

UNDERSTANDING SPEAKING ANXIETY AMONG SAUDI EFL LEARNERS: EMOTIONAL, COGNITIVE, AND INTERPERSONAL PREDICTORS

COMPREENDENDO A ANSIEDADE DE FALA DE ESTUDANTES SAUDITAS EFL: PREDITORES EMOCIONAIS, COGNITIVOS E INTERPESSOAIS

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ABSTRACT

Language learning anxiety is a persistent challenge in second-language classrooms, particularly in contexts where language use is socially visible and evaluative. Grounded in social-psychological perspectives on foreign language anxiety and self-efficacy theory, this study examines emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal predictors of speaking anxiety among Saudi undergraduate EFL learners. Using a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design, data were collected from 170 Saudi university students enrolled in compulsory English language courses across disciplines. A structured questionnaire measured communication embarrassment, fear of negative evaluation, perceived linguistic incompetence, peer interactional climate (psychological safety), and overall speaking anxiety. Descriptive statistical analyses revealed consistently high levels of speaking anxiety across the sample. Communication embarrassment and fear of negative evaluation emerged as the most salient emotional dimensions, highlighting learners' sensitivity to public errors and peer judgment. Cognitive self-appraisals, particularly perceived linguistic inadequacy relative to classmates, were also strongly associated with anxiety. Although perceptions of psychological safety were comparatively lower, many learners reported reluctance to speak due to anticipated negative peer reactions. Overall, the findings indicate that speaking anxiety among Saudi EFL learners is a socially embedded phenomenon shaped by evaluative pressures, self-beliefs, and classroom interactional norms.

Keywords: language learning anxiety, speaking anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, Saudi EFL learners.

RESUMO

A ansiedade na aprendizagem de línguas é um desafio persistente em salas de aula de segunda língua, particularmente em contextos onde o uso do idioma é socialmente visível e avaliativo. Fundamentado em perspectivas sociopsicológicas sobre a ansiedade em língua estrangeira e na teoria da autoeficácia, este estudo examina preditores emocionais, cognitivos e interpessoais da ansiedade de fala entre estudantes sauditas de graduação de EFL (inglês como língua estrangeira). Utilizando um design de levantamento (*survey*) quantitativo e transversal, os dados foram coletados de 170 estudantes universitários sauditas matriculados em cursos obrigatórios de língua inglesa em diversas disciplinas. Um questionário estruturado mediu o constrangimento na comunicação, o medo de avaliação negativa, a percepção de incompetência linguística, o clima interacional entre pares (segurança psicológica) e a ansiedade de fala global. Análises estatísticas descritivas revelaram níveis consistentemente altos de ansiedade de fala em toda a amostra. O constrangimento na comunicação e o medo de avaliação negativa emergiram como as dimensões emocionais mais salientes, destacando a sensibilidade dos estudantes a erros públicos e ao julgamento dos colegas. Autoavaliações cognitivas, particularmente a percepção de inadequação linguística em relação aos colegas de classe, também estiveram fortemente associadas à ansiedade. Embora as percepções de segurança psicológica tenham sido comparativamente menores, muitos alunos relataram relutância em falar devido à antecipação de reações negativas dos pares. No geral, os resultados indicam que a ansiedade de fala entre estudantes sauditas de EFL é um fenômeno socialmente enraizado, moldado por pressões avaliativas, crenças individuais e normas de interação em sala de aula.

Palavras-chave: ansiedade na aprendizagem de línguas, ansiedade de fala, medo de avaliação negativa, estudantes sauditas de EFL.

1. Introduction

Language learning anxiety has long been recognised as a pervasive affective phenomenon shaping second-language use, participation, and performance (Russell, 2020; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). While early research conceptualised anxiety primarily as an individual difference variable within second language acquisition, more recent work has emphasised its socially situated and interactionally constructed nature (MacIntyre, 2007; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). From this perspective, anxiety does not arise solely from linguistic difficulty but emerges through social contexts in which language use is visible, evaluative, and consequential (Clément, 1980; Norton, 2013).

Much of the existing research on language learning anxiety has been conducted in Western or East Asian contexts, often within instructional environments where English functions as either a dominant or widely used second language (Horwitz, 2010; Teimouri, Goetze, & Plonsky, 2019). Comparatively less attention has been paid to sociocultural settings in which English operates as a

foreign language embedded within strong local linguistic, cultural, and religious traditions. In such contexts, speaking English may carry additional social meaning, positioning learners' language use as a marker of competence, identity, and social positioning rather than merely a communicative skill (Pavlenko, 2005; Block, 2007).

