What Drives IELTS Speaking Anxiety? A Study of EFL University Students

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Abstract

Although general foreign language classroom anxiety has received scholarly attention, empirical research examining anxiety within standardized testing environments, such as IELTS speaking preparation, remains limited. The present study was designed to address this gap by examining anxiety levels among English as a Foreign Language students enrolled in an IELTS speaking preparation course and by identifying the underlying factors that contribute to their speaking anxiety. This study aimed to investigate the anxiety levels among EFL students in an IELTS speaking preparation class and to identify factors contributing to their speaking anxiety. Using a mixed-methods design, the study involved twenty students enrolled in an IELTS speaking preparation course at Sunan Ampel State Islamic University, Surabaya. Quantitative data were collected through a modified version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). In contrast, qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with students who exhibited higher levels of anxiety. Descriptive statistics were used to determine the anxiety levels, and thematic analysis was applied to explore the underlying factors. The findings indicated that most students experienced moderate levels of speaking anxiety. The main underlying factors were communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. These results highlight the need for pedagogical strategies to reduce anxiety and increase learners' confidence in IELTS speaking performance.

***Key Words**: foreign language anxiety, speaking ability, speaking anxiety*

INTRODUCTION

Speaking is a productive skill that is crucial to master because, through verbal communication, learners can convey meaning clearly and express their thoughts, feelings, and intentions effectively in real time (Anggini & Arjulayana, 2021). It is not just about repeating memorized phrases; rather, it involves actively selecting appropriate vocabulary, applying grammatical rules, and adjusting language to social contexts to ensure others understand the message. To make the message clearer, learners must speak clearly. As a result, some learners are unable to do this perfectly due to the anxiety or stress they have before attempting to speak, particularly when speaking in a foreign language (Nayyev Mustafa & Ahmed, 2023). Commonly, they worry that their interlocutors have more advanced knowledge than they do, which can lower their self-esteem; they fear making mistakes (like mispronunciation or grammatical errors); and they have negative thoughts about not being able to speak perfectly because it is not their first language. This phenomenon is recognized in the psychological field as speaking anxiety(Sabrina & Khairunnisa, 2025).

The Affective Filter Hypothesis by Krashen (1982) provides an insightful framework for understanding speaking anxiety. According to Krashen, affective elements, including low motivation, fear, and low self-confidence, function as a psychological filter

that can prevent or limit the quantity of understandable input that enters the brain's language acquisition system. Learners are unable to effectively develop or fully understand language when this affective filter is "high," which might be caused by stress or fear. Conversely, when learners feel relaxed and confident, the filter "lowers," allowing improved language acquisition and communication (Krashen, 1982).

Anxiety is an affective factor that is defined as an uncomfortable feeling state in which students experience feelings of insecurity, helplessness, anxiety, and discomfort in both a specific situation and a specific English skill (Rama, 2021). It aligns with Sdorow's (1998) argument that anxiety is an emotional feeling of discomfort accompanied by sympathetic nervous system arousal, which increases heart rate, respiration rate, and sweating (Jiang, Wu, & Liang, 2024).

Furthermore, to conduct a through investigation of students' speaking anxiety within an IELTS preparation environment, this research employed two interconnected theoretical frameworks: Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis and Horwitz et at.'s (1986) Foreign language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) theory. Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis establishes the foundational mechanism for understanding how emotional and psychological elements affect language acquisition and performance. According to Krashen's theory, affective variables-including anxiety, self-confidence, and motivation – function as a concealed psychological obstruction (termed a 'filter') that controls language intake and output. When learners encounter elevated anxiety levels, the affective filter becomes elevated, obstructing comprehensible input from being assimilated efficiently and impeding verbal production. Within the framework of IELTS speaking preparation, demanding evaluative circumstances, inflexible time constraints, and stringent band-score requirements raise learners' affective filters. This psychological impediment restricts students' capacity to effectively utilize their existing linguistic competence, culminating in diminished oral fluency, tentative articulation, and intensified communication difficulties during speaking assessments. While Krashen's hypothesis illuminates the manner in which anxiety operates as a performance impediment, Horwitz et al.'s (1986) FLCA framework furnishes the categorical framework necessary to recognize and assess the particular facets of anxiety encountered by learners. Horwitz et al. (1986) characterize foreign language anxiety as a particular, context-dependent constellation of self-perceptions, convictions, sentiments, and classroom conduct.

