



A Thematic Review of the Effects of Speaking Anxiety-Reducing Interventions on L2 Speech Producing Efficiency in Tertiary Level

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Abstract:

Background: Speaking anxiety continues to be a significant barrier to second language (L2) speech competency, especially among tertiary-level learners. Although it has been demonstrated that a variety of techniques can lessen speaking anxiety, little research has been done on how beneficial they are for students with diverse anxiety levels.

Purpose: This review aims to investigate how the effectiveness of anxiety-reducing interventions varies between high-anxiety and low-anxiety L2 learners, with a focus on speaking proficiency in higher education settings.

Methodology: A thematic analysis approach was adopted to synthesize 50 empirical studies published between 2020 and 2025. These papers are drawn from a variety of language and cultural contexts, such as the Middle East, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Thailand.

Findings: The findings show that while techniques like role-playing, peer engagement, speech technology, and mindfulness typically lessen speaking anxiety, emotionally supportive, organized, and scaffolded interventions are more effective for high-anxiety learners. On the other hand, independent, high-interaction activities are more effective for learners who experience less fear. Sociocultural factors, such as gender, exposure to English, and rural upbringing, also influence the effectiveness of interventions.

Research implications: The review concludes that L2 teaching pedagogy should incorporate differentiated, anxiety-sensitive strategies tailored to each learner's unique profile. It also emphasizes the need for more longitudinal and context-specific research to improve the inclusivity and emotional reactivity of language instruction.

Keywords: L2 Speaking Anxiety; High and Low-Anxiety Learners; Affective Factors in SLA; Technology-Assisted Language Learning; Differentiated interventions; Tertiary EFL Learners.

1 Introduction

One of the most prominent affective barriers that affect oral proficiency and cognitive speech processing in second language (L2) learners is speaking anxiety. The fear or apprehension that arises while speaking a non-native language orally is known as second language (L2) speaking anxiety, which is frequently accompanied by worry, discomfort, and physical symptoms (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Students in higher education often participate in academic speaking activities in English, which can be intimidating for individuals who lack confidence or proficiency (Baroi et al., 2020). By increasing cognitive load and reducing working memory capacity, language anxiety, particularly when speaking, has been shown to impair fluency, lexical retrieval, and syntactic processing (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012). Speaking anxiety can be reduced by using strategies such as peer interaction, reflective tasks, and speech technologies like automatic speech recognition (ASR), according to studies, which ultimately increase learner engagement (Bashori et al., 2021; Aslan & Taş, 2024). These interventions, however, are frequently implemented consistently without taking into account the different anxiety levels of students. Compared to their low-anxiety peers, high-anxiety learners might need more focused or ongoing support. Little is known about how anxiety-reducing interventions vary in their effects on L2 speech processing efficiency across learner profiles, despite the increased interest in affective variables in second language acquisition (SLA). This necessitates a more in-depth, data-driven study in ESL classes, especially in light of higher education in Bangladesh.

Speaking anxiety can vary widely among second language (L2) learners. While some have high anxiety levels that can significantly impair oral performance, others have moderate or low levels that are easier to control (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Despite this variance, existing literature usually treats L2 learners as a homogeneous group, implementing interventions and assessing general improvements in interpersonal responses or speaking performance (Baroi et al., 2020; Ahmad et al., 2024). Although these studies support the idea that speaking anxiety can be decreased by using strategies like peer collaboration, mindfulness exercises, and speech technology, they do not investigate whether students with high baseline anxiety levels gain more or less from these

interventions than students with low or moderate anxiety levels. The possibility that high-anxiety learners would react differently and possibly need more extensive or constant assistance than their low-anxiety peers is overlooked by this lack of difference. Without examining these variations, existing strategies run the risk of providing broad solutions that may not be sufficient for every learner. Furthermore, little is understood about the role that anxiety levels play in mediating achievements in L2 speech processing effectiveness. Addressing this gap is crucial to creating more focused and inclusive approaches that meet the emotional needs of each student in the L2 speaking classroom. This study aims to investigate the effects of speaking anxiety-reducing interventions on L2 speech processing efficiency in tertiary-level learners with different levels of language anxiety. It specifically attempts to assess the efficacy of specific interventions, such as reflection tasks, speech technology, and peer interaction, amongst learners with high and low anxiety levels. The study aims to provide insights into the development of more individualized and successful instructional techniques by determining if anxiety level affects the results of these strategies. To improve L2 speech processing efficiency among students with high and low anxiety levels, this research will help design focused interventions that serve a range of emotional and cognitive requirements in second language speaking classrooms. This review paper aims to answer the following research question:

