

English foreign language learners' reluctance to speak English in higher education

ABSTRACT - Reluctance to speak English remains a persistent challenge for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in higher education, where oral participation is essential for academic engagement and communicative competence. Despite years of formal instruction, a considerable number of university students continue to avoid English communication, suggesting that their reluctance extends beyond purely linguistic limitations. This study investigates the characteristics and determinants of EFL students' reluctance to speak English, with particular attention to the interplay of affective, linguistic, and contextual factors. Employing a mixed-methods design, data were collected from undergraduate EFL students at four public universities in Indonesia using a structured questionnaire containing Likert-scale items. Quantitative data were analyzed through descriptive statistics, while qualitative responses were examined using inductive thematic analysis. The findings indicate that students' speaking reluctance is a multifaceted phenomenon predominantly shaped by speaking anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, diminished self-perceived communicative competence, and instructional approaches that prioritize accuracy over interaction. Silence emerged as a context-dependent, psychologically motivated response rather than an indicator of disengagement. Institutional expectations, hierarchical classroom dynamics, and limited opportunities for low-risk oral practice further exacerbated learners' reluctance. This study advances EFL speaking research by conceptualizing speaking reluctance as an affective-interactional dimension closely linked to willingness to communicate and classroom silence in higher education settings. Pedagogically, the findings underscore the necessity for anxiety-sensitive instruction and the creation of psychologically safe communicative environments.

Fakhrurrazi M. Amin^{1*}
M. Fadli²

Nasruddin³

^{1,2,3}State Institute for Islamic Studies
(IAIN) Langsa, Indonesia

*Corresponding email;

fakhrurrazi.amin@iainlangsa.ac.id

Article History

Submitted: 5 January 2026

Accepted: 25 March 2026

Published: 31 May 2026

Keywords

Speaking anxiety; Willingness to communicate (WTC); English foreign language learners; Classroom silence; Higher education

Recommended APA Citation

Amin, F. M., Fadli, M., & Nasruddin. (2026). English foreign language learners' reluctance to speak English in higher education. *Englisia: Journal of Language, Education, and Humanities*, 13(2), 206-223.

<https://doi.org/10.22373/englisia.133>

1. Introduction

The ability to speak English is essential for the students at the higher education level since it serves not only as indicator of communicative competence, but also as a means of actively participating in academic process (Morreale & Pearson, 2008), such as enables students to communicate their knowledge, ideas, and opinions and improve their relationships with peers, (Hunt et al., 2014; Morreale & Pearson, 2008). Even students are often required to present arguments, research result, and engage in scientific discussion activities that demand confident and clear speaking skills. Failure to develop these oral skills results in reduces academic engagement, limited opportunities for international collaboration, and potential barriers to graduates' career advancement (Rodero, 2025).

Despite its obvious importance, the phenomenon of reluctant to speak English remains obscure in many educational context around the world, empirical evidence shows that many EFL learners still avoid speaking English voluntarily and tend to participate only when prompted by the lecturer (Sato, 2024). Various cross-country studies report that a large number of EFL learners deliberately avoid speaking in class, wait for encouragement from the teacher before participating, or choose to remain passive during oral activities. As a study by Hamouda (2013) in Saudi Arabia, 156 students were reluctant to speak English. This reluctance is particularly prevalent in Asian contexts, where linguistic expectations, sociocultural norms, and affective barriers converge to shape students' participation patterns. As a result, the speaking component continues to be perceived as the most challenging skill for many EFL learners, even after years of formal instruction. This discrepancy between institutional expectations and students' actual communicative behavior raises important questions regarding why students' reluctant to speak English. While previous studies (Chen, 2024; Höl & Kasimi, 2022; Öztürk & Öztürk, 2021) have investigated speaking anxiety or classroom silence individually, fewer have examined how these elements intersect to shape the broader pattern of speaking reluctance among university-level EFL learners.

In the national context of Indonesia, attention to this phenomenon is particularly relevant because higher education in Indonesia is increasingly oriented toward internationalization and the use of English as the academic medium for scientific activities and global collaboration (Andayani, 2022). If students take a passive position in oral communication, these goals will be difficult to achieve. Conceptually, the phenomenon of reluctance to speak can be understood through several complementary theoretical frameworks. The willingness to communicate (WTC) framework highlights an individual's disposition to communicate in certain situations which is influenced by motivation, self-confidence, and opportunities for interaction (Barrios & Napiórkowska, 2024; Darasawang & Reinders, 2021). On the other hand, studies on speaking anxiety emphasize the role of affective factors such as fear of being judged, worry about making mistakes, and evaluative pressure, which can suppress the courage to speak. These two perspectives along with linguistic factors (limited vocabulary/structure), previous learning experiences, and classroom environment provide a basis for explaining why students choose to withdraw from oral practice. Reluctance to speak English has emerged as a pervasive challenge among EFL learners, particularly in higher education contexts where oral communication is

expected to serve as a marker of academic engagement and communicative competence (MacIntyre & Wang, 2021; Ye & Hu, 2025). This reluctance is not merely a surface-level hesitation but a complex behavioral pattern shaped by learners' psychological states, linguistic limitations, sociocultural norms, and prior learning experiences (Kirkpatrick et al., 2024). Conceptually, reluctance to speak English refers to learners' behavioral tendency to avoid, withdraw from, or minimize participation in oral communication (Chaisiri, 2023; Guo et al., 2023; Lei et al., 2024). This reluctance embodies a complex interplay between psychological, linguistic, and environmental factors that collectively diminish learners' willingness to initiate or sustain speech in a second language (Bai, 2023). As a result, reluctance to speak English becomes a critical barrier to achieving meaningful interaction in EFL classrooms and hinders the development of communicative competence that higher education institutions aim to cultivate.

