

Revisiting the Anxiety-Speaking Ability Link in Vocational EFL Education

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Abstract

- Purpose** : This study examines the relationship between speaking anxiety and English speaking ability among students at an Islamic vocational high school in South Sumatra, Indonesia.
- Method** : A quantitative correlational design was employed involving 100 students. Data were collected through a questionnaire and analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson's product-moment correlation.
- Results** : The results showed that the students had a relatively high level of speaking anxiety ($M = 38.49$, $SD = 4.63$), while their English speaking ability was at a moderate level ($M = 36.02$, $SD = 2.63$). The correlation analysis revealed a very weak negative and statistically nonsignificant relationship between speaking anxiety and English speaking ability ($r = -0.043$, $p = 0.670$).
- Conclusion** : The findings indicate that speaking anxiety was not significantly associated with the students' English speaking ability. Their speaking ability may therefore be influenced by other factors, including instructional practices, motivation, learning context, and environmental support.

Keywords: speaking anxiety; English speaking ability; correlational study; vocational high school; foreign language anxiety

1. Introduction

Anxiety is one of the most extensively examined affective factors in foreign language education because learners' emotional states may shape how they participate in and respond to language learning. Speaking is particularly relevant to this issue because oral production requires learners to formulate and deliver language in real time, often under conditions in which opportunities for revision are limited (Altamimi & Altamimi, 2025; Fitriyani et al., 2023). Speaking ability itself is multidimensional, involving the coordinated use of linguistic resources, cognitive processing, and sociolinguistic knowledge (Rizkiya & Pratolo, 2023; Thornbury, 2005). It encompasses dimensions such as accuracy, fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, interaction, and appropriateness to communicative contexts (Harmer, 2007; Shzh-chen & Nancy, 2021). Consequently, difficulties in oral English cannot necessarily be attributed to a single affective factor. Learners may experience problems with vocabulary retrieval, fluency, and confidence (Kashinathan & Abdul Aziz, 2021), while their oral performance may also be shaped by self-esteem (Gultom & Oktaviani, 2022), social pressure from family and peers (Garcia et al., 2023), and classroom climate (Maulana & Kaniadewi, 2025). At the instructional level, structured opportunities such as role-play, picture-description

activities, and technology-mediated practice have also been reported to support speaking development (Cahyadi et al., 2022; Pinatih, 2021; Pratiwi & Ayu, 2020; Vygotsky, 1978; Wood et al., 1976). These observations indicate that speaking ability should be understood as an outcome emerging from the interaction of linguistic, affective, instructional, and contextual conditions rather than from anxiety alone.

Two theoretical perspectives provide a basis for examining how anxiety may relate to foreign language performance. Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis proposes that heightened anxiety can increase an affective filter that may interfere with the processing and use of comprehensible input (Zhang, 2023). At a more domain-specific level, Horwitz et al., (1986) conceptualized Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) as a situation-specific construct involving communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Later discussions have distinguished among trait, state, test-related, and culturally or socially conditioned forms of anxiety (Hermawan & Susilawati, 2024; Sari & Ningsih, 2022). In empirical studies, anxiety has been examined through indicators including nervousness, situational stress, fear of negative evaluation, evaluative situations, and perceptions of social (Hermawan & Susilawati, 2024; Sari & Ningsih, 2022). Its antecedents may include low confidence, limited motivation, insecurity, fear of mistakes, limited vocabulary, grammatical or pronunciation difficulties, insufficient preparation, and classroom dynamics (Zaki, 2025). In vocational settings, fear of ridicule from peers may be especially salient (Sinadia & Ngingi, 2023). These frameworks therefore provide a plausible theoretical basis for expecting anxiety to be associated with speaking performance, while they do not by themselves establish that such an association must occur in every educational context.