How do anxiety-reducing interventions differ in effectiveness between high-anxiety and low-anxiety L2 learners?

2 Method

This review employs a thematic analysis approach to synthesize findings from 50 peer-reviewed articles on the effects of speaking anxiety interventions of EFL learners at the tertiary level. The articles were selected through a systematic search of academic databases, including Scopus, Google Scholar, ResearchGate, ERIC, and JSTOR, using keywords such as “speaking anxiety of EFL learners,” “Speaking anxiety reducing interventions,” “speaking anxiety in tertiary education,” and “effects of speaking anxiety interventions.” The search was limited to articles published between 2020 and 2025 to ensure relevance to current educational practices. Studies were included if they (1) focused on speaking

anxiety at the tertiary level, (2) suggested required interventions to address learners' speaking anxiety, and (3) were peer-reviewed and available in English. Articles were excluded if they (1) did not address speaking anxiety, (2) focused on primary or secondary education, (3) lacked empirical evidence (e.g., opinion pieces or editorials), or (4) were not available in English. This process ensured a focused and high-quality dataset for analysis.

Thematic analysis was conducted following the framework by Braun and Clarke (2006), which involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within the data. The process began with familiarization, where all 50 articles were read thoroughly to gain a deep understanding of their content. Next, coding was performed to extract key ideas, which were then grouped into broader themes such as "Speaking anxiety of EFL learners," "Speaking anxiety reducing interventions," and "speaking anxiety at tertiary level in Bangladesh." Themes were refined and named to reflect their core ideas, ensuring a coherent and structured synthesis of the literature. This approach allowed for a comprehensive exploration of recurring patterns and insights across the articles, providing a nuanced understanding of the effects of speaking anxiety-reducing interventions on EFL learners at the tertiary level.

To maintain academic rigor, all sources were properly cited in accordance with APA guidelines, and direct quotations were used sparingly to avoid plagiarism (Hasan et al., 2025). Potential biases in article selection and interpretation were acknowledged, and efforts were made to include diverse perspectives and contexts. However, this review has certain limitations, including its focus on English-language publications, which may exclude valuable insights from non-English sources, and the potential for publication bias, as studies with significant or positive findings are more likely to be published. Despite these limitations, the thematic approach offers valuable insights into the effects of speaking anxiety-reducing interventions on EFL learners at the tertiary level, highlighting key trends and gaps for future research.

3 Discussion

Speaking anxiety is still a major affective obstacle in second or foreign language (L2) learning environments, especially among tertiary-level learners. It is a multidimensional concept that is

impacted by social, emotional, and cognitive aspects, which have been shown to hinder learners' academic achievement and communicative skills. Over the past decade, an increasing number of studies have investigated the sources of L2 speaking anxiety, its implications on learner engagement and performance, and a range of interventions designed to mitigate its effects. This review synthesizes these empirical contributions across six major thematic areas: (1) sources and nature of speaking anxiety, (2) the role of teachers and pedagogical approaches, (3) classroom-based interventions, (4) technology-assisted strategies, (5) psychological and emotional dimensions, and (6) differential responses between high and low-anxiety learners.