Extensive research has been carried out on the topic of students' reluctance to speak English as a foreign language, which has led to a thorough understanding of the subject (Chalak & Baktash, 2015; Hamouda, 2013; Murad & Jalambo, 2019; Savaşçı, 2014). So far, studies on speaking skills have emphasized three main issues: linguistic competence in speaking (Chalak & Baktash, 2015; Maulana et al., 2016), students' reluctance due to psychological factors (Herbein et al., 2018; Liu & Littlewood, 1997; Mahdi, 2015), and technology in speaking skills (Bilyalova, 2017; Kitagaki, 2012; Maulidah, 2018; Millrood, 2015). These studies' results indicate that students' reluctance to speak English occurs due to several factors. However, the subject perspective related to reluctance to speak English as a foreign language still needs to be thoroughly analyzed. This study was conducted to fill the gap by investigating the subject's perspective on reluctance to speak English as a foreign language. In detail, this study tries to understand why the students' reluctance to speak English as a foreign language in Indonesia.

2. Literature review

2.1. Speaking anxiety

The phenomenon of speaking anxiety in the context of foreign language learning is progressively understood as a construct that is both performance-oriented and interactionally situated affective construct, rather than being viewed solely as a mere subcomponent of broader foreign language anxiety. Foreign language anxiety generally includes the emotional reactions of learners in language learning situations, whereas speaking anxiety arises specifically in the context of immediate oral communication, where the elements of linguistic processing, self-presentation, and social evaluation intersect (Bai, 2023). This distinction holds considerable theoretical importance, as the act of speaking involves immediacy, public exposure, and irreversibility, making it especially vulnerable to disruptions related to anxiety. The seminal work of Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) delineated foreign language anxiety as a unique construct associated with the communicative requirements of the classroom, which was operationalized via the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). While the FLCAS has established a fundamental measurement framework, later studies have raised concerns about its ability to adequately address task-specific and performance-related anxiety,

particularly in the realm of oral communication (Nuranifar, 2014), Consequently, modern research increasingly distinguishes speaking anxiety as a concept that requires distinct theoretical and methodological consideration.

Two prevailing theoretical frameworks underpin contemporary research on speaking anxiety. The framework of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) delineates anxiety as a complex, multifaceted construct that includes cognitive interference, affective tension, and behavioral avoidance in educational environments (Hanifa, 2018; Karatas et al., 2016a; Öztürk & Öztürk, 2021), Nonetheless, this framework has faced criticism for its focus on the classroom setting, potentially overlooking the dynamic and interactive essence of oral communication. Conversely, the Willingness to Communicate (WTC) model positions anxiety as a close affective factor that directly limits learners' preparedness to participate in speaking, thus mediating the connection between perceived communicative competence and actual language utilization (MacIntyre & Wang, 2021; Zabihi et al., 2024). From this vantage point, speaking anxiety operates not just as an emotional reaction, but as a regulatory mechanism that influences communicative behavior.

Methodologically, the assessment of speaking anxiety has transitioned from dependence on the FLCAS to the creation of instruments tailored specifically for speaking, such as the Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA) scales, aimed at improving construct validity in research concerning oral performance. Recent empirical studies are progressively embracing mixed-methods designs, combining questionnaire data with interviews, classroom observations, or stimulated recall to effectively capture both the intensity and situational expressions of anxiety (Thandavaraj & Mohd-Said, n.d.). Consistent empirical evidence suggests that speaking anxiety is influenced by a complex interaction of individual, linguistic, pedagogical, and sociocultural factors. The interplay of individual variables, such as diminished self-efficacy, trait anxiety, perfectionism, and apprehension regarding negative assessment, is influenced by linguistic constraints that encompass restricted lexical access, challenges in pronunciation, and perceived discrepancies between receptive and productive language skills. At the instructional level, the practices of teacher feedback, the dynamics of peer evaluation, and the formats of high-stakes oral assessments can significantly influence the levels of anxiety experienced by students, either intensifying or alleviating it. Outside the confines of the classroom, the sociocultural norms surrounding face-saving, expectations for participation, and the sociolinguistic standing of English whether regarded as a foreign or second language significantly influence the ways in which speaking anxiety is both experienced and articulated across various contexts.

2.2. Willingness to communicate

Offering a theoretically grounded account for learners' decisions to initiate or withhold communication in a second or foreign language, the Willingness to Communicate (WTC) framework has emerged as a pivotal construct in second or foreign language learning. The idea was rethought by MacIntyre and colleagues to include the many of cognitive, emotional, and contextual factors that make up second language (L2) communication, expanding on previous research by McCroskey and Baer on first language communication (Karatas et al., 2016b).

Within this broader framework, WTC is described as an individual's preparedness to participate in a conversation with specific people at a given time, taking into account both fixed tendencies and context-dependent fluctuations (Barrios & Napiórkowska, 2024; Darasawang & Reinders, 2021). The multi-layered design of the L2 WTC model is one of its main contributions. It takes into account both static factors, such as task characteristics and interlocutor support, and dynamic factors, such as personality, self-perceived communicative competence, and communication anxiety (Barrios & Napiórkowska, 2024). Proximal predictors of learners' willingness to speak include L2 self-confidence (Lei et al., 2024), which is defined as the combination of perceived competence and low anxiety. Confidence and fear are not fixed characteristics, according to recent research; rather, they are context-dependent and subject to change depending on the dynamics of the classroom.

