The Challenges of Students' Shyness in Speaking English in the Classroom

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Abstract. Shyness is one of the affective factors that often hinders students' ability to speak English in the classroom, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. This study aims to investigate students' experiences of shyness in speaking English, identify the factors contributing to their shyness, and examine its impact on their speaking learning process. This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach. The participants were junior high school students who were involved in English learning activities during a community service program (KKN). Data were collected through an open-ended questionnaire consisting of 20 questions related to students' attitudes, feelings, experiences, and coping strategies in speaking English. The findings reveal that most students experience nervousness, fear of making mistakes, and fear of being laughed at by peers when speaking English. Peer reactions, low self-confidence, limited vocabulary, and pronunciation difficulties were identified as the main factors causing shyness. Furthermore, shyness negatively affects students' participation and willingness to practice speaking English in class. However, supportive teachers, group-based activities, and a relaxed learning atmosphere were found to help reduce students' shyness. This study suggests that teachers should create a supportive and non-threatening classroom environment to enhance students' confidence in speaking English.

Keywords: EFL Classroom; Qualitative Study; Shyness; Speaking Skill; Students' Perception

1. INTRODUCTION

Speaking is one of the most essential skills in learning English, as it enables students to express ideas, thoughts, and feelings directly in communication. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, speaking ability is often regarded as an indicator of students' success in mastering the language. Through speaking activities, students are expected to practice vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and fluency simultaneously. However, speaking is also considered the most challenging skill for many learners because it requires not only linguistic competence but also psychological readiness to communicate in front of others (Suryani & Widodo, 2022; Zhang & Tsung, 2023).

In many EFL contexts, students have learned English for several years, yet their oral participation in the classroom remains limited. Many students tend to be passive, reluctant to speak, or avoid speaking tasks altogether. This condition indicates that difficulties in speaking are not solely caused by a lack of language knowledge, but are also influenced by affective factors such as anxiety, fear of making mistakes, low self-confidence, and shyness (Al-Hoorie et al., 2021). These affective factors often create emotional barriers that prevent students from actively engaging in speaking activities and reduce their willingness to communicate in the target language.

Among various affective factors, shyness is one of the most common problems faced by students when speaking English in the classroom. Shyness is generally characterized by feelings of nervousness, embarrassment, fear of negative evaluation, and discomfort when

becoming the center of attention. Shy students often hesitate to speak because they are afraid of making mistakes, being laughed at by their classmates, or receiving negative comments from others (Khajavy, 2022). As a result, they tend to remain silent even when they have ideas to share or know the correct answers.

Previous studies have shown that students' shyness has a significant impact on their willingness to communicate and their speaking performance in EFL classrooms. Students who experience high levels of shyness tend to participate less in oral activities and have fewer opportunities to practice speaking English (Oflaz, 2021). Furthermore, peer reactions, such as mocking or laughing, can intensify students' feelings of embarrassment and fear, making them even more reluctant to speak. Teacher behavior also plays an important role, as supportive and encouraging teaching styles can help reduce students' shyness, while overly critical feedback may increase students' anxiety and inhibit participation (Suryani & Widodo, 2022).

Based on observations during English learning activities conducted in a school context, many students showed signs of shyness when asked to speak English in front of the class. Some students admitted feeling nervous, afraid of mispronunciation, and worried about being judged by their peers. These conditions highlight the importance of understanding students' subjective experiences related to shyness in speaking English. However, many previous studies focus more on quantitative measurements of anxiety and speaking performance, while fewer studies explore students' personal experiences and perceptions in depth through qualitative approaches (Creswell & Poth, 2021).

Therefore, this study aims to explore the challenges of students' shyness in speaking English in the classroom using a qualitative approach. Specifically, this research seeks to identify the factors that cause students to feel shy when speaking English, examine the impact of shyness on students' speaking learning process, and understand how students attempt to overcome their shyness. The findings of this study are expected to provide valuable insights for English teachers in creating a supportive learning environment that encourages students to speak English confidently and actively.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Shyness

Shyness is an affective factor that can hinder students' verbal interaction in foreign language learning. This condition is characterised by social anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and low self-confidence, which lead students to refrain from oral participation despite possessing adequate language ability. Research indicates that foreign language anxiety and fear

of social judgement are primary factors limiting students' oral participation in EFL classrooms (Attia & Algazo, 2025; Chen, 2025).

In the EFL context, shyness is closely associated with willingness to communicate (WTC), which refers to students' readiness to use the target language in specific communicative situations. WTC is influenced by psychological factors such as speaking anxiety, self-confidence, and personality traits. Students who experience high levels of anxiety and shyness tend to exhibit lower WTC, thereby limiting their opportunities to practise speaking (Syafitri et al., 2025; Wang & Zhang, 2025). Furthermore, shyness often co-occurs with foreign language anxiety, which has been identified as a negative predictor of students' readiness to engage in oral communication across various English language learning contexts (Alqarni, 2023; Ilyas, 2022).

