Investigating Anxiety in Speaking among EFL Students: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the causes of anxiety in speaking among EFL students and provides solutions to overcome them. A total of 33 students from the sixth semester of the English Education Department at Universitas Ahmad Dahlan participated in this descriptive qualitative research by completing questionnaires and interviews. The results revealed that nervousness, trembling, and shyness are causing anxiety among students in speaking English, and preparation, confidence, peer-seeking, and effort can help overcome speaking anxiety. The implication of the study suggests that language educators should be aware of the causes of anxiety in EFL students and provide appropriate solutions to help them overcome their speaking anxiety. Limitations of the study may include the relatively small sample size and the fact that the study only focused on sixth-semester students in one particular department at a single university. Therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to other populations or contexts. For future research, it would be useful to include a more extensive and diverse sample of participants from different levels of language proficiency and different educational backgrounds. Additionally, incorporating other data collection methods, such as observation or focus groups, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to speaking anxiety among EFL students. Finally, exploring the effectiveness of different interventions or strategies to reduce speaking anxiety could be an interesting avenue for future research.

Introduction

English is a global language that everyone should be able to speak fluently since it allows individuals of all different backgrounds to communicate their thoughts and feelings and serves as a medium of communication (Tridinanti, 2018). Students are required to study at least one foreign language in Indonesia, and English is one of those languages (Abrar et al., 2018; Rini, 2014). More specifically, English is utilized heavily in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) lessons taken at the

higher level of education. However, since they are not native English speakers or users, students frequently encounter difficulties when they are required to speak English (Abrar et al., 2018; Anandari, 2015; Lamb, 2004; Mahmud, 2018). One of the obstacles was anxiety that may be experienced by the students in communication in English which can be devastating and can influence students' adaptation to the target environment, as well as, ultimately, the achievement of their educational goals (Akbar et al., 2018; Woodrow, 2006). The cause was that the EFL class pupils depended only on their speaking practice during the course. When the lesson ended, they continued to connect and speak with their friends using Indonesian or one of the local languages. Hence, it is benevolent to infer that pupils' speaking skills are basic, which will not allow them to reach their full potential in this area.

The second reason might be that speaking English in public is an unusual activity that frequently causes anxiety in certain EFL students (Sutarsyah, 2017). They find it difficult to communicate in English in front of large crowds because non-native speakers frequently experience anxiety and insecurity when required to speak in front of others. Students typically experience anxiety because they lack vocabulary mastery, have not adequately prepared the message to be delivered, and fear of looking foolish if they miscommunicate. Learning a language, especially speaking English, involves psychologically complicated issues, including anxiety.

In general, to address the problems, the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Indonesia and Culture in 2016 gave teachers guidance through the 2013 Curriculum Process Standards on how to conduct educational activities that encourage students to participate in class, particularly when speaking activities. The objective will not be far from what is being achieved, though, if the anxiety among Indonesian students continues to be a problem. Thus, to address this problem, it is essential to look into the root causes of anxiety.

Through the deepening of existing empirical studies and further discussion of Foreign Language Anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986), there were two classifications of the causes of speech anxiety: affective-related and causes-related language. The improvement of the cooperative learning environment and the need to realign the focus to meet linguistic accuracy and provide ample speaking opportunities are important solutions to these problems. The study also presents ideas for enlightening EFL teachers and researchers in carrying out classroom activities in revising future research agendas. This research aims to discover the possible causes of students speaking anxiety and the practical implications for teachers and students. This research uses the conceptual paper method. The research above discussed how students' emotional factors, fear of negative evaluation, and fear of making mistakes could lead to apathy towards speaking skills. This paper explores the importance of encouraging collaborative learning in the classroom and the need to encourage learning strategies to recalibrate opportunities to practice speaking skills without

neglecting the emphasis on language accuracy.

Further, previous studies also focused on the anxiety experienced by Indonesian students who are learning English as a foreign language (EFL) when it comes to speech production (Anandari, 2015). It examines the possible reasons for this anxiety and offers remedies to alleviate this issue. The possible causes of this anxiety such as fear of making mistakes (Al Nakhalah, 2016; Dashti et al., 2016; Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2009) and a lack of confidence (Haidara, 2016; He, 2013) in their language ability. Several strategies have been suggested to reduce anxiety in EFL students, such as creating a supportive classroom environment (Dincer et al., 2012; Kerssen-Griep et al., 2008), incorporating speaking practice into regular lessons (Qutob, 2018), and providing positive feedback (Kerssen-Griep et al., 2008). It can be concluded that reducing anxiety in EFL students is important for improving their language proficiency and overall academic performance.

