

Managing English Speaking Anxiety in Online Classrooms: Coping Strategies of ESL Undergraduates

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ABSTRACT

Speaking remains one of the most anxiety-inducing skills for most second language learners, and despite the global transition to online learning, language anxiety persists in virtual environments. Due to this reason, this study investigates the coping strategies employed by learners to manage speaking anxiety in online classrooms and identifies the strategies dimension they perceive as most effective. A set of questionnaires, adapted from He (2017) the Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (FLSAS), was administered to 190 undergraduates at a public university in Kelantan, Malaysia. Findings reveal that ESL learners draw significantly on supportive peer environments, positive teacher attitudes, vocabulary preparation, and their own readiness and behavioural strategies to mitigate speaking anxiety in online contexts. The study highlights the pedagogical importance of addressing speaking anxiety in digital platforms and provides useful insights for educators to design and implement targeted strategies that increase confidence and engage effective participation in ESL online classrooms.

Keywords: (Language anxiety, speaking anxiety, coping strategies, online classroom)

INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, the second language after the mother tongue is English and it is taught as a compulsory core subject in schools under the national education policy. The fundamental language skills; listening, reading, speaking and writing, are incorporated into the school syllabus and further developed in the tertiary level of education, signifying its influential role as an international lingua franca. A study by Bakar, Esa, Ationg & Jawing (2021) highlights the importance of learning English in the Malaysian schooling system to equip students with essential language skills for global communication. It is evident that English is widely used in multifaceted key sectors such as education, business, travel and culture. Thus, this signifies indispensable functions of English as a global lingua franca that learners will continuously be exposed to from their early education to their professional careers.

Despite spending at least eleven years of formal education learning English, many Malaysian learners struggle with proficiency in the target language (Ch'ng, Chan & Noor Ain, 2025). Ahmad & Awang Hashim (2023) report that speaking in the target language is the most anxiety-provoking especially among ESL undergraduates. Previously, Toubot, Hock Seng & Abdullah (2021) claim that ESL students may feel at ease in reading, writing and listening, but they seem to have difficulties in speaking skills. In fact, Aziz & Kashinathan (2021) state that many Malaysian employers are not satisfied with their new employees, especially the fresh graduates due to lack of communication skills, as they are hardly able to communicate their ideas effectively, especially in company business presentations.

Reflecting current scenarios in Malaysian higher level of education, many learners experience speaking anxiety at an alarming rate due to several factors (Chin, Ting & Yeo, 2016). A recent study by Sapuan, Awang Ali, Mohamed Musli & Idris (2025) shows Malaysian undergraduates in a private university have experienced moderate levels of speaking anxiety. This is worsened as the learning mode has been shifted from traditional classroom learning to virtual learning, where the learners can access their lessons online without attending a

physical classroom. Despite the years that have passed since the global pandemic, the profound tension to adapt to new-norm learning environments remains evident up until current times, making it difficult for foreign language learners to adjust and thereby heightening their speaking anxiety in online classrooms.

The researcher observed that many students remained silent during online class activities, particularly those involving speaking tasks. They frequently kept their cameras off and demonstrated reluctance to participate in discussions, even in a virtual setting. When randomly called upon, some were unwilling to respond. Their struggle with speaking anxiety was a hindrance that restricts their ability to express themselves in English.

While numerous studies have explored the factors contributing to speaking anxiety, considerably less attention has been given to strategies for mitigating this issue specifically in the context of online classrooms. Therefore, to address this gap, the present study aims to identify the coping strategies used by the ESL learners to cope with their speaking anxiety. Accordingly, this study also seeks to investigate the most effective coping strategy category to reduce speaking anxiety among ESL learners.

This study is deemed necessary in assisting language instructors to well-strategise their online teaching approaches, especially lessons involving speaking skills. Thus, there are two research questions formulated for this study:

1. What coping strategies do ESL learners use to reduce their speaking anxiety in online classrooms?
2. Which coping strategy dimension is perceived as the most effective in reducing their speaking anxiety during online speaking classrooms?

