

Communication Anxiety and Speaking Performance in EFL Learners: A Systematic Review of Counseling and Pedagogical Strategies

Nur Cahya¹, Elfi Churnia^{2*}

¹Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, Universitas Mathla'ul Anwar, Indonesia

²Program Studi Bimbingan dan Konseling, Universitas Mathla'ul Anwar, Indonesia

Correspondence Email: echurnia@gmail.com*

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Communication Anxiety; Speaking Anxiety; Foreign Language Anxiety; EFL Learners; Counseling Interventions; Pedagogical Strategies; Speaking Performance; PRISMA Systematic Review.

Abstract

Communication anxiety is a persistent affective barrier that significantly hinders English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' speaking performance. This systematic review synthesizes empirical studies published in the past five years to identify key psychological, linguistic, and instructional factors contributing to communication anxiety and to evaluate counseling-based and pedagogical interventions. Guided by PRISMA 2020 procedures, a comprehensive search across Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, ScienceDirect, DOAJ, and Google Scholar identified 82 eligible studies. Findings indicate that communication anxiety is closely linked to fear of negative evaluation, linguistic insecurity, and low communicative self-efficacy. Teacher-centered instruction, strict error correction, and competitive classroom environments amplify anxiety, whereas supportive pedagogical climates increase learners' willingness to communicate. Anxiety was consistently shown to disrupt fluency, lexical access, coherence, and spontaneous speech production. Counseling-based interventions including cognitive restructuring, mindfulness, relaxation training, and individual counseling effectively reduced affective symptoms and improved emotional regulation. Pedagogical strategies such as peer interaction, task repetition, scaffolded speaking tasks, and technology-mediated practice also contributed to reduced anxiety and improved oral performance. Integrated approaches that combine psychological and instructional support produced the most stable gains. Overall, the review emphasizes the importance of holistic teaching frameworks that simultaneously address affective needs and communicative competence, offering theoretical and practical insights for designing anxiety-sensitive speaking instruction in EFL contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Speaking is widely acknowledged as one of the most challenging skills for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This skill requires real-time cognitive processing, linguistic accuracy, pragmatic appropriateness, and confidence to interact with others using the target language. Many EFL learners, however, experience communication anxiety, a psychological condition marked by nervousness, fear of negative evaluation, self-doubt, and avoidance behavior when speaking English. Communication anxiety, which forms a specific dimension of foreign language anxiety, can significantly undermine learners' willingness to speak, reduce their verbal output, and hinder their overall speaking performance. Recent studies have shown that anxiety in EFL speaking contexts is a

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persistent problem affecting learners of different ages and proficiency levels across diverse educational settings (Nababan & Lestariningsih, 2024; Wirentake, 2025).

Foreign language anxiety continues to receive extensive scholarly attention due to its strong association with lower communicative competence and academic performance. Research over the past five years indicates that speaking anxiety emerges from several internal and external sources, such as fear of making mistakes, unfamiliar vocabulary, lack of speaking practice, fear of peer judgment, and previous negative learning experiences (Bahasa dan Kebudayaan Inggris, 2025; Mabasin, 2025). These factors combine to create a psychological barrier that restricts learners' oral participation and their opportunity to improve speaking proficiency. The phenomenon becomes more complex when considering that EFL classrooms often prioritize accuracy over fluency, reinforcing learners' fear of committing errors during oral communication.

Communication apprehension, a concept introduced by McCroskey (1986), offers a theoretical explanation for this anxiety. It refers to a person's level of fear or anxiety related to real or anticipated communication with others. When applied to EFL learning contexts, communication apprehension manifests in symptoms such as trembling, mental blocks, rapid heartbeat, and avoidance of speaking tasks. These reactions inhibit learners' ability to organize thoughts, articulate ideas, and respond spontaneously. Empirical evidence confirms a negative correlation between communication anxiety and speaking performance. Learners with higher anxiety tend to produce shorter speech, demonstrate limited vocabulary use, and exhibit low fluency in oral assessments. Studies conducted in Indonesia, China, and several Southeast Asian countries consistently reveal similar patterns (Muhyidin & Chuquin, 2025; Chen, 2023).

In response to the growing concern about EFL speaking anxiety, recent research has explored various strategies to reduce learners' anxiety and enhance their speaking performance. These strategies include psychological coping techniques such as deep breathing, positive self-talk, self-reflection, relaxation exercises, and individual counseling sessions aimed at helping students manage their emotions. Other studies highlight effective pedagogical approaches such as peer teaching, collaborative tasks, supportive teacher feedback, and classroom environments that prioritize encouragement rather than evaluation. Findings suggest that when learners feel psychologically safe and emotionally supported, they tend to participate more actively in speaking activities and show improved oral performance (Ayiz & Tauchid, 2024; Nuraeni et al., 2024).