In Saudi Arabia, English is primarily learned as an academic, professional, and global resource rather than as a language of everyday social interaction. Consequently, English use is often confined to classrooms and institutional settings where performance is publicly evaluated and compared. From the perspective of Saudi EFL learners, speaking English frequently involves navigating concerns about peer judgment, social comparison, and face management, particularly in situations where errors are salient and difficult to conceal (Alrabai, 2014; Al-Saraj, 2014; Rahman, 2020). These conditions make Saudi EFL classrooms a particularly relevant site for examining the social-evaluative foundations of language learning anxiety.

Theoretical accounts of foreign language anxiety highlight the role of fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and test anxiety as interrelated components shaping learners' emotional responses to language use (Horwitz et al., 1986). However, social psychological research suggests that fear of evaluation is fundamentally interpersonal, rooted in concerns about how one is perceived by others in socially meaningful interactions (Leary, 1983; Baumeister, 1982). In language classrooms, speaking a second language amplifies these concerns by increasing the likelihood of public errors, accent salience, and perceived competence gaps (Derwing & Munro, 2009; Lindemann, 2017).

Self-efficacy theory further elucidates the cognitive mechanisms through which anxiety is experienced. Learners who doubt their ability to perform successfully are more likely to attend to potential failure, experience heightened emotional arousal, and disengage from challenging tasks (Bandura, 1997). In EFL contexts, perceived linguistic incompetence may thus function less as an objective reflection of ability and more as a socially informed self-appraisal shaped by peer comparison and evaluative feedback (Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1994; Mercer,

2011). When learners believe that their English performance will be judged unfavourably, anxiety becomes a predictable outcome of interaction.

Recent research increasingly frames language anxiety as an outcome of interactional climates that vary in psychological safety, error tolerance, and peer responsiveness (King & Smith, 2017; Russell, 2020). Classrooms characterised by supportive peer relations and low evaluative threat tend to mitigate anxiety, whereas environments marked by ridicule, comparison, or silence intensify it. From a social-psychological perspective, anxiety is therefore co-constructed through classroom norms and interpersonal practices rather than residing solely within individual learners (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005).

Despite growing recognition of these dynamics, empirical research examining how emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal factors jointly shape language learning anxiety in Saudi EFL contexts remains limited. Existing studies often focus on overall anxiety levels or instructional variables, with less attention to the relative contribution of social-evaluative pressures, self-beliefs, and peer interactional climates (Rahman, 2021; Alrabai, 2015; Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018). Addressing this gap is essential for advancing a socially grounded understanding of language anxiety that reflects learners' lived experiences in culturally specific EFL settings.

The present study responds to this need by examining emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal predictors of language learning anxiety among Saudi undergraduate EFL learners. Drawing on foreign language anxiety theory and self-efficacy perspectives, the study adopts a social-psychological approach to investigate how communication embarrassment, fear of negative evaluation, perceived linguistic incompetence, and peer interactional climate interact to shape anxiety in classroom interaction. By situating anxiety within social-evaluative environments, the study aims to extend existing models and contribute to a more nuanced account of second-language anxiety as a socially embedded phenomenon.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Language Learning Anxiety as a Socially Situated Phenomenon*

Language learning anxiety has been widely recognised as a key affective factor influencing second-language use, participation, and performance. Early conceptualisations defined language anxiety as a situation-specific form of anxiety associated with language learning contexts, particularly classroom-based communication (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). This line of research established anxiety as a multidimensional construct encompassing communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. While these foundational models contributed significantly to understanding individual differences in second-language learning, they tended to frame anxiety primarily as an internal psychological state rather than a socially embedded experience.

Subsequent scholarship has increasingly challenged this individualistic framing, arguing that language anxiety is produced and sustained through social interaction and evaluative contexts (MacIntyre, 2007; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). From this perspective, anxiety is not simply a reaction to linguistic difficulty but an outcome of situations in which speakers anticipate judgment, comparison, and potential loss of face. Language use becomes anxiety-provoking when it renders speakers visible to others and positions them as objects of evaluation. This reconceptualisation aligns with broader social psychological approaches that emphasise the role of interpersonal dynamics, social identity, and perceived evaluation in shaping emotional responses (Leary, 1983; Baumeister, 1982).

