

INVESTIGATING ORAL PERFORMANCE ANXIETY AMONG IRAQI FIRST-YEAR EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: LEVELS, TYPES, AND CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

Hussien Jawad Abdulridha

Department of English, College of Education, Al-Zahraa University for Women, Karbala-Baghdad Road (opposite pole 70) in the Holy Governorate of Karbala, Iraq

Corresponding Author Email: hussien.jawad@alzahraa.edu.iq

Article Info	Abstract
Article History Received: June 2026 Revised: August 2026 Accepted: September 2026 Published: October 2026	<i>Speaking is often the most anxiety-inducing language skill for EFL learners, and first-year university students face particular pressure as they transition to more demanding, evaluative oral tasks; however, this challenge remains underexamined among Iraqi university EFL learners specifically. The present study examined the level, dominant type, and causes of oral performance anxiety among first-year Iraqi EFL learners. One hundred-fifty undergraduate EFL learners from Iraq participated, selected via purposive sampling based on intermediate English proficiency (ages 20–25). The Causes of Speaking Anxiety Questionnaire (CSAI) and the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) were used, and data were analyzed using SPSS. Results showed that speaking anxiety was a major problem for the learners in this sample: 90.6% exhibited high levels of anxiety, with mean scores of 3.64 for cognitive anxiety, 3.40 for somatic anxiety, and 3.40 for behavioral anxiety. Cognitive anxiety was the most prevalent type. Fear of receiving a low grade from teachers was the leading cause ($M = 3.99$), endorsed by 116 of 150 participants (77.3%). These findings suggest that speaking anxiety is not a uniform trait among students, and that instructors should adopt supportive feedback, low-stakes speaking practice, gradual increases in task difficulty, and dedicated preparation time when designing oral activities.</i>
Keywords Foreign language anxiety; Speaking skill; Oral performance; EFL learners; Cognitive anxiety;	
How to cite: Abdulridha, H.J. (2026). Investigating Oral Performance Anxiety Among Iraqi First-Year EFL University Students: Levels, Types, and Contributing Factors, <i>JOLLT Journal of Languages and Language Teaching</i> , 14(4), 1255-1268. Doi: https://doi.org/10.33394/joltt.v14i4.21492	
Copyright© 2026, Hussien Jawad Abdulridha This is an open-access article under the CC-BY-SA License	

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important language-learning skills is speaking performance. Academic, professional, and social success are considered to be primarily dependent on the development of oral communication skills (Skehan, 1989). For a variety of reasons, this capacity has posed a significant obstacle to students' advancement in learning a foreign language. First of all, being able to speak clearly is essential for success in school or work settings, but it can be particularly challenging for people learning a foreign or second language. Second, oral interaction may be a powerful tool for the development of communicative language ability because students are more inclined to experiment with complex lexical and syntactic expressions in their spoken discourse (Swain, 1995). Third, communicating across different educational and social settings can be highly beneficial for consolidating understanding of subject matter considering that it requires learners to express and organize their ideas in real time. It additionally provides instructors with direct insight into students' abilities of comprehension skills and communicative proficiency, enabling them to adapt their teaching

methods accordingly (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). However, because learners' attempts to produce spoken output are influenced by a wide range of cognitive, emotional, and social factors, including attention, communication apprehension, ambiguity tolerance, and anxiety—the focus of this study—acquiring accurate and fluent oral performance is difficult.

Anxiety has been defined as the "expected change in mental processes and behavior in reaction to ambiguity about an upcoming threat" (Grupe & Nitschke, 2013). According to Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), speaking-related anxiety in a foreign language setting is specifically understood as a unique complex set of self-perceptions, thoughts, emotions, and actions associated with classroom language learning that result from the particularity of the language learning process. Speaking anxiety, in the words of MacIntyre and Gardner (1994), is the fear that arises when one must use the target spoken language orally, especially in assessment or public settings.

The investigation of speaking anxiety has its foundations in communication apprehension studies conducted in first-language contexts. As an outcome, investigation into first-language acquisition and speaking in public is essential for overcoming second-language speaking anxiety. For those who speak in L1, L2, and foreign languages, speaking-related anxiety is commonly experienced (Horwitz et al., 1986; Phillips, 1992; Young, 1990). When speaking makes second and foreign language learners anxious, they often worry that they won't be able to communicate clearly and that their teachers or other people will think poorly of them as a result. Speaking anxiety is similar to general language anxiety in that it is typified by excessive worry, negative self-evaluation, fear of being judged by others, and avoidance of or excessive preparation for speaking tasks (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Horwitz et al., 1986).

First-year Iraqi EFL students may experience speaking anxiety as they shift from grammar-focused schooling to university courses emphasizing oral participation, especially in teacher-centered classrooms with limited speaking practice.