Horwitz et al. (1986) developed a theory called "Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety" (FLCA), which describes the anxiety many students experience, particularly in language courses. It combines concerns about how they will be seen with their own doubts, behaviors, and feelings about learning a foreign language in the classroom (Tsui & Cheng, 2022). Horwitz et al (1986) divided FLCA into three main themes that frequently come together, which are test anxiety, which is the fear of making a mistake on an exam or quiz; communication apprehension, which is feeling intimidated when speaking in the target language; and fear of negative evaluation, which is the persistent concern that people will criticize your mistakes (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). These are not isolated anxieties; rather, they are part of a special chain created by the unique characteristics of language acquisition, such as making strange noises while being observed. Research using the 33-item Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) shows that it accurately measures this construct, with strong test-retest reliability of about 0.83, indicating that it is distinct from general anxiety (Tsui & Cheng, 2022).

Anxiety in language learning is a well-recognized barrier that significantly affects learners' performance, particularly in speaking abilities. For students preparing for the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), this problem becomes even more obvious given the exam's high stakes. Therefore, IELTS speaking can substantially increase learners' affective filter. In the Indonesian EFL context, even though the Indonesian higher education system places a high value on English competence (Mali & Timotius, 2023),

Many university students struggle with substantial speaking anxiety, which makes it difficult for them to get the best results on IELTS speaking exams. According to Mustamir (2024), cultural reluctance, fear of getting a bad score, and a lack of confidence are the main causes of speaking anxiety among Indonesian EFL learners Mustamir's (2024) comprehensive analysis identifies fear of negative evaluation, diminished self-assurance, and cultural opposition as fundamental factors contributing to general speaking anxiety among EFL learners. Likewise, contemporary empirical investigations conducted in Indonesian higher education institutions concentrate on general or argumentative speaking courses, attributing anxiety to competency gaps, apprehension regarding errors, insufficient preparation, and restricted English language proficiency (Apriliano & Prayogo, 2024; Khafidhoh et al., 2023; Mustamir, 2024). Nevertheless, although these investigations offer significant contributions to understanding broad classroom contexts, they predominantly focus on low-stakes, peer-centered learning environments.

As a result, the existing body of research has not sufficiently examined how these anxiety mechanisms operate within the distinctive psychological and interpersonal context of the IELTS speaking examination. Notably, prior scholarship neglects the complex interaction between general foreign language anxiety and high-stakes assessment circumstances—including the unequal authority relationship inherent in direct examiner-candidate exchanges, standardized rubric-based evaluation criteria (such as Fluency and Coherence, Lexical Resource, Pronunciation), and the tension associated with immediate, time-constrained spontaneous communication under rigorous band-score requirements. Through its failure to distinguish general classroom anxiety from examination-specific evaluative strain, contemporary research creates a substantial lacuna in comprehending the specific origins of anxiety during IELTS preparation. To address this research gap, the current investigation utilizes a mixed-methods approach to examine the precise manifestations and contributing factors of IELTS speaking anxiety among Indonesian university EFL learners, furnishing empirical evidence to enable educators and learners to effectively address examination-specific anxiety.

METHOD

Design

This study examines the factors influencing IELTS speaking anxiety among Indonesian university students using a mixed-methods strategy. To comprehend a research problem, a mixed-methods strategy involves gathering, evaluating, and combining qualitative and quantitative methods (Creswell, 2009). Quantitative surveys were used to map the frequency and degree of anxiety factors; the researcher distributed a 33-item questionnaire, adapted from Horwitz et al.'s Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS). The questionnaire was distra 20-studentuted to 20 students enrolled in the course.

Respondent

The study's participants were 20 first-semester EFL students who were enrolled in an IELTS speaking preparation course at Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya for the 2025/2026 academic year. Data collection utilized a sequential sampling method: initially, all 20 students completed a questionnaire designed to evaluate their levels of speaking anxiety. Following this, purposive interviews were conducted with those students who demonstrated high anxiety levels, aiming to investigate the specific factors that contributed to their IELTS speaking anxiety.

Instrument

In this study, the researchers used primary data. According to Ary et al. (2010), primary data are the facts and figures that a researcher gathers directly from the source (Ary, Donald, Jacobs, Lucy Cheser, Sorensen, 2010). Furthermore, the data of this study refer to

students' perceptions of the factors contributing to IELTS speaking anxiety. Therefore, to obtain the data, the researchers distributed questionnaires and interviewed EFL students who had taken an IELTS speaking preparation course at Universitas Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya.