Within this socially situated view, anxiety is understood as a dynamic state that fluctuates across interactional contexts rather than a stable learner trait. Research adopting this approach highlights how anxiety intensifies during public speaking tasks, spontaneous interaction, and peer-facing activities—contexts in which the risk of negative evaluation is particularly salient (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Woodrow, 2006). These findings underscore the importance of examining language anxiety not only as an individual affective response but also as a socially constructed phenomenon rooted in interaction.

2.2. Fear of Negative Evaluation and Communication Embarrassment

Fear of negative evaluation has consistently emerged as one of the strongest predictors of language learning anxiety. Originally conceptualised as concern about being judged unfavourably by others (Watson & Friend, 1969), fear of negative evaluation has been shown to play a central role in shaping second-language communication behaviour. Learners who anticipate negative judgments from peers or instructors are more likely to avoid speaking, limit participation, and experience heightened anxiety during interaction (Horwitz et al., 1986; Kitano, 2001).

Communication embarrassment represents a closely related but distinct emotional response that reflects feelings of shame, exposure, and self-consciousness during language use. Embarrassment arises when speakers perceive their performance as falling short of social expectations, particularly in public settings where mistakes are visible (Miller, 1996). In second-language contexts, speaking errors, accent features, and hesitations can serve as salient cues that trigger embarrassment, especially when learners believe these cues will be noticed and evaluated by others (Derwing & Munro, 2009; Lindemann, 2017).

Empirical research suggests that embarrassment may be a more immediate and affectively intense response than general fear of evaluation. Studies have shown that learners frequently report embarrassment rather than generalized anxiety when describing negative speaking experiences, indicating that anxiety is often anchored in specific social moments rather than abstract apprehension (Dewaele & Tsui, 2013). This distinction is particularly relevant in classroom contexts where speaking activities are performed in front of peers and errors are difficult to conceal. Communication embarrassment thus serves as a critical emotional mechanism linking social evaluation to language anxiety.

2.3. Cognitive Self-Appraisals and Perceived Linguistic Incompetence

In addition to emotional responses, cognitive self-appraisals play a crucial role in shaping language anxiety. Perceived linguistic incompetence refers to learners' subjective evaluations of their own language ability relative to task demands or peer performance. Importantly, these perceptions are often weakly

correlated with objective measures of proficiency, suggesting that anxiety is driven more by beliefs about competence than by actual ability (MacIntyre, Noels, & Clément, 1997; Sparks & Ganschow, 2007).

Self-efficacy theory provides a useful framework for understanding how these cognitive appraisals influence anxiety. According to Bandura (1997), individuals who doubt their ability to perform successfully are more likely to experience stress, avoid challenging situations, and interpret difficulties as evidence of personal inadequacy. In second-language contexts, low self-efficacy can heighten attentional focus on potential errors, amplify emotional arousal, and undermine communicative confidence (Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1994; Mercer, 2011).

Research has consistently shown that learners who perceive themselves as linguistically incompetent report higher levels of anxiety and lower willingness to communicate (MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Conrod, 2001). These effects are particularly pronounced in speaking tasks, where performance is immediate, visible, and difficult to revise. Cognitive self-doubt thus interacts with emotional responses such as embarrassment and fear of evaluation to produce anxiety during language use.

2.4. Interpersonal Context and Psychological Safety

Recent work has increasingly highlighted the role of interpersonal context in shaping language anxiety. Psychological safety—the perception that one can take interpersonal risks without fear of negative consequences—has been identified as a key factor influencing participation and emotional comfort in group settings (Edmondson, 1999). In language classrooms, psychological safety manifests through norms governing error tolerance, peer responsiveness, and the treatment of mistakes.

Studies have shown that supportive peer environments can buffer the effects of anxiety by reducing the perceived cost of errors (King & Smith, 2017; Khajavy, MacIntyre, & Barabadi, 2018). When learners perceive their classmates as nonjudgmental and encouraging, they are more willing to speak despite linguistic limitations. Conversely, classrooms characterised by ridicule, excessive correction,

or competitive comparison tend to exacerbate anxiety and discourage participation (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014).