Research on speaking anxiety in diverse settings has consistently shown that EFL students experience significant levels of oral communication anxiety in a variety of contexts. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, no previous study has specifically looked at speaking anxiety among first-year EFL Iraqi students in a university setting. While studies in other Middle Eastern and Asian EFL contexts have examined levels, types, or causes of speaking anxiety separately, few have analyzed all three dimensions together within a single sample; doing so here is intended to provide a more integrated picture of oral performance anxiety among Iraqi university students specifically. Thus, the current investigation aims to respond to the following research inquiries: *What is the level of oral performance anxiety among first-year Iraqi EFL students?; Which dimension of speaking anxiety (cognitive, somatic, or behavioral) is most prevalent among first-year Iraqi EFL students?; and Which self-reported factors are most strongly endorsed as contributors to speaking anxiety among first-year Iraqi EFL students?*

Literature Review

Speaking Anxiety

The term "speaking anxiety" encompasses a broad spectrum of negative emotions that can arise during a speaking task, such as anxiety, fear, and apprehension (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). A speaker may feel these negative emotions to varied degrees, based on the conditions surrounding the speaking event. While delivering an oral presentation during class can cause anxiety in some students, this fear may not exist when discussing the same subject informally with peers. Many students may experience increased anxiety when speaking in the presence of others. Speaking anxiety is therefore a situational experience that depends on a number of factors, such as the oral task at hand, the social context, one's expectations of oneself and the audience, and prior speaking experiences. While the terms

"communication apprehension" and "speaking anxiety" are frequently employed interchangeably, communication apprehension is a more general concept that includes anxiety about any kind of communication, while speaking anxiety refers to the various types of fear one identifies with a speaking activity.

One of the main issues EFL students face in academic settings is anxiety during speaking assignments. It has a negative impact on them, and as a result, they form negative attitudes regarding oral participation. Oral production in a foreign language is known to be extremely complex by nature, requiring multiple simultaneous cognitive and affective processes. Accordingly, speaking anxiety results from both the social vulnerability of oral performance and the linguistic difficulty of the target language (Woodrow, 2006). Given the established correlation between anxiety in foreign language classrooms and diminished oral output and performance, the impact of anxiety as an affective factor in the speaking process cannot be disregarded (Horwitz et al., 1986).

Researchers investigating foreign language anxiety have created a number of measures, many of which focus on the anxiety associated with speaking and oral performance when using a foreign or second language (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Speaking-specific anxiety may not be sufficiently captured by the task anxieties related to reading, writing, and listening in a foreign or second language. Numerous studies have developed and validated measures intended to measure the anxiety associated with a particular oral production (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Liu & Jackson, 2008).

The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), developed by Horwitz et al. (1986), was the first widely used instrument for assessing foreign language anxiety with a strong emphasis on speaking. The FLCAS was designed for use with foreign language learners in classroom contexts and has been validated across numerous linguistic and cultural settings (Aida, 1994; Liu & Jackson, 2008). In investigations on language learning, the FLCAS is the most frequently used indicator of oral performance anxiety in foreign language contexts (Dewaele, 2013), though researchers have noted that its items predominantly reflect oral performance apprehension. To address the need for a more speaking-specific measure, the Oral Communication Apprehension Scale (OCAS) and related instruments have been developed to isolate speaking anxiety from broader constructs of foreign language anxiety (Woodrow, 2006).

Horwitz et al. (1986), identified three major performance-related fears that are common among students who speak a foreign language: 1) Communication Apprehension, which includes an individual's fear of communicating verbally with other people; 2) Test Anxiety, specifically as it relates to oral exams where individuals fear failing; and 3) Fear of Negative Evaluation (or social anxiety about being judged negatively by their teacher, classmates, etc.) which applies to fear of receiving a negative judgment from anyone involved in any verbal conversation.

The Second Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (SLSAS), adapted from Cheng's (2004) framework for writing anxiety, has been applied in several studies to measure the physiological, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions of speaking anxiety in EFL learners (Woodrow, 2006; Huang, 2010). The cognitive aspects relate to the thoughts that lead to an individual experiencing speaking anxiety (i.e., fear of being embarrassed for poor speaking skills; concerns that the listener will judge the speaker negatively; worrying about making mistakes in grammar or pronunciation). The somatic aspect is related to the physical symptoms that occur prior to or while performing a speaking activity (e.g., a racing heart; sweating; shaking voice) and avoidance is associated with behaviorally avoiding speaking by not participating in class discussions; failing to participate in group discussions; and/or not attending an oral event.

Reasons of Speaking Anxiety

Speaking requires those who speak to simultaneously process vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, pragmatics, and social context, making it a cognitively and emotionally taxing activity. According to MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) and Dörnyei and Ryan (2015), speaking a second language is characterized as a complex combination of cultural, social, and contextual considerations, as well as student-specific characteristics like personality, self-esteem, self-efficacy, L2 proficiency, gender, and prior oral language exposure. Because of this, there are many different reasons precisely why foreign language learners experience anxiety when speaking. However, based on existing research on foreign language speaking anxiety, some general causes can be identified, ranging from highly personal factors like self-esteem to procedural factors like standardized speaking assignments and teacher feedback practices.

To speak in a foreign language requires an individual to be able to master numerous aspects at once, i.e. phonetic/phonological characteristics, grammatical accuracy, fluency as well as appropriate use of context. Managing all of these elements simultaneously can cause anxiety and a feeling of being overwhelmed for learners and this anxiety will ultimately increase the speaker's sense of inadequacy (Woodrow, 2006; Horwitz et al., 1986). Liu and Jackson (2008) observe that anxiety persists in EFL speaking classrooms across all proficiency levels, despite how long students have studied English speaking skills. Consequently, the field has seen an increase in interest in determining the specific reasons of oral performance anxiety in FL instruction and evaluating its impact on students' oral performance.