A considerable body of empirical research has reported a negative association between speaking anxiety and oral performance. For example, high anxiety has been associated with reduced participation among Turkish university freshmen (Durmuş & Kızıltan, 2025), restricted vocabulary use and syntactic complexity among Thai secondary students (Muengnakin & Narathakoon, 2025), and performance pressure during spontaneous speaking tasks in China (Jiamei et al., 2025). Indonesian research has likewise documented difficulties associated with speaking anxiety, including reduced fluency and confidence among senior high school students in Jakarta (Lestari et al., 2024) and sentence-construction difficulties and avoidance of speaking practice among junior high school students in Palembang (Despita, 2022). Quantitative evidence has also shown a moderate negative correlation between anxiety and speaking ability (Alfiana, 2019), while other work has examined the relationship between self-efficacy and anxiety (Mardianti et al., 2023) and reported higher oral scores among lower-anxiety learners in video-based assessment (Winataputra, 2021). However, the evidence is not uniformly negative. Nolayatin et al., (2025) found only a weak and statistically insignificant relationship in classroom presentations, while Hasan, (2024) found no significant difference in speaking anxiety between English Club participants and non-participants. Fadly et al., (2022), meanwhile, reported a very strong positive relationship between learning motivation and speaking skill ($r = 0.952$), suggesting that factors other than anxiety may account for substantial variation in oral outcomes. The coexistence of significant, weak, and non-significant findings indicates that the anxiety-speaking relationship requires closer attention to context, measurement, learner characteristics, and instructional conditions.

This inconsistency points to an important limitation in the existing literature. Much of the available evidence has been generated in academic-track secondary schools or tertiary institutions (Vi et al., 2025), whereas vocational high schools, and particularly Indonesian Islamic vocational schools, remain comparatively underrepresented. This matters because vocational education places English within a different institutional purpose: students may receive less instructional time for general English while simultaneously being expected to develop communication that is relevant to future technical and workplace contexts (Ehsanifard et al., 2022; Harmer, 2007; Thornbury, 2005). In addition, an Islamic vocational school situated within a boarding-school environment may involve distinctive communal and social expectations that could shape perceptions of peer evaluation and social norms (Horwitz et al., 1986; Sinadia & Ngingi, 2023). Thus, findings from general academic or university settings cannot simply be assumed to apply to this population. The present study addresses this contextual gap by examining whether speaking anxiety is statistically associated with English speaking ability in an Indonesian Islamic vocational high school. Importantly, the study does not assume in advance that anxiety must be a significant predictor; instead, it tests whether the relationship proposed by dominant theoretical accounts is observable in this specific educational ecology.

The study was conducted at SMK Islam Raden Fatah Tugumulyo, an Islamic vocational high school in Lempuing District, Ogan Komering Ilir Regency, South Sumatra, Indonesia. Preliminary observation revealed an instructive contrast: although many students appeared hesitant when speaking English, the school had produced a top competitor in an inter-district English master-of-ceremony competition. This contrast provided a practical rationale for examining whether students' reported speaking anxiety was actually associated with their reported speaking ability. Drawing on FLCA theory (Horwitz et al., 1986) and the Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982), the study examined speaking anxiety through nervousness, stressness, fear of negative evaluation, evaluative situations, and social norm perception, and examined English speaking ability through vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and contextual conditions. The central research question was: Is there a significant relationship between speaking anxiety and students' English speaking ability? The study therefore contributes to the literature not by assuming a universal anxiety effect, but by testing the applicability of that relationship in an under-examined vocational and religious educational context. Its value lies particularly in clarifying whether the negative association documented in some previous settings is also evident among Indonesian Islamic vocational students.

H₀: There is no significant relationship between speaking anxiety and students' English speaking ability.

H₁: There is a significant relationship between speaking anxiety and students' English speaking ability.

The findings are intended to contribute to the discussion of foreign language anxiety by adding evidence from an Indonesian Islamic vocational-school context and by clarifying the extent to which the anxiety–speaking relationship can be observed in a setting that differs from the academic and tertiary contexts represented in much of the existing literature. The study also provides a basis for considering whether pedagogical and environmental conditions should be examined alongside anxiety when explaining students' English speaking ability.

2. Method

This study employed a quantitative correlational design to examine the strength, direction, and significance of the relationship between speaking anxiety and English speaking ability, following Creswell and David Creswell's (2018). The design did not permit causal inference; therefore, findings were interpreted only as statistical associations.