Despite the abundance of research on foreign language anxiety, there remains a lack of comprehensive synthesis that specifically integrates counseling-based strategies and pedagogical approaches aimed at addressing communication anxiety. Most existing reviews examine anxiety in general language learning contexts, with limited emphasis on speaking anxiety and its direct impact on oral communication performance. Furthermore, counseling interventions are often discussed separately from language teaching strategies, even though both domains share the common goal of supporting learner well-being and performance. The fragmented nature of this literature underscores the need for a systematic review that consolidates empirical findings from the past five years.

Given this gap, the present systematic review aims to synthesize recent empirical studies on communication anxiety among EFL learners and examine how counseling and pedagogical strategies have been used to reduce anxiety and improve speaking performance. By integrating insights from educational psychology, counseling, and language pedagogy, this review seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of effective approaches for supporting learners who struggle with anxiety in oral communication. The insights generated from this review are expected to contribute to the development of more holistic, evidence-based practices for EFL educators, language counselors, and curriculum designers, ultimately helping learners build confidence and achieve better communicative outcomes.

METHOD

This systematic review was conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) framework, which provides updated guidance for ensuring transparency and reproducibility in systematic evidence synthesis (Page et al., 2021). Although the review protocol was not prospectively registered, all methodological decisions including search procedures, eligibility criteria, screening processes, quality appraisal, and synthesis methods were determined a priori to minimize bias and enhance methodological rigor. The primary aim of this review was to synthesize empirical studies published during the last five years that examined communication anxiety among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners and investigated counseling-based and pedagogical strategies aimed at reducing anxiety and improving speaking performance.

A comprehensive and systematic search was undertaken across five major scholarly databases: Scopus, Web of Science Core Collection, ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), ScienceDirect, and the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). Google Scholar was used as an additional search engine to identify supplementary peer-reviewed literature and regionally indexed publications, including those from Indonesian SINTA-accredited journals. These databases were selected due to their extensive coverage of research in applied linguistics, educational psychology, counseling, and language pedagogy, and their capacity to index a wide variety of empirical studies relevant to the phenomenon of speaking anxiety.

The search strategy was developed through an iterative process informed by preliminary scoping of existing literature and by examining key terms commonly used in recent empirical studies. Boolean operators were used to combine free-text keywords and controlled vocabulary to maximize the sensitivity and precision of the search. The final search strings included terms such as “communication anxiety,” “speaking anxiety,” “foreign language anxiety,” “EFL learners,” “speaking performance,” “counseling intervention,” and “pedagogical strategy,” typically combined in the following manner: (“communication anxiety” OR “speaking anxiety” OR “foreign language anxiety”) AND (“EFL” OR “English as a Foreign Language”) AND (“speaking performance” OR “oral performance”) AND (“counseling” OR “intervention” OR “pedagogical approach”). Searches were conducted between January and February 2026. A publication year filter was applied to include studies published within the last five years, and language restrictions were set to English and Indonesian to capture relevant international and regional evidence.

All retrieved records were imported into a reference management software for systematic organization and duplicate removal. Duplicate records were eliminated through both automated detection and manual verification. The remaining studies underwent a three-phase screening process consisting of title screening, abstract screening, and full-text assessment. Two reviewers independently conducted each stage of the screening procedure, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion or, where necessary, arbitration by a third reviewer. This multi-reviewer procedure was adopted to ensure accuracy and reduce the risk of selection bias, consistent with best practices for systematic review methodology (Moher et al., 2009; Page et al., 2021).

The eligibility criteria were defined in advance and applied consistently throughout the screening process. Studies were included if they met the following criteria: (a) published within the last five years; (b) peer-reviewed and indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, ScienceDirect, DOAJ, or Indonesian SINTA-accredited journals; (c) written in English or Indonesian; (d) used quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods research designs; (e) involved participants who were EFL learners; (f) explicitly examined communication or speaking anxiety; and (g) reported empirical findings related to counseling-based strategies or pedagogical interventions intended to reduce anxiety or improve speaking performance. Studies were excluded if they focused on general language anxiety without addressing speaking performance, lacked empirical data, provided insufficient methodological detail, or were

published as theses, dissertations, conference papers, or book chapters, as these sources do not consistently meet peer-review standards.

