency

Speaking fluency from a psycholinguistic perspective refers to the smooth, rapid, and coherent production of speech resulting from efficient coordination of cognitive processes. Fluent speech depends on automaticity, meaning the speaker is able to retrieve vocabulary, apply grammar rules, and organize ideas with minimal conscious effort. According to psycholinguistic models of speech production, such as Levelt's framework, speech proceeds through conceptualization, formulation, and articulation stages. When these stages operate seamlessly, speech appears natural and fluid. However, any cognitive strain—such as anxiety—interferes with retrieval and formulation, resulting in slower speech, longer pauses, fillers, and disruptions in coherence. Fluency is also shaped by working memory capacity, which manages the simultaneous demands of planning sentences while producing speech. Consequently, speaking fluency is not solely a linguistic skill but a cognitive performance dependent on mental efficiency, processing speed, and emotional regulation.

3. Cognitive Load Theory and Its Relation to Speaking Anxiety

Cognitive load theory explains how the brain's limited working memory capacity affects the processing of complex tasks, including second language speaking. When learners speak, they must juggle vocabulary access, syntactic planning, grammatical accuracy, and monitoring of pronunciation, all while maintaining the flow of communication. Speaking anxiety significantly increases cognitive load by diverting attention toward worries about performance, fear of errors, or negative evaluations. As more mental resources are allocated to emotional regulation rather than linguistic processing, learners' ability to produce fluent and accurate speech decreases. This heightened cognitive load manifests as hesitations, incomplete sentences, and difficulty organizing thoughts. Over time, excessive cognitive burden can condition learners to avoid speaking situations entirely, limiting opportunities for fluency development. Thus, cognitive load theory provides a valuable lens for understanding how emotional and cognitive factors interact to influence oral performance in EFL contexts.

4. Working Memory and Its Role in Oral Language Production

Working memory plays a central role in oral language production, serving as the temporary storage system that allows learners to hold linguistic elements in mind while processing and producing speech. Successful speaking requires learners to keep

ideas active, retrieve vocabulary, structure sentences, and monitor accuracy simultaneously. When working memory functions efficiently, learners can integrate these processes smoothly, resulting in fluent output. However, the capacity of working memory is limited, and emotional states such as anxiety further reduce its effectiveness by consuming attentional resources. As a result, learners may struggle to maintain coherent ideas, remember key vocabulary, or construct grammatically correct sentences during speaking tasks. This breakdown leads to pauses, repetitions, and fragmented speech. Understanding working memory's role in speaking emphasizes that fluency is not simply a measure of linguistic knowledge but a reflection of how well cognitive systems manage real-time processing demands.

5. Affective Filter Hypothesis and Speaking Fluency

The Affective Filter Hypothesis posits that emotional variables—such as motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety—act as a filter that influences the extent to which learners can process linguistic input and produce output. A high affective filter, often caused by fear or stress, blocks language acquisition and restricts learners' capacity to experiment with new vocabulary or structures during speaking activities. When EFL learners experience speaking anxiety, their affective filter rises, leading to heightened self-consciousness and reduced willingness to communicate. This emotional barrier not only limits oral participation but also hinders the development of fluency, as learners miss opportunities to practice and internalize linguistic patterns. Conversely, a low affective filter creates a relaxed, supportive environment in which learners feel comfortable taking risks, resulting in more spontaneous and fluent speech. Understanding the affective filter underscores the importance of emotional well-being in achieving oral proficiency.

6. Interactionist Perspectives on Anxiety and Oral Communication

Interactionist theories emphasize that language development occurs through meaningful social interaction, highlighting the role of communication opportunities, feedback, and negotiation of meaning in shaping learners' oral proficiency. Speaking anxiety disrupts this process by reducing learners' willingness to participate in conversations, ask questions, or respond to peers. When anxiety inhibits interaction, learners miss crucial opportunities to refine their speaking skills through real-time feedback and collaborative dialogue. Interactionist perspectives argue that fluency emerges from repeated exposure to communicative practice, where learners gradually develop automaticity and confidence. Anxiety, however, breaks this cycle by limiting engagement and reducing the quantity and quality of linguistic input and output. As a result, learners may remain stuck at a low level of fluency despite having adequate linguistic knowledge. This viewpoint highlights the importance of supportive interactional environments that minimize anxiety and encourage active participation in communicative exchanges.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore how language anxiety influences the speaking fluency of EFL learners from a psycholinguistic perspective. The method focused on analyzing conceptual patterns, theoretical interpretations, and documented findings from previous scholarly works rather than collecting numerical data or interview responses. Relevant literature on language anxiety, cognitive processing, and speaking fluency was systematically