In EFL settings, particularly those characterized by limited exposure to authentic communication and strong evaluative norms, learners frequently experience heightened anxiety and fragile self-confidence (Dewaele et al., 2024). These affective conditions have been shown to constrain WTC, resulting in reduced oral participation even among learners with adequate linguistic resources (Abalı, 2013; Agung, 2019; Clinton et al., 2023). Importantly, such patterns should not be interpreted as universal features of "Asian learners," but rather as contextually mediated tendencies shaped by instructional practices, assessment regimes, and sociocultural expectations surrounding classroom communication. The WTC framework also foregrounds the role of contextual and interactional variables in shaping learners' communicative behavior. Classroom climate, peer relationships, task design, and teacher interaction styles interact dynamically to either facilitate or inhibit situational WTC (Bagherzadeh, 2025; S. Li et al., 2024; Salbaş & Ekmekci, 2025; J. Zhang et al., 2018). Learning environments that emphasize psychological safety, supportive feedback, and opportunities for meaningful interaction tend to foster higher levels of willingness to communicate. In contrast, settings characterized by public error correction, competitive dynamics, or rigid teacher-centered practices may amplify learners' perception of communicative risk, thereby suppressing WTC (Myers, 2025; Rafik, 2025).

From an interpretive perspective, WTC framework serves as the primary interpretive lens for understanding learners' reluctance to speak English in higher education classrooms. Specifically, the framework is employed to interpret how students' reported experiences such as feelings of insecurity, fear of negative evaluation, limited perceived competence, and classroom interaction patterns contribute to moment-to-moment decisions about whether to speak or remain silent. Rather than treating reluctance as a single causal factor, the analysis draws on the layered structure of WTC to examine how psychological factors, linguistic self-perceptions, and classroom dynamics collectively influence students' readiness to communicate (Lei et al., 2024). In this way, the framework enables the study to connect individual narratives of silence with broader theoretical explanations of communicative behavior in EFL learning environments.

One essential dimension of the WTC framework is the link between communication anxiety and learners' readiness to talk (Kartal & Balçikanlı, 2018). Communication anxiety has consistently been highlighted as one of the most powerful proximal determinants of WTC, as high levels of anxiety can weaken learners' perceived communicative ability and reduce their

willingness to initiate connection. However, anxiety and WTC should not be viewed as opposing constructs. Instead, they serve as complementary explanatory viewpoints. While anxiety describes the mental strain felt during communicative circumstances, WTC explains how such emotional states transfer into observable behavioral choices specifically, whether or not learners choose to participate in communication.

2.3. English foreign language learning

The global status of English as a principal medium for international discourse has established it as a fundamental element within educational frameworks across the globe. In numerous expanding-circle contexts, such as Indonesia, English is acquired as a foreign language rather than functioning as a medium for everyday social engagement. In contexts of English as a Foreign Language, exposure to the language is predominantly restricted to formal educational environments, resulting in few chances for genuine application outside of the classroom (Moeller & Catalano, 2015; Sulistiyo, 2016). The limited exposure to the language makes the process of learning English intricate and influenced by various factors, including the design of educational frameworks, the backing of institutions, and the active participation of learners, rather than relying solely on organic interactions (Chou, 2018).

The instructional success of English as a foreign language (EFL) classes is affected by several interconnected factors, according to research in the field (Abali, 2013; Agung, 2019; Clinton et al., 2023). These factors include the teacher's competence and language proficiency, the classroom environment, the motivation of the learners, the instructional orientation, and the availability of learning resources. In settings where teachers are the principal interpreters of English for students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, teacher competency is seen as an important factor. Teachers have a crucial role in English as a foreign language (EFL) classes, impacting students' exposure, interactional possibilities, and views of English usage (Sulistiyo, 2016). Sustained professional growth is crucial for retaining educational relevance, according to empirical findings from the Indonesian EFL environment. Researchers Cirocki and Farrell (2019) found that in order to keep up with the ever-changing demands of curricula and student needs, EFL teachers in Indonesia must continually update their pedagogical and disciplinary skills. Moreover, when teachers apply tactics that encourage student agency, engagement, and strategic language use as highlighted by Pérez and Aleixandre (2018) learners' learning outcomes and performance are greatly affected.

Recent research highlights the significance of technology-mediated instruction in improving EFL learning environments. The incorporation of information and communication technologies (ICT) facilitates a transition from teacher-centered practices to more interactive and learner centered pedagogies, while also enhancing access to authentic linguistic input (Tuti Hidayati, 2016). The effectiveness of pedagogical innovations depends on teachers' preparedness and contextual sensitivity. EFL learning in Indonesia is significantly influenced by broader sociocultural and policy frameworks, extending beyond classroom-level variables. The intersection of learners' cultural values, communicative norms, and beliefs with national language policies and governmental attitudes towards English education influences instructional

practices and learner dispositions (Marcellino, 2015; Zein, 2016). Calls for enhancing EFL teaching in Indonesia emphasize the necessity for systemic alignment among curriculum design, teacher education, and sociocultural realities to ensure meaningful integration of English learning into the formal education system (Mappiasse & Bin Sihes, 2014).

2.4. Higher education and EFL speaking reluctance

Universities have a significant impact on students' ability to communicate effectively and their desire to participate in intellectual discussions mediated by English. According to Fuentesal-García et al. (2025) and Hasanah and Lestari (2025), universities are often seen in EFL settings as places that encourage students to feel comfortable speaking English, encourage active involvement, and provide continuous exposure to the language as a means of communication rather than just as a subject in the classroom. However, there is mounting evidence that many college-level EFL students, even after receiving a great deal of preparation, still struggle to speak English in a more formal classroom context. University students in Asian higher education contexts suffer from chronic speaking anxiety, low self-perceptions of their communication skills, and a heightened fear of being badly evaluated, according to empirical studies (Bashori et al., 2022; Sato, 2024). Importantly, these results cast doubt on the idea that linguistic inadequacies are the only cause of EFL speaking reluctance among university students. In reality, it is a product of the intricate web of relationships between individual psychology, group dynamics, and institutional norms in educational settings. Students' perceptions of the risks involved in communicating and the credibility of their academic work influence their contextual behavioral choices, including their unwillingness to speak up.