The flow of study selection followed the PRISMA 2020 structure. The database search identified a total of 1,498 records. After removing 372 duplicates, 1,126 records remained for title and abstract screening. A total of 846 records were excluded for irrelevance to communication anxiety, EFL speaking performance, or counseling and pedagogical interventions. The remaining 280 articles underwent full-text review, during which 198 were excluded for lacking a focus on speaking anxiety, not involving EFL learners, insufficient methodological rigor, or absence of relevant intervention-related findings. Ultimately, 82 studies met all inclusion criteria and were incorporated into the final synthesis. Due to substantial methodological and analytical heterogeneity, a meta-analysis was not feasible, and a narrative synthesis approach was adopted instead.

Quality appraisal was conducted using established critical appraisal instruments to ensure methodological soundness across studies. The Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) Critical Appraisal Checklists were used to evaluate qualitative and quantitative descriptive studies, as they provide standardized criteria for assessing validity, reliability, and reporting clarity (Aromataris & Munn, 2020). The Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) was applied to evaluate mixed-methods studies because of its strong validity and consistent use in social science research (Hong et al., 2018). For quasi-experimental or intervention-based studies, appropriate JBI checklists and the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) tools were utilized to examine methodological transparency, sampling adequacy, appropriateness of analytical techniques, and consistency between findings and conclusions (CASP, 2018). Only studies assessed as having high or moderate methodological quality were retained in the synthesis.

A structured data extraction template was developed and used to extract essential information from each included study. Extracted data consisted of bibliographic information, study context, participant demographics, research design, theoretical frameworks, instruments used to measure communication or speaking anxiety, types of counseling or pedagogical interventions, primary findings, and reported limitations. Data extraction was carried out independently by two reviewers to ensure accuracy and reduce risk of bias, with any disagreements resolved through consensus.

Given the diversity of study designs, measurement instruments, anxiety constructs, and intervention types, a narrative synthesis was employed. The synthesis involved iterative coding, categorization, and thematic integration of key findings to identify patterns and theoretical relationships within and across studies. This analytical approach enabled a nuanced understanding of the psychological antecedents of communication anxiety, the pedagogical conditions that contribute to its emergence, and the effectiveness of counseling-based and instructional strategies in reducing anxiety and improving the speaking performance of EFL learners.

RESULTS

A total of eighty-two studies met the inclusion criteria and were included in the qualitative synthesis. These studies, published in the last five years, collectively provide an extensive overview of communication anxiety among EFL learners and the effectiveness of counseling and pedagogical strategies in mitigating its impact on speaking performance. Research settings were predominantly located across Asian countries such as Indonesia, China, Vietnam, Malaysia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Japan, Turkey, and the Philippines, reaffirming that speaking anxiety is a widespread challenge in EFL contexts (Chen, 2023; Zhang, 2023). Most studies employed quantitative or mixed-method approaches, while several incorporated qualitative or quasi-experimental designs to explore psychological influences, classroom conditions, and intervention outcomes.

Across the eighty-two studies, speaking anxiety was consistently found to exert a negative influence on oral performance. High levels of communication anxiety were associated with reduced fluency, restricted lexical access,

disrupted coherence, and diminished confidence during speaking tasks (Chen, 2023; Alharbi, 2022). Several studies underscored fear of negative evaluation as the primary psychological antecedent, followed by linguistic insecurity, limited vocabulary, perfectionism, and lack of speaking practice (Nababan & Lestariningsih, 2024; Sari & Putra, 2022). Other studies highlighted the instructional environment, particularly teacher-centered classrooms, strict error correction, and competitive atmospheres, as significant contributors to heightened anxiety (Nguyen, 2021; Tuan, 2020). Conversely, communicative classrooms characterized by supportive teacher feedback, peer collaboration, and scaffolded tasks were associated with diminished anxiety and improved participation (Yildiz, 2022; Tran, 2021).

Evidence from quasi-experimental and intervention-focused studies demonstrated that counseling-based strategies such as cognitive restructuring, mindfulness training, relaxation exercises, and individual counseling significantly reduced communication anxiety and improved students' cognitive control during speaking activities (Hosseini, 2020; Rahimi, 2020; Fauzi, 2022). Pedagogical strategies including peer teaching, repeated task cycles, cooperative learning, and technology-mediated speaking tasks also contributed to significant improvements in speaking performance while lowering anxiety levels (Ayiz & Tauchid, 2024; Zhang, 2023). Studies combining counseling and instructional approaches reported the most substantial and sustained effects, indicating that psychological and pedagogical interventions complement each other in supporting anxious learners (Nurhadi, 2023).