From a social constructionist perspective, anxiety is co-produced through interactional practices rather than residing solely within individuals. Classroom norms, peer reactions, and institutional expectations collectively shape how speaking English is experienced and evaluated (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). This view shifts attention away from deficit-oriented explanations of anxiety and toward the social conditions under which anxiety emerges.

2.5. Language Anxiety in EFL and Saudi Contexts

While the global literature on language anxiety is extensive, research conducted in EFL contexts highlights the importance of sociocultural specificity. In settings where English is not used in everyday interaction, speaking English may be perceived as a marked activity that carries social meaning beyond communication (Pavlenko, 2005). Learners in such contexts often report heightened anxiety due to limited exposure, reduced opportunities for informal practice, and increased emphasis on correctness.

In Saudi Arabia, English occupies a distinctive position as a foreign language associated with education, employment, and global engagement. Studies conducted in Saudi EFL contexts consistently report high levels of speaking anxiety, particularly in classroom interaction (Alrabai, 2014; Al-Saraj, 2014). These studies suggest that anxiety is closely tied to fear of negative evaluation, low self-confidence, and concerns about peer judgment. Cultural norms emphasizing face, respect, and social harmony may further intensify embarrassment and reluctance to speak publicly.

However, much of the existing research in Saudi contexts has focused on overall anxiety levels or instructional variables, with less attention to the interaction between emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal factors. Moreover, many studies adopt an educational or pedagogical lens, leaving the social-psychological mechanisms underlying anxiety underexplored (Alrabai, 2015; Dewaele &

Alfawzan, 2018). There remains a need for integrative models that account for how evaluation, self-beliefs, and interactional climate jointly shape anxiety experiences.

2.6. Research Gap

The literature reviewed above highlights a shift from individualistic to socially grounded understandings of language learning anxiety. Emotional responses such as embarrassment, cognitive self-appraisals of competence, and interpersonal dynamics of evaluation and safety emerge as interrelated components shaping anxiety during second-language use. While these mechanisms have been examined in various contexts, their combined influence remains underexplored in Saudi EFL settings.

Existing research points to the salience of social-evaluative concerns in Saudi classrooms but lacks comprehensive analyses that integrate emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal predictors within a single model. Addressing this gap is essential for advancing a nuanced, socially informed account of language learning anxiety that reflects learners' lived experiences. The present study responds to this need by examining how communication embarrassment, fear of negative evaluation, perceived linguistic incompetence, and peer interactional climate jointly contribute to anxiety among Saudi EFL learners, thereby extending existing models within a culturally specific context.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The present study employed a **quantitative, cross-sectional survey design** to examine emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal predictors of language learning anxiety among Saudi EFL learners. A quantitative approach was selected to allow systematic measurement of learners' self-reported experiences and to assess the relative contribution of theoretically motivated predictors through statistical analysis. This design is particularly suitable for investigating socially situated psychological constructs, such as anxiety and evaluation, as they are experienced

across a defined population at a single point in time. The study did not involve manipulation of instructional conditions; rather, it focused on capturing learners' perceptions of speaking English within evaluative classroom environments.

3.2 Research Context and Population

The study was conducted in the context of Saudi higher education, where English is taught as a foreign language and constitutes a compulsory component of undergraduate curricula across disciplines. In this context, English is primarily used for academic and professional purposes rather than everyday social interaction, making classroom communication a central site for second-language use and evaluation. The target population consisted of Saudi undergraduate students enrolled in English language courses, representing diverse academic disciplines. This context is particularly relevant for examining language learning anxiety, as speaking English often occurs in public, evaluative settings where learners' performance is visible to peers and instructors.

3.3 Participants and Sampling Technique

A total of 170 undergraduate Saudi EFL learners participated voluntarily in the study. A purposive stratified sampling technique was employed to ensure representation across key demographic variables, including gender, academic discipline, and prior experience with English language learning in digitally mediated environments. Stratification was used to capture variability in learners' exposure to English and classroom interactional norms, which may influence anxiety experiences. Participation was entirely voluntary, and no incentives were offered.

Table 1 – Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 170)

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	88	51.8
	Female	82	48.2
Academic Discipline	Business	58	34.1
	Engineering	62	36.5
	Humanities	50	29.4
Prior Exposure to English-speaking Tasks	High	44	25.9
	Moderate	68	40.0
	Low	58	34.1
Total	—	170	100

The sample size was considered adequate for descriptive and regression-based analyses examining relationships among psychological and interpersonal variables.