Speaking Skill and Affective Factors

Speaking skills are abilities that not only depend on linguistic mastery but are also heavily influenced by students' emotional readiness. Affective factors such as speaking anxiety and shyness often arise when students are required to speak in formal situations, which lowers their self-confidence and encourages them to avoid speaking tasks that demand direct social interaction. This anxiety is generally triggered by the fear of making mistakes, lack of self-confidence, and concerns about negative evaluation (Wirentake, 2025).

Furthermore, the fear of judgment from peers and teachers can worsen students' affective conditions and provoke emotional and physical reactions that hinder oral performance. Low self-confidence, which is influenced by learning experiences, social support, and students' psychological conditions, becomes one of the main factors contributing to difficulties in speaking in the EFL classroom. Therefore, teaching approaches sensitive to affective aspects are needed, such as creating a supportive learning environment, emotional reinforcement, and speaking activities that encourage safe risk-taking (Asnaini et al., 2025).

Speaking Skills and Affective Factors

Speaking skills do not solely depend on linguistic competence but are also strongly influenced by students' emotional readiness. Affective factors such as speaking anxiety and shyness frequently emerge when students are required to speak in formal situations, thereby reducing self-confidence and encouraging learners to avoid speaking tasks that demand direct social interaction. This anxiety is commonly triggered by fear of making mistakes, lack of self-confidence, and concerns about negative evaluation (Wirentake, 2025).

Furthermore, fear of judgement from peers and teachers can exacerbate students' affective conditions and elicit emotional as well as physical reactions that hinder oral

performance. Low self-confidence, shaped by learning experiences, social support, and students' psychological conditions, constitutes one of the primary factors contributing to speaking difficulties in EFL classrooms. Therefore, teaching approaches that are sensitive to affective aspects are required, including the creation of a supportive learning environment, emotional reinforcement, and speaking activities that encourage safe risk-taking (Asnaini et al., 2025).

The Role of Teachers in Addressing Shyness

Teachers play a crucial role as facilitators in creating an emotionally safe classroom climate that encourages students to communicate. Research indicates that instructional strategies prioritising positive feedback, emotional encouragement, and the development of a supportive learning atmosphere can help reduce students' anxiety and foster their self-confidence in speaking English (Ulpa et al., 2025).

In addition, teachers may implement various approaches such as role play, small-group discussions, and active learning activities, which not only reduce social pressure but also allow students to practise collaboratively without fear of judgement. These strategies contribute to increased active participation in speaking activities (Muthmainnah et al., 2025). Accordingly, the teacher's role in facilitating safe interaction and providing constructive feedback is essential in supporting students in overcoming shyness in EFL classrooms.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to investigate the challenges of students' shyness in speaking English in the classroom. This design was selected because it enables the researcher to explore students' personal experiences, feelings, and perceptions in depth, particularly regarding affective factors that influence their speaking performance. Qualitative descriptive research is suitable for capturing participants' perspectives in natural settings and for describing phenomena as experienced by individuals (Merriam & Tisdell, 2021). A qualitative approach is considered appropriate for understanding the complexity of students' emotional responses and classroom interactions that cannot be adeuately measured through numerical data alone (Miles et al., 2020).

Participants

The participants of this study were junior high school students grade IX who participated in English learning activities during a Community Service Program (KKN). The participants consisted of male and female students from different classes with varying levels

of English proficiency. The students were selected using purposive sampling, as they were actively involved in classroom speaking activities and had direct experiences related to speaking English in front of their classmates. Purposive sampling allows researchers to select participants who can provide rich and relevant information related to the research focus (Etikan et al., 2021).

Measures

The main instrument used in this study was an open-ended questionnaire consisting of 20 questions. The questionnaire was designed to examine several aspects related to students' shyness in speaking English, including:

a. Students' attitudes toward English,
b. Emotional responses when speaking English in class,
c. Factors that cause shyness (e.g., fear of making mistakes and peer reactions),
d. The influence of teachers' attitudes and teaching styles,
e. The impact of shyness on students' speaking learning process, and
f. Strategies used by students to overcome shyness.