The study was conducted at SMK Islam Raden Fatah Tugumulyo, an Islamic vocational high school in Tugumulyo Village, Lempuing District, Ogan Komering Ilir Regency, South Sumatra, Indonesia, in September 2025. The school, managed by the Darussalam Islamic Boarding School Foundation, offers Computer and Network Engineering (TKJ), Motorcycle Business and Engineering (TBSM), and Fashion Design (TB). The population consisted of 125 students in the 2025/2026 academic year. Using purposive sampling and survey-research guidance from (Memon et al., 2020), 100 students from grades X–XII and all three programs were selected. This sampling reflected the specific population and context rather than supporting broad statistical generalization (Creswell & David Creswell, 2018). The sample comprised 54% male and 46% female students.

The study examined speaking anxiety (X) and English speaking ability (Y). Speaking anxiety was defined as nervousness, worry, or fear when speaking English, particularly in formal or evaluative situations, and measured through five indicators: nervousness, stressness, fear of negative evaluation, evaluative situations, and social norm perception. Speaking ability referred to students' capacity to convey ideas and information orally using appropriate linguistic elements and was measured through six indicators: vocabulary mastery, grammar, pronunciation, supportive learning conditions, social pressure, and environment. Both variables were measured using five-point Likert-scale self-report questionnaires ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Data were collected using two structured questionnaires. The speaking anxiety questionnaire was adapted from Horwitz et al.'s (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and contextualized for vocational-school students. It contained 10 items across five indicators, while the speaking ability questionnaire contained 12 items across six indicators, with two items per indicator. Instrument development followed questionnaire-design principles proposed by Creswell and Creswell (2018), emphasizing alignment with research objectives, clarity, and appropriate Likert-type responses.

Validity was assessed through item-total correlations using SPSS, with all 22 items showing r -values above the critical value and significance levels below 0.05. Reliability was examined using Cronbach's alpha, with >0.60 considered acceptable. The speaking anxiety and speaking ability scales yielded $\alpha = 0.769$ and $\alpha = 0.752$, respectively, indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 26 through descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive analysis included mean, standard deviation, minimum, maximum, and frequency distributions. Normality was tested using the one-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, while linearity was examined using the deviation-from-linearity statistic. As both assumptions were satisfied, Pearson Product Moment correlation was applied to determine the direction and strength of the relationship. Statistical significance was assessed using a two-tailed test at $\alpha = 0.05$. Consistent with the correlational design, the coefficient was interpreted as an association rather than causal evidence.

3. Result

Respondent Characteristics

The 100 respondents were distributed across three grade levels (X, XI, and XII) and three vocational programs (TKJ, TBSM, and TB), as summarized in Table 1. Overall, male students comprised 54% of the sample ($n = 54$) and female students comprised 46% ($n = 46$). This distribution reflects the gendered enrollment pattern typical of the school's vocational tracks: Motorcycle Business and Engineering (TBSM) enrolled exclusively male students in this sample, Fashion Design (TB) enrolled exclusively female students, while Computer and Network Engineering (TKJ) drew a more balanced mix of male and female students across all three grade levels.

Table 1. Distribution of Respondents by Grade, Vocational Program, and Gender

Grade	Vocational Program	Male	Female	Total
X	Computer & Network Engineering (TKJ)	6	4	10
	Fashion Design (TB)	0	4	4
	Motorcycle Business & Engineering (TBSM)	11	0	11
XI	Computer & Network Engineering (TKJ)	8	10	18
	Fashion Design (TB)	0	10	10
	Motorcycle Business & Engineering (TBSM)	10	0	10
XII	Computer & Network Engineering (TKJ)	10	11	21
	Fashion Design (TB)	0	7	7
	Motorcycle Business & Engineering (TBSM)	9	0	9
Total		54	46	100

Source: Field survey data (2025).