To represent the diversity of the included studies without overwhelming the reporting format, twenty studies are presented below as a representative subset. These studies exemplify the methodological variety, cross-national distribution, and thematic patterns found across the full data set.

Table 1. Characteristics of Representative Studies Included in the Review (n = 20)

Author(s) & Year	Country	Design	Participants	Focus	Main Findings
Chen (2023)	China	Quantitative	312 university EFL learners	Speaking anxiety & performance	High anxiety negatively predicted fluency, coherence, and lexical quality.
Nababan & Lestariningsih (2024)	Indonesia	Qualitative	28 undergraduates	Speaking anxiety factors	Anxiety triggered by fear of mistakes and peer evaluation.
Wirentake (2025)	Indonesia	Mixed-methods	60 students	Strategies & anxiety levels	Preparation, relaxation, and peer support used to manage anxiety.
Ayiz & Tauchid (2024)	Indonesia	Quasi-experimental	50 learners	Peer teaching intervention	Reduced anxiety and improved speaking scores.
Mabasin (2025)	Philippines	Survey	247 students	Communication apprehension	Strong correlation between apprehension and speaking performance.
Nguyen (2021)	Vietnam	Qualitative	22 learners	Anxiety sources	Triggered by limited vocabulary and teacher criticism.
Alharbi (2022)	Saudi Arabia	Quantitative	380 male EFL learners	Public speaking anxiety	High anxiety predicted low performance in formal speaking tasks.
Khan & Rahman (2023)	Malaysia	Mixed-methods	45 college students	PRCA-24 & oral tasks	Anxiety higher in spontaneous speaking tasks.
Hosseini (2020)	Iran	Experimental	72 learners	Counseling	Cognitive restructuring

Author(s) & Year	Country	Design	Participants	Focus	Main Findings
				intervention	significantly reduced anxiety.
Tuan (2020)	Vietnam	Observation	40 students	Classroom climate	Supportive classroom climate reduced anxiety.
Tran (2021)	Vietnam	Mixed-methods	95 learners	Online speaking anxiety	Anxiety increased online but improved with scaffolded feedback.
Sari & Putra (2022)	Indonesia	Qualitative	30 high school learners	Peer evaluation anxiety	Fear of peer judgment strongest anxiety predictor.
Zhang (2023)	China	Survey	412 students	Mobile-assisted speaking	Repeated digital practice lowered anxiety.
Rahimi (2020)	Iran	Quasi-experimental	65 learners	Mindfulness training	Mindfulness reduced physiological anxiety symptoms.
Murata (2023)	Japan	Case study	18 learners	Communication breakdown	Anxiety highest during impromptu speaking.
Hadi (2021)	Indonesia	Survey	210 undergraduates	Vocabulary & anxiety	Limited vocabulary strongly predicted anxiety.
Yildiz (2022)	Turkey	Quasi-experimental	52 learners	Task-based learning	Task repetition lowered anxiety and improved fluency.
Le (2021)	Vietnam	Phenomenological	12 students	Lived experiences	Anxiety linked to negative English learning histories.
Fauzi (2022)	Indonesia	Mixed-methods	71 EFL learners	Counseling & performance	Counseling improved confidence and performance structure.
Nurhadi (2023)	Indonesia	Experimental	48 students	Cognitive-behavioral training	CBT reduced catastrophic thinking during speaking tasks.

Thematic Analysis

The thematic synthesis of the included studies generated four dominant themes. The first theme concerns the psychological antecedents of communication anxiety, in which fear of negative evaluation, self-perceived incompetence, and low self-efficacy consistently emerged as primary predictors of anxiety (Sari & Putra, 2022; Le, 2021). The second theme centers on instructional and classroom-based factors, where strict correction practices, teacher-centered classrooms, and competitive learning environments were found to intensify anxiety (Nguyen, 2021; Tuan, 2020). Supportive learning environments, peer collaboration, and scaffolded tasks were inversely associated with anxiety and positively related to speaking engagement (Yildiz, 2022; Tran, 2021).

The third theme relates to the substantial impact of communication anxiety on speaking performance. High-anxiety learners frequently demonstrated shorter utterances, reduced lexical richness, limited fluency, and avoidance of spontaneous communication (Chen, 2023; Alharbi, 2022). The fourth theme involves the demonstrated effectiveness of counseling-based and pedagogical interventions. Studies employing cognitive-behavioral approaches, mindfulness, individual counseling, peer teaching, repeated tasks, and technology-assisted speaking practice consistently reported reduced anxiety and enhanced speaking proficiency (Rahimi, 2020; Hosseini, 2020; Zhang, 2023).

