

EFL Speaking Anxiety among Vietnamese University Students

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigated foreign language speaking anxiety among Vietnamese EFL students, focusing on their experiences, perceived contributing factors, and coping strategies during English-speaking activities. Participants were 11 Vietnamese undergraduates enrolled in EFL courses, and data were collected through structured written interviews and analysed using thematic analysis. Findings showed that speaking anxiety was strongest during performance-based tasks, particularly presentations, speaking tests, and final examinations. In addition to language limitations, fear of mistakes, and low confidence, participants highlighted perceived public evaluation pressure as an important influence on their experiences and responses. Four interconnected coping strategies emerged, comprising self-regulation and emotional control, cognitive preparation, practice, and digital learning resources. Digital resources and private or low-pressure practice also provided alternative spaces for preparation before speaking activities. The study contributes context-specific qualitative evidence on how Vietnamese EFL students interpret and manage speaking anxiety in the performance-oriented environment of a private university, complementing research focused primarily on anxiety levels, causes, or correlates. The findings have implications for EFL teaching and teacher education, particularly the design of supportive speaking activities that combine gradual performance demands, preparation opportunities, and accessible forms of practice.

Keywords English speaking anxiety, EFL students, English as a Foreign Language

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INTRODUCTION

English is an essential means of communication in academic, professional, and international contexts, making oral communication skills particularly important for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students who regularly participate in discussions, presentations, recitations, and other speaking tasks. However, despite years of instruction, some students experience fear, nervousness, and tension when speaking, which may limit participation and hinder speaking development. Foreign language speaking anxiety refers to anxiety associated with using a language that students have not fully mastered. Horwitz et al. (1986) conceptualised foreign language classroom anxiety as a situation-specific form involving communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation, which may be particularly evident when students speak spontaneously, perform before others, or respond to questions. Such anxiety can negatively affect oral performance and participation (Sadighi & Dastpak, 2017), as students may hesitate or avoid speaking because of concerns about mistakes, negative evaluation, or difficulty expressing ideas (Khoudri, 2024).

The issue is particularly relevant at the university level, where speaking activities are integral to language learning. Vietnamese university students regularly engage in discussions, presentations, recitations, and other performance-based tasks designed to develop oral proficiency. Although these activities provide opportunities for authentic communication, performing in English before peers and instructors may also heighten anxiety. Research has similarly documented speaking anxiety among EFL students during public speaking, particularly oral presentations (Tsang, 2025). However, much of the existing research has focused on measuring anxiety levels or examining their relationships with speaking performance, proficiency, and academic outcomes, with comparatively less attention to how university EFL students experience, interpret, and cope with anxiety in specific speaking situations. This qualitative study addresses this gap by examining Vietnamese university EFL students, focusing on their experiences of speaking anxiety, the situations and factors that contribute to it, and the coping strategies they employ. The study provides context-specific insights into foreign language speaking anxiety, extending existing perspectives on foreign language classroom anxiety, while its findings may help teachers identify anxiety-provoking situations and develop supportive communicative practices and may inform learner-support initiatives, curriculum planning, and teacher education aimed at promoting students' confidence, participation, and willingness to communicate in English.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety

Foreign language speaking anxiety is a multidimensional, situation-specific phenomenon shaped by psychological, linguistic, social, and contextual factors. It may arise when students perceive a gap between speaking-task demands and their ability to perform successfully, particularly when anticipating evaluation by teachers or peers. Common concerns include making mistakes, limited vocabulary, mispronunciation, and difficulty expressing ideas, which may affect emotions and willingness to participate (Sadighi & Dastpak, 2017; Yan, 2024; Khoudri, 2024). Horwitz et al. (1986) conceptualised foreign language classroom anxiety as involving communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation, providing a framework for understanding anxiety in public, spontaneous, and formally evaluated speaking situations.

Psychological and Linguistic Factors

Psychological factors such as fear of negative evaluation and mistakes, low self-confidence, negative self-assessment, and concerns about appearing incompetent may heighten speaking anxiety and discourage communication (Yan, 2024; Sam et al., 2024). These concerns may interact with linguistic difficulties, including limited vocabulary, grammatical uncertainty, pronunciation problems, inadequate preparation, and difficulty organising ideas, increasing uncertainty and reducing confidence. Among Vietnamese students, negative self-assessment, self-comparison, fear of negative evaluation, lack of preparation, perceptions of teachers and native speakers, communication apprehension, and linguistic difficulties have been identified as important contributors to speaking anxiety (Nguyen, 2025; Thach & Khau, 2025). These factors are interconnected, as perceived linguistic limitations may reduce confidence and increase fear of mistakes, which can further interfere with vocabulary retrieval, idea organisation, and spontaneous speech. Speaking anxiety is therefore a dynamic phenomenon in which anxiety and language

performance may interact over time (Kasbi & Elahi Shirvan, 2017), reflecting both students' linguistic resources and their perceptions of their ability to meet communicative demands.