3.1 Sources and Nature of Speaking Anxiety

A variety of interconnected factors have been repeatedly identified as the cause of speaking anxiety in L2 situations. Learners often struggle internally with low self-confidence, fear of negative evaluation, and a history of negative speaking experiences (Alsowat, 2016; Zahari & Nurcholis, 2025; Saputro & Sahrudin, 2025). These elements foster a sense of anxiety when learners are required to speak publicly or spontaneously, particularly in academic settings. Chicho (2025) noted that classroom-based public speaking is one of the most anxiety-inducing activities for tertiary-level students. Moreover, students often experience anxiety during public speaking due to fear of making mistakes, being judged by others, or forgetting what to say (Widayati & Hidayati, 2022).

Socio-cultural and environmental influences also play a substantial role. Studies from South and Southeast Asia show how socio-economic background, rural origin, and limited exposure to English outside the classroom can intensify speaking anxiety (Alam & Hasan, 2025; Mamun, 2021; Mobarak, 2020; Baroi et al., 2020; Rahman et al., 2024). Additionally, peer pressure and gendered expectations, particularly in co-educational contexts, have been found to accelerate anxiety among female learners (Chowdhury et al., 2024; Muktingrum et al., 2024). Speaking anxiety remains at modest levels among student populations, despite demographic consistency, according to Quvanch et al. (2024), indicating its psychological complexity and context-specific manifestation. Additionally, Hasan and Labonya (2016) discovered that students in both public and private universities reported high levels of discomfort in English-

speaking tasks, making stage fright, anxiety, and a lack of speaking practice among the most enduring obstacles to speaking skill development at the undergraduate level in Bangladesh.

3.2 Role of Teachers and Teaching Methods

Teachers play a significant role in shaping learners' emotional experiences and creating environments that reduce anxiety. To reduce speaking anxiety, several studies emphasize the importance of sympathetic, student-centered instructional techniques (Atifnigar, 2024; Sam et al., 2024). Providing prompt and helpful feedback (Zahari & Nurcholis, 2025), creating dynamic and captivating lessons (Alsowat, 2016), and creating psychologically secure environments where students feel encouraged rather than condemned are all examples of effective teaching practices (Rohmah & Wijaya, 2025). Students' reluctance to speak has also been demonstrated to decrease with the use of specific instructional tactics, such as structured listening assignments, clear instructions, and confidence-building exercises (Sam et al., 2024; Tabassum & Aziz, 2024). For instance, the Peer Teaching Method promotes psychological safety and collaborative learning, both of which raise learners' self-efficacy in public speaking (Ayiz & Tauchid, 2025). Additionally, inclusive and emotionally responsive teaching requires personalized support, relaxed classroom settings, and anxiety-reduction strategies, including encouragement of risk-taking and meditation (Bajri & Elmahdi, 2024). According to Hasan et al. (2024), students in English departments experienced greater difficulty speaking in English-medium instruction (EMI) classrooms, as they were anxious and focused on language accuracy. In contrast, students in other departments, who prioritized content over language, were able to communicate more easily.

3.3 Classroom-Based Strategies and Interventions

Several classroom-based approaches have shown promise in reducing speaking anxiety and increasing student interest. A thorough analysis of techniques, including peer interaction, teacher-student connection, mood-enhancing relaxation exercises, and rational emotive therapy, is given by Toyama and Yamazaki (2021). These techniques enhance students' motivation and communication skills, in addition to reducing speaking anxiety (Hasan et al., 2020). According to Cantos et al. (2024), cooperative group activities, game-based learning, and delayed error correction are effective strategies for fostering a positive and engaged

learning environment in the classroom. Tasks that require authentic communication, such as role-playing and simulations, have been highly successful. Fluency and confidence are greatly enhanced by regular role-playing practice in actual situations, according to Permatasari et al. (2025). Similarly, scaffolded assignments that offer structure and predictability, including oral presentations and mini-speeches (Öztürk & Öztürk, 2021; Gürbüz & Cabaroğlu, 2021), might reassure nervous students. Furthermore, Aslan and Taş (2024) emphasize the importance of incorporating a variety of speaking exercises to maintain student interest and promote fluency in impromptu language use.