Descriptive Statistics of the Research Variables

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for both research variables. The speaking anxiety variable produced a mean score of 38.49 ($SD = 4.63$), with scores ranging from 25.00 to 49.00 (range = 24.00). Given that the ten-item instrument yields a theoretical maximum of 50, this mean corresponds to approximately 77% of the maximum possible score, indicating a relatively high overall level of speaking anxiety among respondents. The English speaking ability variable produced a mean score of 36.02 ($SD = 2.63$), with scores ranging from 27.00 to 45.00 (range = 18.00).

Relative to the twelve-item instrument's theoretical maximum of 60, this mean corresponds to approximately 60% of the maximum possible score, indicating a moderate overall level of speaking ability. Notably, the standard deviation for speaking ability (2.63) was considerably smaller than that for speaking anxiety (4.63), suggesting that students' speaking-ability scores were more tightly clustered around the mean, whereas their anxiety levels varied more widely across individuals.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Speaking Anxiety and English Speaking Ability

Variable	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Speaking Anxiety (X)	100	24.00	25.00	49.00	38.49	4.63
English Speaking Ability (Y)	100	18.00	27.00	45.00	36.02	2.63

Source: SPSS version 26 output.

Instrument Validity and Reliability

Item-level validity testing showed that all 10 items on the speaking anxiety instrument and all 12 items on the English speaking ability instrument produced corrected item-total correlation coefficients exceeding the critical r-table value of .1966, with significance levels below 0.05, confirming that all 22 items met the criterion for construct validity (Table 3). Reliability testing using Cronbach's alpha showed that both instruments exceeded the conventional acceptability threshold of 0.60, with the speaking anxiety scale yielding alpha = .769 and the English speaking ability scale yielding alpha = 0.752, indicating that both instruments demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency.

Table 3. Summary of Instrument Validity and Reliability

Instrument	Number of Items	Validity ($r > .1966$, $p < .05$)	Cronbach's Alpha	Reliability Status
Speaking Anxiety (X)	10	All items valid	0.769	Reliable
English Speaking Ability (Y)	12	All items valid	0.752	Reliable

Source: SPSS version 26 output.

Assumption Tests

Before conducting the correlation analysis, two prerequisite assumptions were tested. The one-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test produced an asymptotic significance value of 0.185 (> 0.05), indicating that the residuals were normally distributed and satisfied the assumption required for parametric analysis. The linearity test produced a deviation-from-linearity significance value of 0.110 (> 0.05), confirming a linear relationship between speaking anxiety and English speaking ability and supporting the use of Pearson Product Moment correlation (Table 4).

Table 4. Results of the Normality and Linearity Tests

Test	Statistic / Sig. Value	Criterion	Result
Normality (One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov)	Test statistic = 0.075; Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed) = 0.185	Sig. > 0.05	Normally distributed
Linearity (Deviation from Linearity)	Sig. = .110	Sig. > 0.05	Linear relationship

Source: SPSS version 26 output.

Correlation Test and Hypothesis Testing

The Pearson Product Moment correlation analysis yielded a correlation coefficient of $r = -0.043$ with a two-tailed significance value of $p = 0.670$ ($N = 100$) (Table 5). Because the significance value exceeded the alpha level of 0.05, the null hypothesis (H_0) was accepted and the alternative hypothesis (H_1) was rejected, indicating that there is no statistically significant relationship between speaking anxiety and students' English speaking ability in this sample. Although the coefficient's negative sign is consistent with the theoretically expected direction of the relationship, its near-zero magnitude indicates that speaking anxiety and English speaking ability were, in practice, statistically independent of one another among the students examined in this study.

Table 5. Pearson Product Moment Correlation Test Result

	Speaking Anxiety (X)	English Speaking Ability (Y)	N
Speaking Anxiety (X) - Pearson Correlation	1	-0.043	100
Speaking Anxiety (X) - Sig. (2-tailed)	-	0.670	100
English Speaking Ability (Y) - Pearson Correlation	-0.043	1	100
English Speaking Ability (Y) - Sig. (2-tailed)	0.670	-	100

Source: SPSS version 26 output.