Similarly, other articles investigated the issue of speaking anxiety among Indonesian secondary students learning English as a foreign language (EFL), particularly, the possible triggers of language anxiety problems. The author identifies the probable causes of speaking anxiety. Comparable factors such as fear of making mistakes and lack of self-confidence were mentioned. One more factor, namely lack of exposure to English outside the classroom, was also discussed (Mahmud, 2018) and were discussed. The article offers practical implications to address speaking anxiety in EFL students, including creating a caring classroom environment that encourages participation (Potvin, 2021; Sheppard, 2010), and utilizing authentic materials to increase exposure to English (Bordonaro, 2018; Pazilova & Turdubekova, 2021). In some areas, the studies complement each other about the similarities of anxiety, such as fear of making mistakes and lack of self-confidence. An additional cause, lack of exposure to speaking English practice out of regular classroom setting, contributes to the students' anxiety in practicing their English speaking. Moreover, providing supportive or caring classroom environment that encourages students' participation to speak English was suggested as the solution, also incorporating authentic materials for EFL students. Previous studies have looked at the causes of speaking anxiety. However, they have not prioritized the correlation of each cause. Meanwhile, in this study, the researchers attempted to expand the related field by investigating the relationship between the causes of speech anxiety and rethinking possible ways of dealing with this problem.

Furthermore, the current study procures a topic similar to the previous studies: anxiety in speaking English. Nevertheless, this was conducted in different settings and provided students' self-reflection to deal with that anxiety by utilizing questionnaires, namely open-ended questionnaires to determine the causes of speaking anxiety and closed-ended questionnaires for self-reflection. The researchers used one kind of questionnaire and an interview to find the causes and the solutions to overcome anxiety of EFL students in speaking English. In specific, the students

of English Education Study Program at Universitas Ahmad Dahlan encountered problem such as feeling anxious, afraid, insecure, and other uncertainties when they speak English in public. There was also a lack of preparation of the material they will convey to the audience. Therefore, the research aims to find out the causes of students' anxiety when speaking English in public and the solutions to overcome the problem. The study is expected to contribute to the overview for English teachers at the tertiary and secondary level about the need to overcome students' anxiety when speaking English.

Method

The research methodology used in this study was the descriptive qualitative approach, which involves gathering descriptive information through recorded or spoken words and observable behaviors (B. Taylor, 2012; S. J. Taylor et al., 2015). The data was collected through delivering questionnaires and interviews (Johnson & Christensen, 2019). For the interviews, the researchers used a semi-structured format, adopting questions from Kondo and Ling (2004). There were five questions that needed to be answered by the participants. However, not all students who filled out the questionnaires were willing to participate in the interviews, so only three students were interviewed. The questionnaires were distributed to 33 participants using Google Forms, while the interviews were conducted via voice notes or voice recordings. As the aim of this research was to investigate foreign language anxiety among students in the sixth-semester of the English Study Program at Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, the researcher used the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), developed by Horwitz et al. (1986), as the questionnaire to measure foreign language anxiety among students in the sixth-semester of the English Study Program at Universitas Ahmad Dahlan. The FLCAS consists of 17 statements that measure the participants' anxiety levels in various situations related to learning a foreign language (Horwitz et al., 1986). By utilizing a combination of questionnaires and interviews, the researcher has collected comprehensive data on foreign language anxiety among the participants. The FLCAS questionnaire provided a quantitative measurement of anxiety levels, while the interviews allowed for a more in-depth exploration of the factors contributing to anxiety in speaking English of the students.

Discussion

This section presents the findings of a study that aimed to investigate the reasons behind the speaking anxiety experienced by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students and identify potential solutions to overcome it. The data were collected through questionnaires and interviews that were administered to 33 sixth-semester students enrolled in the English Education Department at Universitas Ahmad Dahlan. The questionnaire was given to all 33 students, while only three of them participated in the interviews, serving as the research subjects. The study found

that the main causes of speaking anxiety among EFL students were fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, and inadequate language proficiency. The identified solutions to overcome this anxiety included increasing language practice, enhancing confidence levels, and reducing the students' fear of making mistakes. These findings provide valuable insights for educators and policymakers in designing effective EFL teaching programs and addressing the challenges faced by EFL student.