These problems become even more severe when students move from secondary to tertiary school. Presentations, debates, and critical discussions are commonplace in university classes, and students are expected to engage in these activities with advanced academic speaking abilities assumed (M. Amin & Zulfutri, 2022). Communicative expectations like these might make students feel anxious and isolated, especially if their previous English classes were more test-or form-focused. Tertiary students may be even more reluctant to participate in situations when there is a noticeable gap in competency since they tend to compare their speaking abilities to those of their classmates, according to the research. The transition from secondary to higher education further intensifies these challenges. University classrooms often impose heightened discursive demands, requiring students to participate in presentations, debates, and critical discussions that presuppose advanced academic speaking skills (X. Chen et al., 2022). For learners whose prior English education emphasized form-focused or examination-oriented instruction, such communicative expectations may generate heightened self-consciousness and withdrawal. Research suggests that tertiary learners frequently evaluate their speaking ability relative to their peers, which may exacerbate reluctance to participate, particularly in settings where proficiency disparities are salient.

Reluctance to speak English as a foreign language (EFL) in higher education is due in part to institutional power dynamics. Many Asian university contexts still have hierarchical teacher-student relationships, which can make students feel like they are competing with each

other in a high-stakes exam instead of learning from one another (Bossér & Lindahl, 2019; Lee & Ng, 2010). Students' inclination for quiet or minimum engagement is bolstered when they regard speaking in such settings as perhaps harming their faces. Learners' communicative involvement is further mediated by pedagogical practices at the tertiary level. Research has demonstrated that oral engagement is restricted and reluctance is intensified in classrooms where lectures predominate, there are few chances for interaction, and speaking assignments are assessment-driven. On the other hand, research has shown that student-centered, communicative methods that prioritize dialogue, formative assessment, and psychological safety can reduce fear and increase openness to speaking (Inada, 2023; Kassem, 2019; Tholibon et al., 2022). Blended and technology enhanced learning environments are often said to help students communicate better in class by lowering the pressure to do well right away. However, how well these tools are used in the classroom and how prepared the students are to actively participate determine how effective they are.

3. Method

3.1. Research context and design

This research was conducted within the context of university EFL programs in Indonesia, where English is learned as a foreign language and possibilities for authentic spoken engagement remain limited. The study focuses on students' reluctance to speak in English, conceptualized as an affective–epistemic concern influenced by linguistic anxiety, perceived competence, and educational opportunities. A quantitative cross-sectional survey design with an exploratory focus was employed (Busetto et al., 2020). This design was chosen to assess the students' perceptions at a certain moment, facilitating the discovery of prevailing emotional tendencies associated with speaking performance. The study employs a post-positivist epistemological perspective, acknowledging that learners' subjective impressions serve as legitimate empirical evidence for comprehending learning constraints in EFL contexts." The survey included open-ended questions to enhance the quantitative findings, allowing participants to express experiential insights beyond predetermined response options.

3.2. Participant

Participants were undergraduate EFL students enrolled in an English language education program at an Indonesian higher education institution, representing four distinct state universities in Aceh province. The distribution of gender was predominantly female, consistent with the demographic profile of language education programs in the region. Participants were recruited via convenience sampling, considered suitable due to the exploratory nature of the study and its objective to generate context-specific insights rather than population-wide generalizations. All participants possessed previous experience with speaking-oriented courses, thereby ensuring that their responses were rooted in genuine learning encounters. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was secured prior to data collection.

3.3. Data collection

Data were gathered by a self-administered online questionnaire aimed at assessing three principal constructs: (1) Speaking comfort in public context, (2) grammar-related speaking anxiety, and (3) Self-assessed speaking confidence. The questionnaire principally comprised Likert-scale items employing a five-point response format for sophisticated measurement of attitudinal intensity. The construction of items was guided by recognized constructs in EFL research, specifically foreign language anxiety, self-efficacy, and willingness to communicate, while being tailored to the institutional context. The questionnaire comprised both closed-ended and open-ended questions, encouraging participants to offer suggestions and reflections on techniques to mitigate speaking reluctance. The online administration mode enhanced accessibility and promoted honest responses, especially regarding emotional aspects that could be underreported in in-person contexts.

3.4. Data analysis

In order to find commonalities across the assessed dimensions, descriptive statistics procedures, such as percentage analysis and frequency distributions, were used to examine the quantitative data. The study's emphasis on perceptual mapping, rather than hypothesis testing, made this approach appropriate. The findings shed light on the students' emotional positioning in regard to English speaking assignments. Inductive theme analysis was used to examine the qualitative data collected from open-ended responses. After carefully coding the responses, grouping them into overarching conceptual groups based on recurrent themes. These qualitative findings supplemented the quantitative patterns with more in-depth explanations and brought attention to educational implications based on students' perspectives. In order to address the following research issues, we provide and thoroughly describe the results of the data analysis: (1) the form of students' reluctant to speak English, (2) develop multiple representative themes to study the factors contributing to students' reluctance to speak English, and 3) then analyse the implications of this reluctance thematically. To ascertain the validity of this study, Methodological triangulation was employed by obtaining expert opinion to validate this study (Miles & Huberman, 2014)

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Patterns of EFL speaking reluctance in higher education

The research included seventy-three undergraduate students from four different University in Aceh, Indonesia (refer to Table 1).

Tabel 1

Participants' home university

| No | Subject of research | Number of subjects | Percentage |
|----|--------------------------|--------------------|------------|
| 1. | IAIN Langsa | 19 | 26 |
| 2. | UNSAM | 21 | 28.8 |
| 3. | UIN Lhokseumawe | 16 | 21.9 |
| 4. | UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh | 17 | 23.3 |

Participating institutions are very evenly distributed, with 26% from IAIN Langsa, 28.8% from UNSAM, 21.9% from UIN Lhokseumawe, and 23.3% from UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh. The results can be seen as representing patterns of EFL speaking habits in regional higher education environments.