4. Discussion

Students' Level of Speaking Anxiety

The descriptive results showed that students at SMK Islam Raden Fatah Tugumulyo reported a relatively high level of speaking anxiety ($M = 38.49$, $SD = 4.63$; approximately 77% of the maximum possible score). This indicates that anxiety was a notable feature of students' reported experiences when speaking English, even though the subsequent correlation analysis did not show a significant association with reported speaking ability. The finding is theoretically consistent with Foreign

Language Classroom Anxiety theory (Horwitz et al., 1986), particularly its emphasis on communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and anxiety in evaluative situations. The pattern is also compatible with the Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982), which provides a theoretical explanation for why anxiety may interfere with language use. Similar concerns about evaluation and performance have been documented among Thai, Turkish, and Chinese EFL learners (Durmuş & Kızıltan, 2025; Jiamei et al., 2025; Muengnakin & Narathakoon, 2025). The present finding extends this body of evidence by demonstrating that relatively high speaking anxiety is also present among students in an Indonesian Islamic vocational-school context. However, the descriptive presence of anxiety should not be interpreted as evidence that anxiety necessarily determines speaking ability, because the correlational result provides no statistical support for such a relationship in this sample.

Students' English Speaking Ability

Students' English speaking ability was at a moderate level ($M = 36.02$, $SD = 2.63$; approximately 60% of the maximum possible score). The relatively small standard deviation indicates that reported speaking-ability scores were clustered fairly closely around the mean. From a componential perspective, speaking proficiency requires the coordinated development of accuracy, fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, and interactional competence (Harmer, 2007; Thornbury, 2005). The moderate overall score therefore suggests that students had developed a degree of oral ability while still having room for further development across these dimensions. This interpretation is compatible with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural perspective, in which competence develops through interaction and scaffolder support, including assistance from more capable others (Wood et al., 1976). It is also consistent with evidence that structured speaking practice, such as role-play, can support speaking development (Pinatih, 2021). Importantly, however, the present measure captures students' reported speaking ability rather than directly observed oral performance; therefore, the result should be interpreted as an indication of perceived ability within this sample rather than as a standardized estimate of speaking proficiency.

The Relationship between Speaking Anxiety and English Speaking Ability

The central finding was that speaking anxiety was not significantly associated with students' English speaking ability ($r = -0.043$, $p = .670$). The coefficient was negative, which is directionally consistent with the relationship anticipated by FLCA theory and the Affective Filter Hypothesis, but its magnitude was negligible and the association was statistically non-significant. Thus, the data do not provide evidence that students who reported higher levels of speaking anxiety also reported substantially lower speaking ability in this sample. This is an important finding because it qualifies, rather than simply confirms, the expectation that anxiety should be closely tied to oral performance.

The result differs from studies reporting significant negative relationships between anxiety and speaking performance, including research involving Indonesian secondary students (Despita, 2022; Lestari et al., 2024) (Lestari et al., 2024; Despita, 2022), non-English-major university students in Vietnam (Vi et al., 2025), and vocational-school students in Pekanbaru (Alfiana, 2019). At the same time, it is compatible with evidence of weak or non-significant relationships, including Nolayatin's (2024) classroom-presentation study and Hasan's (2024) comparison of English Club and non-English Club students. Rather than treating these findings as mutually exclusive, the broader pattern suggests that the anxiety-speaking relationship may be contingent on contextual and

measurement conditions. The present study contributes to this discussion by extending the non-convergent evidence to an Indonesian Islamic vocational high school, a setting that has received less attention than general secondary and university contexts. In this respect, the contribution is not that the study disproves the theoretical relevance of anxiety; rather, it shows that the expected negative association was not evident when both constructs were measured through self-report in this particular population. The finding therefore supports a more context-sensitive interpretation of foreign language anxiety in which anxiety is considered one possible influence among several rather than a universally sufficient explanation of speaking ability.