A. The Causes of Student' Anxiety in Speaking Skill

Based on seventeen statements (FLCAS) used from Horwitz, & Cope (1886) given to the students, there are eleven statements and several questions for the interviews adopted from Kondo and Ling (2004), which are used according to the students' causes to anxiety in speaking English;

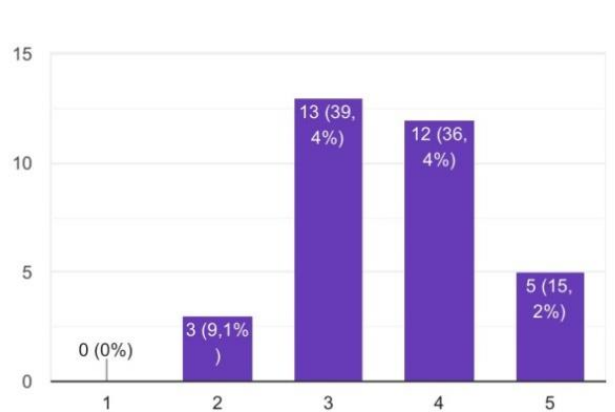**1. I feel very self-conscious about speaking English in front of other students**

Fig 1: The degress of self-consious

The diagram explains that of the 33 students who answered the statement "I feel very self-conscious about speaking English in front of other students" as many as three (9.1%) students answered disagree, thirteen (39.4%) students answered neither agree, twelve (36.4%) students answered agree, and as many as five (15.2%) students answered strongly agree. The students with initial (AD) said *"kadang sebelum mulai speaking nya itu percaya diri dan yakin kalo bisa nampilin yang terbaik, tapi pas udah ngomong sama orang atau ngomong di depan kelas biasanya gugup [sometimes before starting to speak in English I am confident and believe that I can show my best, but when I asked to speak English with someone or speak in front of the class, I just feel nervous]".*

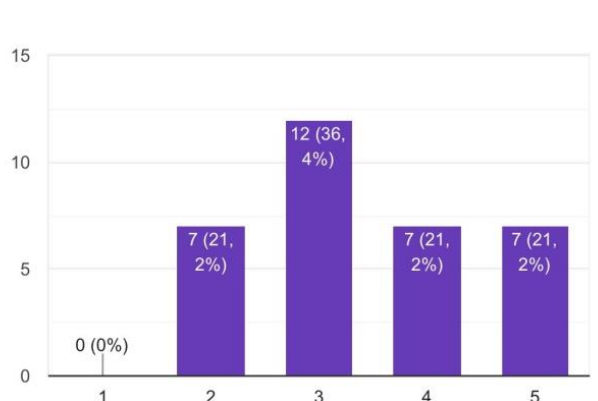## 2. I don't worry about making mistakes in English

Fig 2: The degree of worry

In the diagram above, it can be seen that 33 students answered the statement "I don't worry about making mistakes in English." There areseven (21.2%) students answered disagree, twelve (36.4%) students answered neither agree, seven (21.2%) students answered agree and seven (21.2%) students answered strongly agree. The students with initial (AR) said *"...kalau mau ngomong harus pakai teks. Tetapi saya berusaha percaya diri kak [...If I want to speak, I have to use text. But I'm trying to believe in myself]".*

3. I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on to speak in English
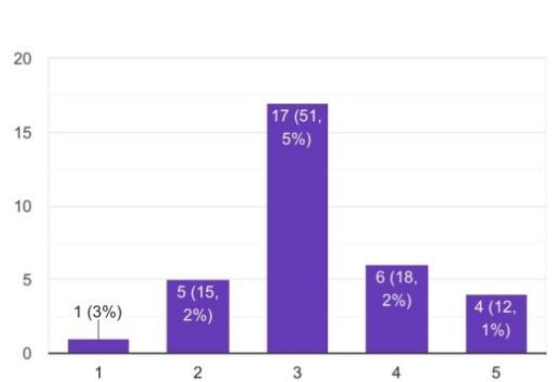

Fig 3: The degree of nervous

In the diagram above, it can be seen that 33 students answered the statement "I tremble when I know that I'm going to be called on to speak in English". There are one (3%) student answered strongly disagree, five (15.2%) students answered disagree, seventeen (51,5%) students answered neither agree, six (18,2%) students answered agree and four (12.1%) students answered strongly agree. The student with initial (AR) said that *"sejujurnya saya gugup kalau ngomong bahasa inggris di depan kelas karena bahasa inggris saya belum lancar, kalau mau ngomong harus pakai teks [honestly I tremble because my English is not fluent, if I want to speak I have to use text...]"*