Data Collection Technique

The main quantitative tool is a questionnaire adapted from Horwitz et al.'s Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), comprising 33 carefully designed items. Several aspects of language anxiety, such as test anxiety, communication apprehension, and fear of negative evaluation, are measured in the questions. The questionnaire was slightly adjusted to fit the IELTS speaking context, ensuring that the questions directly relate to students' experiences with IELTS speaking practice. The students gave each question a 5-point rating: 1 for "strongly disagree" to 5 for "strongly agree" (Horwitz et al., 1986).

Moreover, for the qualitative data, the researchers applied semi-structured interviews. Ary et al. (2018) define semi-structured interviews as those that use a flexible guide rather than a tight questionnaire. Depending on how the conversation is going, the interviewer may change the order of the questions, clarify meanings, or ask more follow-up questions (Ary, Jacobs, Irvine, & Walker, 2018). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants who showed high anxiety levels in the questionnaire to gain more information about the factors contributing to IELTS speaking anxiety. These interviews aimed to dive deeper into the personal stories and feelings behind the numbers. The conversations helped uncover why and how certain factors increase speaking anxiety. Each interview lasted 30 to 45 minutes and was conducted in a friendly, supportive atmosphere to help participants feel comfortable sharing honest experiences.

Data Analysis

Upon completion of the questionnaires, the collected data underwent analysis and interpretation to determine the anxiety levels experienced by IELTS students. Anxiety level measurements were derived from a 33-item modified Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) using a 5-point Likert scale (with anchors ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), yielding total composite scores ranging from 33 to 165. To classify foreign-language speaking anxiety levels, this investigation employed the classification framework established by Debreli and Seren (2016). These cut-off points are grounded in the theoretical item mean standards of the 5-point scale: a composite score below 99 (corresponding to an item mean < 3.0, or below the neutral position) denotes a low anxiety level; a score between 99 and 132 (corresponding to an item mean between 3.0 and 4.0, or neutral to agreement) reflects a moderate anxiety level; and a score exceeding 132 (corresponding to an item mean > 4.0, or agreement to strong agreement) indicates a high level of speaking anxiety. This approach methodologically anchors the score thresholds in the particular scoring properties of the 33-item instrument. Subsequently, after calculating initial scores, the data were organized into the three dimensions of foreign language anxiety identified by Horwitz et al. (1986): communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety.

Following the completion of the questionnaire analysis, the researcher recruited students with elevated anxiety scores from the IELTS speaking preparation course for qualitative interviews. Subsequently, thematic analysis was employed to systematically analyze the interview data. The researcher conducted multiple reviews of the interview transcripts to identify patterns of recurring concepts and emotional responses. The identified themes were subsequently categorized into three distinct groups: test anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and communication apprehension. This qualitative investigation provided detailed, contextualized interpretations that complemented the

quantitative findings, thereby establishing a comprehensive understanding of students' anxiety experiences in the IELTS speaking classroom.

RESULT

EFL students' anxiety level in the IELTS speaking preparation course

To determine EFL students' anxiety during the IELTS speaking preparation course, descriptive statistics were used to analyze mean scores.

Table 1. Frequency and percentage of EFL students' anxiety levels

	Statement	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Moderate	15	75.0	75.0	75.0
	Low	5	25.0	25.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

The result presented in Table 1 reveals that 15 students have a moderate anxiety level, representing 75% and scoring 99-132, and 5 students have a low anxiety level, representing 25% and scoring less than 99. This indicates that most of them have a moderate anxiety level, which means that the majority of students experience a manageable yet noticeable degree of anxiety that can affect their IELTS speaking performance. Even though they are not debilitated by severe anxiety, they still face pressures significant enough to affect their motivation, focus, and emotional control.

Factors contributing to students' IELTS speaking anxiety

Twenty EFL students enrolled in the IELTS speaking preparation course were given the questionnaire. The findings indicated that most students experience moderate levels of anxiety. Furthermore, to learn more about the elements influencing students' IELTS speaking anxiety, three students who performed better than others were interviewed. It was discovered that several factors influence students' speaking anxiety on the IELTS, and it was categorized into three main factors as follows:

Communication Apprehension

Anxiety and worry when speaking to others are symptoms of a form of shyness known as communication apprehension. Four of the statements addressed communication anxiety. The table that follows shows the outcome.