Synthesis Narrative

Overall, the evidence indicates that communication anxiety is shaped by a complex interaction between psychological, linguistic, and instructional variables. Anxiety consistently predicts diminished speaking performance, confirming that managing learners' affective states is essential for oral proficiency development. Counseling-based approaches effectively target learners' emotional and cognitive responses, while pedagogical strategies modify environmental and instructional variables that influence anxiety. The most effective approaches integrate both domains, suggesting that speaking anxiety reduction requires holistic interventions that address psychological readiness as well as instructional design.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this systematic review provide a comprehensive and multidimensional understanding of communication anxiety among learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), revealing the complex interplay between psychological, linguistic, and instructional variables. Across the eighty-two studies included in the review, communication anxiety consistently emerged as a significant barrier to effective oral communication in EFL contexts. This discussion synthesizes the thematic patterns identified in the literature, situates them within theoretical perspectives on affective learning, and critically evaluates the implications for counseling-based and pedagogical interventions aimed at reducing speaking anxiety and improving learners' oral performance.

A central theme that emerged across the reviewed studies is the role of psychological antecedents in shaping learners' levels of communication anxiety. Fear of negative evaluation was the most frequently cited psychological factor influencing anxiety during oral tasks, aligning with long-standing understandings of language anxiety as closely tied to self-perception and social judgment. Studies by Sari and Putra (2022), Le (2021), and Nababan and Lestariningsih (2024) demonstrated that learners often anticipate criticism from peers and teachers, leading to apprehension, over-monitoring of speech, and avoidance of speaking opportunities. These findings resonate with theoretical frameworks such as Horwitz's concept of Foreign Language Anxiety, which posits that language anxiety is a situation-specific form of anxiety arising from learners' perceived inability to meet social and academic expectations in the target language environment.

Closely linked to fear of negative evaluation is the issue of linguistic insecurity. Several studies reported that learners who perceived their vocabulary range, pronunciation skills, or grammatical accuracy as insufficient experienced heightened anxiety during oral communication (Chen, 2023; Hadi, 2021). Such learners often struggled with real-time lexical retrieval and syntactic planning, especially in spontaneous speaking tasks. Because speaking requires immediate and unrehearsed production, learners with weaker linguistic foundations tend to feel more vulnerable to judgment, which intensifies anxiety. This cyclical relationship between linguistic limitations and affective responses is crucial, as it suggests that anxiety is not merely an emotional phenomenon but also a cognitive-linguistic one.

In addition to psychological factors, instructional and classroom-based variables were also identified as significant contributors to communication anxiety. Teacher-centered classrooms, strict correction practices, and competitive academic environments were repeatedly found to elevate anxiety levels. Nguyen (2021) and Tuan (2020) noted that learners felt particularly anxious when teachers corrected errors publicly or when classroom interactions emphasized accuracy over fluency. Such environments can inadvertently reinforce learners' fear of making mistakes, thereby reducing their willingness to participate in oral activities. In contrast, supportive classroom climates that promote encouragement, effort-based feedback, and collaborative learning were associated with lower anxiety and increased oral engagement. These findings underscore the importance of creating an

emotionally safe learning environment, where learners feel empowered to take communicative risks without fear of ridicule or punishment.

Technology-mediated learning emerged as an important instructional factor influencing communication anxiety. Studies such as Zhang (2023) and Tran (2021) found that digital tools including mobile-assisted speaking applications and online speaking platforms had the potential to reduce learners' anxiety by providing controlled, low-stakes environments for practice. Repeated practice opportunities, flexible pacing, and personalized feedback features were particularly effective in reducing the affective burden associated with oral tasks. However, Tran (2021) also found that online speaking tasks could initially heighten anxiety due to perceived public exposure and performance recording. This suggests that the effectiveness of technology tools depends heavily on their design and integration into supportive pedagogical frameworks.

The impact of communication anxiety on speaking performance was robustly evident across all research designs. High-anxiety learners consistently demonstrated shorter utterances, restricted lexical diversity, limited fluency, and reduced coherence during oral tasks (Chen, 2023; Alharbi, 2022). Anxiety frequently disrupted cognitive processes such as working memory and speech planning, leading to hesitations, fillers, pauses, and avoidance strategies. These behavioral outcomes align with cognitive-interference theories, which argue that anxiety consumes cognitive resources necessary for task performance. In the context of EFL speaking, anxiety competes with linguistic processing demands, resulting in diminished performance. Such findings emphasize the critical need to address anxiety as part of skill development, as linguistic competence alone is insufficient when affective barriers remain unaddressed.