LITERATURE REVIEW

English Language Speaking Anxiety

A classic foundational work from Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) defined foreign language anxiety as distinct complex self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behavior that relate to classroom language learning due to the uniqueness of the language learning process. Among the four language skills, speaking is often identified as the most anxiety-inducing aspect of second or foreign language learning and is regarded as the primary source of classroom language anxiety (Saltan, 2003; Ozturk & Gurbuz, 2014). MacIntyre & Gardner (1991), viewed speaking anxiety as a situation-specific type of anxiety that emerges during oral performance in a second or foreign language, as well as a fear to express it verbally (Balemir, 2009)

Several studies have been done to investigate the intensity of foreign language speaking anxiety and its factors. Miskam & Saldavi (2018) found that the majority of Malaysian undergraduates demonstrate moderate levels of speaking anxiety and the dominant factor that contributes to this issue among them is communication apprehension. This has hindered learners' efforts in acquiring the target language, diminished their overall learning outcomes, and consequently impeded the development of their communicative competence. This echoes with a study conducted by Ahmad & Awang Hashim (2023), that a majority of ESL Malaysian undergraduates report fairly elevated levels of anxiety in speaking tasks that significantly impacted their performance and class participation.

Speaking Anxiety in Online Classrooms

The Covid-19 pandemic substantially intensified the transition to online virtual learning environments, which marked a pivotal impactful shift in the education system, globally. All educational stakeholders have embraced online learning to be conducted in schools and universities to prevent the outbreak, and surprisingly, online learning remains relevant and functional post pandemic era. This is endorsed by findings from Malaysian based studies, that online and hybrid learning continue to be effective and practical modes of instruction even after the pandemic. This is exemplified a study by Bustami, et.al. (2022), which demonstrate that when a sound instructional design, effective technology integration, and active student engagement, online learning produces high level of satisfaction among university students, while in Abd Karim & Mustapha (2025), ESL learners

report that online instruction does not impede their English acquisition and are generally satisfied with online modes.

However, Saffari, Amini, Lee, Alipour, and Abbaspour (2024) found that online environments set their own challenges, including anxiety in online language learning. This is due to requirements in online learning such as learners must actively use audio-visual tools to communicate with instructors and classmates in the target language, thus increasing anxiety among ESL learners. Ch'ng et al. (2025) also highlighted that fear of negative evaluation becomes more pronounced in virtual speaking tasks, as learners feel exposed to both instructors and peers simultaneously, which intensifies their anxiety levels. Foreign language anxiety tends to be heightened in online learning contexts compared to traditional classrooms, largely because learners are separated from instructors and peers, experience reduced interaction and delayed feedback, feel less confident in self-directed learning, and must rely heavily on digital tools and internet technologies (Doğan, 2020).

Furthermore, Hongnaphadol (2023) examined online language anxiety among university students using exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses. The study confirmed that online learning environments can heighten language anxiety and identified key factors contributing to it, including lack of interaction, fear of negative evaluation, and low confidence in using technology for language learning. The results reinforce that speaking anxiety is a significant challenge in online classrooms and suggest the need for targeted strategies to support learners.

Collectively, these findings suggest that while online learning offers accessibility and flexibility, it introduces unique psychological stressors that can significantly hinder oral communication, making it essential for educators to develop supportive strategies tailored to digital environments.

Past Studies in Mitigating Strategies

Past research by Yasuda and Nabei (2018) highlighted two perspectives on coping strategies for language anxiety: functionality and effectiveness. From a functional standpoint, coping strategies should be adaptable to specific contexts since language anxiety is situation-dependent; for example, ESL learners often fear peer evaluation in classrooms with native speakers, while EFL learners are more concerned about teacher judgments when learning with peers of similar proficiency. From the effectiveness perspective, the authors emphasized the importance of consistently practising coping strategies to reduce speaking anxiety. Nevertheless, they also noted that limited empirical evidence leaves uncertainties about the actual effectiveness of these strategies in mitigating anxiety.

Furthermore, Miskam and Saidalvi (2019) conducted a study involving 42 Malaysian undergraduates using The Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (FLSAS) adapted from Huang (2004), observed that communication apprehension was a dominant factor in learners' speaking anxiety, which hindered their oral performance and overall language learning progress. Their findings emphasized the need for constructive support systems to help learners develop effective coping mechanisms that address their fear of interaction and evaluation. In addition, Aziz and Kashinathan (2021), drawing on systematic review data from tertiary-level ESL students, highlighted that learners' limited vocabulary and fear of negative evaluation contributed significantly to speaking difficulties, thus, reinforcing the importance of teacher intervention. Variety of teaching methods like using interactive language games in class and setting up a welcoming learning atmosphere in schools would drive the learners' confidence and boost their motivation to learn and speak the language.

Mohd Nasir and Ramsa (2024) revealed that ESL learners adopted a range of coping strategies to deal with speaking anxiety, including thorough preparation and rehearsal, engaging in positive self-talk, and seeking support from peers. While these adaptive strategies were reported to enhance confidence and facilitate participation, some learners relied on avoidance techniques, such as minimizing verbal contributions, which ultimately reinforced their anxiety and restricted language development. This study was conducted in a Malaysian classroom setting, involving 55 learners from a public institution. The findings suggest that educators play a critical role in reducing speaking anxiety by fostering a supportive and non-threatening

classroom environment, encouraging active use of constructive coping strategies, and providing meaningful feedback that normalizes errors as part of the learning process.