Table 2. The Analysis of Students' Communication Apprehension

No.	Statement	SD	D.	N.	A	SA
1.	It frightens me when I don't understand what the IELTS examiner is saying in the speaking test.	10%	20%	20%	40%	10%
2.	I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in the IELTS speaking test.	10%	20%	20%.	30%	20%
3.	I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my IELTS speaking test	15%	10%.	15%	40%.	20%
4.	In the IELTS speaking class I can get so nervous that I forget things I know.	0%	0%	20%	45%	35%

***SD = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; N = Neither Disagree Nor Agree; A=Agree; SA = Strongly Agree.**

Feeling frightened if the answers to the examiners are incorrect

The first factor contributing to students' IELTS speaking anxiety is the fear of making mistakes when they answer examiners' questions because they do not really understand what the examiner is saying. The fear of giving wrong answers to the examiner is closely linked to the anxiety that arises when students do not understand what the examiner is saying during the IELTS speaking test. A lack of comprehension often triggers panic, as students worry that misunderstanding the question will lead them to respond inappropriately or incorrectly. This uncertainty creates a chain reaction: when students cannot fully grasp the examiner's words, their confidence in their ability to answer accurately diminishes, heightening the fear of making mistakes. In turn, this fear can cause hesitation and overthinking, further impairing listening comprehension and fluency. Eight students agreed, and two students strongly agreed with this statement. The following quotations from students support this factor.

Excerpt 1

Student 1: "I'm worried that my answer is bad and doesn't meet the examiner's expectations."

Students 2: "I'm afraid my answer is too long-winded, I'm thinking too much."

The excerpt indicated that student 1 is facing evaluative anxiety, characterized by a fear of judgment. They perceive the IELTS examiner as a subjective gatekeeper whose individual preferences must be deciphered, rather than as an objective evaluator using a standardized rubric. Furthermore, student 2 is dealing with cognitive overload and excessive self-monitoring. By overthinking, they confine themselves to their own thoughts, hindering fluency and disrupting the natural flow.

According to the interview results, some factors underlie fear of giving the wrong answer during IELTS speaking practice. Some students experience anxiety about making grammatical errors during IELTS speaking practice, as shown in the quotation below.

Excerpt 2

Student 1: *"*The main factor that makes me anxious about speaking during IELTS speaking practice is making grammatical errors. I'm afraid of blanks and making grammatical errors, which makes my answers less good during the test*."*

Student 2: "I am thinking too much that I make grammatical errors when I speak."

Furthermore, another anxiety factor during IELTS speaking practice is a lack of vocabulary mastery. Some students experience this as follows:

Excerpt 3

Student 1: "When I speak, I worry about choosing the wrong vocabulary, so that it may take too long to think."

Student 2: "I felt that I still lack vocabulary mastery. I still say a lot of 'ee ee ee' when I speak, because I was thinking about what words I was going to say. Sometimes, I forgot what. Sometimes words in English are so confusing that I'm confused and even more nervous because it's so complicated to say."

Some students are too afraid to make grammatical mistakes, which leaves them short on vocabulary when they speak. Therefore, they fear that their answers are incorrect. Another factor that makes students anxious during IELTS speaking practice is the need to speak spontaneously. The needspeak needspeakeake 2 above, 6 students agreed, and 4 students strongly agreed. It indicated that several students get panicked when they speak to us without any preparation in IELTS speaking practice, as they stated below:

Excerpt 3
Student 1: ″When I was asked to speak spontaneously in the IELTS Speaking practice, I felt so anxious. I felt nervous, and I was afraid of suddenly going blank, and worried that my answers would sound messy or inadequate.*″*
Student 2: "When I asked to speak spontaneously, I felt confused.*″*
Student 3: *"*If I am asked to speak spontaneously, I will immediately panic.*″*

The data collected from the interviews reveal that participants view spontaneous speaking as a source of stress. Student 1 articulated feelings of anxiety, nervousness, and fear of experiencing a mental block, as well as worries about the potential disorganization or inadequacy of their responses. This indicates that spontaneous speaking imposes both cognitive and emotional challenges on learners, who must quickly generate, organize, and accurately express their ideas within a constrained timeframe:

Excerpt 4
Student 2 conveyed confusion, suggesting a lack of clarity about how to initiate or structure an immediate response when no preparatory time is available. In contrast, Student 3 remarked that they would "immediately panic," highlighting a strong emotional reaction that could hinder their ability to think clearly and communicate effectively.