3.4 Technology-Assisted Approaches

Emerging technologies, which provide flexibility, customization, and low-pressure settings, have created new opportunities for lowering L2 speaking anxiety. One example of a virtual tutor is ChatGPT, which promotes self-paced learning and offers constructive criticism. Comparing students using ChatGPT to those in conventional classes, Celik et al. (2025) discovered that the former showed greater confidence and decreased fear. According to studies by Li et al. (2025) and Bashori et al. (2021), automatic speech recognition (ASR) techniques have been shown to enhance learners' vocabulary retention, pronunciation accuracy, and fluency. Although these tools are successful in addressing performance anxiety at the individual level, they are still not very effective in reducing social and emotional anxiety. El Shazly (2021) and Li et al. (2025) both concluded that AI technologies were inadequate for treating emotional insecurity and anxiety connected to peers. Chen et al. (2022) suggest incorporating dynamic assessment frameworks into digital platforms to fill these gaps by lowering unnecessary cognitive burden and providing immediate, tailored feedback (Uddin et al., 2024). Furthermore, Chen and Hwang (2020) demonstrate how idea mapping in flipped classrooms fosters linguistic organization and critical thinking, thereby reducing speaking anxiety. According to Meyer and Patty (2024), using video blogs, or vlogs, enabled students to practice speaking in less critical environments and reflect on themselves, reducing affective barriers. Additionally, Hasan et al. (2018) and Silfani et al. (2025) emphasized that in Bangladeshi tertiary-level contexts, YouTube and similar platforms significantly enhance students' speaking abilities, pronunciation, and overall motivation. In addition to lowering cognitive burden, the audio-visual

format creates a relaxed learning atmosphere that allows students to advance their communication and presentation skills at their own pace. This supports more general research showing that

when intentionally incorporated into language training, real, media-rich information can be an effective means of reducing speaking anxiety. The summary of findings is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of the findings.

Author and Year	Key Findings
Alsowat, 2016; Zahari & Nurcholis, 2025; Saputro & Sahiruddin, 2025	Internal fears and past experiences cause anxiety.
Widayati & Hidayati, 2022; Alam & Hasan, 2025	Public speaking and cultural factors increase anxiety.
Quvanch et al., 2024; Hasan & Labonya, 2016	High anxiety hinders speaking development.
Atifnigar, 2024; Sam et al., 2024	Supportive teaching reduces anxiety.
Rohmah & Wijaya, 2025; Bajri & Elmahdi, 2024	Safe environments build confidence.
Toyama & Yamazaki, 2021; Cantos et al., 2024	Role-plays and games lower fear.
Celik et al., 2025; Li et al., 2025	Tech tools boost confidence and fluency.
Chen et al., 2022; Meyer & Patty, 2024	Reflection and media reduce emotional barriers.
Hasan et al., 2018; Silfani et al., 2025	Media platforms improve motivation and skills.

3.5 Psychological and Emotional Dimensions

Learners' anxiety levels and speaking abilities are intricately linked to affective factors, especially attitude and emotional resilience. Sun and Wang (2024) discovered that whereas students with fixed mindsets are more prone to anxiety and performance avoidance, those with growth mindsets like speaking more and are more motivated to interact. It has been demonstrated that positive psychology techniques, such as the use of success recollection activities (Jin et al., 2021), significantly reduce anxiety associated with learning a foreign language and promote student well-being. Emotional stability and communicative confidence are also supported by self-regulation techniques, such as establishing clear learning objectives and connecting new information to existing knowledge (Bojović, 2020). To foster psychological resilience, Atifnigar (2024) and Suratina & Sribayak (2025) emphasize the importance of encouraging students to think positively, be self-aware, and seek help when needed. It has also been demonstrated that virtual teaching methods, such as the Synchronous Virtual Flipped Classroom (Muluk et al., 2025), increase self-efficacy; however, social presence and technical difficulties need to be properly addressed.

3.6 Differential Responses of High and Low-Anxiety Learners

The impact of anxiety-reducing interventions varies depending on learner profiles, which is a significant finding from the reviewed studies.