reviewed to identify recurring themes and explanatory frameworks. The analysis centered on understanding how anxiety affects cognitive mechanisms such as working memory, lexical retrieval, and self-monitoring, and how these disruptions manifest in learners' speaking behavior. This approach allowed for an in-depth examination of the relationship between emotional variables and fluency without relying on empirical measurement tools. The qualitative descriptive method was chosen because it provides a comprehensive and coherent understanding of complex psychological and linguistic interactions, making it appropriate for interpreting the multifaceted nature of language anxiety in EFL speaking performance.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of the analysis reveal that language anxiety manifests primarily through behavioral, cognitive, and affective disruptions that collectively weaken speaking fluency. Learners often show observable signs such as increased pauses, self-corrections, and avoidance of oral tasks, indicating interference in the real-time processing required for speech production. At the cognitive level, anxiety limits working memory capacity, making it challenging to retrieve vocabulary or organize ideas smoothly, which leads to broken fluency patterns. Affective factors such as low confidence, fear of negative evaluation, and emotional tension further reinforce these disruptions by discouraging risk-taking and reducing participation. These findings align with psycholinguistic models that emphasize the vulnerability of speech planning and articulation under emotional pressure. The interplay of these factors demonstrates that anxiety is not an isolated emotional response but a multidimensional barrier that influences every stage of oral communication.

Further analysis shows that the instructional environment significantly shapes the extent to which anxiety affects fluency. Supportive teacher feedback, collaborative peer interactions, and communicative task designs contribute to lowering anxiety levels and improving learners' willingness to engage in speaking activities. In contrast, highly evaluative or competitive environments intensify anxiety and reduce opportunities for practice, which are essential for developing automaticity and fluency. The results also indicate that repeated exposure to meaningful speaking tasks helps learners gradually overcome anxiety by strengthening cognitive familiarity and confidence. As students practice more frequently, they experience improvements in pacing, coherence, and idea development. This suggests that fluency growth is closely linked to both emotional comfort and structured instructional support, highlighting the need for learning environments that prioritize psychological safety alongside linguistic goals.

Discussion

Table 1. Manifestations of Language Anxiety in EFL Speaking

No.	Indicator of Anxiety	Behavioral Expression	Psycholinguistic Effect
1	Speech hesitation	Frequent pauses and fillers	Interference with lexical access
2	Self-monitoring	Overchecking grammar & pronunciation	Reduced automaticity
3	Avoidance tendency	Reluctance to speak in class	Decreased exposure to input/output

4	Physical tension	Voice trembling, rigid posture	Cognitive overload
5	Fear of evaluation	Worry about mistakes	Reduced attention to message

The results reflected in Table 1 demonstrate how language anxiety manifests in observable behaviors that directly influence the speaking performance of EFL learners. Hesitations, prolonged pauses, and fillers often appear when learners experience disruptions in lexical retrieval and struggle to organize their thoughts under pressure. These behaviors are not simply signs of poor linguistic ability but rather indicators of heightened psycholinguistic strain. Over-monitoring of speech is another common pattern, where learners focus excessively on grammatical accuracy and pronunciation, preventing natural flow and spontaneity. This pattern illustrates the tension between linguistic knowledge and performance: learners may understand the language well but fail to express it fluently when anxiety interferes. Fear of being evaluated by peers or teachers further intensifies these manifestations and restricts students' willingness to participate actively in speaking tasks, ultimately reducing opportunities for authentic communication.

Beyond behavioral signals, the manifestations listed in Table 1 reveal deeper psycholinguistic consequences that shape fluency development. Anxiety-induced self-monitoring consumes cognitive resources that should support automatic speech production, resulting in slower articulation and fragmented discourse. Physical symptoms, such as trembling or rigid posture, reflect increased cognitive load and pressure on working memory, limiting learners' ability to coordinate speech planning and articulation. Avoidance tendencies show how anxiety can lead learners to withdraw from communicative opportunities, thereby restricting the input and practice necessary for fluency development. When anxiety dominates the speaking process, learners shift attention from meaning construction to error prevention, weakening the communicative function of speech. These findings reinforce that fluency challenges cannot be fully understood through linguistic factors alone; emotional and cognitive dynamics are equally influential in shaping learners' ability to communicate effectively.

Table 2. Cognitive Disruptions Associated with Speaking Anxiety

No.	Cognitive Process	Disruption Description	Impact on Fluency
1	Working memory	Reduced capacity	Difficulty sustaining utterances
2	Lexical retrieval	Slowed word access	Increased hesitation
3	Syntactic planning	Fragmented sentence construction	Broken fluency flow
4	Attentional control	Focus shifts to worries	Loss of coherence
5	Conceptualization	Difficulty organizing ideas	Disorganized speech

The cognitive disruptions summarized in Table 2 emphasize how anxiety infiltrates the psycholinguistic mechanisms underlying speech production. Working memory reduction is one of the most prominent impacts, as anxious learners struggle to hold linguistic information while formulating ideas. This leads to shorter utterances and difficulty sustaining coherent sentences. Lexical retrieval also becomes slower

under anxiety, causing noticeable delays and hesitations even when learners possess the necessary vocabulary. This illustrates the gap between internal knowledge and performance under pressure. Syntactic planning is similarly affected, with learners producing grammatically incomplete or fragmented sentences. These outcomes highlight that fluent speech is not solely dependent on linguistic knowledge but significantly influenced by how efficiently cognitive systems operate under emotional strain.