Several aspects of an individual's behavior as a speaker in an EFL classroom can be associated with the experience of Oral Performance Anxiety (OPA) for learners of English as a second or foreign language. An example is that these individuals may experience L1 interference when they are producing speech. Another example is that these students will typically lack motivation to produce spoken English. Students may also receive inadequate training in oral skills using their second language. Students may also feel threatened about receiving criticism from teachers. The majority of students are also unaware of the correct use of vocabulary, pronunciation, and the organization of discourse. Furthermore, many students do not possess sufficient ability to communicate in their L2. Finally, anxiety experienced while speaking a new language has many psychological components such as self-confidence, self-efficacy and the tolerance of ambiguity (Dewaele, 2013; Horwitz et al., 1986; Krashen, 1982; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994).

Horwitz et al. (1986) discovered that fear of receiving a poor grade was a major cause of anxiety in oral production situations in their seminal study of anxiety in foreign language classrooms. The most important and common cause of speaking anxiety is the fear of making mistakes or receiving unfavorable feedback from peers or the teacher, given that speaking in a foreign tongue is a productive activity that is significantly affected by the demands of real-time performance. When a learner believes that their respective positions oral performance is being evaluated, whether formally or informally, they may experience fear of negative evaluation, which encompasses both academic evaluations (like oral grades) and social evaluations (like peer reactions) (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

According to Hassan (2001), there are several possible causes of speaking anxiety, such as inadequate oral skill development, a lack of exposure to native-speaker models, unfamiliarity with oral task frameworks, and authoritative, teacher-centered teaching methods that offer few chances for real-world communication. Students' emotional reactions to speaking assignments were found to be significantly influenced by their level of self-confidence. According to research, even students with sufficient L2 speaking proficiency may not always think of themselves as proficient speakers and may still have severe oral

performance anxiety (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Consequently, it was found that low self-esteem or perceived lack of proficiency in the target language were strongly associated with students' perceptions of L2 speaking anxiety.

Speaking in a second language requires the simultaneous use of phonology, grammar, vocabulary, and pragmatics, and difficulty processing these components in real time is a recurring source of anxiety; Saito et al. (2024) identified the inability to access known vocabulary in real time as a primary cause of speaking anxiety across learner populations, and Suratin and Sribayak (2025) similarly note that limited vocabulary access, grammar, and pronunciation are frequent sources of concern. Proficiency-related self-perceptions are also closely tied to affective experience: Saito et al. (2025) found that anxiety, enjoyment, and motivation are causally intertwined with L2 speech learning, with lower-proficiency learners typically reporting higher anxiety.

Fear of being negatively evaluated by teachers or peers is widely identified as the most significant source of L2 oral performance anxiety, extending beyond formal testing to any situation in which a learner's spoken output feels open to scrutiny (Rajitha & Alamelu, 2020; Bárkányi & Brash, 2025). Low self-confidence compounds this concern: Rajitha and Alamelu (2020) identify a lack of confidence as one of the most significant predictors of speaking anxiety, while Bárkányi and Brash (2025) note that confidence and identity-based barriers can be especially salient for learners facing broader personal challenges.

Affective and situational factors further shape learners' responses to oral tasks. Self-efficacy and ambiguity tolerance jointly predict speaking performance and anxiety (Rokhman et al., 2021), and distinct anxiety–enjoyment profiles have been linked to differing levels of speaking self-efficacy among undergraduates (Chen & Li, 2025). The real-time nature of speaking allows little opportunity for planning, and time pressure during impromptu tasks is a recognized source of anxiety and disrupted fluency (Suratin & Sribayak, 2025). Topic familiarity plays a similar role: unfamiliar or complex topics heighten anxiety by placing learners under pressure to perform beyond their current resources, whereas familiarity with the topic and context supports willingness to communicate, including in online settings (Suratin & Sribayak, 2025; Majid et al., 2025).

Insufficient speaking practice and limited opportunities for authentic oral interaction can also contribute to speaking anxiety. Resnik et al. (2023) found that restricted interactive practice during emergency remote teaching amplified anxiety, and Suratin and Sribayak (2025) similarly note that limited exposure to English and limited preparation time heighten apprehension during public-speaking tasks.

Teacher Feedback: The way teachers provide corrective feedback in the form of spoken communication can cause an emotional reaction on behalf of their student. Harsh, or public error correction may create increased levels of anxiety in students. On the other hand; supporting/constructive corrective feedback by teachers may reduce student anxiety. Nurjanah et al. (2024) found that students prefer certain types of oral corrective feedback and they support the idea that when students receive supportive and/or structured corrective feedback from their teachers, that reduces anxiety. In contrast, the research supports the idea that when students are provided with unclear explanations as corrective feedback from their teachers and/or immediate response demands from teachers, those conditions will increase student apprehension.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

To figure out the extent to which students suffer from anxiety concerning speaking and what form of speaking anxiety is most common, a cross-sectional quantitative descriptive survey with proficiency screening was carried out. Additionally, it aimed to identify the primary causes of speaking anxiety in Iraqi EFL students. This design does not test causal

relationships or associations between speaking anxiety and students' speaking achievement. One hundred –fifty undergraduate English language students participated in the investigation. There were 80 male students and 70 female students. The participants were between the ages of 20 and 25. They were all proficient in English at an intermediate level. All participants were first-year students in the English Language Departments at the University of Al-Zahraa and the University of Karbala. The total first-year population was 800 students, all of whom completed the OQPT, with all participants meeting the intermediate-level criterion. This proficiency restriction ensured a relatively homogeneous sample but may limit the generalizability of the findings to other proficiency levels. The following tools were used in this study to help with the data collection process:

Research Instruments

Quick Oxford Placement Test (QOPT): The learners' language proficiency had to be measured before the results could be obtained. This task was completed using the Quick Oxford Placement Test. The 60 multiple-choice questions on the QOPT assess students' vocabulary and grammar skills. 1–17 Basic, 18–27 Fundamental, between 28 and 36 Low-Intermediate, 48 to 55 Advance, 37 to 47 Intermediate, and 56–60 Very sophisticated. **Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Survey (FLCAS):** The FLCAS (Horwitz et al., 1986) was utilized in order to measure the learners based upon a quantity of foreign language speaking anxiety through the way they perceived it. The FLCAS consists of thirty-three items that are rated utilizing a five-point Likert scale with the rating options ranging from 1 (strongly agree) toward 5 (strongly disagree). It assesses three primary aspects of anxiety: fear of receiving a poor grade, test anxiety, and communication anxiety. The literature has provided copious documentation of the FLCAS's validity and reliability (Aida, 1994; Liu & Jackson, 2008). The instrument's reliability was tested in the current study using a sample of 15 students, and the results showed a Cronbach's alpha of 0.91, indicating that it was appropriate for the target sample. The validity of the instrument confirmed by two Ph.D. holders in Applied Linguistics.

Causes of Speaking Anxiety Survey (CSAI): As a framework for examining the reasons behind speaking anxiety in EFL contexts, the Causes of Speaking Anxiety Survey was developed based on established research on foreign language and speaking anxiety. It is separated into two parts. Demographic data makes up the first section, while ten items on a five-point Likert scale make up the second section. The items were changed from the original writing anxiety survey to incorporate factors unique to oral performance, such as low self-confidence in oral production, time constraints in speaking tasks, fear of oral evaluation, and lack of speaking practice. Responses ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating stronger perceptions of the identified causes of speaking anxiety.

Procedure

Following institutional approval from the Department of English Language, a Quick Oxford Placement Test (QOPT) was administered as a standardized measure to guarantee participant homogeneity in terms of English proficiency. Under the researcher's close supervision, students completed the test, and those who received an intermediate score were invited to take part in the subsequent stages. Two classes of first-year EFL students were selected based on their QOPT performance. Participation in the survey stage was voluntary. In the second phase of the study, the Causes of Speaking Anxiety Inventory (CSAI) and the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) were administered, in that order, to the selected participants during a regular class period. The same procedures were followed in both classes, and students completed the questionnaire individually in English, with Arabic clarification when needed. It took approximately 20 minutes, and incomplete responses were excluded.

Data Analysis

The study's findings are quantitative in character. To better comprehend the study's conclusions, the data were analyzed, presented, and examined. Version 26 of the SPSS software was utilized for the analysis. The results of the questionnaires given to the students served as the basis for the interpretation and analysis. For the first inquiry, the researcher categorized the degrees of speaking-related anxiety through three primary groups: high, moderate, and low degrees. For the second inquiry, the researcher categorized the kinds of speaking anxiety through three primary groups: Cognitive Anxiety, Somatic Anxiety, and Behavioral Anxiety. Descriptive statistics were used to examine the various forms of speaking anxiety and calculate the average for each category based on the FLCAS survey. Descriptive statistical methods were used to identify the most common sources of speaking anxiety among EFL students to provide an appropriate response to Research Question three.

The results from the CSAI survey completed by students were analyzed using a method where each count was multiplied by the points assigned for that respective question. Ten questions on the survey are rated on a five-point Likert scale, with 1 denoting "strongly disagree" and 5 denoting "strongly agree." The total score was calculated and transformed into a percentage by multiplying each counting result by the questionnaire point. The highest percentage that was recorded was determined as the primary cause of speaking anxiety. The following formula was used to determine the percentage: The percentage is calculated as follows: the overall score for each item divided by total score for all items $\times 100\%$. Additionally, the average of each question was calculated using SPSS software.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

In summary, the majority of participants (90.7%) exhibited high levels of speaking anxiety, with an overall mean of 3.52 on the FLCAS. Cognitive anxiety was the most prevalent dimension ($M = 3.64$), followed by somatic and behavioral anxiety (both $M = 3.40$). Fear of the teacher's negative evaluation emerged as the leading endorsed cause ($M = 3.99$). The researcher used the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) to examine the overall mean and general direction of anxiety in order to determine the degree of oral performance anxiety experienced by EFL students. High speaking anxiety is indicated by a total score above 132, low speaking anxiety is indicated by a total score below 99, and moderate speaking anxiety is indicated by a total score between these two values. The FLCAS questionnaire results are displayed in Table 1, which displays speaking anxiety levels and percentages, and Table 2, which displays the overall mean and direction of participant responses.