3.4 Data Collection Instrument

Data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire developed for the purposes of this study. The instrument consisted of two sections. The first section collected demographic information, including gender, academic discipline, and prior exposure to English-speaking tasks. The second section comprised Likert-scale statements designed to measure key constructs identified in the literature: communication embarrassment, fear of negative evaluation, perceived linguistic incompetence, peer interactional climate (psychological safety), self-efficacy for spoken English, and overall language learning anxiety.

All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*). The items were worded to reflect learners' subjective experiences of speaking English in socially evaluative classroom contexts, rather than focusing on instructional practices. To enhance content validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by three experts in applied linguistics and social psychology, who evaluated item clarity, relevance, and contextual appropriateness for Saudi EFL learners. Minor wording revisions were made based on their feedback.

3.5 Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire was administered online using a secure survey platform. Participants were invited to complete the survey through institutional communication channels. The opening page of the questionnaire provided information about the study's purpose, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity. Informed consent was obtained electronically prior to participation, and respondents were informed that they could withdraw at any time without penalty.

The online format allowed participants to complete the questionnaire at their convenience and facilitated participation across multiple academic departments. The estimated completion time was approximately 10–12 minutes. Data collection was carried out over a three-week period, resulting in the final sample of 170 complete responses.

3.6 Data Analysis

Survey responses were exported from the online survey platform and initially organised in Microsoft Excel for screening and data cleaning. The cleaned dataset was subsequently imported into SPSS (Version 26) for analysis. The data were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques to summarise Saudi EFL learners' perceptions of gamified English language learning.

Frequencies and percentages were calculated for each questionnaire item to describe patterns of agreement and disagreement among participants. Mean scores were used to indicate the overall level of endorsement for statements related to motivation, participation, and engagement, while standard deviations provided insight into the dispersion and consistency of responses. This descriptive analytical approach enabled a clear and systematic examination of learners' reported experiences with gamification in English language learning contexts.

4. Results and Findings

This study aimed to examine Saudi EFL learners' experiences of speaking anxiety in English language classrooms, focusing on emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal dimensions of anxiety. A total of 170 undergraduate Saudi EFL learners from various faculties, including Business, Engineering, and Humanities, participated in the study. The demographic diversity of the sample provided a broad basis for capturing learners' experiences of speaking English across different academic contexts.

Participants reported varying degrees of discomfort and anxiety related to speaking English in classroom settings. Descriptive statistical analyses were conducted to summarise learners' responses to 18 Likert-scale statements measuring speaking anxiety. Mean scores, standard deviations, and the percentage of learners indicating agreement (combining *Agree* and *Strongly Agree*) were calculated for each item, providing an overall picture of the intensity and prevalence of speaking anxiety among Saudi EFL learners.

Overall, the descriptive findings revealed high levels of speaking anxiety across the sample. Mean scores across the 18 items ranged from 3.68 to 4.42, with agreement percentages ranging between 64% and 89%, indicating that speaking anxiety is a salient and persistent experience for many learners. These results suggest that speaking English in classroom contexts is frequently associated with emotional discomfort, self-doubt, and concern about evaluation.

The highest-rated item was "*I feel anxious when I have to speak English in front of my classmates,*" which recorded a mean score of 4.42 (SD = 0.58), with 89% of learners indicating agreement. This finding highlights the strong emotional impact of peer-facing speaking situations and suggests that public speaking contexts represent a major source of anxiety for Saudi EFL learners. Similarly, the statement "*I worry about making mistakes when I speak English aloud in class*" received a mean score of 4.38 (SD = 0.61), with 87% agreement, indicating that fear of making errors strongly contributes to speaking anxiety.

Learners also reported high levels of communication embarrassment associated with spoken English use. The item *"I feel embarrassed when I make mistakes while speaking English"* yielded a mean score of 4.35 (SD = 0.63), with 86% agreement, suggesting that embarrassment and self-consciousness are central emotional responses during speaking activities. In a similar vein, *"Speaking English makes me feel self-conscious about how others see me"* recorded a mean of 4.30 (SD = 0.65), with 85% of participants agreeing. These results indicate that speaking anxiety is closely tied to concerns about visibility and social exposure in the classroom.