The table further illustrates that attentional control plays a critical role in shaping speech fluency. Anxiety redirects learners' attention from the communicative task toward internal worries, such as fear of errors or negative judgment. This mental shift disrupts coherence, preventing learners from maintaining a logical flow of ideas. Conceptualization—the phase where speakers structure their message before producing it—is also impaired, leading to disorganized speech and difficulties forming clear arguments. These disruptions reveal that fluent oral performance requires stable cognitive functioning, which anxiety directly undermines. The findings confirm that speaking fluency cannot thrive when mental resources are compromised, as learners struggle to coordinate idea generation, linguistic formulation, and articulation simultaneously. Hence, reducing cognitive disruptions is essential for supporting learners' oral competence.

Table 3. Affective Influences on Speaking Fluency

No.	Affective Factor	Description	Effect on Performance
1	Self-confidence	Belief in ability to speak	Enhances or restricts fluency
2	Motivation	Desire to engage in speaking	Supports sustained practice
3	Self-efficacy	Judgement of speaking capability	Influences willingness to attempt tasks
4	Emotional stability	Ability to regulate anxiety	Improves coherence and clarity
5	Willingness to communicate	Openness to interaction	Increases frequency of speaking

Table 3 presents affective variables that shape learners' speaking fluency through emotional and psychological pathways. Self-confidence emerges as a central factor, as learners with higher confidence tend to speak more naturally and engage in communicative tasks without excessive concern about errors. Motivation is equally important, influencing learners' commitment to practicing speaking skills both inside and outside the classroom. When motivation is strong, learners are more inclined to participate and challenge themselves in communicative activities, which enhances fluency through repeated exposure. Self-efficacy, or the belief in one's ability to perform successfully, determines whether learners attempt challenging speaking tasks or withdraw from them. High self-efficacy often correlates with greater persistence and resilience during oral communication.

Emotional stability and willingness to communicate add further depth to the affective influences on fluency identified in Table 3. Emotional stability enables learners to regulate anxiety, maintain clarity of thought, and produce coherent speech even in demanding communicative environments. Learners who can manage emotional fluctuations are better equipped to sustain fluency when encountering

linguistic challenges. Willingness to communicate reflects learners' readiness to initiate or engage in interaction and plays a crucial role in determining how frequently they use the language. The more learners speak, the more they develop automaticity, reduce hesitation, and improve phrase-level fluency. These affective elements collectively highlight that fluency development is not solely dependent on linguistic ability but significantly shaped by emotional readiness, personal beliefs, and internal motivational drives.

Table 4. Instructional Factors Influencing Anxiety and Fluency

No.	Instructional Element	Description	Influence on Fluency
1	Teacher feedback	Supportive vs. critical responses	Shapes learner confidence
2	Classroom atmosphere	Safe vs. evaluative environment	Reduces or heightens anxiety
3	Speaking task design	Complexity and familiarity	Affects cognitive load
4	Peer interaction	Collaborative vs. competitive	Impacts willingness to communicate
5	Practice opportunity	Frequency of speaking	Promotes fluency development

Table 4 highlights instructional conditions that influence both anxiety and speaking fluency in EFL learning environments. Teacher feedback is one of the most powerful determinants of learners' emotional responses. Supportive, constructive feedback encourages students to view mistakes as part of the learning process, whereas overly critical feedback heightens anxiety and reduces participation. Classroom atmosphere also plays a key role. A safe, inclusive environment allows learners to speak freely without fear of judgment, lowering affective barriers. Task design influences cognitive load; activities that are overly complex may overwhelm learners, while familiar and meaningful tasks support smoother speech production. These findings indicate that instructional choices can either mitigate or intensify the emotional challenges that hinder fluency.

Peer interaction and practice opportunities further shape learners' fluency development. Collaborative interactions promote confidence and provide learners with authentic communicative exchanges that reinforce fluency. Competitive environments, however, may heighten anxiety and discourage students from taking risks in speaking. The frequency of practice is essential because fluency depends on repeated exposure to speaking tasks that foster automaticity. Learners who regularly participate in communicative activities gradually reduce hesitation and improve coherence in oral production. These instructional factors show that fluency is not solely an individual challenge but a product of the learning ecosystem. When instructional practices align with learners' emotional needs, fluency improves as anxiety diminishes and cognitive resources are freed for meaningful communication.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study emphasizes that language anxiety plays a significant and multifaceted role in shaping the speaking fluency of EFL learners, particularly through its impact on essential psycholinguistic processes. Anxiety

disrupts working memory, slows lexical retrieval, and increases self-monitoring, all of which hinder the smooth production of speech and reduce learners' confidence in oral communication. These disruptions manifest in frequent pauses, fragmented sentences, and avoidance of speaking tasks, ultimately limiting opportunities for fluency development. The findings also highlight that supportive instructional environments and emotionally safe learning conditions are crucial for mitigating anxiety and promoting more effective speaking performance. By understanding the cognitive and affective mechanisms through which anxiety affects fluency, educators can design interventions that not only enhance linguistic competence but also address learners' emotional needs, leading to more sustainable improvements in EFL oral proficiency.

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