Intervention studies included in this review provide valuable insights into effective strategies for reducing communication anxiety and enhancing speaking performance. Counseling-based interventions, including cognitive restructuring, mindfulness training, relaxation techniques, and individual counseling, demonstrated significant positive effects. Studies conducted by Hosseini (2020), Rahimi (2020), and Fauzi (2022) revealed that learners who underwent these interventions experienced improved emotional regulation, reduced catastrophic thinking, and increased confidence during oral communication. Cognitive restructuring in particular was effective in helping learners challenge irrational beliefs about failure or incompetence, replacing them with adaptive, self-supportive beliefs. Mindfulness training also produced notable physiological and emotional benefits, decreasing physical symptoms of anxiety such as rapid heartbeat and trembling, which often impede oral production.

Pedagogical interventions were equally prominent across the reviewed studies. Approaches such as peer teaching, repeated task cycles, cooperative learning, and scaffolded feedback were consistently found to reduce anxiety and improve speaking performance. For example, Ayiz and Tauchid (2024) demonstrated that peer teaching promoted a sense of shared responsibility and reduced performance pressure, while Yildiz (2022) reported that task repetition allowed learners to build familiarity and confidence, leading to improved fluency. These findings align with sociocultural theories of language learning, which highlight the role of social interaction and mediated practice in language development. Collaborative learning environments enable learners to negotiate meaning, receive feedback, and gradually build communicative competence without the anxiety often triggered by teacher-centered interactions.

A particularly compelling finding across intervention studies is that the most effective approaches combined counseling-based and pedagogical strategies. Learners benefited when emotional regulation techniques were integrated with structured speaking tasks, allowing them to manage anxiety proactively while simultaneously practicing language skills. Studies such as those by Nurhadi (2023) and Fauzi (2022) demonstrated that learners who engaged in both counseling and instructional interventions showed more sustained reductions in anxiety and more substantial improvements in speaking performance. This suggests that communication anxiety is best addressed through holistic, multidimensional approaches that consider both affective and instructional dimensions.

Although this review provides strong evidence regarding the nature of communication anxiety and the effectiveness of various interventions, it also reveals several gaps and inconsistencies in the literature. Methodological heterogeneity across studies, including varied measurement instruments, inconsistent operational definitions of speaking anxiety, and differing intervention protocols, limits the comparability of findings. Additionally, most studies relied on self-report measures, which may be susceptible to social desirability bias and subjective misinterpretation of anxiety symptoms. Few studies incorporated physiological measures of anxiety, such as heart rate variability, which could provide more objective assessments of anxiety levels during speaking tasks.

Another gap involves the limited exploration of cultural factors influencing communication anxiety. Although studies included in this review originated from culturally diverse contexts, few explicitly analyzed how cultural norms related to self-expression, collectivism, or power distance may shape learners' anxiety experiences. This represents an important direction for future research, particularly in Asian contexts where social harmony and hierarchical relationships often influence classroom dynamics.

Furthermore, intervention studies rarely examined long-term outcomes beyond immediate post-intervention effects. Longitudinal research is needed to determine whether reductions in anxiety translate into lasting improvements in speaking performance and whether learners internalize psychological and linguistic strategies for future communicative tasks. Additionally, few studies investigated how technology-based interventions interact with counseling approaches to foster both skill development and affective management, representing another promising avenue for pedagogical innovation.

Overall, the synthesis of evidence highlights that communication anxiety is a multidimensional construct requiring comprehensive, integrative approaches. Effective anxiety reduction must address both internal psychological states and external instructional conditions. Counseling-based strategies help learners regulate emotions and reframe self-perceptions, while pedagogical interventions provide the communicative practice necessary to build linguistic and pragmatic competence. When implemented together, these approaches create optimal conditions for learners to engage confidently and meaningfully in oral communication. These findings support a paradigm shift in EFL pedagogy, advocating for the systematic integration of counseling principles within language instruction to foster both emotional well-being and communicative proficiency.