Consistent with survey data, students' reluctance to speak English was shown through long periods of silence, not participating voluntarily, not responding much, and depending on classmates for help with oral tasks. This was especially noticeable in whole-class discussions and questioning sessions led by the lecturer as seen in table 2.

Tabel 2

Students' reluctant to speak English.

| No | Indicator | Number of subjects | Percentage |
|----|---------------|--------------------|------------|
| 1. | Very Insecure | 2 | 2.7 |
| 2. | Insecure | 10 | 13.7 |
| 3. | Neutral | 44 | 60.3 |
| 4. | Secure | 15 | 20.5 |
| 5 | Very Secure | 2 | 2.7 |

Table 2 shows that 60.3% of participants were unsure or neutral about their English-speaking confidence, while 16.4% were either highly insecure or felt insecure. A mere 23.2% of students considered themselves to be confident or extremely confident public speakers. While obvious insecurity is not prevalent, there is a sizable neutral zone, as shown in Table 2, which may imply that students' confidence is weak or conditional and so susceptible to disruption from classroom expectations. Despite having enough language knowledge, many students choose to remain silent, which can be explained by their shaky confidence. Here are some snippets from open ended question that provide light on how nervousness and a fear of making mistakes: *"Sometimes we are reluctant to speak English because we are afraid of making mistakes."*

Given the social and evaluative stakes involved, it's clear that public speaking is seen as an academically high-risk activity (Amaravathi & Kanagathara, n.d.; Khalid et al., 2022). The psychological toll of critical comments was described by another respondent as follows: *"Many students want to appear confident when speaking English, but negative responses make them feel pressured, embarrassed, and lose confidence."*

The prevalence of social comparison processes in university classrooms only served to heighten students' reluctance. People felt more self-conscious and were less likely to participate when they compared their speaking abilities to those of their perceived more competent classmates. Public speaking responsibilities, such presentations or questions guided by a lecturer, brought this phenomenon to a heightened level. The role of hierarchical teacher-student interactions was also substantial (Tholibon et al., 2022). Transforming speaking into a performance-oriented activity, instructors were frequently seen as authoritative examiners instead of facilitating engagement. The sensible response to institutional power dynamics, rather than a lack of motivation, was quiet under these conditions. This finding is in line with previous research conducted in Asian higher education settings (Bossér & Lindahl, 2019; Lee & Ng,

2010). However, this study adds to the existing literature by showing how these hierarchies influence fear of speaking English as a foreign language (EFL) and how silence can be used as a social and academic strategy.

Moreover, the data showed classrooms' pedagogical techniques often helped to reinforced students' resistance. Oral engagement was seen more as a means of evaluation than of development due to lecture-centered education, few opportunities for student-teacher interaction, and assessment-driven speaking assignments. On the other hand, data also revealed from open ended questions that students were cognizant of pedagogical factors that could mitigate reluctant. *"Offering students consistent encouragement and constructive criticism can help them overcome their reluctant,"* one participant said, highlighting the significance of low-risk speaking venues and supportive comments. According to another participant, students are able to speak more readily when there is a supportive classroom climate, which can be achieved through controlled yet casual English interactions. Despite its pervasiveness, the statement imply that pedagogical resistance can be shaped by instructional design and classroom climate.

4.2. Speaking reluctance as an affective-pedagogical phenomenon in EFL contexts

Figure 1 shows the results of an analysis of open-ended questionnaire responses that describes the complex interaction of emotional, pedagogical, and linguistic elements that determine students' reluctance to speak English as a foreign language. These elements do not work alone; rather, they amplify each other to make it such that people are less likely to speak English up in class and in other social settings.

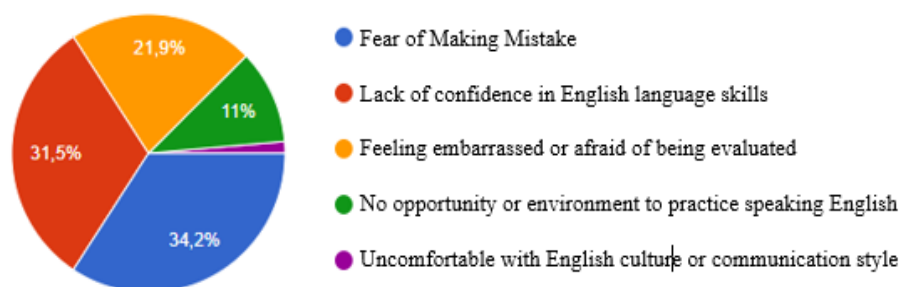


Figure 1. Students' reluctance to speak English as a foreign language

4.2.1. Affective and emotional factors

Based on the survey results, it is clear that students' emotional concerns about making mistakes and speaking nervously are the main reasons they are reluctant to speak English. These problems were identified by over 50% of the participants as the most significant obstacles to effective oral communication. Anxiety is closely associated with the dread of receiving unfavourable feedback from teachers and classmates, according to qualitative replies. Participants occasionally reluctant to speak English due to a fear of making mistakes, according to one participant. "Students are sometimes reluctant to speak English because they are afraid of making mistakes."

Another participant highlighted the emotional consequences of negative peer reactions: “Many students want to appear confident when speaking English, but being laughed at for pronunciation or grammatical mistakes makes them feel pressured, embarrassed, and discouraged from speaking confidently.”

Taken together, these passages paint a picture of public speaking as an emotionally and socially fraught endeavor fraught with peril. This finding is in line with previous research on public speaking anxiety (Fathikasari et al., 2022; Gallego et al., 2022) and the fear of unfavorable evaluation (Jia & Yue, 2023; J. Li et al., 2023), which has consistently shown that anxiety is a major barrier to people's willingness to communicate (Bai, 2023; M. Wang et al., 2022; Zarrinabadi et al., 2023). Rather than indicating a lack of drive or ability, remaining silent serves as a defensive mechanism.