Classroom, Evaluative, and Sociocultural Factors

Speaking anxiety varies according to communicative context, audience, formality, and perceived consequences of poor performance. Vietnamese non-English-major freshmen reported greater anxiety when answering teachers' questions, taking speaking tests, and giving presentations than during role-plays or group activities, highlighting the effects of public exposure and evaluation (Ho & Truong, 2022). Similarly, Thach and Khau (2025) found greater anxiety in formal and evaluative situations, while Yen (2026) reported salient anxiety among final-year English-major students when oral competence was assessed publicly or in professionally relevant contexts. Sociocultural concerns, including fear of losing face, being judged, and receiving unfavourable reactions, may also shape students' interpretations of mistakes and evaluation (Ho & Truong, 2022; Nguyen, 2025). However, these influences should be understood contextually rather than treated as fixed characteristics of Vietnamese students, as they interact with confidence, linguistic competence, previous experiences, and classroom environments.

Speaking Anxiety, Willingness to Communicate, and Participation

Speaking anxiety may reduce classroom participation when students anticipate embarrassment, misunderstanding, or negative evaluation, leading them to hesitate to raise their hands, volunteer answers, express opinions, or initiate interaction. This is closely related to willingness to communicate, which is influenced by situational and psychological factors such as perceived communicative competence and confidence (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Anxiety may affect both required speaking performance and voluntary participation. Avoidance may also reduce opportunities for practice and confidence development, potentially creating a self-reinforcing cycle in which anxiety limits participation, reduced participation limits communicative development, and students continue to perceive themselves as insufficiently prepared or capable. This interpretation is consistent with MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) model of second-language willingness to communicate, which highlights the relationships among perceived communication competence, anxiety, and decisions to engage in L2 communication. However, this cycle represents a plausible explanatory process rather than a causal relationship established by the present study.

Pedagogical Responses and Anxiety-Sensitive Instruction

The literature suggests addressing speaking anxiety by reducing excessive evaluative pressure while maintaining meaningful communication through psychological safety, adequate preparation, constructive feedback, and gradual confidence development. Vietnamese university students reported lower anxiety during collaborative and less publicly evaluative activities than during formal presentations, speaking examinations, and teacher-directed questioning (Ho & Truong, 2022). Research also supports learner-centred practices (Atifnigar, 2024), controlled code-switching as potential linguistic support when learners struggle to express ideas (Sholikhah & Isnaini, 2024), and attention to differences in evaluative pressure across speaking contexts (Yen, 2026). Accordingly, speaking instruction may progress from individual preparation to pair work, small-group interaction, and larger public performances, supported by vocabulary assistance, planning time, models,

sentence frames, and rehearsal. Constructive feedback can frame errors as part of language development rather than personal failure, while repeated practice and gradual exposure may support more confident participation.

Coping Strategies and Student Agency

Students may develop individualised strategies for managing speaking anxiety, including emotional self-regulation, cognitive preparation, rehearsal, additional language practice, and resources beyond formal classrooms. Calming techniques, emotional control, and positive self-talk may help manage immediate nervousness (Shi, 2025), while organising ideas, reviewing vocabulary, preparing responses, and memorising key expressions may increase readiness and reduce uncertainty (Xiao et al., 2024). Rehearsal, mirror practice, peer communication, and engagement with English outside the classroom may further build familiarity and confidence. However, coping strategies may not work equally for all students because responses depend on confidence, previous experiences, linguistic resources, and perceived support. Coping is therefore best understood as an individualised process through which learners manage particular sources of anxiety.

Research Gap and Contribution of the Present Study

Despite substantial research on foreign language speaking anxiety, a gap remains in understanding how Vietnamese university EFL students personally experience, interpret, and manage anxiety within specific institutional contexts. Existing Vietnamese studies have identified psychological, linguistic, evaluative, and sociocultural factors associated with speaking anxiety (Ho & Truong, 2022; Thach & Khau, 2025; Nguyen, 2025; Yen, 2026), but much of this research has focused quantitatively on prevalence, intensity, sources, or relationships among variables. Although quantitative approaches establish broader patterns, they may not fully capture how students interpret anxiety-provoking situations, how concerns interact, or how learners attempt to manage anxiety. The present study addresses this gap through qualitative accounts of Vietnamese EFL students, exploring their experiences of speaking anxiety, perceived contributing factors, and coping strategies rather than measuring anxiety levels or testing predetermined relationships. Its contribution is a context-specific account of how performance pressure, linguistic insecurity, fear of negative evaluation, self-confidence, participation, and coping practices intersect within a private Vietnamese university, complementing quantitative research and informing more responsive EFL pedagogy.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This qualitative study explored how Vietnamese university EFL students experience, interpret, and cope with speaking anxiety.