Table 1
The Levels of Oral Performance Anxiety

Level	N	Percentage (%)
High level	136	90.7%
Moderate level	10	6.7%
Low level	4	2.7%
Total	150	100%

After examining the FLCAS questionnaire, the researcher divided the speaking anxiety levels into three major groups. They fall into three categories: high, moderate, and low. Table 1 shows that 90.7% of participants have high speaking anxiety, 6.7% have moderate speaking anxiety, and 2.7% have low speaking anxiety (individual percentages are rounded to one decimal place and therefore sum to slightly above 100%). High levels of anxiety have become the predominant level among the participants, according to the statistical results. As a result, the researcher comes to the conclusion that most participants experience severe speaking anxiety.

Table 2
The General Mean of FLCAS

	Participants	Lowest	Highest	Mean	SD
Overall	150	2.12	5.00	3.5240	.47832

The explanation of the five-point Likert scale classifies the mean into five groups: Agree (3.41 to 4.20), strongly disagree (1.00 to 1.80), disagree (1.81 to 2.60), uncertain (2.61 to 3.40), and strongly agree (4.21 to 5.00). The FLCAS's in general mean of 3.5240 shows that most participants' responses ranged into the "agree" range. This indicates that the majority of participants have a high degree of speaking anxiety because the overall direction is "agree." The mean of every classification from the FLCAS questionnaire was used to examine the various forms of speaking anxiety. It should be noted that this general mean reflects the average item-level response on the FLCAS, which is conceptually distinct from the total-score classification (high/moderate/low) reported in Table 1; both nonetheless point in the same direction, toward elevated anxiety in this sample.

Table 3
Type of Speaking Anxiety

The Type	Participants	Lowest	Highest	Mean	SD
Cognitive Anxiety	150	2.25	4.63	3.6430	.51203
Somatic Anxiety	150	1.50	4.75	3.4020	.63140
Behavioral Anxiety	150	1.60	4.90	3.4020	.65321
Valid N	150	1.50	4.90		

Table 3 shows that the mean for somatic anxiety is 3.4020, behavioral anxiety is 3.4020, and cognitive anxiety is 3.6430. whereas somatic anxiety along with behavioral anxiety have similar mean but different standard deviations, cognitive anxiety possesses the highest mean. Because somatic anxiety has a lower standard deviation than behavioral anxiety, somatic anxiety is the second category, and behavioral anxiety has a slightly lower relative standing. Among the three dimensions of speaking anxiety, cognitive anxiety had the highest mean ($M = 3.64$), followed by somatic anxiety ($M = 3.40$) and behavioral anxiety ($M = 3.40$). Thus, cognitive anxiety showed the highest mean score among the three dimensions in this sample.

The primary causes of speaking anxiety were then identified by analyzing the Causes of Speaking Anxiety Standard Inventory (CSAI) questionnaire. Multiply each score by the matching Likert point was the first phase in interpreting the students' answers. A five-point Likert scale is used to score the ten questions in the CSAI questionnaire: 1 represents strongly disagree, 2 represents disagree, 3 represents neither disagree nor agree, 4 represents agree, and 5 represents strongly agree. The percentage was calculated by multiplying each answer by its Likert point, then adding up the total score. The primary cause of speaking anxiety was found to be the largest percentage. The following formula was used to determine the percentage: The percentage is calculated as follows: total rating for each item divided by total score for all items $\times 100$ percent. The mean for each query was calculated using SPSS software. The results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4
Causes of Speaking Anxiety: Descriptive Statistics

Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD	Overall	M	SD	(%)
I feel anxious because I am afraid of being negatively evaluated by my teacher when I speak English.	50	66	20	10	4	582	3.99	0.99	10.7
I feel nervous because I am not confident in my ability to speak English fluently.	42	56	24	20	8	554	3.69	1.17	10.2
I am nervous that I will make grammar	28	54	50	14	4	542	3.61	0.99	10.0

Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD	Overall	M	SD	(%)
mistakes when speaking English.									
I feel stressed when I have to speak English in front of the class without preparation.	40	56	30	20	4	558	3.72	1.08	10.3
I feel anxious about speaking English because of previous embarrassing moments in class.	28	48	36	30	8	508	3.39	1.15	9.3
I feel anxious because I worry that my pronunciation is incorrect when I speak English.	44	48	26	24	8	546	3.64	1.21	10.0
I feel anxious when I can't find the right words to express myself in English.	28	52	40	18	12	516	3.44	1.16	9.5
I feel anxious when I think my English speaking must be perfect in front of others.	46	44	36	18	6	574	3.83	1.14	10.6
I feel nervous when speaking English with native speakers because of cultural differences.	30	50	44	18	8	526	3.51	1.10	9.7
I feel anxious that I will not be able to understand others or make myself understood when speaking English.	30	50	30	24	16	504	3.36	1.26	9.3

The first item on the questionnaire, "fear of the teacher's negative evaluation," is the primary cause of speaking anxiety among participants, accounting for the largest share of the total score (10.7%). This percentage reflects the item's proportional share of the total score summed across all ten items, rather than the proportion of participants who endorsed it. Expressed as an agreement rate, 116 of the 150 participants (77.3%) selected agree or strongly agree with this item, confirming it as the most widely endorsed cause of speaking anxiety. Agreement rates for the remaining items ranged from approximately 51% to 65%.