Fear of negative evaluation was another prominent dimension of speaking anxiety. A substantial proportion of learners agreed with the statement *"I am afraid that my classmates will judge my English negatively,"* which showed a mean score of 4.28 (SD = 0.66) and 84% agreement. Likewise, *"I avoid speaking English because I worry about how others will evaluate me"* recorded a mean of 4.18 (SD = 0.70), with 81% agreement, indicating that concerns about peer judgment influence learners' willingness to participate in spoken English activities.

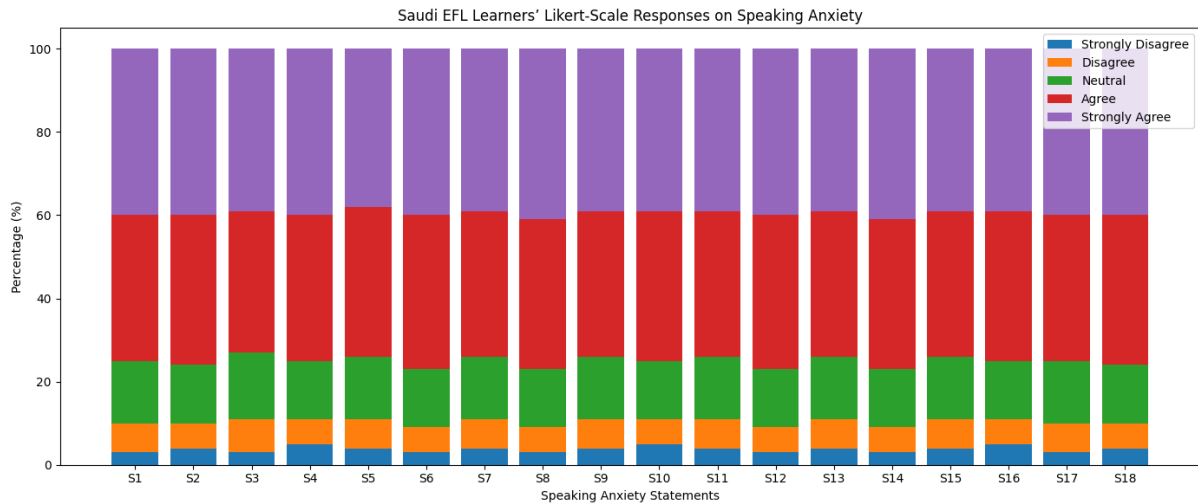
Cognitive aspects of speaking anxiety were also strongly reflected in the results. The statement *"I feel that my English speaking ability is weaker than that of my classmates"* yielded a mean score of 4.12 (SD = 0.72), with 79% of learners indicating agreement. Similarly, *"I doubt my ability to express my ideas clearly in English"* recorded a mean of 4.15 (SD = 0.69) and 80% agreement. These findings suggest that negative self-appraisals and perceived linguistic inadequacy play a significant role in shaping speaking anxiety.

Performance-related anxiety was particularly evident in situations requiring spontaneous speech. The item *"I feel tense when I have to speak English without preparation"* had a mean score of 4.33 (SD = 0.60), with 88% agreement, indicating that unplanned speaking tasks are especially anxiety-inducing. Likewise, *"I become nervous when I know I will be called on to speak English in class"* recorded a mean of 4.25 (SD = 0.64), with 85% agreement, further highlighting the anticipatory nature of speaking anxiety.

Items related to interpersonal classroom climate and psychological safety received comparatively lower mean scores, though agreement levels remained notable. The statement “*I feel safe taking risks when speaking English in class*” (reverse-coded) yielded a mean score of 3.68 (SD = 0.81), with 64% agreement, suggesting that many learners do not perceive the classroom as a fully supportive environment for spoken English use. Similarly, “*I hesitate to speak English because I fear negative reactions from peers*” recorded a mean of 4.10 (SD = 0.73), with 78% agreement, underscoring the influence of peer responsiveness on speaking behaviour.

Taken together, the descriptive analysis of responses from 170 Saudi EFL learners demonstrates that speaking anxiety is widespread and strongly experienced across emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal dimensions. High mean scores and agreement percentages across most items indicate that learners frequently experience nervousness, embarrassment, fear of negative evaluation, and self-doubt when speaking English in classroom settings.