Together, these insights suggest that the expectation to speak without prior preparation induces speaking anxiety among IELTS learners. This anxiety seems to arise not only from linguistic challenges but also from psychological factors such as fear of making mistakes, apprehension about negative evaluations, low self-confidence, and pressure to deliver coherent responses on the spot. Such emotional responses may elevate learners' cognitive load, complicating their ability to access vocabulary, organize their thoughts, and maintain fluency during the speaking task.

Another factor of IELTS students' anxiety is nervousness. Most students are nervous during IELTS speaking practice. Based on Table 2 above, 8 students agreed, and 4 students strongly agreed with the statement ″I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my IELTS speaking test.*″* This indicates that some students experienced some level of speaking anxiety during IELTS speaking practice. According to the interview results, this nervousness stems from the new environment and limited self-confidence in English language skills, as stated below.

Excerpt 5
Student 2: *"*I was nervous when speaking in my IELTS speaking course because my English skills are still not very good.*″*
Student 3: ″Honestly, the IELTS speaking class is a new environment for me, my friends are also new, so I feel nervous when I'm asked to speak in the class.*″*

Moreover, the statement *"*In the IELTS speaking class, I can get so nervous that I forget things I know.*″* 9 students agreed, and 7 students strongly agreed. It indicated that nervousness can affect students' performance. As stated below:

Excerpt 6
Student 2: *"*Yesterday, when I was asked about a tourist destination I recommended, I had already planned what I was going to say, but I felt nervous, and suddenly I went blank during speaking practice.*″*
Student 3: *"*I felt so nervous, so that the sentence I wanted to say was already in my mind, but when I wanted to say it, it felt like I forgot everything.*″*

The findings from the interviews reveal that students' anxiety in the IELTS Speaking class is largely driven by a lack of confidence in their English skills and the unfamiliarity of the learning environment. Student 2 expressed that their nervousness stemmed from their belief that their English proficiency was "still not very good." This indicates that a deficiency in self-confidence regarding language abilities contributes to increased speaking anxiety. Likewise, Student 3 noted that the presence of new classmates in an unfamiliar classroom setting heightened their nervousness when required to speak. This suggests that environmental factors, including unfamiliarity with the learning context and peers, significantly contribute to the escalation of students' anxiety. These qualitative insights are supported by the results of the questionnaire. The statement, "In the IELTS speaking class, I can get so nervous that I forget things I know," was met with strong agreement from all participants, with 9 students agreeing and 7 students strongly agreeing. This unanimous feedback highlights that nervousness is a prevalent experience among the participants and has a considerable effect on their speaking performance. Additionally, the interview data provides further clarification on how nervousness impacts students during speaking tasks.

Fear of Negative Evaluation

Fear of negative evaluation refers to students' anxiety about how others will judge their speaking abilities. There were 3 statements related to this factor. The analysis of them is presented below.

Table 3. Student Speaking Anxiety Level and Statement

No.	Statement	SD	D.	N.	A	SA
1.	I keep thinking that the other students are better at IELTS speaking than I am.	0%	10%	15%	30%	45%
2.	I feel very self-conscious about speaking English in front of other students during the IELTS simulation	0%	0%	55%.	0%	45%
3.	I am afraid that the other students will Laugh at me when I speak in IELTS speaking practice	20%	30%.	10%	30%.	10%

***SD = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; N = Neither Disagree Nor Agree; A = Agree; SA = Strongly Agree**

Lack of confidence is the primary cause of IELTS students' worry, as they fear receiving a poor evaluation. Consequently, they compared their speaking ability with others' and then felt anxious about their own. According to the table above, 6 students agreed and 9 strongly agreed. This indicates that most students lacked confidence in their speaking abilities. As quoted below:

> **Excerpt 7**
> Student 1: “I have a friend who is more confident when speaking in IELTS Speaking practice, and I often compare myself to him. I worry about getting a low score and not being as good as him because I don't have enough confidence.”
> Student 2: “There is definitely a lack of self-confidence, like sometimes I feel anxious when I see my friends who are better at speaking, and there is definitely a feeling of inferiority.”
> Student 3: “After knowing my other friend's speaking performance was better, I became a bit anxious.”