Specifically, the study addressed the following questions:

1. How do university EFL students describe their experiences of foreign language speaking anxiety?
2. What factors do university EFL students perceive as contributing to their foreign language speaking anxiety?
3. How do university EFL students cope with anxiety when speaking English?

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to develop an in-depth understanding of university EFL students' experiences of English language speaking anxiety, focusing on their experiences, perceived sources, and coping strategies. The design was appropriate because the research questions required detailed accounts of students' feelings, interpretations, and experiences that may not be captured through standardised or numerical measures. According to Braun and Clarke (2021), unlike quantitative methods, which establish prevalence, intensity, and relationships among variables, the qualitative approach provided insight into the meanings students attached to speaking situations and how they managed anxiety. A mixed-methods design was unnecessary because the study was exploratory and interpretive rather than intended to quantify anxiety or establish statistical relationships. The analysis remained grounded in participants' accounts while identifying recurring patterns. The study was informed by Horwitz et al.'s (1986) theory of foreign language classroom anxiety, which conceptualises anxiety as a situation-specific form involving communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. This framework guided the examination of speaking anxiety, contributing factors, coping strategies, and recurring patterns but was not quantitatively tested.

The participants were 11 Vietnamese undergraduate students at a university in Central Vietnam during the 2026-2027 academic year, selected using purposive maximum variation sampling. Participants were information-rich cases who were first-year students in the General English Program, aged 18-20, with B1-B2 proficiency according to the university placement system, and enrolled in the same English course and proficiency level. The sample included five males and six females. All regularly engaged in classroom discussions, oral presentations, recitations, pair and group activities, and other interactive speaking tasks, providing recurring opportunities to communicate in English and experience speaking anxiety. Participants were recruited based on self-reported experiences of nervousness, apprehension, discomfort, hesitation, concerns about mistakes or negative evaluation, or anxiety during presentations and other oral tasks. Speaking anxiety was identified through self-report rather than clinical diagnosis (Horwitz et al., 1986), and no teacher recommendations or formal psychological assessments were used. Participation was voluntary, and students were informed that participation or refusal would not affect their grades, academic standing, or relationships with instructors.

The final sample size was determined by the information needs of the qualitative design rather than statistical power (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Data collection and analysis proceeded concurrently to assess saturation. Following each interview, responses were coded and compared with previously identified codes, themes, factors, experiences, and coping strategies. A saturation matrix was used to monitor whether subsequent interviews generated new codes, categories, or substantially different information relevant to the research questions. Saturation was considered reached when successive interviews no longer produced substantially new information and instead confirmed, elaborated on, or repeated previously identified findings. Recruitment therefore ended at 11 participants when additional interviews were unlikely to provide meaningful new information. Sample adequacy was assessed based on the depth, relevance, diversity, and redundancy of the data, consistent with the maximum variation approach (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). These participant characteristics and sampling procedures provide contextual information for assessing the applicability and transferability of the findings.

The primary instrument was a structured written interview guide comprising open-ended questions organised around three areas aligned with the research questions, namely (1) experiences of speaking anxiety, (2) situations and factors associated with anxiety, and (3) coping strategies used when speaking English. The questions were presented in a consistent order, while their open-ended format allowed participants to describe their experiences in their own words. The guide was developed based on the research questions, relevant literature, and Horwitz et al.'s (1986) conceptualisation of foreign language classroom anxiety. Three experts in English language education and Applied Linguistics reviewed the instrument for relevance, clarity, appropriateness, and alignment with the study objectives. Following their review, the questions were revised to address ambiguity, repetition, and potentially leading wording. These procedures were informed by methodological recommendations on the systematic development of qualitative interview guides (Kallio et al., 2016). No pilot test was conducted; consequently, the guide was not preliminarily administered to participants before the main data collection. This is acknowledged as a methodological limitation because the questions were not tested with participants before implementation.

Structured written interviews were selected to provide participants with an opportunity to reflect on and describe their experiences of speaking anxiety without the immediate interpersonal demands of a live oral interview. This approach was considered appropriate for exploring potentially sensitive experiences, including embarrassment, fear of making mistakes, and concerns about negative evaluation. Opara et al. (2023) discussed the potential benefits and challenges of online written interviews as a qualitative data collection method, including their practical flexibility and potential to facilitate accounts of sensitive experiences. The written format also allowed participants to formulate their responses at their own pace and convenience. Nevertheless, written responses cannot be assumed to be more candid or detailed than oral responses. Presenting the same questions in the same order promoted consistency across participants, although the depth and specificity of their responses could still vary. Google Forms facilitated convenient response collection and organisation while minimising transcription errors. However, written interviews provided fewer opportunities for immediate follow-up and clarification and could produce shorter responses. To address these limitations, open-ended questions included prompts requesting specific examples and detailed descriptions. Participants completed the interviews independently, were given sufficient reflection time, and could contact the researcher for clarification without being directed toward particular responses. Each interview took approximately 20-30 minutes, after which responses were securely stored and prepared for analysis.