Low-pressure, emotionally supportive, and structured settings are generally the most beneficial for high-anxiety learners. Methods that work especially well for this group include authentic role-plays (Permatasari et al., 2025), scaffolded feedback (Öztürk & Öztürk, 2021), and gradual exposure to public speaking (Alsowat, 2016). Interventions that promote risk-taking and strengthen emotional safety are also necessary to address the fixed mindset tendencies of these learners (Sun & Wang, 2024). Low-anxiety learners, on the other hand, frequently perform best in dynamic, independent environments. They respond better to tasks involving spontaneous speaking, such as vlogging (Meyer & Patty, 2024), impromptu talks (Aslan & Taş, 2024), and cooperative peer work (Toyama & Yamazaki, 2021). However, Zahari & Nurcholis (2025) warn that unless sufficient scaffolding is provided, some treatments that are frequently used for all learners, such as group presentations or peer interaction, can backfire on students who are more anxious. The implication is obvious: to ensure that interventions are developmentally and affectively appropriate, learner profiles and anxiety assessments should be conducted before they are implemented (Anis & Hasan, 2025).

3.7 Differentiated Impact of Interventions Based on Anxiety Levels

Speaking anxiety impacts students differently, according to several studies (Alsowat, 2016; Zahari & Nurcholis, 2025). Students who express high

baseline anxiety frequently have more difficulty with engagement, pronunciation, and fluency. Interventions including teacher reassurance, explicit technique instruction, and supportive classroom environments work better for these students than generalized approaches (Bajri & Elmahdi, 2024). On the other hand, because they are emotionally prepared, low-anxiety learners can benefit more quickly from impromptu assignments, interactive classroom activities, and autonomous tools (Aslan & Taş, 2024; Meyer &

Patty, 2024). In line with Sun and Wang's (2024) findings, which suggest that students with growth mindsets are less anxious and more receptive to communicative risks, this trend implies that learner disposition moderates the effectiveness of interventions. On the other hand, emotionally supportive and predictable routines are more beneficial to people with fixed mindsets, who frequently overlap with high-anxiety learners. The summary of the findings is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of the key findings

Author & Year	Key Findings
Sun & Wang, 2024	Growth mindset reduces anxiety, boosts motivation.
Jin et al., 2021	Positive activities lessen anxiety.
Bojović, 2020	Self-regulation supports emotional stability.
Atifnigar, 2024; Suratina & Sribayak, 2025	Positivity and self-awareness build resilience.
Muluk et al., 2025	Virtual methods increase self-efficacy.
Permatasari et al., 2025	Role-plays aid high-anxiety learners.
Öztürk & Öztürk, 2021	Scaffolded feedback benefits anxious students.
Meyer & Patty, 2024	Vlogs and impromptu tasks suit low-anxiety students.
Zahari & Nurcholis, 2025	Lack of scaffolding can hinder anxious learners.
Bajri & Elmahdi, 2024	Supportive environments aid anxious learners.
Aslan & Taş, 2024	Autonomous tasks benefit low-anxiety learners.

3.8 Contradictions in Technological Effectiveness

Technology-based interventions have shown potential in enhancing speaking skills, especially AI tools and ASR systems. By providing tailored feedback in a relaxed setting, Celik et al. (2025) and Khan et al. (2024) discovered that ChatGPT helped lower anxiety. El Shazly (2021) and Li et al. (2025) draw attention to the drawbacks of these tools for high-anxiety learners, noting that although pronunciation improved, emotional worries about self-perception and peer assessment persisted. This conflict highlights the need to incorporate emotional intelligence into digital platforms. ASR and similar techniques are helpful for self-monitoring and practice, but they are not enough on their own. To effectively address the emotional causes of worry, high-anxiety learners require more than just technical solutions; they also need social connection and empathetic support (Chen et al., 2022; Bashori et al., 2021).