The second factor is speaking in front of other students. Table 3 showed that 9 students strongly agreed with the statement. This indicates that Several students were uncomfortable

speaking in front of others, as they stated below:

Excerpt 8
Student 1: "I felt anxious and scared when I had to speak in class, especially when I had to answer directly."
Student 2: *"*I felt self-conscious when I spoke in class."
Student 3: "I also feel very nervous when speaking in class, in front of my friends.*"*

Another factor contributing to IELTS students' anxiety is the fear of being laughed at when they speak. Table 3 showed that 6 students agreed with the statement. It indicated that some students feared being laughed at when they spoke during IELTS speaking practice.

Test Anxiety

Test anxiety is a psychological condition characterized by intense stress, fear, or worry before or during an exam or performance assessment. There were 4 statements related to this context, as described below.

Table 4. Anxiety test

No.	Statement	SD	D.	N.	A	SA
5.	I worry about the consequences of failing my IELTS speaking band score.	10%	10%	15%	25%	40%
6.	Even if I am well prepared for the IELTS speaking class, I feel anxious about it.	10%	5%	25%.	20%	40%
7.	IELTS speaking preparation moves so quickly I worry about getting left behind	0%	40%.	10%	30%.	20%
8.	I can feel my heart pounding when I'm going to be called on in the IELTS speaking test	15%	5%	20%	30%	30%

***SD = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; N = Neither Disagree Nor Agree; A = Agree; SA = Strongly Agree**

The first factor contributing to IELTS students' anxiety in the test is the fear of IELTS score band failure. The result revealed that 5 students agreed and 8 students strongly agreed. It showed that most students fear and worry about failing to achieve a high IELTS speaking band score. As the following interview statement.

Excerpt 9
Student 1: *"*I was afraid of getting a low score on the IELTS Speaking test. I'm afraid my performance won't reflect my true abilities because I'm lacking confidence or nervous.*"*
Student 2: *"*Previously, I felt less confident, so I wasn't too worried about the score because, honestly, I already thought that my test score would definitely be less than expected.*"*

The data revealed that both participants demonstrate low self-efficacy, which directly impairs their expectations of success on a high-stakes assessment. The data indicate that low confidence manifests in two forms among learners: an active fear of not being able to showcase their true abilities (anxiety-driven underperformance) and a passive resignation to anticipated failure.

The second significant factor identified is the ongoing presence of anxiety, even with thorough preparation for speaking. As shown in Table 4, four students concurred, and

eight strongly concurred with this observation, suggesting that most participants experience anxiety during the IELTS speaking test, irrespective of their preparation level. Additionally, qualitative feedback from the interviews revealed underlying factors that exacerbate this problem. These factors include a heightened fear of committing grammatical mistakes, the anxiety of experiencing a mental block during the test, and considerable unease with direct eye contact, stemming from the belief that the assessment resembles an interrogation, as described below:

> **Excerpt 10**
> Student 1: *"*Even though I have prepared for the IELTS speaking test, I am still afraid of going blank, making grammatical errors, or my answers not being good enough during the test*."*
> Student 2: *"*When the test guide looked into my eyes, it felt like I was being interrogated. So it made my mind go blank to answer, and it took me a while to speak*."*

The excerpt indicated that both students clearly expressed their concerns regarding the fear or occurrence of their "mind going blank." Student 1 is apprehensive about it, even after thorough preparation, whereas Student 2 encountered this issue in real-time during the examination. This suggests that mere preparation is insufficient to completely mitigate the significant psychological stress associated with the exam.

Another factor is fear of falling behind. Table 4 shows that 6 students agreed and 4 strongly agreed, indicating that some students feel worried about falling behind their friends in English language ability or achievement in the IELTS speaking course. Commonly, students get panicked before and during the IELTS speaking test. Table 4 shows that 6 students agreed and 6 students strongly agreed with the related statement. When students panic before and during the IELTS speaking test, it can manifest in several physical symptoms, such as a pounding heart, sweating, and even trembling, as students stated below.

> **Excerpt 11**
> Student 1: "I was trembling a little, and my heart was pounding fast when I was about to face the IELTS Speaking test."
> Student 2: "I felt nervous when I was going to face the IELTS speaking test, and my hands were sweating cold."