Written interview responses were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase framework. The researcher became familiar with the data through repeated reading, identified meaningful segments and assigned initial codes, grouped related codes into potential themes concerning anxiety experiences, perceived sources, and coping strategies, reviewed themes against coded extracts and the full dataset, and refined, defined, and named themes before developing an analytic account linked to the research questions and relevant literature. Coding was primarily inductive, with codes and themes emerging from participants' responses, while the research questions and conceptual framework guided attention to communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, perceived linguistic difficulties, and coping responses. Thus, the framework contextualized and interpreted emerging findings rather than imposing predetermined categories.

Before data collection, the researcher obtained authorisation and ethics committee approval. Participants received informed-consent forms explaining the study's purpose, requirements, duration, voluntary nature, and data-handling procedures and provided consent before accessing the written interview. They could decline any question or withdraw at any time without academic penalty or other negative consequences. No identifying information, such as names or student identification numbers, was collected; responses were coded, and findings were presented in aggregate or through anonymised quotations. No financial or material incentives were provided. Data were securely stored with access limited to the researcher, retained according to relevant university research policies, and subsequently destroyed.

Rather than quantitative validity and reliability, the study addressed trustworthiness using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was supported by alignment among the research questions, interview guide, theoretical framework, and thematic analysis, as well as expert review and repeated examination of the dataset and emerging themes. Dependability was strengthened through systematic documentation of recruitment, data collection, coding, theme development, and analytical revisions, with the structured guide ensuring consistency. Confirmability was supported by grounding interpretations in participants' responses, maintaining an audit trail linking raw data to codes, themes, and findings, and using anonymised quotations to demonstrate this connection. Transferability was addressed through detailed descriptions of participants and the research context, including demographics, academic programmes, proficiency levels, and learning conditions, allowing readers to assess applicability to similar university EFL settings despite the absence of statistical generalisability. These procedures strengthened methodological rigour and supported faithful and transparent representation of participants' accounts.

FINDINGS

Table 1. *Students' Experiences with EFL Speaking Anxiety*

Transcriptions	Codes	Themes	Interpretation
Respondent 2: Presentation, and Speaking test Respondent 6: I usually feel most nervous when speaking English during the Final exam. Respondent 11: ...when the teacher asks me to answer a question or give a short presentation.	Anxiety Triggered by Performance-Based Situations	Presentations Speaking tests and final exams Being called on in class	Students consistently reported heightened anxiety during formal speaking tasks
Respondent 1: Rapid heartbeat, Nervousness, anxiety, Loss of composure Respondent 2: I feel very nervous and it's a little hard for me to breathe normally.	Symptoms of English Language Anxiety	Rapid heartbeat Nervousness Loss of composure	Speaking anxiety often leads to physical symptoms
Respondent 11: I may hesitate to raise my hand because I'm afraid of making mistake. But I know that practicing is important, so I try to participate more when I can Respondent 7: My anxiety about public speaking sometimes affects my participation in English classes. When I feel anxious, I might hesitate to raise my hand or share my opinion. I'm afraid of making mistakes or being judged by others.	Reduced Participation and Avoidance Behaviour	Hesitation to raise hands Incomplete or poor performance in presentations	Anxiety has clear behavioural consequences.

Performance-Based Speaking Tasks as Sources of Anxiety

Participants reported greater speaking anxiety during performance-based and evaluative activities, particularly presentations, speaking tests, and final examinations. Respondent 2 identified “presentation and speaking test” as anxiety-provoking, Respondent 6 mentioned the “Final exam,” and Respondent 11 found speaking more difficult “in front of the whole class.” Anxiety therefore varied by situation and intensified when students perceived their performance as publicly evaluated. However, the specific source differed, as formal assessment was more anxiety-provoking for some, while public exposure increased anxiety for others. These findings are consistent with Ho and Truong (2022), who found heightened anxiety during speaking activities requiring performance before others, including classroom presentations, and extend this finding by showing that both formal evaluation and public exposure were important anxiety-provoking features for participants.

Physical and Emotional Manifestations of Speaking Anxiety

Participants experienced speaking anxiety through both physiological and emotional symptoms. Respondent 1 reported “Rapid heartbeat, nervousness, anxiety, loss of composure,” Respondent 2 stated, “my heart races and I feel a bit tense,” and Respondent 11 described feeling “nervous and a bit hard to breathe.” Although symptoms varied in form and intensity, a recurring pattern was physiological arousal accompanied by nervousness or tension. Respondents 1 and 2 reported rapid heartbeat and physical tension, while Respondent 11 experienced difficulty breathing; some participants emphasised bodily reactions, whereas others also described loss of composure or emotional discomfort. These findings align with research showing that foreign language anxiety involves both psychological and physiological responses (Sutarsyah, 2017; Akkakoson, 2016), demonstrating that participants experienced speaking anxiety not only as internal nervousness but also through personally felt bodily reactions.