Overall, the findings reveal that speaking anxiety constitutes a significant challenge for Saudi EFL learners. The results highlight the prominence of social-evaluative pressures, communication embarrassment, and perceived linguistic inadequacy in shaping learners’ speaking experiences. These findings provide a strong empirical basis for the discussion of implications and interpretations presented in the following section. (*see Figure 1*)



5. Results and Discussion

The present study set out to examine emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal predictors of speaking anxiety among Saudi undergraduate EFL learners from a social-psychological perspective. The findings reveal that speaking anxiety is a pervasive and strongly felt experience, characterised by high levels of emotional discomfort, self-consciousness, and apprehension during classroom interaction. Importantly, the results suggest that anxiety is not merely an individual psychological disposition but a socially embedded response shaped by evaluative pressures, self-beliefs, and peer interactional dynamics.

Across the sample, learners reported particularly high anxiety when speaking English in front of classmates, highlighting the centrality of public visibility in triggering emotional distress. This finding is consistent with earlier work identifying fear of negative evaluation as a core component of foreign language anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986; Kitano, 2001), but it also extends this literature by demonstrating how evaluation concerns are experienced as immediate, peer-oriented pressures in classroom interaction. In this sense, speaking anxiety appears to be anchored less in abstract apprehension and more in concrete social moments where learners' competence, identity, and face are perceived to be at stake.

Communication embarrassment emerged as a salient emotional dimension of anxiety, with a large proportion of learners reporting feelings of shame and self-consciousness when making mistakes while speaking English. This supports arguments that embarrassment functions as an affectively intense, interaction-specific response that links social exposure to anxiety (Miller, 1996; Dewaele & Tsui, 2013). In the Saudi EFL classroom context, where speaking opportunities are often limited and performance is publicly observable, errors may become highly salient markers of inadequacy. The prominence of embarrassment in the findings reinforces the view that anxiety is not only anticipatory but also grounded in learners' lived interactional experiences.

Fear of negative evaluation further emerged as a dominant contributor to speaking anxiety. Learners expressed strong concern about being judged unfavourably by peers, and many reported avoiding participation due to anticipated evaluation. This pattern aligns with social psychological accounts of anxiety as fundamentally interpersonal, rooted in concerns about how one is perceived by others (Leary, 1983; Baumeister, 1982). In EFL classrooms, where linguistic performance is inseparable from public identity construction, such concerns are likely intensified. The findings suggest that peer audiences, rather than instructors alone, play a critical role in shaping anxiety experiences.

Cognitive self-appraisals also featured prominently in learners' reported anxiety. Many participants perceived their English-speaking ability as inferior to that of their classmates and doubted their capacity to express ideas clearly. Consistent with self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997), these negative self-beliefs appear to heighten vulnerability to anxiety by directing attention toward potential failure and amplifying emotional arousal. Importantly, these perceptions are unlikely to reflect objective proficiency alone; instead, they are socially informed appraisals shaped by comparison, feedback, and classroom norms. This finding supports previous research showing that perceived competence, rather than actual ability, is a key driver of language anxiety (MacIntyre et al., 1997; Sparks & Ganschow, 2007).

The results also highlight the role of interpersonal classroom climate, particularly perceptions of psychological safety. Although items related to safety and peer support received comparatively lower mean scores, a substantial proportion of learners indicated reluctance to speak due to fear of negative peer reactions. This suggests that many Saudi EFL classrooms may not be experienced as fully supportive environments for risk-taking in spoken English. From a social constructionist perspective, anxiety is co-produced through interactional practices, including peer responses, silence, and norms surrounding error treatment (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). The findings therefore underscore that anxiety is not simply located within individual learners but emerges through classroom interactional ecologies.

Taken together, the results support a socially grounded conceptualisation of speaking anxiety in Saudi EFL contexts. Emotional responses such as embarrassment, cognitive self-doubt, and interpersonal evaluation pressures appear to operate in concert, reinforcing one another during classroom interaction. This integrative pattern addresses a gap in existing Saudi EFL research, which has often examined anxiety as a global construct or focused on instructional variables in isolation. By foregrounding social-evaluative mechanisms, the present study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how speaking anxiety is experienced and sustained in culturally specific EFL settings.