4.2.2. Pedagogical and classroom-related factors

Students' reluctance is shaped in large part by pedagogical techniques as well. The results indicate that students are less likely to have opportunities for meaningful speaking engagement when lessons focus on grammatical knowledge rather than communicative practice. “English instruction from earlier levels focused mainly on grammar, while speaking practice was rarely implemented,” one respondent said, reflecting on their previous learning experiences critically. Consequently, a large number of students' struggle with their English proficiency.

This view draws attention to a systemic problem in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching, namely the fact that students' lack of practice speaking in class weakens their self-assurance. Furthermore, students who lacked self-assurance felt that they were left out of class discussions and that sitting quietly became the norm due to the unequal distribution of speaking opportunities. This finding is in line with the literature on English as a foreign language in higher education, which cites assessment-oriented speaking activities (Khalili et al., 2024; Wicking, 2022) and training that is primarily focused on lectures as reasons that discourage students from speaking up (X. Wang, 2025; Xuan Mai et al., 2024).

4.2.3. Linguistic and environmental constraints

From a linguistic standpoint, students frequently experienced reluctance or breakdowns in communication due to their stated struggles with pronunciation and vocabulary. Even fewer chances to use English outside of class added insult to injury. Due to the continued dominance of Indonesian, the majority of respondents admitted that they seldom utilized English in their daily communication. Students experience more mental strain when attempting to speak English when they are not immersed in a native language context. As a result, students' self-esteem and desire to communicate are already low, and the combination of language barriers with emotional problems further makes matters worse. The results indicate that students' reluctance to speak English is caused by a combination of emotional vulnerability, instructional approaches, and language limitations, rather than any one factor acting alone. Immediate psychological causes include speaking anxiety and the fear of unfavourable evaluation. Long-term structural circumstances that contribute to speaking reluctance include training that is focused on grammar

and minimal exposure to spoken English. By showing how pedagogical and environmental factors enhance emotional obstacles, these results expand previous research on EFL speaking anxiety (Bai, 2023; Höl & Kasımi, 2022; Nuranifar, 2014). This is especially true in situations where English is rarely spoken outside of the classroom. It is crucial to recognize that students' lack of speaking is not a sign of passivity but rather a natural and adaptive reaction to the danger they sense in speaking up.

Affective sensitivity, pedagogical experiences, and limited linguistic exposure all have a role in students' reluctance to speak English as a foreign language, as shown by the results. Structural conditions that perpetuate students' silence include long-standing pedagogical methods that value grammatical correctness above communicative use and immediate psychological barriers such as speaking anxiety and fear of unfavourable assessment. When faced with situations where chances to utilize English outside of class are limited, these emotional reactions are heightened by linguistic challenges pertaining to pronunciation and vocabulary. Silence is positioned as a sensible and adaptive reaction to perceived communication danger because these factors do not function in isolation but rather reinforce each other. This synthesis highlights the need of seeing EFL speaking reluctance in higher education not as a personal failing but as a phenomenon influenced by emotional, pedagogical, and institutional factors within its specific setting.

4.2.4. Implications of students' reluctance to speak English as a foreign language

Developing communication competency, especially fluency and accuracy, is often hindered by the students' unwillingness to speak English. The results show that chances for meaningful language use and interaction, which are crucial for second language learning, are limited when oral engagement is constrained (Lee & Ng, 2009). New evidence supports the idea that emotional variables, such fear of speaking a foreign language (FLA), have a negative impact on students' desire to participate actively in class discussions, which in turn reduces their ability to produce meaningful work (Maher & King, 2023). In particular, pupils with high anxiety tend to be quiet or participate little, even when they know the language well enough; this limits their ability to communicate.

The importance of the classroom setting and teaching methods is emphasized by students' reflections. *“Providing positive feedback and giving students regular opportunities to practice can help them overcome their reluctance to speak.”* Concerning Classroom environment was emphasized by another participant: *“Creating a supportive classroom environment, such as structured yet relaxed English conversation activities, helps students feel more comfortable speaking.”*

Supportive, non-evaluative learning environments improve WTC by lowering performance-related anxiety and establishing psychological safety, according to these viewpoints (D. Zhang et al., 2024). More evidence from research points to the importance of task design: students show more work-to-complete (WTC) when the activities are low-stakes, student-centered, and collaborative, as opposed to when the teaching is strict and focuses on accuracy. Reluctance to speak English has wider academic and professional ramifications than

just classroom issues. Presentations in the classroom, job interviews, and group projects involving multiple countries might be challenging for students who tend to avoid speaking up in class. This is in line with previous research that has shown that public speaking anxiety has a detrimental effect on both short-term and long-term language use in the workplace (Ilyas, 2022). Because of its potential impact on learning outcomes and graduation competencies, reluctance is a problem in the classroom, the academy, and the social and professional spheres.