Avoidance and Reduced Classroom Participation

Speaking anxiety was also reflected in participants’ classroom participation, particularly in their willingness to initiate voluntary speaking. Respondent 7 explained, “When I feel anxious, I might hesitate to raise my hand or share my opinion,” while Respondent 11 stated, “I hesitate to raise my hand because I’m afraid of making a mistake.” These accounts indicate variation in how anxiety was experienced, with Respondent 7 describing occasional hesitation and Respondent 11 reporting a stronger reluctance to participate. Such responses are consistent with the view that foreign language anxiety involves not only emotional reactions but also behavioural responses associated with communication in the language classroom (Horwitz et al., 1986). However, the participants’ accounts should not be interpreted as evidence that anxiety alone determines classroom participation. Willingness to communicate is influenced by multiple interacting factors, including learners’ perceived communicative competence, confidence, situational conditions, and the immediate classroom context (Solhi & Thumvichit, 2025). Similarly, anxiety may affect language-related performance and processing, but its effects can vary according to the particular task and individual learner (Khoudri, 2024). Thus, while anxiety appeared to constrain some participants’ willingness to initiate communication, the degree of its behavioural effect varied across individuals. This interpretation is also compatible with Sholikhah and Isnaini’s (2024) finding that speaking anxiety can be an obstacle in EFL speaking contexts, while students may employ strategies such as code-switching to manage their apprehension. Rather than treating reduced participation as a

uniform consequence of anxiety, the findings therefore suggest that speaking anxiety interacts with individual and contextual factors in shaping students' classroom participation.

Table 2. *Factors of Students' EFL Speaking Anxiety*

Transcriptions	Codes	Themes	Interpretation
Respondent 3: I'm afraid I don't know enough vocabulary and won't understand English.	Perceived Language Deficiency	Limited vocabulary	Students identified the limited linguistic competence.
Respondent 10: I'm afraid of mispronouncing words, misinterpreting meanings, using incorrect grammar, or not being able to find the right vocabulary.		Difficulty with Pronunciation Weak grammar	
Respondent 2: I was very worried about making such mistakes. I was afraid of being ridiculed, afraid that people wouldn't understand what I was trying to convey.	Fear of Making Mistakes and Negative Feedback	Miscommunication Inability to express ideas Worry about being ridiculed	Students fear imperfection and being negatively judged.
Respondent 7: Yes, I think English proficiency affects confidence when speaking. My vocabulary or grammar is limited at times.	Low Self-Confidence	General lack of confidence	Students consistently acknowledged that perceived proficiency level directly affects confidence.

Language Limitations and Perceived Linguistic Inadequacy

Language limitations emerged as a contributing factor to speaking anxiety, particularly concerns about vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and word choice, although these varied across participants. Respondent 3 stated, "I'm afraid I don't know enough vocabulary," while Respondent 10 explained, "I'm afraid of mispronouncing words... using incorrect grammar or not being able to find the right vocabulary." These perceived inadequacies made some participants more cautious and apprehensive during oral communication, with concerns ranging from vocabulary to pronunciation, grammatical accuracy, and clearly expressing intended meanings. This finding is consistent with Kasbi and Elahi Shirvan (2017), who note that speaking anxiety can interfere with cognitive processing, including word retrieval, idea organisation, and fluent speech. The findings further suggest a reciprocal cycle in which perceived linguistic limitations increase anxiety, while anxiety interferes with language retrieval and organisation, potentially intensifying concerns about speaking performance.

Fear of Making Errors and Negative Evaluation

Fear of making errors and negative evaluation was another prominent source of speaking anxiety, as participants worried not only about producing incorrect English but also about classmates' and teachers' reactions. Respondent 2 reported, "I was very worried... afraid of being ridiculed, afraid that the people wouldn't understand," while Respondent 10 stated, "I'm afraid of mispronouncing words, misinterpreting meanings, using incorrect grammar, or not being able to find the right vocabulary." Thus, fear extended beyond linguistic correctness to embarrassment, misunderstanding, and unfavourable social judgement, linking speaking anxiety to both performance and social-evaluative concerns. Mistakes became particularly anxiety-provoking when participants perceived them as potential sources of embarrassment or negative judgements about

their ability, especially when their performance was visible to teachers and classmates. This finding aligns with Horwitz et al. (1986), who identify fear of negative evaluation as a central component of foreign language classroom anxiety, and Akkakoson (2016), who links expectations of negative evaluation with communication apprehension and performance-related stress.