DISCUSSION

EFL Students' Anxiety Level in The IELTS Speaking Preparation Course

The results revealed that most of the students (75%) had a moderate level of anxiety, indicating that they had significant emotional and cognitive difficulties that affected their ability to speak. These results align with an increasing amount of literature that identifies speaking anxiety as a common and significant affective factor among language learners (Horwitz et al., 1986; Liu & Jackson, 2008; Mak, 2011).

The prevalence of moderate anxiety indicates that IELTS students experience manageable but constant tension that can affect their confidence, fluency, and cognitive abilities. This pattern aligns with Horwitz et al.'s (1986) *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)* theory, which posits that communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety are interrelated components of foreign language anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986). Similarly, studies conducted by Trang (2012) and Zhang (2021) showed that EFL learners often experience moderate to high levels of speaking anxiety, particularly when performance is being evaluated formally (Trang, 2012; (Zhang, 2021).

The moderate anxiety level is not adequately controlled. It can be both a motivator and an obstacle to performance. According to Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014), extreme anxiety levels interfere with fluency and spontaneous language use, while moderate anxiety might motivate students to prepare carefully (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Therefore, the present research indicates that for most students who have moderate anxiety levels, the IELTS speaking course might be beneficial; an overwhelming fear of making mistakes and being judged may result in avoidance and self-doubt. Moreover, the fundamental concept of foreign language classroom anxiety was established by earlier research, such as Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), but few studies have examined it in relation to the structured, examiner-led, and time-constrained nature of IELTS speaking tasks. Therefore, this study presents a new empirical perspective on how IELTS-oriented learning environments shape EFL students' anxiety experiences.

Factors Contributing to Students' IELTS Speaking Anxiety

Horwitz et al. (1986) identified three primary causes of anxiety: communication apprehension, fear of a negative evaluation, and test anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986) as discussed below:

Communication apprehension

Communication apprehension emerged as a central factor contributing to IELTS speaking anxiety. Students' fears of making grammatical mistakes, misunderstanding examiners' questions, and speaking spontaneously are consistent with global EFL trends. Suratin and Sribayak (2025) reported that fear of making mistakes, lack of vocabulary, and time constraints were the strongest internal triggers of anxiety among Thai adult EFL learners (Suratin & Sribayak, 2025). Likewise, Dong (2023) found that high anxiety levels negatively correlate with learners' self-efficacy and their willingness to engage in spoken language learning (Dong, 2023).

Students' reported fear of misunderstanding examiners' questions aligns with He, Zhou, and Zhang (2021), who noted that brief lapses in listening comprehension during oral activities increase emotional and cognitive stress (Zhou & Zhang, 2021). When students find it difficult to understand questions in real time, they become more focused on avoiding mistakes rather than communicating, which increases anxiety. Furthermore, the tendency to overthink before answering, exhibited by pauses, hesitations, or self-corrections, reflects what Jin and Zhang (2021) refer to as the "cognitive–affective feedback loop," in which anxiety reduces the attentional resources required for effective language processing. Worry and self-monitoring restrict fluency in these situations, putting students between expression and comprehension (Jin & Zhang, 2021); moreover, spontaneous speaking is restricted. The unprepared, real-time nature of IELTS speaking tasks triggers anxiety similar to what Idrissi (2022) identified as "psychological barriers to speaking fluency," situations where anxiety impairs students' ability to deliver coherent responses (Idrissi, 2022).

Furthermore, the results of the interview indicated that students often expressed concerns regarding the potential misinterpretation of the examiner's questions. This observation aligns with the research conducted by Mahmud and Wong (2022), which highlighted that misinterpreting examiner prompts and cues is a major source of anxiety for candidates taking the IELTS test (Mahmud & Wong, 2022). Overthinking and disfluency are caused by a combination of limited vocabulary and linguistic uncertainty, reflecting the dynamic interaction of cognitive and emotional variables in speech production.

Fear of negative evaluation

Fear of negative evaluation was another major factor. Students' statements revealed that they often compared themselves to peers and felt anxious when speaking in front of others. This aligns with findings from Toubot, Seng, and Abdullah (2018), who discovered that low self-confidence and fear of judgment were the most significant predictors of speaking anxiety among Libyan EFL undergraduates (Toubot, Seng, & Abdullah, 2018).