Discussion

The results of the present study indicate that Iraqi EFL English language learners experience a high level of speaking anxiety. Specifically, 136 participants (90.66%) reported high levels of speaking anxiety, 10 participants (6.66%) reported moderate levels, and only 4 participants (2.66%) reported low levels. These results are consistent with those reported by Woodrow (2006), who found that the majority of EFL learners in her study exhibited high levels of oral communication anxiety. The results of this study are similar to the research conducted by Liu & Jackson (2008) which found that most Chinese university EFL students experience very high levels of anxiety when they speak in English. Therefore, there is a consistent pattern emerging globally for many different types of EFL learner. These comparisons should be interpreted cautiously because the samples and contexts differ. In Iraq, university transition, oral assessment, limited communicative practice, and unfamiliar speaking tasks may contribute to anxiety, but these factors were not directly tested.

According to the analysis of the categories of speaking anxiety that were studied, cognitive anxiety was found to be the most prevalent form of anxiety experienced by students. This conclusion is consistent with findings from Horwitz et al. (1986) which also stated that communication apprehension and fear of being evaluated negatively (both are based on cognition) are the two most important elements of foreign language classroom anxiety. Additionally, Dewaele (2013), using a significant number of multilingual participants, indicated that, for all participants, in addition to social evaluative concerns, cognitive evaluative concerns were most predictive of foreign language anxiety when students engage in oral production. In other words, when learners are worried about what others will think of how well or poorly they speak in class, they also have an increased level of cognitive anxiety. As a result, learners suffering from cognitive speaking anxiety must manage multiple external

evaluative pressures while simultaneously attempting to produce comprehensible spoken output.

The obtained data revealed that the main causes of speaking anxiety are fear of the teacher's negative evaluation (10.7%), high frequency of oral assignments and presentations (10.6%), insufficient oral technique and fluency skills (10.3%), and fear of oral speaking tests (10.2%). Fear of the teacher's negative evaluation ranked as the foremost cause of speaking anxiety. Rather than being driven by the ranking of these percentages alone, the pattern of results is better interpreted through the broader constructs of evaluative concern, task demands, and perceived proficiency that these items represent. These findings resonate strongly with the recent literature. In addition, Bárkányi and Brash (2025) stated that students facing broader personal challenges have an increased tendency to fear being judged by their peers for being incompetent when communicating orally. Rajitha and Alamelu (2020) demonstrated that the fear of others evaluating one negatively is one of the most common factors contributing to second language (L2) speaking anxiety. Thus, fear of negative evaluation does not only occur in formal oral assessments; but, also occurs whenever the student's speech is considered as open to public or peer scrutiny.

The high frequency of oral assignments and presentations (10.6%) and fear of oral speaking tests (10.2%) further underscore the role of time pressure and spontaneity as significant contributors to speaking anxiety. Suratin and Sribayak (2025) identify time constraints as a major external factor, noting that limited preparation time for public-speaking and impromptu tasks creates urgency that disrupts fluency and heightens fear of failure. Additionally, insufficient oral technique and fluency skills (10.3%) point to a lack of L2 oral communication skills as a core concern. Recent research has identified concerns with vocabulary retrieval and pronunciation accuracy as most significant worries for learners (Suratin & Sribayak, 2025). Saito et al. (2024) also demonstrated that being unable to locate the correct vocabulary to use in real-time was a key source of speaking anxiety across various learner populations due to an imbalance between declarative and automatic knowledge.

Psychological aspects of the learner's experience, as well as other environmental variables, also contribute to students' fear of speaking. In terms of predicting speaking performance by students, Rokhman et al. (2021) found that both anxiety and self-efficacy were predictors. Regarding their findings concerning how different types of anxiety–enjoyment profiles relate to speaking self-efficacy for undergraduate Chinese students, Chen and Li (2025) state that specific anxiety-enjoyment profile patterns correlate with varying levels of speaking self-efficacy. Low self-esteem further compounds this anxiety; Rajitha and Alamelu (2020) identify low self-confidence as a key predictor of speaking anxiety, and Bárkányi and Brash (2025) highlight confidence and identity-based barriers as particularly salient for learners facing broader personal challenges. Overall levels of L2 proficiency affect learners' affective responses to oral tasks, with lower-proficiency learners typically reporting higher anxiety. Saito et al. (2025) disentangle the causal relationships among motivation, enjoyment, anxiety, and speech learning, demonstrating that proficiency-related self-perceptions are deeply intertwined with emotional experience.

Poor oral skill development—characterized by insufficient speaking practice and limited opportunities for authentic oral interaction—can also contribute to speaking anxiety. Resnik et al. (2023) found that restricted interactive practice during emergency remote teaching amplified anxiety, while Suratin and Sribayak (2025) note that lack of exposure to English and limited preparation time heighten apprehension during public-speaking tasks. As with the earlier comparisons, that study's remote-teaching context differs from the present in-person setting, so the parallel is suggestive rather than direct. Another important consideration is "topic familiarity". According to Suratin & Sribayak (2025), when students are asked to discuss complicated subjects with insufficient prior experience/knowledge, they will be

anxious because they perceive themselves under pressure to achieve more than their current resources allow. In addition to this, Majid et al. (2025) suggest that both topic and context familiarity in online environments affect post-graduates' willingness to use oral communication.