4. I keep thinking that the other students are better at than I am in speaking English
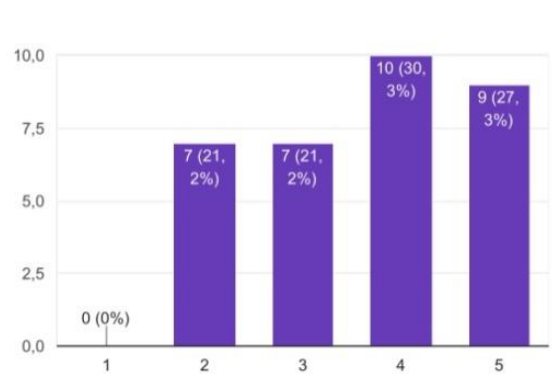

Fig 4: The degree of unconfident

In this diagram above explains that of the 33 students who answered the statement "I keep thinking that the other students are better at than I am in speaking English" as many as seven (21,2%) students answered disagree, seven (21,2%) students answered neither agree, ten (30.3%) students answered agree, and nine (27,3%) students answered strongly agree. The students with initial (HR) *"aku suka belajar bahasa inggris bareng temen, karena bisa sharing, terus juga kalo ada temen yang udah ngerti atau udah lancar bahasa inggrisnya tuh bisa dikoreksi [I likes to study with my friends because they can share anything, if my friend understands better than me, so they can correct and give suggestion]".* The student with initial (AD) add *"aku suka karena kita jadi ngobrol bareng, abis itu kita bisa saling bertukar vocabulary... [I like it, because we can talk together, after that we can exchange vocabulary]".*

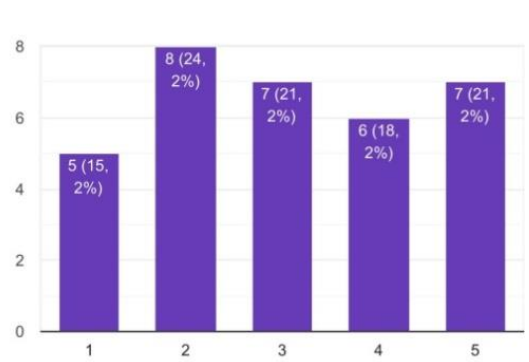**5. I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English**

Fig 5: The degree of fear of making mistakes

In this diagram above, it can be seen that 33 students answered the statement "I am afraid that the other students will laugh at me when I speak English". There are five (15,2%) student answered strongly disagree, eight (24,2%) students answered disagree, seven (21,2%) students answered neither agree, six (18,2%) students answered agree and seven (21,2%) students answered strongly agree. The student with initial (HR) *"...aku ngerasa nervous, takut*

kalo aku ngelakuin kesalahan dan bakal di ketawain [...I feel nervous or embarrassed if I make a mistake and I'll be laughed at]".

6. I often feel like not going to my English class

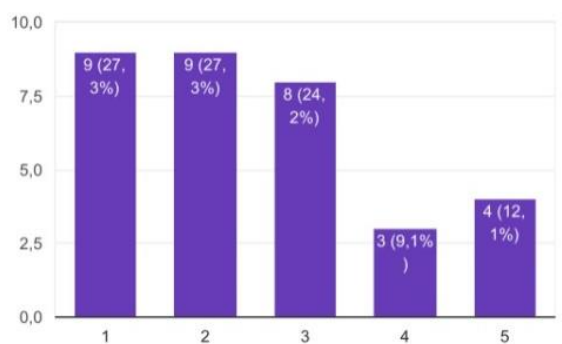
Fig 6: The degree of self-withdrawl

In this diagram above, it can be seen that 33 students answered the statement "I often feel like not going to my English class". There are nine (27,3%) student answered strongly disagree, nine (27,3%) students answered disagree, eight (24,2%) students answered neither agree, three (9,1%) students answered agree and four (12,1%) students answered strongly agree. The student with initial (AR) *" walaupun aku lagi males aku tetep ikut kelas, biasanya ngumpulin niat sampe bener-bener mood untuk belajar lagi [Even if I'm not in the mood to join the class, I'll do it by force and gather my will]"* .

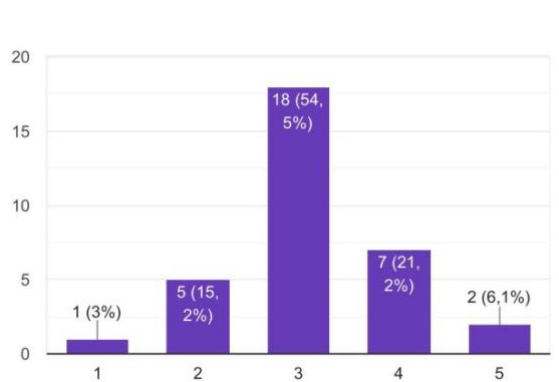## 7. I would not be nervous speaking in English with native speaker

Fig 7: The degree of anxious

In this diagram above, it can be seen that 33 students answered the statement "I would not be nervous speaking in English with native speakers." There are one (3%) student answered strongly disagree, five (15.2%) students answered disagree, eighteen (54.5%) students answered neither agree, seven (21.2%) students answered agree and two (6.1%) students answered strongly agree.