3.9 Emotional Support and Classroom Practices

The importance of teacher behavior and classroom atmosphere is a recurring theme in the literature. Across all anxiety levels, interventions such as peer support, role-playing in real-world situations, and scaffolded feedback were consistently

effective (Öztürk & Öztürk, 2021; Permatasari et al., 2025). On the other hand, low-anxiety learners reacted favorably to more open-ended assignments, but high-anxiety learners benefited more from planned exercises and regular reassurance. This bolsters the claim that educators need to implement differentiated teaching methods. Regular routines, relaxation methods, and risk-free participation opportunities like small group discussions are crucial for students with high levels of anxiety (Atifnigar, 2024; Cantos et al., 2024). By addressing both the cognitive and affective domains, these strategies guarantee that students feel emotionally secure while completing speaking assignments.

3.10 Socio-Cultural and Contextual Differences

The literature also highlights the impact of sociocultural and economic factors on the level of anxiety in students and their responses to interventions. According to studies conducted in Bangladesh, students from Bengali-medium and rural areas have higher anxiety levels because they are less exposed to English and are afraid of being judged (Rahman et al., 2024; Baroi et al., 2020; Mamun, 2021). This implies that when designing interventions, the language and socioeconomic

backgrounds of the pupils must also be considered. Furthermore, in specific research, gender was found to be a moderating factor. According to Muktiningrum et al. (2024), female students showed greater anxiety and favored techniques like careful planning and peer support. These results suggest that inclusive and culturally sensitive interventions, rather than language-focused ones alone, are necessary for success.

4 Conclusion

This review study looked at how different anxiety-reduction techniques worked for L2 learners with high and low anxiety levels. It was discovered that although techniques like technology, structured speaking exercises, mindfulness, and peer cooperation are usually beneficial, their effects vary according to the learner's profile. While autonomous, high-interaction tasks are more beneficial for low-anxiety learners, emotionally supportive and scaffolded activities are more effective for high-anxiety learners. Contextual elements, such as classroom dynamics and instructor conduct, as well as internal factors like low self-esteem and a fear of receiving a poor grade, significantly influence how students respond. While ASR and AI chatbots help address anxiety linked to pronunciation and fluency, they are less successful in lowering social or emotional anxiety.

The examination of seven major themes shows the necessity of learner-centered, varied approaches in L2 classrooms. While low-anxiety learners favor dynamic, unstructured environments, high-anxiety learners flourish in progressive exposure and teacher empathy. Few studies, however, address non-Western, multilingual situations where cultural and socioeconomic factors may exacerbate anxiety, and the majority do not differentiate learners based on their level of anxiety or assess long-term consequences. To investigate how anxiety interacts with identity, classroom dynamics, and digital tools over time, future research should focus on longitudinal, mixed-methods studies. All things considered, successful L2 training requires both emotional and cognitive receptivity.

The review excludes older fundamental research and is limited to publications from 2020 to 2025. The generalization across age groups and international contexts is limited by the majority of studies' concentration on Asian tertiary-level EFL learners. Some inferences are drawn from the paucity of studies that specifically compare the

impact of interventions by anxiety level. Furthermore, relying too heavily on published information can lead to publication bias. In order to gain a deeper understanding of anxiety-sensitive L2 speaking therapies, more varied, longitudinal, and empirically focused research is required.

The study's findings lead to several suggestions for educators and policymakers. Teachers should utilize tools such as the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) to measure students' anxiety levels early on, enabling them to design differentiated and anxiety-sensitive teaching approaches. After that, instruction should be modified to accommodate different emotional needs, using low-stakes speaking opportunities, such as mini-presentations, peer teaching, and vlogs, to gradually boost students' confidence. To better prepare teachers to assist high-anxiety language learners, teacher education programs should also incorporate instruction in psychological support, emotional intelligence, and inclusive communication methods.

The assessment emphasizes to policymakers the necessity of a more adaptable and inclusive language curriculum that emphasizes speaking from an early age, especially in multilingual and low-income environments. Investments in language labs, digital tools with integrated emotional feedback, and student services like peer mentorship and counseling are all examples of institutional support. These programs could enhance overall communication outcomes and reduce dropout rates. To gain a better understanding of the long-term efficacy of various speaking anxiety therapies, future research should focus on long-term studies that examine the interactions between learner characteristics, including mentality, resilience, and socioeconomic status.

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