Institutionally, communication-oriented curriculum is undermined by recurrent speaking reticence. Teachers may not get a true picture of their students' abilities when they ask them questions but then ask them to stay silent. This makes it difficult to evaluate their communicative competence. Blended learning environments and digital technologies have the ability to offer students opportunities to speak frequently and with less concern, according to survey results. Students also see technology as a useful tool for enhancing their public speaking abilities (Amin & Sundari, 2020; M. Amin & Zulfitri, 2022). Graduates may be less prepared for the global academic and professional settings where strong oral communication skills are essential if this pervasive reluctance is not addressed. The importance of educational and technical approaches that promote communicative practice, psychological safety, and prolonged oral engagement should be emphasized by higher education institutions, as these consequences are interconnected. So, addressing students' reluctant to speak English is an institutional duty with long-term academic and socio-economic ramifications, not just a pedagogical matter.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that speaking reluctance among EFL students in Indonesian higher education is not a simple reflection of linguistic inadequacy but a complex phenomenon shaped by the interplay of affective vulnerability, pedagogical practices, and institutional expectations. The findings extend WTC theory by highlighting how hierarchical classroom dynamics and face-saving concerns, particularly salient in the Acehnese cultural context, interact with individual anxiety to suppress oral participation. These insights carry several implications. First, teacher education programs should equip pre-service teachers with strategies for creating psychologically safe speaking environments, including low-stakes practice opportunities and supportive error correction. Second, curriculum designers should integrate sustained, scaffolded speaking tasks that build confidence incrementally rather than relying on high-stakes presentations. Third, institutions should recognize speaking reluctance as a systemic issue requiring coordinated pedagogical and policy responses, not merely individual remediation. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to track how speaking reluctance evolves over time, examine the effectiveness of specific interventions, and investigate the perspectives of teachers and administrators who shape classroom speaking norms.

Declaration on the use of AI

AI-based tools (ChatGPT, Gemini, and NotebookLM) were used during the preparation of this manuscript to assist with language refinement and organizational support. All interpretations, analyses, and conclusions are the responsibility of the authors.

References

- Abdullah, K. I., & Abdul Rahman, N. L. (2010). A study on second language speaking anxiety among UTM students. *A Study on Second Language Speaking Anxiety among UTM Students*, 1–6
- Anindya, S., & Triyoga, A. (2025). EFL pre-service teacher identity development during an international teaching practicum program: A narrative study. *Englisia: Journal of Language, Education, and Humanities*, 12(2), 299–322. <https://doi.org/10.22373/ej.v12i2.29443>
- Asfihana, R., & Putri, N. A. (2025). Challenges and adaptation strategies of pre-service EFL teachers: An international short-term teaching program in Thailand. *Eduvelop: Journal of English Education and Development*, 8(2), 67–82. <https://doi.org/10.31605/eduvelop.v8i2.4783>
- Amin, F. M., & Sundari, H. (2020). Efl students' preferences on digital platforms during emergency remote teaching: Video conference, lms, or messenger application? *Studies in English Language and Education*, 7(2), 362-378. <https://doi.org/10.24815/siele.v7i2.16929>
- M. Amin, F., & Zulfitri, Z. (2022). Emergency remote teaching during COVID-19 crisis: An analysis of EFL students' engagement in Aceh. *Englisia: Journal of Language, Education, and Humanities*, 9(2), 46-59. <https://doi.org/10.22373/ej.v9i2.11722>
- Baker, W. (2015). Culture and complexity through English as a lingua franca: Rethinking competences and pedagogy in ELT. *Journal of English as a Lingua Franca*, 4(1), 9–30. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jelf-2015-0005>
- Banegas, D. L. (2023). Language teacher educators' identity construction: A sociocultural perspective. *TESOL Quarterly*, 57(4), 1356–1382. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00336882231212855>
- Banks, J. A. (2008). *An introduction to multicultural education* (4th ed.). Pearson.
- Barkhuizen, G. (2016). Narrative approaches to exploring language, identity and power in language teacher education. *RELC Journal*, 47(1), 25–42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688216631222>
- Beauchamp, C., & Thomas, L. (2009). Understanding teacher identity: An overview of issues in the literature and implications for teacher education. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 39(2), 175–189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057640902902252>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Burarungrot, M., & Premsrirat, S. (2021). Multilingualism, bi/multilingual education and social inclusion: A case study in Southern Thailand. *Manusya: Journal of Humanities*, 24(3), 373–389. <https://doi.org/10.1163/26659077-24030006>
- Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Multilingual Matters.
- Canagarajah, S. (2012). *Translingual practice: Global Englishes and cosmopolitan relations*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203073889>
- Chen, Y., & McConachy, T. (2022). Translating intercultural experiences into pedagogic insights: Shifts in language teachers' perceptions of English as a language for intercultural communication. *Language Awareness*, 31(4), 431–449. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09658416.2021.1919688>

- Chen, X., Zhai, X., Zhu, Y., & Li, Y. (2022). Exploring debaters and audiences' depth of critical thinking and its relationship with their participation in debate activities. *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, 44, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tsc.2022.101035>
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. Jossey-Bass.
- Civitillo, S., Juang, L. P., Badra, M., & Schachner, M. K. (2019). The interplay between culturally responsive teaching, cultural diversity beliefs, and self-reflection: A multiple case study. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 77, 341–351. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2018.11.002>
- Darvin, R., & Norton, B. (2015). Identity and a model of investment in applied linguistics. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 35, 36–56. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190514000191>
- Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics*. Oxford University Press.
- Fang, F., McConachy, T., & Yuan, R. (2024). Intercultural learning and identity development as a form of teacher development through study abroad: Narratives from English language practitioners. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 37(2), 247–266. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07908318.2024.2323453>
- Gibson, K. (2022). Bridging the digital divide: Reflections on using WhatsApp instant messenger interviews in youth research. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 19(3), 611–631. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1751902>
- Hanna, F., Oostdam, R., Severiens, S. E., & Zijlstra, B. J. H. (2019). Domains of teacher identity: A review of quantitative measurement instruments. *Educational Research Review*, 27, 100307. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2019.01.003>
- Hasymi, M., & Nurkamto, J. (2023). Cross-cultural experiences in teacher education: Indonesian pre-service English teachers' perspectives on international teaching practicum. *Voices of English Language Education Society*, 7(3), 614–626. <https://doi.org/10.29408/veles.v7i3.24115>
- Hiratsuka, T. (2022). *Narrative inquiry into language teacher identity: ALTs in the JET program*. New York, NY: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003248729>
- Huang, Q., Cheung, A. C. K., & Xuan, Q. (2023). The impact of study abroad on pre-service and in-service teachers' intercultural competence: A meta-analysis. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 127, 104091. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2023.104091>
- Jackson, J. (2018). *Online intercultural education and study abroad: Theory into practice*. New York, NY: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315098760>
- Karim, A., Kabilan, M. K., Sultana, S., Amin, E. U., & Rahman, M. M. (2024). Reflecting on reflections concerning critical incidents in developing pre-service teachers' professional identity. *English Teaching & Learning*, 48, 291–318. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42321-023-00140-1>
- Kılıç, M., & Cinkara, E. (2020). Critical incidents in pre-service EFL teachers' identity construction process. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 40(2), 182–196. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2019.1705759>
- Kaya, F. (2023). Identity (re)construction of Turkish pre-service language teachers during the practicum. *International E-Journal of Educational Studies*, 7(14), 243–256. <https://doi.org/10.31458/iej.es.1228795>