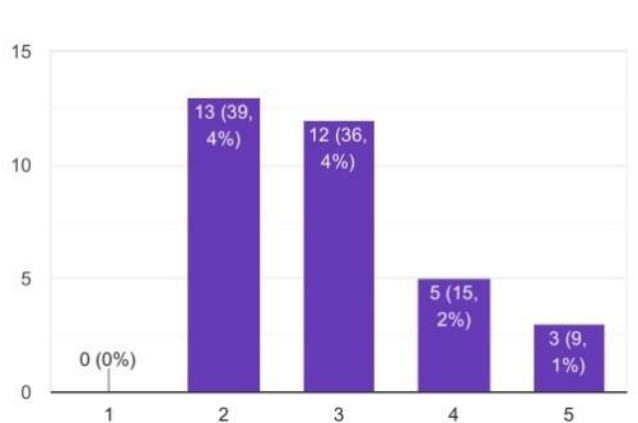**8. It embarrasses me to volunteer answer in my English class**

Fig 8: The degree of shyness

In this diagram above explains that of the 33 students who answered the statement "It embarrasses me to volunteer answer in my English class" as many as thirteen (39,4%) students answered disagree, twelve (36,4%) students answered neither agree, five (15,2%) students answered agree, and as many as three (9,1%) students answered strongly agree.

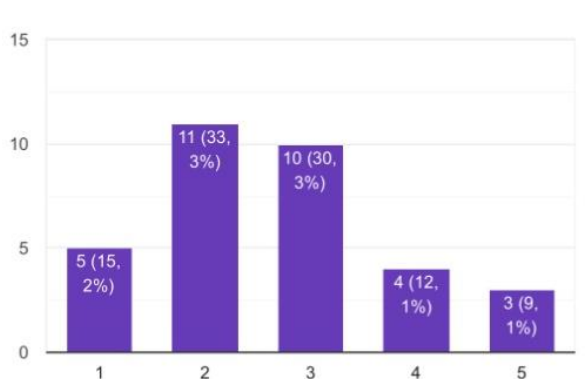**9. I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting**

Fig 9: The degree of furious

In this diagram above, it can be seen that 33 students who answered the statement "I get upset when I don't understand what the teacher is correcting". There are five (15,2%) students answered strongly disagree, eleven (33,3%) students answered disagree, ten (30,3%) students answered neither agree, four (12,1%) students answered agree and three (9,1%) students answered strongly agree.

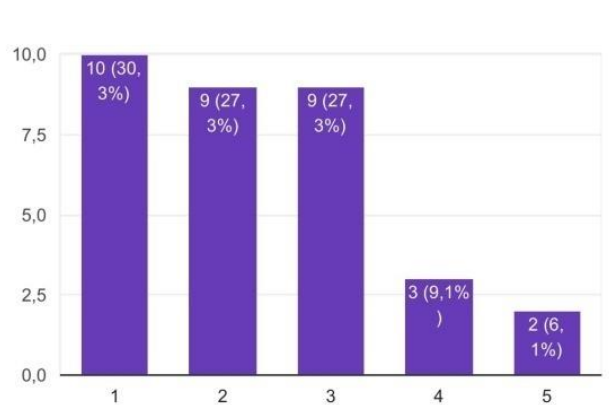**10. The more I study for a language test, the more confused I get**

Fig 10: The degree of confusion

In this diagram above, it can be seen that 33 students who answered the statement "The more I study for a language test, the more confused I get". There are ten (30,3%) student answered strongly disagree, nine (27,3%) students answered disagree, nine (27,3%) students answered neither agree, three (9,1%) students answered agree and two (6,1%) students answered strongly agree.

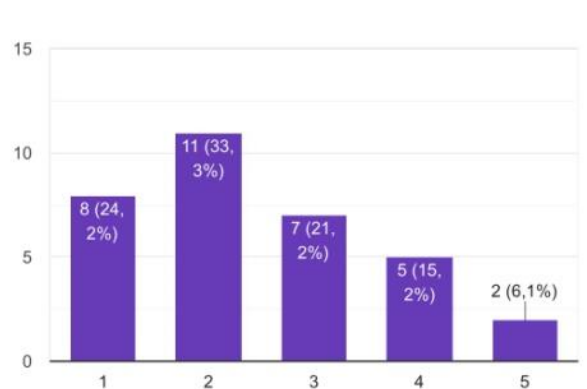**11. It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in the English class**

Fig 11: The degree of panic

In this diagram above, it can be seen that 33 students who answered the statement "It frightens me when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in the English class". There are eight (24,2%) student answered strongly disagree, eleven (33,3%) students answered disagree, seven (21,2%) students answered neither agree, five (15,2%) students answered agree and two (6,1%) students answered strongly agree.