The fear of negative evaluation, especially from examiners, correlates with more general Asian EFL tendencies, where anxiety is increased by cultural values that emphasize humility and face-saving. According to Mustamir's (2024) meta-synthesis, cultural communication techniques that emphasize politeness and the avoidance of mistakes often influence Indonesian learners' hesitation to communicate (Mustamir, 2024). Evaluative fear is therefore heightened in IELTS tests due to the perceived power imbalance between the examiner and the student.

Test anxiety

Another significant factor was test anxiety, which includes nervousness despite preparation, panic during exams, and fear of receiving low IELTS scores. In all modules, Hartono (2019) discovered a modest to moderately negative connection between test-taking anxiety and IELTS achievement, suggesting that anxiety directly affects test performance (Hartono, 2019). Students in the current study exhibited physical symptoms like trembling and sweating, which are typical of "foreign language test anxiety," as described by Horwitz et al. (1986).

Interestingly, several students experienced nervousness even after adequate preparation, which correlates with findings by Yue (2023), who found that test anxiety can overcome motivation and readiness, limiting learners' capacity to exhibit competence (Yue, 2023). This demonstrates that mental readiness might be just as important for IELTS performance as academic preparation. This study presents the ideas that test anxiety, communication anxiety, and fear of failing a test contribute to IELTS speaking anxiety in Indonesian EFL university students. The findings reinforce the relevance of affective variables in language assessment and call for emotionally supportive, culturally aware, and learner-centered approaches in IELTS preparation programs.

Based on these results, several pedagogical and theoretical implications can be drawn. First, language instructors and IELTS trainers should design speaking activities that gradually increase in complexity and exposure. Allowing learners to practice in supportive, low-pressure environments can help desensitize them to evaluation and improve self-confidence. Role-playing, peer interviews, and small-group speaking simulations may reduce apprehension before transitioning to examiner-style speaking tasks.

Second, explicit training in anxiety-regulation strategies such as deep breathing, positive self-talk, and visualization can be incorporated into IELTS preparation classes. Studies show that learners who engage in mindfulness and self-regulation activities experience measurable reductions in anxiety levels and improved fluency. Teachers should also provide constructive, empathetic feedback that focuses on communication effectiveness rather than linguistic perfection, helping students see mistakes as natural aspects of learning.

Future researchers are encouraged to explore the longitudinal effects of anxiety-reduction interventions and to compare different test-oriented speaking environments, such as TOEFL. Further research could also investigate the role of gender, personality traits, and digital learning platforms in shaping speaking anxiety and confidence.

CONCLUSION

The results revealed that most participants (75%) experienced a moderate level of speaking anxiety, while 25% showed a low level. This indicates that, although anxiety did not

completely paralyze learners, it still created meaningful psychological barriers that affected their confidence, fluency, and spontaneity during IELTS speaking tasks. The results demonstrate that three interrelated components, communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety, collectively shape students' IELTS speaking anxiety. Communication apprehension emerged when students feared misinterpreting the examiner's questions, making grammatical or vocabulary errors, or speaking spontaneously without preparation. These fears align with the cognitive-affective interactions observed in previous research, suggesting that when learners worry excessively about accuracy, their attentional resources are divided, leading to hesitation and disfluency.

The second factor, fear of negative evaluation, reflects the learners' sensitivity to how peers and examiners perceive them. Many students expressed concern about being judged, laughed at, or considered less competent than others. Such fears often stem from limited self-confidence and cultural tendencies toward modesty and avoidance of public error, traits frequently noted among Indonesian and Asian EFL learners. This fear not only restricts oral participation but also weakens learners' self-perception as capable English speakers. The third factor, test anxiety, was intensified by the high-stakes nature of the IELTS exam. Even students who had prepared extensively reported nervousness, trembling, and mental blankness during testing. The anticipation of a low band score heightened stress, demonstrating how emotional readiness is as crucial as linguistic competence in language performance.

Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on affective factors in foreign language learning and underscores the need to view IELTS preparation not only as a linguistic process but also as an emotional journey. By addressing the psychological dimensions of test preparation, educators can cultivate learners who are not only proficient in English but also resilient, confident, and emotionally prepared to perform at their best.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The researcher would like to sincerely thank everyone who participated in the IELTS speaking preparation course. Their willingness to share their honest experiences, thoughts, and emotions made this study deeply meaningful and reflective of real classroom realities.

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