Conclusively, these studies underscore the critical role of educators in fostering supportive and non-threatening classroom environments, designing activities that encourage active use of adaptive strategies, and providing consistent, constructive feedback to normalize mistakes as part of the learning process. However, there is still lack of research focusing on the coping strategies of speaking anxiety in online classrooms.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework of this study, which is developed to examine coping strategies that influence speaking anxiety among ESL undergraduates in online classrooms. The framework is grounded in prior research (Yasuda & Nabei, 2018; Miskam & Saidalvi, 2019; Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021; Mohd Nasir & Ramsa, 2024), which highlights four interrelated dimensions: supportive environment, student readiness and behaviour, teacher attitude and practices, and vocabulary familiarity and preparation.

Firstly, a supportive environment dimension (based on Yasuda & Nabei, 2018; Mohd Nasir & Ramsa, 2024) emphasizes the role of peer collaboration and a safe, non-judgmental space in reducing anxiety. Students who feel secure in their learning community are more likely to take risks in using the target language. Secondly, student readiness and behaviour dimension (based on Yasuda & Nabei, 2018; Mohd Nasir & Ramsa, 2024) refers to learners' active efforts, such as thorough preparation, rehearsal, and positive self-talk, which enable them to face speaking tasks with greater confidence. Thirdly, teacher attitude and practices (based on Miskam & Saidalvi, 2019; Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021; Mohd Nasir & Ramsa, 2024) also plays a critical role, as constructive feedback, encouragement, and the use of interactive teaching methods can foster motivation and reduce fear of negative evaluation. Finally, vocabulary familiarity and preparation dimension (based on Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021; Mohd Nasir & Ramsa, 2024) highlights the importance of lexical readiness, where adequate practice and vocabulary enrichment allow learners to express themselves more effectively and with less hesitation.

These four dimensions highlight the strategic approaches that support students in addressing speaking anxiety during online classes. Reinforcing them is expected to lessen anxiety levels and, at the same time, encourage more confident oral contributions and language proficiency in virtual environments.

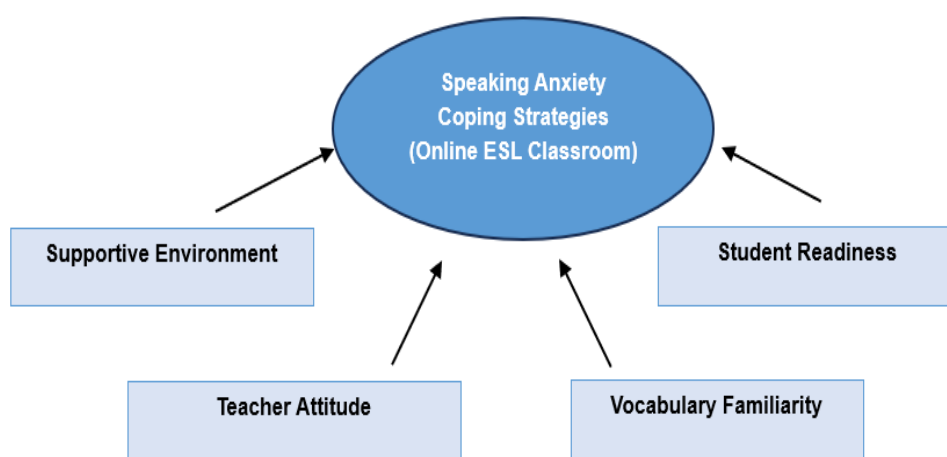


Figure 1 - Conceptual Framework of the Study - Coping Strategies for Speaking Anxiety in ESL Online Classrooms

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a quantitative descriptive research design to investigate the coping strategies used by ESL undergraduates in managing speaking anxiety in online classrooms. A purposive sample of 190 undergraduates at a public university in Kelantan, responded to the survey that was distributed by class instructors via Google

Form. The participants enrolled in English language subjects, which involved various online speaking assessments and speaking activities conducted virtually throughout the semester (14 weeks), thus, making them suitable participants for this study.

The instrument used in this study is a 5 Likert-scale questionnaire and rooted from the Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (FLSAS) by He (2017).