The data analysis revealed that various factors contribute to English speaking anxiety among students, including nervousness, confusion, shyness and so on. The participants' lack of proficiency in the English language primarily caused nervousness when communicating in

front of the class. Furthermore, the students' fear of committing errors in their vocabulary and grammatical structures resulted in physical manifestations of trembling and shyness. These findings suggest that improving language proficiency and addressing students' fears of making errors could mitigate the symptoms of speaking anxiety. Consequently, English educators should design strategies that support students' language learning and provide them with a supportive learning environment to reduce speaking anxiety.

B. The Solutions to Overcome Speaking Anxiety

The current study employed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz and Cope (1986) to measure students' levels of anxiety while speaking English. In addition, semi-structured interviews adapted from Kondo and Ling's (2004) work were conducted to gather information regarding students' self-reported coping mechanisms for speaking anxiety. The FLCAS includes six statements that examine various aspects of anxiety, while the interviews provide insight into the strategies that students utilize to manage their speaking anxiety. The combination of these research instruments provides a comprehensive understanding of students' experiences and offers valuable insights for designing effective language teaching programs that address students' speaking anxiety;

1. I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for English class
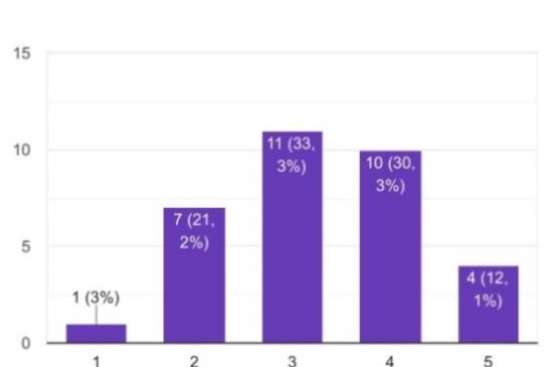

Fig 12: The degree of self-preparation

In the diagram above, it can be seen that 33 students who answered the statement "I don't feel pressure to prepare very well for English class". There are one (3%) student answered strongly disagree, seven (21,2%) students answered disagree, eleven (33,3%) students answered neither agree, ten (30,3%) students answered agree and four (12,2%) students answered strongly agree. The student with initial (HR) said "*sebelum mulai kelas, saya praktek membaca, benerin spelling nya, kalo ada pronounciation yang kita gak tau biasanya dengerin dulu di google translate yang voice nya itu [before start the class, I practice reading the text, correcting the spelling, if there is a pronunciation that is not sure I usually listen to the voice on google translate to fix it]".*

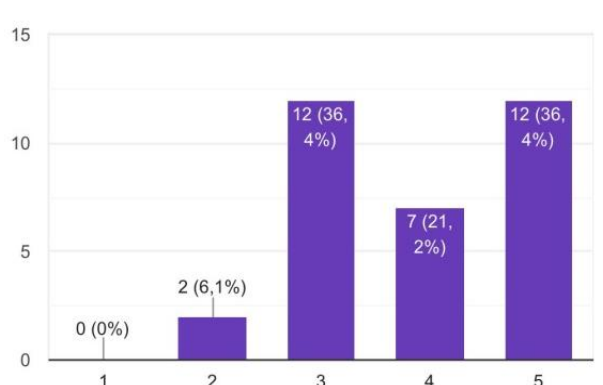**2. I try to make habit of studying English frequently**

Fig 13: The degree of habituation activity

In this diagram above explains that of the 33 students who answered the statement "I try to make habit off studying English frequently" as many as two (6,1%) students answered disagree, twelve (36,4%) students answered neither agree, seven (21,2%) students answered agree, and as many as twelve (36,4%) students answered strongly agree. The student with initial (AR) said "*biasanya tergantung materi. Misal kita diminta untuk presentasi, nah itu kita presentasi tentang apa, kita menyiapkan tata bahasa, catatan-catatan untuk kita ngomong pas presentasi [I usually depends on the material that will be taught that day, if there is a presentation then I will prepare string words, sentences, grammar and notes to be delivered during the presentation]*".