Several factors may help explain why the expected relationship was not statistically evident. First, both constructs were measured through self-report questionnaires. The speaking-ability measure therefore captures students' perceptions of their ability rather than directly observed oral performance. Differences between perceived and actual performance may have weakened the observed association. This methodological explanation is especially important because speaking ability is multidimensional and performance-based by nature (Harmer, 2007; Thornbury, 2005). Second, students may develop ways of managing anxiety through repeated exposure to speaking situations. The possibility of adaptation is consistent with a sociocultural view of learning in which competence can develop through interaction, scaffolding, and repeated participation even when learners continue to experience affective pressure (Vygotsky, 1978; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). The present data, however, do not directly measure coping or adaptation, so this explanation should be regarded as plausible rather than established. Third, previous research suggests that self-esteem, classroom climate, and motivation can also shape students' willingness to communicate and speaking outcomes (Fadly et al., 2022; Gultom & Oktaviani, 2022; Maulana & Kaniadewi, 2025). The very strong relationship between motivation and speaking skill reported by Fadly et al., (2022), for example, indicates that motivational processes may warrant attention alongside anxiety. Students may also employ strategies such as preparation, positive self-talk, and gradual exposure to speaking tasks, as reported by Rizkiya and Pratolo (2023). Taken together, these considerations suggest that the non-significant correlation should not be read as evidence that anxiety is irrelevant. Rather, it indicates that anxiety alone did not explain meaningful variation in students' reported speaking ability in this sample. This distinction is important for the research gap: studies that focus primarily on anxiety may overlook the interaction of affective, instructional, motivational, and environmental conditions that characterize vocational speaking development.

Pedagogical Implications

The pedagogical implications should be derived cautiously from the pattern of findings. The relatively high level of reported anxiety indicates that emotional and evaluative pressures remain a legitimate educational concern, even though anxiety was not significantly associated with speaking ability. Teachers may therefore continue to cultivate a supportive classroom atmosphere, provide constructive feedback, and normalize mistakes as part of language learning, as suggested by Rizkiya and Pratolo, (2023). At the same time, the non-significant correlation indicates that anxiety reduction should not be treated as the sole route to improving speaking ability. Greater attention should also be given to direct opportunities for oral practice and skill development. Evidence concerning role-play (Pinatih, 2021), picture-description activities (Pratiwi & Ayu, 2020), and technology-mediated speaking practice (Cahyadi et al., 2022) provides relevant examples of instructional approaches that

can increase opportunities for meaningful oral production. In vocational education, such activities can be embedded in workplace-oriented tasks, such as explaining procedures, presenting projects, or simulating customer interactions, thereby connecting English practice with students' prospective occupational communication needs (Ehsanifard et al., 2022). The contribution of the present findings to pedagogy is therefore a shift in emphasis: teachers should address anxiety as part of the learning environment while simultaneously strengthening the linguistic and communicative conditions through which speaking ability develops.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between speaking anxiety and English speaking ability among 100 students at SMK Islam Raden Fatah Tugumulyo, an Islamic vocational high school in South Sumatra, Indonesia. The descriptive results showed a relatively high level of speaking anxiety and a moderate level of reported English speaking ability. However, Pearson Product Moment correlation analysis indicated no statistically significant relationship between the two variables ($r = -0.043$, $p = 0.670 > 0.05$). Although the negative direction of the coefficient is consistent with theoretical expectations, its negligible magnitude does not support the conclusion that speaking anxiety was meaningfully associated with students' reported speaking ability in this sample.

The main contribution of the study is to add context-specific evidence to the mixed literature on foreign language anxiety by showing that the expected negative association was not observed in an Indonesian Islamic vocational-school context. This finding qualifies interpretations derived from studies in which anxiety has been significantly associated with poorer speaking performance and suggests that the relationship should be examined in relation to learner population, educational setting, and measurement approach. The study does not establish that anxiety has no effect on speaking performance generally; rather, it indicates that anxiety alone did not account for meaningful variation in self-reported speaking ability among the participants examined. Pedagogically, the findings suggest that anxiety-sensitive teaching should be combined with sustained opportunities to develop vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and meaningful oral communication in supportive learning environments. These implications are particularly relevant to vocational education, where English development can be linked to future occupational communication needs.

6. References

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