Table 1 shows the distribution of the 15 items survey, mainly five (5) sections; Section A consists of items on demographic profile, Section B comprises of 5 items on Supportive Environment, Section C has 3 items on Student Readiness, Section D contains 4 items on Teacher Attitude/Practices, and lastly, Section E includes another 3 items on Vocabulary Familiarity. (*see Appendix*)

Table 1 - Distribution of items in the survey

Section	Coping Strategy Dimension	Number of Items
B	Supportive Environment (SE)	5
C	Student Readiness (SR)	3
D	Teacher Attitude / Practices (TA)	4
E	Vocabulary Familiarity (VF)	3

The survey items were adapted and contextualized to suit the purpose of this current study. Minor wording adjustments such as “breakout rooms”, “online chat”, “interactive online games” were made to reflect the online classroom environment. Therefore, a reliability statistic is done to determine the internal consistency reliability. The 15 items have a high internal reliability score of Cronbach alpha 0.896.

Table 2 - The 5-point Likert Scale

Scale	Mean	Descriptive Equivalent
5	4.01 - 5.00	Strongly Agree (SA)
4	3.01 - 4.00	Agree (A)
3	2.01 - 3.00	Neutral (N)
2	1.01 - 2.00	Disagree (DA)
1	0.01 - 1.00	Strongly Disagree (SDA)

Table 2 indicates the 5-point Likert scale was used to describe the rating displayed in the results. Moreover, since descriptive correlational statistics were used in this study, the mean or 'the average' was used to analyze the overall result of the respondents' preferred coping mechanism in overcoming second language speaking anxiety.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings for coping strategies used by the ESL learners

This section presents data to answer research question 1 - What coping strategies do ESL learners use to reduce their speaking anxiety in online classrooms?

Table 3 - The findings for research question 1

Items	Mean	Descriptive Equivalent
SE1	4.474	SA

SE2	4.384	SA
SE3	4.124	SA
SE4	4.211	SA
SE5	4.387	SA
SR1	3.015	A
SR2	3.378	A
SR3	3.276	A
TA1	4.193	SA
TA2	3.863	A
TA3	3.457	A
TA4	3.762	A
VF1	3.542	A
VF2	3.859	A
VF3	3.894	A

Table 3 shows the respondents' coping strategies to reduce their speaking anxiety in online classrooms. All fifteen (15) strategies positively impacted the respondents in minimizing their speaking anxiety in online classrooms, as all items stated a mean score more than 3.01, which indicates at least they agreed (A) or strongly agreed (SA) with the statements.

The highest mean score (4.474) is item SE1 (Having classmates work in online breakout rooms or small groups helps reduce my nervousness when speaking English). Most of the respondents strongly agreed with the statement may be due to working in small groups helps them to feel more comfortable using the target language. Reflecting the common situation in the classroom, learners feel shy and reluctant to answer the teacher's questions or respond to the discussion in class. On the contrary, the learners will be more comfortable and willing to start or participate in the discussion when they are placed in small groups. This is aligned to Mohd Nasir & Ramsa's (2024) study, where they found that working in small groups was an effective coping mechanism to reduce English language speaking anxiety as it transforms such as a threatening and intimidating classroom environment into a positive and supportive learning environment. Similarly, another study by Kibtiah (2023) also showed that using small group discussion drastically reduced speaking anxiety and increased active participation.

The second highest mean score (4.387) is item SE5 (Playing interactive online language games (e.g., Kahoot, Quizizz, breakout activities) helps reduce my nervousness in speaking English). This is because interactive language online games create a more fun, engaging atmosphere and may reduce stress among the learners, as they regard speaking tests are anxiety-induced (Yasli & Trisno, 2024). By participating in online language games, the learners may feel more secure and less anxious since they can still appear as 'active' participants as some of the games may only ask the players to give answers, and not to voice out their opinions. This is supported by findings from a study conducted by Ahmed et al. (2022), which found a significantly lower anxiety level among learners using game-based learning than for those using traditional methods.

Meanwhile, the lowest mean score (3.015) is item SR1 (Doing relaxation exercises before or during online classes (e.g., productive self-talk, breathing exercises) helps reduce my fears in speaking English). Despite the lowest mean score, the respondents reacted positively and agreed with this item. The statement is less favourable, most possibly because learners may perceive them as taking time or difficult to apply under real pressure, especially with limited guidance in online settings. Moreover, not everyone is aware about the most suitable relaxation strategies for them to reduce their anxiety level, and for some learners they might feel difficult to adapt themselves with those strategies, unless they were instructed to do so.

Findings for coping strategies dimension preferred by the ESL learners

This section presents data to answer research question 2 - Which coping strategy dimension is perceived as the most effective in reducing their speaking anxiety during online speaking classrooms?