Open-ended questionnaires are effective in qualitative research because they allow participants to express their thoughts freely and provide detailed explanations of their experiences without being restricted by predetermined response options (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. First, all students' responses were read repeatedly to gain a general understanding of the data. Second, relevant statements were coded based on recurring ideas and patterns. Third, the codes were grouped into broader themes such as fear of making mistakes, peer influence, teacher support, lack of confidence, and coping strategies. Finally, the themes were interpreted and described descriptively to answer the research questions and were supported by relevant theories and previous studies. Thematic analysis was chosen because it provides a flexible and systematic approach for identifying patterns of meaning across qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings of this study are presented based on the themes generated through thematic analysis. After repeatedly reading the students' responses, several recurring ideas were identified and grouped into major themes related to students' shyness in speaking English in the classroom.

Fear of Making Mistakes

The most dominant theme emerging from the data was fear of making mistakes. Many students expressed fear of incorrect pronunciation, grammatical errors, and inappropriate word choice when speaking English. Students frequently mentioned that English pronunciation is different from its spelling, which increased their anxiety and hesitation. This fear often caused students to feel nervous and reluctant to speak, even when they understood the topic being discussed.

Peer Influence

Another prominent theme was peer influence. A large number of students reported feeling shy because they were afraid of being laughed at, mocked, or judged by their classmates. Negative peer reactions, such as laughter and teasing, were perceived as highly discouraging. As a result, students tended to avoid speaking English in front of the class. However, some students stated that they felt more comfortable when their peers were supportive or when speaking in smaller groups.

Teacher Support

The theme of teacher support emerged as an important factor influencing students' confidence. Most students described their teachers' attitudes positively, highlighting patience, encouragement, and clear explanations. Supportive teacher behavior made students feel safer and more confident when speaking English. Students noted that gentle correction and motivational comments helped reduce their fear and embarrassment.

Lack of Confidence

The data also revealed lack of confidence as a recurring theme closely related to shyness. Many students admitted that they did not feel confident in their speaking ability, which led them to remain silent or avoid eye contact when asked to speak. This lack of confidence was often linked to limited vocabulary, fear of errors, and negative peer evaluation.

Coping Strategies

Despite experiencing shyness, students demonstrated various coping strategies. These included practicing independently, calming themselves before speaking, ignoring negative

comments, and preferring to speak in pairs or groups. Many students expressed a strong preference for relaxed learning situations such as games and small-group discussions, which helped them feel less pressured and more willing to speak English.

Discussion

Fear of Making Mistakes and Speaking Anxiety

The findings indicate that fear of making mistakes is the primary source of students' shyness in speaking English. This result supports previous research suggesting that concern over linguistic accuracy often increases speaking anxiety in EFL learners (Khajavy, 2022). Students' fear of pronunciation and grammatical errors reflects the high pressure they associate with speaking tasks, which can inhibit spontaneous communication.

The Role of Peer Influence in Shaping Shyness

Peer influence emerged as a critical factor affecting students' emotional responses. The fear of negative evaluation from classmates significantly reduced students' willingness to speak. This finding is consistent with Al-Hoorie et al. (2021), who argue that social evaluation anxiety strongly impacts learners' oral participation. The data highlight that classroom social dynamics play a crucial role in either reinforcing or reducing students' shyness.

Teacher Support as a Protective Factor

The positive role of teacher support found in this study aligns with previous studies emphasizing the importance of a supportive learning environment. Teachers who provide encouragement, patience, and constructive feedback help lower students' affective barriers (Oflaz, 2021). The findings suggest that teacher behavior can function as a protective factor that mitigates students' fear and builds their confidence to speak.

Coping Strategies and Instructional Implications

Students' coping strategies indicate their awareness of emotional challenges in speaking English. The preference for pair and group work supports communicative language teaching principles that reduce public pressure and promote meaningful interaction. This study extends previous research by showing how students actively attempt to manage their shyness through self-regulation and selective participation, offering insights for designing speaking activities that are emotionally supportive.

5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This study examined the challenges of students' shyness in speaking English in the classroom using a qualitative descriptive approach. The findings indicate that students' shyness is primarily influenced by affective and social factors. Fear of making mistakes, especially in pronunciation and grammar, and fear of negative peer evaluation were identified as the main causes of students' reluctance to speak English. In addition, lack of self-confidence limited students' participation in speaking activities, even though many of them had positive attitudes toward learning English. The study also revealed that teacher support plays a crucial role in reducing students' shyness. Encouraging feedback, patience, and a supportive classroom atmosphere helped students feel more confident and willing to speak. Overall, students' shyness in speaking English is a complex issue that requires attention to emotional, social, and instructional aspects in EFL classrooms.

It is suggested that English teachers create a supportive and non-threatening learning environment by encouraging respectful peer interactions and reducing excessive error correction. Pair and group speaking activities, games, and relaxed discussions should be integrated to increase students' confidence. Future research is recommended to employ interviews or classroom observations to explore students' emotional experiences in greater depth.

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