Lastly, the kind of corrective feedback a student receives while participating in an oral speaking activity has a direct effect on their emotional state. According to Nurjanah et al. (2024), as students are choosing which types of oral corrective feedback they prefer, the type of support and structure provided by the teacher when giving this type of feedback will decrease a student's anxiety level. On the other hand, if the type of feedback is not clearly explained, and the teacher asks students for immediate responses, it may cause students to become anxious or apprehensive. The present findings, which identify fear of the teacher's negative evaluation as the primary cause of speaking anxiety, strongly support the argument that teachers should give more positive, constructive feedback and frequently encourage students to enhance their oral communication skills.

CONCLUSION

The present study concludes that oral performance anxiety is a serious and pervasive challenge among first-year Iraqi EFL university students. The findings show that 90.7% of the participants experienced a high level of speaking anxiety, while only a small proportion reported moderate or low levels. Among the three dimensions examined, cognitive anxiety emerged as the most prominent, with a mean score of 3.64, exceeding both somatic and behavioral anxiety, which each recorded a mean of 3.40. This pattern indicates that students' difficulties are strongly associated with worry, negative self-evaluation, fear of making mistakes, and concern about how their oral performance will be judged. The study further identified fear of the teacher's negative evaluation as the most strongly endorsed source of anxiety, with 77.3% of participants agreeing or strongly agreeing with this concern. Other important contributing factors included frequent oral assignments and presentations, insufficient oral technique and fluency, fear of oral tests, pronunciation concerns, and pressure to speak perfectly. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that oral performance anxiety is multidimensional and closely connected to both evaluative pressure and students' perceptions of their own communicative competence. The results therefore reinforce the importance of treating speaking anxiety not merely as an individual weakness, but as an affective and instructional issue that can significantly influence students' willingness to participate and develop oral proficiency.

The study also concludes that reducing speaking anxiety requires deliberate pedagogical attention to classroom climate, task design, feedback practices, and assessment procedures. Because fear of negative evaluation emerged as the leading concern, English language instructors should place greater emphasis on constructive, supportive, and transparent feedback rather than correction practices that students may perceive as punitive or threatening. Oral activities should also progress gradually from low-risk pair and small-group interaction toward more demanding individual presentations and assessed speaking tasks, giving students sufficient preparation time and repeated opportunities to build confidence. At the same time, teachers should recognise that students may experience different combinations of cognitive, somatic, and behavioral anxiety, even when their overall level of anxiety is similarly high. This implies that instructional responses should be flexible rather than uniform. The findings therefore support the development of psychologically safe speaking environments in which mistakes are treated as part of learning, expectations are clearly communicated, and students are encouraged to practise oral English without excessive fear of judgment. However, because the study used a cross-sectional descriptive design and did not test causal relationships or specific interventions, these pedagogical recommendations should be viewed as evidence-informed implications rather than experimentally validated solutions. Future research should

consequently examine intervention-based strategies, include learners across different proficiency levels, and explore how speaking anxiety changes over time and across different institutional contexts.

FUNDING

This research received no funding.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflict of interest.

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and all responses were kept confidential and used solely for research purposes. Participants were informed that their decision to participate, or not, would have no bearing on their academic standing, and all data were stored securely with access limited to the research team..

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request. This includes the de-identified participant responses, the FLCAS and CSAI instruments.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author would like to thank all those who have helped in the preparation of this article.

DECLARATION OF USING AI TOOLS

No generative AI tools were used at any stage of this study.

REFERENCES

- Aida, Y. (1994). Examination of Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's construct of foreign language anxiety: The case of students of Japanese. *Modern Language Journal*, 78(2), 155–168. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1994.tb02026.x>
- Arnold, J., & Brown, H. D. (1999). A map of the terrain. In J. Arnold (Ed.), *Affect in language learning* (pp. 1–24). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511585712>
- Bárkányi, Z., & Brash, B. (2025). Foreign language speaking anxiety, mental health, and online learning: Overcoming barriers in the digital age. *Language Teaching*, 1–19. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444825101080>
- Chastain, K. (1975). Affective and ability factors in second language learning. *Language Learning*, 25(1), 153–161. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-1770.1975.tb00115.x>
- Chen, X., & Li, C. (2025). Latent profiles of Chinese undergraduates' English speaking anxiety and enjoyment: Associations with speaking self-efficacy. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijal.70078>
- Cheng, Y. S. (2004). A measure of second language writing anxiety: Scale development and preliminary validation. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 13(4), 313–335. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2004.07.001>
- Daly, J. A., & Miller, M. D. (1975). The empirical development of an instrument to measure writing apprehension. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 9(3), 242–249.
- Dewaele, J.-M. (2013). The link between foreign language classroom anxiety and psychoticism, extraversion, and neuroticism among adult bi- and multilinguals. *Modern Language Journal*, 97(3), 670–684. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2013.12036.x>
- Dörnyei, Z., & Ryan, S. (2015). *The psychology of the language learner revisited*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315779553>