Low Self-Confidence and Perceived Pressure

Low self-confidence was another important factor, as reflected in Respondent 7's statement, "I feel anxious since I do not have confidence to speak." However, confidence was closely interconnected with perceived language limitations and fear of negative evaluation rather than functioning as an isolated factor. Doubts about vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, or overall English ability could weaken confidence, heighten concerns about mistakes and negative evaluation, and discourage participation, while fear of negative evaluation could further reduce confidence and willingness to speak. These findings suggest an interrelated cycle in which perceived linguistic limitations undermine self-confidence, reduced confidence heightens sensitivity to errors and evaluation, and negative-evaluation concerns further discourage speaking. This is consistent with Sam et al. (2024) and Solhi and Thumvichit (2025), who associate low confidence in language abilities with increased speaking anxiety and reduced willingness to participate. The findings further highlight that anxiety depends not only on participants' actual English knowledge but also on their perceived ability and expectations of how others will evaluate their performance.

Table 3. *Strategies for Students' EFL Speaking Anxiety*

Transcriptions	Codes	Themes	Interpretation
Respondent 2: I often take deep breaths, and I usually express it through body language.	Self-Regulation	Taking deep breaths	Students coped by calming themselves.
Respondent 3: All I know is that I try to memorize things so I can speak better. Respondent: 6: If I know the topic I'm going to talk about beforehand, I usually brainstorm ideas and arrange them in order. If I don't know the topic, I'll look up some new vocabulary to remember.	Cognitive Preparation	Memorizing vocabulary or sentences Organizing ideas	Students are preparing mentally before speaking.
Respondent 2: I practice by speaking in front of a mirror or practicing speaking with an AI. Respondent 3: Yes, I practice using English learning apps like Duolingo. Respondent 4: Sometimes I learn by preparing my own answers and speaking them aloud. Respondent 10: I occasionally watch movies in English and listen to music in English.	Practice-Oriented Coping Mechanisms	Speaking in front of the mirror Using AI tools or language apps Watching movies and listening to music	Frequent practice is the central coping mechanism.

Self-Regulation and Emotional Management

Participants independently reported several self-regulation strategies in response to open-ended interview questions, including deep breathing, calming themselves, and consciously managing emotional reactions. Respondent 2 stated, "I often take deep breaths, and I usually express it through body language," describing a deliberate physical strategy for managing immediate nervousness. Strategies varied across participants, with some using physical techniques such as breathing and others focusing on remaining calm or controlling their emotions. Overall, participants recognised their emotional responses and attempted to regulate them before or during speaking tasks. However,

these findings reflect perceived management of immediate speaking-related discomfort rather than objectively demonstrated anxiety reduction, consistent with Bielak and Mystkowska-Wiertelak (2024), who emphasise self-regulation and emotional management in coping with foreign language anxiety.

Cognitive Preparation and Mental Planning

Participants also described preparing what to say by organising ideas, planning responses, and memorising information. Respondent 6 stated, “I brainstorm ideas and arrange them in order,” suggesting that organisation provided structure and reduced uncertainty, while Respondent 3 said, “I try to memorize things so I can speak better,” indicating that memorisation provided security through prepared language and increased perceived readiness. Thus, preparation served different functions, as organisation helped structure responses, while memorisation enabled greater reliance on familiar language. Both were associated with greater perceived preparedness and confidence, although their benefits varied. The findings do not demonstrate that preparation directly reduces anxiety; rather, participants viewed it as a means of increasing readiness and confidence. This is consistent with Kawashima (2019), who found that pre-task planning reduced speaking anxiety, and Fallah (2017), who examines mindfulness and coping self-efficacy in relation to foreign language anxiety. In this study, feeling prepared and knowing what to say were particularly important to participants’ perceived confidence.

Practice as a Coping Strategy

Regular speaking practice and rehearsal also emerged as important coping strategies. Participants described practising alone, speaking aloud, and rehearsing before speaking activities. Respondent 2 stated, “I practice by speaking in front of a mirror,” Respondent 4 reported “speaking to them aloud,” and Respondent 10 explained, “I practice speaking beforehand to feel more confident.” These practices were associated with greater familiarity, preparation, and confidence. However, as with other strategies, the findings reflect participants’ perceptions rather than demonstrated causal effects. The qualitative design cannot establish that practice objectively reduces speaking anxiety; rather, it indicates that participants perceived repeated practice and rehearsal as useful for feeling more prepared and comfortable speaking English.