5.1 Pedagogical and Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study carry several important implications for theory, research, and pedagogical practice. Theoretically, the results lend strong support to models of language anxiety that move beyond individual difference explanations and emphasise the socially situated nature of affect in second-language use. Speaking anxiety among Saudi EFL learners appears to be deeply embedded in evaluative classroom environments where visibility, comparison, and peer judgment are salient. This underscores the value of integrating social psychological constructs—such as embarrassment, evaluation, and psychological safety—into existing frameworks of foreign language anxiety.

For future research, the findings suggest the need for greater attention to interactional and contextual factors shaping anxiety. While the present study relied on self-report data, qualitative approaches such as classroom observation, stimulated recall, or interactional analysis could further illuminate how anxiety is enacted and negotiated in real-time classroom interaction. Longitudinal designs may also help capture fluctuations in anxiety as learners' self-beliefs and classroom relationships evolve. Importantly, research in Saudi and other EFL contexts would benefit from models that explicitly examine the interplay between emotional responses, cognitive appraisals, and interpersonal climates rather than treating these dimensions as independent variables.

Pedagogically, the findings highlight the critical role of classroom climate in shaping learners' emotional experiences of speaking English. Creating psychologically safe environments where errors are normalised and peer judgment is minimised may help reduce anxiety and encourage participation. Instructors can contribute to such environments by explicitly framing mistakes as part of learning, using supportive feedback strategies, and discouraging ridicule or excessive comparison. Structured speaking activities that reduce public exposure—such as small-group discussions or rehearsed tasks—may also help learners build confidence before engaging in whole-class interaction.

The prominence of embarrassment and fear of negative evaluation suggests that anxiety-reduction strategies should not focus solely on improving linguistic competence but also on addressing learners' emotional and social concerns. Raising learners' awareness of shared anxiety experiences, fostering peer empathy, and promoting collaborative rather than competitive classroom norms may help mitigate evaluative threat. Additionally, pedagogical practices that support learners' self-efficacy—such as goal-setting, positive feedback, and opportunities for successful communication—may weaken the link between perceived incompetence and anxiety.

At a broader level, the findings underscore the importance of culturally sensitive approaches to language teaching. In Saudi EFL contexts, where concerns about face, respect, and public performance may be particularly salient, speaking

anxiety cannot be fully understood or addressed without considering sociocultural norms. Pedagogical interventions should therefore be attuned to learners' social realities and emotional experiences rather than assuming that anxiety reflects individual deficits.

Overall, this study demonstrates that speaking anxiety among Saudi EFL learners is a socially embedded phenomenon shaped by emotional reactions, cognitive self-beliefs, and interpersonal classroom dynamics. Addressing anxiety effectively requires not only attention to language proficiency but also deliberate efforts to reshape evaluative environments and interactional practices. By foregrounding the social foundations of anxiety, the study offers both theoretical refinement and practical guidance for fostering more inclusive and emotionally supportive EFL classrooms.

6. Conclusion

This study examined speaking anxiety among Saudi undergraduate EFL learners through a social-psychological lens, focusing on the emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal factors that shape learners' classroom experiences. The findings demonstrate that speaking anxiety is a pervasive and strongly felt phenomenon, characterised by heightened embarrassment, fear of negative evaluation, and negative self-appraisals of linguistic competence. These dimensions were closely intertwined, suggesting that anxiety emerges not as an isolated individual trait but as a socially embedded response to evaluative classroom environments.

By situating speaking anxiety within peer-facing interactional contexts, the study extends traditional models of foreign language anxiety that have tended to prioritise individual difference explanations. The prominence of communication embarrassment and peer evaluation highlights the importance of visibility, social comparison, and face concerns in shaping learners' emotional experiences of speaking English in EFL classrooms. The findings further underscore the role of perceived linguistic inadequacy as a socially informed self-belief rather than a direct reflection of objective proficiency.

Despite its contributions, the study is not without limitations. The reliance on self-report data restricts insights into moment-to-moment interactional processes, and the cross-sectional design precludes causal interpretations. Future research would benefit from mixed-method and longitudinal approaches that examine how speaking anxiety develops and fluctuates over time and across interactional settings.

Overall, the study reinforces the need for pedagogical and theoretical approaches that recognise speaking anxiety as a socially situated phenomenon. Addressing learners' emotional experiences requires not only linguistic support but also classroom practices that reduce evaluative threat and foster psychological safety, thereby enabling more confident and meaningful second-language use.

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