- Ellis, R. (1994). *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford University Press.
- Gardner, R. C., & MacIntyre, P. D. (1993). A student's contributions to second language learning: Part II. Affective variables. *Language Teaching*, 26(1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444800000045>
- Grupe, D. W., & Nitschke, J. B. (2013). Uncertainty and anticipation in anxiety: An integrated neurobiological and psychological perspective. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 14(7), 488–501. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nrn3524>
- Hassan, B. A. (2001). The relationship of writing apprehension and self-esteem to the writing quality and quantity of EFL university students. *Mansoura Faculty of Education Journal*, 4, 3–37.
- Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *Modern Language Journal*, 70(2), 125–132. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1986.tb05256.x>
- Huang, H. T. (2010). The relationship between foreign language anxiety and English achievement in Taiwan. *Journal of Education and Foreign Languages and Literature*, 11, 65–74.
- Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Pergamon Press.
- Liu, M., & Jackson, J. (2008). An exploration of Chinese EFL learners' unwillingness to communicate and foreign language anxiety. *Modern Language Journal*, 92(1), 71–86. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2008.00687.x>
- MacIntyre, P. D., & Gardner, R. C. (1991). Investigating language class anxiety using the focused essay technique. *Modern Language Journal*, 75(3), 296–304. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1991.tb05358.x>
- MacIntyre, P. D., & Gardner, R. C. (1994). The subtle effects of language anxiety on cognitive processing in the second language. *Language Learning*, 44(2), 283–305. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-1770.1994.tb01103.x>
- Majid, R. H., Amri, M., & Zen, E. L. (2025). Gender-based speaking anxiety in online EFL postgraduate students. *Premise: Journal of English Education and Applied Linguistics*, 14(1), 132–149. <https://doi.org/10.24127/pj.v14i1.9275>
- Nurjanah, L., Rahmanningtyas, H., & Yaniafari, R. P. (2024). Examining students' oral corrective feedback preferences for improving speaking proficiency. *Celtic: A Journal of Culture, English Language Teaching, Literature and Linguistics*, 11(1), 23–38.
- Oxford, R. L. (1992). Who are our students? A synthesis of foreign and second language research on individual differences with implications for instructional practice. *TESOL Canada Journal*, 9(2), 30–49. <https://doi.org/10.18806/tesl.v9i2.602>
- Phillips, E. M. (1992). The effects of language anxiety on students' oral test performance and attitudes. *Modern Language Journal*, 76(1), 14–26. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1992.tb02573.x>
- Price, M. L. (1991). The subjective experience of foreign language anxiety: Interviews with highly anxious students. In E. K. Horwitz & D. J. Young (Eds.), *Language anxiety: From theory and research to classroom implications* (pp. 101–108). Prentice Hall.
- Rajitha, K., & Alamelu, C. (2020). A study of factors affecting and causing speaking anxiety. *Procedia Computer Science*, 172, 1053–1058. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.procs.2020.05.154>
- Resnik, P., Dewaele, J.-M., & Knechtelsdorfer, E. (2023). Differences in the intensity and the nature of foreign language anxiety in in-person and online EFL classes during the pandemic: A mixed-methods study. *TESOL Quarterly*, 57(2), 618–642. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.3177>

- Rezaei, M., & Jafari, M. (2014). Investigating the levels, types, and causes of writing anxiety among Iranian EFL students: A mixed method design. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 98, 1546–1554. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.03.577>
- Rokhman, N. M., Latief, M. A., & Suryati, N. (2021). Learners' anxiety, self-efficacy, and personality as predictors of learners' speaking performance. *Jurnal Pendidikan: Teori, Penelitian, Dan Pengembangan*, 6(1), 103–112. <https://doi.org/10.17977/jptpp.v6i1.14399>
- Saito, K., Uchihara, T., Takizawa, K., & Suzukida, Y. (2024). Declarative and automatized phonological vocabulary knowledge in L2 listening proficiency: A training study. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 45(6), 1187–1218. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0142716424000468>
- Saito, K., Dewaele, J.-M., In'nami, Y., & Abe, M. (2025). Disentangling the causal role of motivation, enjoyment, and anxiety in second language speech learning: A final report. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 47(3), 461–487. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0272263125000038>
- Skehan, P. (1989). *Individual differences in second-language learning*. Edward Arnold.
- Sparks, R. L., & Ganschow, L. (1991). Foreign language learning differences: Affective or native language aptitude differences? *Modern Language Journal*, 75(1), 3–16. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1991.tb01076.x>
- Suratin, N., & Sribayak, V. (2025). Factors contributing to speaking anxiety and anxiety reduction techniques in Thai adult EFL learners. *LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network*, 18(1), 294–319.
- Swain, M. (1995). Three functions of output in second language learning. In G. Cook & B. Seidlhofer (Eds.), *Principles and practice in applied linguistics* (pp. 125–144). Oxford University Press.
- Woodrow, L. (2006). Anxiety and speaking English as a second language. *RELJ Journal*, 37(3), 308–328. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688206071315>
- Young, D. J. (1990). An investigation of students' perspectives on anxiety and speaking. *Foreign Language Annals*, 23(6), 539–553. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1944-9720.1990.tb00424.x>
- Young, D. J. (1991a). Creating a low-anxiety classroom environment: What does language anxiety research suggest? *Modern Language Journal*, 75(4), 426–439. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1991.tb05378.x>
- Young, D. J. (1991b). Language anxiety from the foreign language specialist's perspective: Interviews with Krashen, Omaggio Hadley, Terrell, and Rardin. *Foreign Language Annals*, 25(2), 157–172. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1944-9720.1992.tb00524.x>
- Zhang, X. (2019). Foreign language anxiety and foreign language performance: A meta-analysis. *Modern Language Journal*, 103(4), 763–781. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12590>
- Zheng, Y. (2008). Anxiety and second/foreign language learning revisited. *Canadian Journal for New Scholars in Education*, 1(1), 1–12.