In conclusion, communication anxiety significantly impedes learners' speaking performance in EFL contexts, but a wide range of empirically supported interventions can mitigate its effects. The evidence demonstrates that integrated counseling-pedagogical models hold the greatest promise for improving learners' emotional readiness, reducing anxiety, and enhancing oral proficiency. Such approaches are especially relevant as EFL classrooms increasingly emphasize communicative competence and learner-centered instruction. The findings of this review underscore the need for educational systems, teacher-training programs, and counseling units to collaborate in developing integrated frameworks that support learners' psychological and linguistic development. This integrated vision provides a strong foundation for future research and pedagogical innovation aimed at addressing one of the most persistent challenges in foreign language education.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this systematic review provide a comprehensive and evidence-based understanding of the persistent issue of communication anxiety among learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Across the eighty-two empirical studies reviewed, communication anxiety consistently emerged as a multifaceted construct shaped by psychological, linguistic, and instructional variables. The review demonstrates that anxiety does not operate as an isolated emotional challenge; rather, it permeates the cognitive, affective, and social dimensions of oral communication. This reinforces the notion that speaking proficiency is inseparable from learners' emotional

well-being, thus validating long-standing claims within the affective domain of second language acquisition research.

A central conclusion arising from this synthesis is that communication anxiety exerts a substantial negative impact on learners' speaking performance. High levels of anxiety were shown to inhibit fluency, reduce lexical variety, disrupt coherence, and diminish pragmatic appropriateness. These findings align with theoretical perspectives suggesting that anxiety consumes cognitive resources needed for language processing, leading to compromised performance even among learners with adequate linguistic competence. In practical terms, this implies that efforts to improve speaking proficiency cannot rely solely on linguistic instruction; they must also address learners' affective states. Ignoring the emotional dimension of speaking places learners at a disadvantage and limits the effectiveness of instructional strategies.

Another major conclusion is that the sources of communication anxiety are rooted in both internal and external factors. Internally, learners frequently struggle with fear of negative evaluation, low self-efficacy, and linguistic insecurity, particularly in relation to vocabulary retrieval, pronunciation accuracy, and spontaneous speech production. Externally, anxiety is shaped by the nature of instructional practices and classroom climate. Teacher-centered pedagogies, strict error correction, and competitive atmospheres intensify learners' anxiety, whereas supportive environments, scaffolded tasks, and collaborative opportunities reduce affective barriers to communication. This duality of internal and external factors indicates that comprehensive solutions must be multi-layered, targeting both learners' psychological readiness and the pedagogical structures within which speaking activities occur.

One of the most significant contributions of this review is its evaluation of counseling-based and pedagogical interventions designed to reduce speaking anxiety. Counseling-oriented approaches including cognitive restructuring, relaxation training, mindfulness practices, and individual counseling were found to be effective in helping learners regulate emotions, challenge maladaptive beliefs, and develop greater confidence. Pedagogical interventions such as peer teaching, cooperative learning, repeated speaking tasks, and technology-mediated speaking practice also led to notable improvements in learners' oral performance and reductions in anxiety. Importantly, the most impactful improvements were observed in studies that integrated counseling-based techniques with instructional strategies. This finding suggests that communication anxiety is best addressed through holistic, integrative models that harmonize psychological and pedagogical support. Such models acknowledge that reducing anxiety is not merely a matter of increasing practice opportunities but also requires active intervention in learners' cognitive and emotional processes.

The evidence synthesized in this review underscores the need for educational institutions, language programs, and counseling units to collaborate in developing systemic approaches to anxiety reduction. Teacher training programs should equip educators with knowledge of affective learning principles, helping them create emotionally supportive speaking environments. At the same time, counseling services within schools and universities should be oriented toward supporting language learners, particularly those who struggle with performance-based anxiety. Integrating these institutional efforts will ensure that learners receive comprehensive support that addresses both instructional and psychological needs.

Finally, this review highlights the importance of advancing research on communication anxiety in several key areas. Future studies should employ longitudinal designs to track the durability of intervention effects, use multi-modal assessment tools that combine self-report with physiological measures, and investigate how cultural norms influence learners' affective responses to speaking. More research is also needed on technology-enhanced interventions, particularly those that incorporate adaptive feedback, anonymity features, and virtual counseling components. Such approaches hold considerable promise for supporting anxious learners in increasingly digitalized learning environments.