Digital and Informal English-Learning Practices

Some participants also used digital tools and informal English exposure as coping practices, including language-learning applications, videos, and music. Respondent 3 stated, “I practice using English learning apps like Duolingo,” while Respondent 10 reported that they “watch English videos and listen to English music.” These practices extended English exposure and opportunities for practice beyond the formal classroom. However, the findings do not establish that digital tools directly reduced speaking anxiety or that all participants perceived them as anxiety-reducing; rather, some students incorporated them into their individual approaches to English practice and exposure. Previous research highlights the potential of digital and AI-supported tools to provide flexible, individualised language-learning opportunities (Rezai et al., 2026; Yang et al., 2024), providing context for participants’ technology use. Nevertheless, because this study did not examine the

effectiveness of AI or digital interventions in reducing speaking anxiety, claims about their anxiety-reducing effects remain beyond the scope of the findings.

DISCUSSION

This study explored foreign language speaking anxiety among Vietnamese university EFL students, focusing on their experiences, perceived sources, and coping strategies. Anxiety was particularly evident in performance-based and evaluative situations, including presentations, speaking tests, and final examinations, and was associated with perceived linguistic limitations, fear of negative evaluation, low self-confidence, and reduced participation. These findings support Horwitz et al.'s (1986) conceptualisation of foreign language anxiety as situation-specific and involving communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation, as well as Vietnamese EFL research reporting greater anxiety during public and formal speaking tasks (Ho & Truong, 2022; Thach & Khau, 2025; Tsang, 2025). However, the findings suggest that evaluation should not be treated as a single condition, as some participants were more affected by formal assessment, whereas others were more affected by public exposure. Thus, anxiety appeared to reflect the interaction between task demands, perceived consequences, and audience visibility.

Participants also experienced physiological and emotional manifestations, including rapid heartbeat, tension, nervousness, difficulty breathing, and loss of composure. This supports research describing foreign language anxiety as both psychological and physiological (Akkakoson, 2016; Sutarsyah, 2017). Anxiety was further associated with difficulty producing English spontaneously, including vocabulary retrieval, sentence formulation, and mental translation. Consistent with Kasbi and Elahi Shirvan (2017), these findings suggest an interaction between perceived linguistic limitations and anxiety; however, the data do not establish that linguistic difficulty or translation directly causes anxiety.

Speaking anxiety also affected participation. Participants reported hesitation to raise their hands, share opinions, or speak voluntarily because of anticipated mistakes and negative evaluation. This aligns with research connecting anxiety with avoidance and reduced willingness to communicate (MacIntyre et al., 1998; Sholikhah & Isnaini, 2024). Nevertheless, avoidance was not uniform, as some participants described temporary hesitation, whereas others reported stronger reluctance. This variation suggests that anxiety may constrain participation without necessarily eliminating students' willingness to communicate. The proposed cycle in which anticipated evaluation increases anxiety, anxiety reduces participation, and reduced participation limits opportunities for practice is consistent with the literature, but remains an interpretation rather than a causally established process (Solhi & Thumvichit, 2025).

Perceived linguistic inadequacy, fear of mistakes, and low confidence appeared closely interconnected in participants' accounts. Concerns about vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and expressing ideas were associated with apprehension about being misunderstood or negatively judged. These findings are consistent with research identifying linguistic difficulties, communication apprehension, and fear of negative evaluation as factors associated with foreign language speaking anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986; Thach & Khau, 2025). Importantly, confidence did not appear to operate as an isolated factor. Rather, participants' perceived language limitations were intertwined with concerns about how others might evaluate their performance, potentially

discouraging classroom participation. This interpretation highlights the interaction of linguistic self-perceptions and social-evaluative concerns in participants' experiences of speaking anxiety, while recognising that the qualitative findings do not establish causal relationships.

Participants reported four groups of coping strategies, namely self-regulation, cognitive preparation, speaking practice, and informal or digital English-learning activities. Deep breathing and emotional control were reported as ways of managing anxiety, while organising ideas, reviewing vocabulary, and memorizing content reflected efforts to prepare for speaking tasks. Rehearsal and mirror practice provided additional opportunities to practice before speaking, while language-learning applications, English videos, music, and other digital resources extended participants' engagement with English beyond formal instruction. These accounts are broadly consistent with research documenting the use of preparation, positive thinking, and other coping strategies among learners experiencing English-speaking anxiety (Nguyen, 2025). However, the reported use of digital resources should not be interpreted as evidence that these activities independently reduced anxiety. The findings indicate that participants perceived these practices as useful for preparation, familiarity, confidence, or emotional management, but the study did not measure their effectiveness in reducing anxiety or improving speaking performance. Coping is therefore best understood as a learner-reported and individualised process rather than demonstrated intervention effectiveness.

The findings also provide a contextual contribution to Vietnamese EFL research. Although concerns about embarrassment, judgement, and losing face have been discussed in relation to Vietnamese students (Ho & Truong, 2022; Nguyen, 2025), the present findings suggest that such concerns should not be treated as fixed cultural characteristics. They occurred alongside linguistic difficulties, confidence, previous experiences, task demands, and classroom conditions, supporting a contextual rather than purely cultural interpretation. This is particularly relevant in a private university setting where students regularly encounter performance-oriented speaking activities.