- Kubota, R. (2016). The multi/plural turn, postcolonial theory, and neoliberal multiculturalism. *Applied Linguistics*, 37(4), 474–494. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amu045>
- Liu, X., Mearns, T., & Admiraal, W. (2023). Teacher–student relationship as a lens to explore teacher identity in an intercultural context. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 136, 104379. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2023.104379>
- Li, J., Jia, S., Wang, L., Zhang, M., & Chen, S. (2023). Relationships among inferiority feelings, fear of negative evaluation, and social anxiety in Chinese junior high school students. *Frontiers in Psychology*, (13) 1-9, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1015477>
- Martin Beltrán, M., Durham, C., & Cataneo, A. (2023). Preservice teachers developing humanizing intercultural competence during field-based interactions. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 124, 104008. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2022.104008>
- Maesaro, M., & Wijirahayu, S. (2025). Exploring the experiences during teaching internships in Indonesia and Thailand: Perspectives on intercultural skills. *Journal of English Teaching, Literature, and Applied Linguistics*, 9(1), 41–61. <https://doi.org/10.30587/jetlal.v9i1.9352>
- McConachy, T. (2018). Critically engaging with cultural representations in foreign language textbooks. *Intercultural Education*, 29(1), 77–88. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2017.1404783>
- Nghia, T. L. H., & Tai, H. N. (2017). Preservice teachers' identity development during the teaching internship. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 42(8), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2017v42n8.1>
- Nimasari, E. P., Harmanto, B., Bonavidi, R., Cobantoro, A. F., Elvina Dwi, C., & Velrinda Fahza'a, R. (2025). Engaging students in a collaborative and reflective reading material development: Participatory action research. *JEES (Journal of English Educators Society)*, 10(2), 106–117. <https://doi.org/10.21070/jees.v10i2.1948>
- Norton, B. (2013). Identity, literacy, and the multilingual classroom. In S. May (Ed.), *The multilingual turn* (pp. 103–122). Routledge.
- Peng, Y., & Xiong, T. (2021). Reproducing or recreating pedagogies? The journey of three CSL teachers' learning of the communicative approach. *Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, 30(2), 131–140. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40299-020-00520-2>
- Pennycook, A. (2017). *The cultural politics of English as an international language*. London, England: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315225593>
- Postholm, M. B. (2018). Teachers' professional development in school: A review study. *Cogent Education*, 5(1), 1-22 <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2018.1522781> Missing page number
- Pravitasari, H., Yanto, E. S., & Fatihah, I. N. K. (2025). Emotional experiences and identity construction of pre-service English teachers during teaching practicum in Indonesia. *Journal of English and Education (JEE)*, 11(1), 68–87. <https://doi.org/10.20885/jee.v11i1.40130>
- Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Syahri, I., Susanti, R., & Dwiana, N. R. (2025). From cultural exchange to identity formation: Intercultural experiences of Indonesian pre-service English teachers in the Philippines. *English Learning Innovation*, 6(2), 323–343. <https://doi.org/10.22219/englie.v6i2.40964>

- Tian, Z., & McConachy, T. (2021). Relational challenges in an intercultural volunteer programme. *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 50(6), 588–609. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17475759.2021.1959381>
- Torres-Rocha, J. C. (2023). English language teacher educators' critical professional identity constructions and negotiations. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 23(1), 53–68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2023.2166058>
- Turbinita, G. E., Safriyani, R., & Safriani, A. (2023). Exploring language barriers during international teaching practicum in Thailand: Pre-service teachers' voices. *J-Shelves of Indragiri (JSI)*, 5(1), 125–141. <https://doi.org/10.61672/jsi.v5i1.2666>
- Wulandari, D. A. R., Maghfiroh, A., Harmanto, B., Sinthong, P., & Simpol, W. (2025). Implementing soft-power as an experiential learning strategy to enhance speaking engagement: A case study in a Thai school. *JOLLT Journal of Languages and Language Teaching*, 13(3), 1406–1418. <https://doi.org/10.33394/jollt.v13i3.13818>
- Wang, X. (2025). Breaking the silence: Empirical insights on encouraging quiet students to speak out in law classes. *European Journal of Legal Education*, 6(2), 339–369
- Xuan Mai, L., Ngoc, L. K., & Thao, L. T. (2024). Factors hindering Student participation in English-speaking classes: Student and Lecturer perceptions. *Sage Open*, 14(3) 1-18, <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440241266297>
- Yuan, R., Liu, W., & Lee, I. (2019). Confrontation, negotiation and agency. *Teachers and Teaching*, 25(8), 972–993. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2019.1688286>
- Zhang, D., Wu, J. G., & Fu, Z. (2024). From shy to fly: Facilitating EFL learners' willingness to communicate with an AI chatbot and an intelligent tutoring system. *System*, (127), 2-15. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2024.103501>