In conclusion, communication anxiety remains a significant challenge in EFL learning, but it is one that can be addressed effectively through carefully designed, evidence-based interventions. By combining counseling strategies with thoughtful pedagogical design, educators can create empowering learning contexts that foster both emotional readiness and linguistic competence. This integrative approach provides a viable pathway for enhancing learners' speaking performance while simultaneously supporting their psychological well-being. The findings of this systematic review thus contribute to a deeper theoretical and practical understanding of communication anxiety and offer a comprehensive foundation for future research and pedagogical innovation in EFL education.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this systematic review yield several important pedagogical implications for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching and learning, particularly concerning the design of speaking instruction, classroom interaction, and the integration of affective support mechanisms. Given the consistent evidence that communication anxiety exerts a substantial negative influence on students' speaking performance, teachers and curriculum designers must conceptualize speaking instruction not only as a linguistic endeavor but also as an affective and psychological process. Affective considerations should therefore be treated as foundational rather than peripheral elements of speaking pedagogy.

One key implication is the need for EFL instructors to intentionally create emotionally supportive classroom environments that enable learners to take communicative risks without fear of negative judgment. Studies included in this review demonstrated that learners' anxiety is significantly shaped by instructional practices and teacher-student interactions (Nguyen, 2021; Tuan, 2020). Teachers who adopt encouraging, patient, and non-punitive approaches can lessen the psychological burden learners experience during oral tasks. This suggests that teacher professional development programs must explicitly address affective pedagogy, equipping educators with the skills to provide constructive feedback, minimize public error correction, and foster a culture of mutual respect and encouragement. Emotionally supportive classrooms empower learners to participate more actively, develop resilience in the face of linguistic challenges, and demonstrate greater willingness to communicate.

A second pedagogical implication relates to the design of speaking tasks. Evidence from multiple studies indicates that task repetition, scaffolded activities, and peer collaboration can significantly reduce speaking anxiety while enhancing performance (Yildiz, 2022; Ayiz & Tauchid, 2024). Repetition provides learners with opportunities to refine their linguistic output and gain familiarity with communicative demands, thereby reducing uncertainty and anxiety. Scaffolded tasks such as guided dialogues, structured presentations, and supported role-plays allow learners to gradually build complexity and confidence. Moreover, peer collaboration offers social support that helps to diffuse individual performance pressure. Thus, speaking activities should be designed to promote gradual competence building, shared responsibility, and supportive interpersonal engagement.

Another implication concerns the integration of technology-mediated speaking practice. Studies included in this review revealed that mobile-assisted and computer-assisted tools can serve as effective anxiety-reducing platforms when appropriately implemented (Zhang, 2023; Tran, 2021). Technologies that offer private rehearsal spaces, automated feedback, and repeated practice opportunities provide learners with safe environments to experiment with language. However, for technology to be pedagogically meaningful, teachers must deliberately integrate these tools into broader instructional frameworks rather than using them superficially. Careful orchestration of technology-enhanced tasks can help learners overcome the initial affective barriers associated with speaking and progressively build communicative confidence.

The review's findings also highlight the importance of embedding counseling principles into classroom pedagogy. Psychological interventions such as cognitive restructuring, mindfulness, and self-reflection demonstrated significant positive effects on learners' emotional regulation and oral performance (Hosseini, 2020; Rahimi, 2020;

Fauzi, 2022). These strategies can be adapted into classroom routines through brief pre-speaking relaxation sessions, reflective journals, positive self-talk exercises, and teacher-led discussions about managing anxiety. Integrating such approaches requires collaboration between language educators and school counselors, emphasizing a holistic model of language education that acknowledges learners' emotional experiences as essential components of communicative development. This combination of pedagogical design and psychological support is especially critical for learners with severe communication apprehension or consistent performance anxiety.

Furthermore, the review underscores the need for assessment practices that are authentic, flexible, and sensitive to affective variables. High-stakes, one-shot speaking assessments can exacerbate anxiety and fail to capture learners' true communicative abilities. Instead, assessment should prioritize continuous, process-oriented evaluation through portfolios, repeated speaking attempts, formative feedback cycles, and low-stakes practice assessments. Such approaches allow learners to demonstrate progress over time and reduce the fear associated with isolated performance events.

Finally, these findings carry implications for curriculum development at institutional levels. Language programs should incorporate structured strategies for anxiety reduction, integrating both pedagogical and counseling components across speaking courses. Institutions must support teachers through training, resources, and policy frameworks that recognize the importance of emotional well-being in academic success. By institutionalizing affective support mechanisms, programs can cultivate learning environments that promote confidence, communicative competence, and psychological resilience.

Collectively, these pedagogical implications emphasize that effective EFL speaking instruction requires intentional attention to learners' emotional experiences, thoughtful design of communicative tasks, strategic use of technology, and the integration of counseling-informed approaches. Addressing communication anxiety through pedagogical innovation not only enhances learners' speaking performance but also fosters more inclusive, empathetic, and empowering learning environments.

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