Overall, EFL students' speaking anxiety was shaped by formal evaluation and public exposure, with linguistic insecurity, confidence, evaluation concerns, and participation closely interconnected. Students also demonstrated agency through varied coping practices, although their effectiveness cannot be established by the present qualitative design. The findings extend existing research by illustrating how Vietnamese university EFL students experience and negotiate speaking anxiety in performance-oriented activities. They highlight the value of preparation, gradual exposure, rehearsal, supportive feedback, and accessible practice, while recognising the need for further empirical validation.

LIMITATIONS

The small, purposively selected qualitative sample provided in-depth accounts but limits representation of Vietnamese university EFL students, while the focus on the research locale limits transferability because participants' experiences may have been shaped by its curriculum, assessment practices, classroom environment, instructional approaches, and student population. Reliance on self-reported written interview responses also captures perceptions rather than observed behaviour or objectively measured anxiety and offers fewer opportunities for follow-up than oral interviews. Selecting participants based on reported speaking-anxiety experiences further excluded perspectives from students with little or no anxiety. Moreover, the non-experimental and non-

longitudinal design prevents conclusions about whether coping strategies reduce anxiety or improve confidence and speaking performance. Thus, the findings should be viewed as context-specific qualitative insights into how Vietnamese university EFL students experience, perceive, and manage speaking anxiety rather than as generalisable evidence of coping-strategy effectiveness.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings have implications for EFL teacher education and classroom practice, although the proposed approaches are not experimentally validated interventions. Teachers can scaffold speaking tasks through preparation, rehearsal, small-group practice, and final performance; provide supportive corrective feedback that addresses errors without increasing fear of negative evaluation; and integrate linguistic and fluency support through vocabulary, sentence starters, pronunciation models, and brief speaking activities. Multiple participation pathways, such as pair work, small-group discussions, recorded tasks, and technology-supported activities, can provide less threatening opportunities for communication. Teachers can also promote preparation and self-regulation through planning, rehearsal, deep breathing, positive self-talk, and reflection, while digital and informal English-learning resources can provide optional practice beyond the classroom. These approaches address participants' reported anxiety, linguistic difficulties, and coping practices while promoting learner autonomy and supportive conditions for communication; however, their effectiveness in reducing anxiety or improving speaking performance requires further empirical investigation.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated foreign language speaking anxiety among Vietnamese university EFL students, focusing on their experiences, perceived sources, and coping strategies. Anxiety was particularly evident in evaluative speaking situations and was associated with fear of negative evaluation, perceived limitations in vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, low self-confidence, difficulty producing English spontaneously, and reduced classroom participation. Participants reported coping through physical and emotional self-regulation, cognitive preparation, speaking rehearsal, and informal or digital English-learning activities; however, these self-reported strategies cannot be considered demonstrably effective interventions. The study contributes a context-specific qualitative account showing that speaking anxiety involves interconnected linguistic, psychological, and social dimensions. The findings suggest that EFL instruction should address both language development and the evaluative and emotional conditions surrounding speaking activities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Future research should employ comparative, longitudinal, and intervention-oriented designs to extend these findings. Comparative qualitative or mixed-methods studies could examine speaking anxiety across multiple Vietnamese institutions, including public and private universities, different academic programmes and proficiency levels, educational levels, and other Asian EFL contexts to identify shared and context-specific patterns and strengthen transferability. Intervention studies could examine scaffolded speaking tasks, structured peer feedback, task-based activities, technology-supported practice, and learner self-regulation using quantitative or mixed-methods approaches to assess changes in anxiety, confidence, participation, and speaking performance.

Longitudinal studies could track changes in speaking anxiety over time in relation to proficiency, classroom experiences, speaking-task exposure, and coping practices, while examining its relationships with willingness to communicate, perceived communicative competence, motivation, and classroom participation. Given that the present study provides a context-bound qualitative account rather than a generalisable explanation, larger and more diverse samples across institutions and educational settings are needed to assess transferability and provide stronger evidence for effective pedagogical responses to foreign language speaking anxiety.

DECLARATION

Ethics Approval and Informed Consent

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from FPT University. All procedures were conducted in accordance with applicable institutional standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before participation.

AI Tool Use

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author(s) used Grammarly to check grammar and ChatGPT to improve language clarity. These tools were used in identify sections. The author reviewed, edited, and verified all AI-assisted output and take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available because sharing them could compromise participant privacy, confidentiality, or applicable ethical requirements. Data may be available from corresponding author subject to appropriate approval, where permitted.

Author Contributions

The sole author was responsible for the conceptualization, research design, analysis, interpretation, and preparation of the manuscript and accepts full responsibility for the work.

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