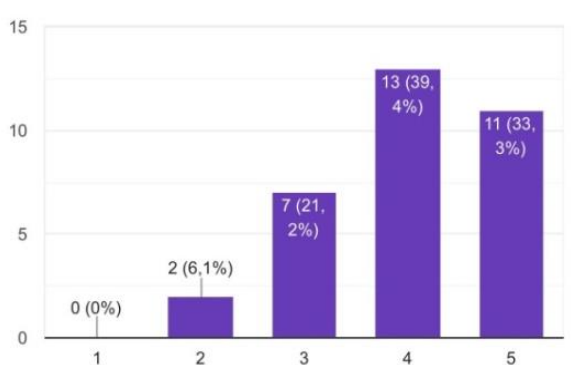**3. I try to relax when I am in my English class**

Fig 14: The degree of resignation

The diagram above explains that of the 33 students who answered the statement "I try to relax when I am in my English class" as many as two (6,1%) students answered disagree, seven (21,2%) students answered neither agree, thirteen (39,4%) students answered agree, and as many as eleven (33,3%) students answered strongly agree. The student with the initial (HR) said "*Apa yang biasanya saya lakukan adalah dengan mengambil napas dalam-dalam terus saya pindah tempat untuk merilekskan diri [What I usually do when I feel anxious is take a deep breath and I like to move my body parts to relax]*".

4. I always think positively that I am able to speak English in the classroom
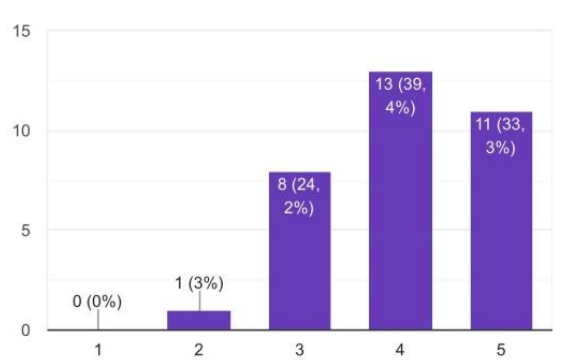

Fig 15: The degree of positive thinking

The diagram above explains that of the 33 students who answered the statement "I always think positively that I am able to speak English in the classroom," as many as one (3%) students answered disagree, eight (24,2%) students answered neither agree, thirteen (39,4%) students answered agree, and as many as eleven (33,3%) students answered strongly agree. The student with initial (HR) said "saya *punya pemikiran kak kalo aku tuh bisa ngelakuin yang terbaik walaupun aku masih kurang percaya diri karena aku ga lancar sama gak punya keberanian buat ngomong di depan kelas... [I have thought that I can do my best even though I'm not confident because I'm not fluent and don't have the courage to speak in front of the class...]*".

5. I take deep breath when I feel anxious in my English class
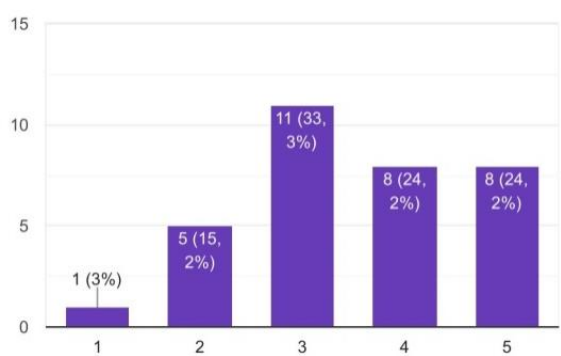
Fig 16: The degree of effort

In this diagram above, 33 students answered, "I take deep breath when I feel anxious in my English class". There are one (3%) student answered strongly disagree, five (15,2%) students answered disagree, eleven (33,3%) students answered neither agree, eight (24,2%) students answered agree and eight (24,2%) students answered strongly agree. The student with initial (AR) said " *saya mencoba untuk tetep santai kak, seperti mengambil nafas agar tidak terlalu terlihat gugup [...I try to relax, Sis. Like take a breath so as not to look nervous]*".

6. I tell myself that other must also be anxious
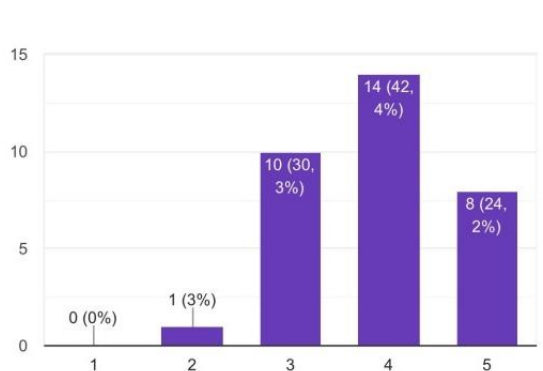

Fig 16: The degree of peer-seeking

The diagram explains that of the 33 students who answered the statement "I tell myself that other must also be anxious" as many as one (3%) students answered disagree, 10 (30,3%) students answered neither agree, fourteen (42,4%) students answered agree, and as many as eight (24,2%) students answered strongly agree.

Based on the results of the data above, it can be concluded that several solutions can help students overcome speaking anxiety such as preparation, confidence, peer seeking, and effort. The research findings indicated that several factors contribute to students' anxiety while speaking English, as illustrated in the graphs for each statement. Analysis of the questionnaire responses revealed that many students experienced nervousness when asked to volunteer answers in front of the class. Additionally, some students reported feeling trembling and shy due to the fear of being ridiculed by peers if they made pronunciation or grammatical errors. Akbar et al.'s (2018) study supported these results, indicating that many students in the English Education Department were afraid of speaking English in front of the class due to concerns about making mistakes. The underlying reason for this anxiety was the students' fear of public speaking, as they believed that they may fail to compose coherent sentences, forget their prepared materials or blank out during speaking performances (Akbar et al., 2018). These findings underscore the importance of providing students with an encouraging learning environment that fosters confidence-building activities and enables them to overcome their speaking anxiety.

Kondo and Ling (2004) identified five strategies to overcome speaking anxiety in English: preparation, confidence, resignation, peer seeking, and effort. However, this study focused on four of these strategies. The first solution was preparation, deemed critical in reducing students' speaking anxiety. Preparing for an English-speaking task by taking thorough notes, practicing correct spelling and grammar, other techniques that enhance students' self-control of the subject matter, and reducing their anxiety levels. By developing strong preparation habits, students may feel more confident and better equipped to handle the speaking task, reducing anxiety symptoms (Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004). These findings underscore the importance of designing language

teaching programs that prioritize preparation and help students develop effective strategies for managing their speaking anxiety.

The second solution identified in this study was building confidence. Students who can stay calm and relaxed while speaking English tend to feel more confident and perform better. This increased confidence can lead to enhanced fluency in English speaking tasks. Deep breathing and remaining calm can help reduce anxiety levels and promote a more relaxed speaking experience when students feel shy or nervous due to mistakes or mispronunciations. According to Tsiplakides and Keramida (2009), engaging in exercises that involve focused breathing can generate a calming effect and reduce nervous energy, contributing to better speaking outcomes. Therefore, language teachers should incorporate techniques that build students' confidence and promote relaxation in their teaching programs, helping learners feel more at ease while speaking English.

The third solution to overcome speaking anxiety was peer seeking, which involved students studying with other peers who have similar difficulties understanding the class material or controlling their anxiety. Students tend to prefer studying with peers who are more proficient in English because they can get motivation and attention to speak. In peer seeking activities, students can exchange ideas and even receive feedback from peers if they make mistakes, contributing to a more relaxed speaking experience. The more students observe the language in action, the more they become interested in English and invested in their learning (Cepik & Yastibas, 2013). Therefore, incorporating peer seeking activities into language teaching programs can help students build their confidence and reduce their speaking anxiety. By working together and supporting each other, learners can overcome the fear of speaking English in public and become more proficient in the language.

The fourth solution to overcome speaking anxiety was effort. The study revealed that students made significant efforts to overcome their anxiety about speaking English, particularly when in a bad mood. To improve their mood, students tended to watch English series or movies, which helped them to relax and feel more comfortable speaking English. In addition, students reported that listening to English songs improved their enjoyment and enabled them to better understand correct pronunciation. These solutions were found to motivate students to improve their speaking skills in English.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study found that several factors such as nervousness, trembling, and shyness cause students to experience anxiety when speaking English. However, solutions such as preparation, confidence, peer-seeking, and effort were identified to help students overcome their anxiety. Specifically, preparation can involve taking notes and practicing English speaking skills,

while confidence can be developed by staying calm and relaxed during speaking. Peer-seeking activities can help students exchange ideas and receive feedback from their peers, while efforts to practice speaking skills can include watching English movies or series with subtitles and listening to English music.

Despite these findings, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. Firstly, the sample size was limited, and the study only included students from one department in one university. Secondly, the study only focused on anxiety when speaking English and did not consider other aspects of language learning anxiety. Therefore, future research should include a larger and more diverse sample to increase the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, it would be beneficial to investigate other factors contributing to language learning anxiety and examine the effectiveness of various interventions to help students overcome their anxiety.

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