Table 4 - Findings for All Four Coping Strategies Dimensions

Dimension	Total Mean	Descriptive Equivalent
Supportive Environment (SE) – SE1, SE2, SE3, SE4, SE5	4.316	SA
Student Readiness (SR) – SR1, SR2, SR3	3.223	A
Teacher Attitude (TA) – TA1, TA2, TA3, TA4	3.819	A
Vocabulary Familiarity (VF) – VF1, VF2, VF3	3.765	A

The result in Table 4 reveals notable differences across the four dimensions of coping strategies for speaking anxiety in online classrooms. Among the dimensions, **Supportive Environment (SE)** stated the highest total mean of **4.316**, which is descriptively equivalent to ‘Strongly Agree’. This suggests that learners place strong emphasis on a safe, collaborative, and non-judgmental learning atmosphere where peer support and encouragement reduce their speaking anxiety. This aligns with Yasuda and Nabei (2018), who argued that functional coping strategies are situation-specific and that a supportive environment helps learners adapt their strategies more effectively. Similarly, Mohd Nasir and Ramsa (2024) emphasized that peer support and a positive classroom climate enhance learners’ confidence and participation while minimizing avoidance behaviours.

Moreover, the dimensions of **Teacher Attitude (TA)** ($M = 3.819$, **Descriptive Equivalent: Agree**) and **Vocabulary Familiarity (VF)** ($M = 3.765$, **Descriptive Equivalent: Agree**) were also positively endorsed. These findings indicate that students recognize the role of teachers in providing constructive feedback, encouragement, and interactive strategies that lessen their fear of negative evaluation. This corroborates Miskam and Saidalvi’s (2019) observation that communication apprehension is a dominant source of speaking anxiety, requiring teacher intervention and support to reduce learners’ fear of interaction. In addition, Aziz and Kashinathan (2021) highlighted the role of limited vocabulary in increasing learners’ hesitation and speaking difficulty, noting that teacher-facilitated vocabulary building and preparatory tasks can help alleviate such anxieties.

By contrast, **Student Readiness (SR)** received the lowest mean score of **3.223**, which is descriptively equivalent to ‘Agree’, suggesting that while learners acknowledge the importance of preparation, rehearsal, and positive self-talk, these internal strategies are less frequently or less effectively practised compared to external supports such as peer collaboration and teacher facilitation. This is consistent with past findings (Yasuda & Nabei, 2018) that the effectiveness of coping strategies relies not only on individual readiness but also on contextual support.

Overall, the findings reinforce that external supports, particularly a supportive learning environment and teacher assistance, play a more prominent role in alleviating speaking anxiety than internal self-regulation strategies.

CONCLUSION

This study was undertaken to address the limited research on speaking anxiety coping strategies in online classrooms setting, particularly through the lens of the Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (FLSAS). The findings reveal that working in small groups significantly enhanced learner engagement by creating a more supportive and less intimidating learning environment. More importantly, **Supportive Environment (SE)** emerged as the dominant dimension of coping strategies, highlighting its central role in reducing speaking anxiety among ESL learners in virtual settings. These results carry valuable implications for pedagogical practice, especially for teachers facilitating online speaking tasks. In order to promote **Student Readiness (SR)** strategies (the least favoured coping strategies), the educators may instruct the learners to do some relaxation exercises before the class starts. Additionally, the educators should prioritize fostering a safe, inclusive, and encouraging classroom atmosphere where errors are normalized as part of the learning process, while learners are encouraged to actively participate in small-group discussions to increase their confidence and maximize opportunities for practising the target language.

While the study contributes meaningful insights, it is not without limitations. The sample was drawn from a single context, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future studies should expand to include larger and more diverse populations across different institutions and learning modes, including hybrid and face-to-face classrooms, to gain a broader understanding of coping strategies. Longitudinal research is also needed to evaluate the sustained effectiveness of strategies such as relaxation exercises, vocabulary support, or teacher-led interventions in reducing speaking anxiety. Furthermore, incorporating qualitative approaches, such as interviews or classroom observations, could provide richer insights into learners' experiences and coping behaviours.

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APPENDIX

Statements for Questionnaire

Supportive Environment (SE)

SE1. Having classmates work in online breakout rooms or small groups helps reduce my nervousness when speaking English.

SE2. It helps reduce my nervousness to discuss my fears about speaking English with other students in online chats or group discussions.

SE3. Participating in a virtual support group or activity (e.g., online English club, English corner, or forum) helps reduce my fears in speaking English

SE4. I do not feel so anxious when speaking English in an online classroom with a friendly and supportive atmosphere.

SE5. Playing interactive online language games (e.g., Kahoot, Quizizz, breakout activities) helps reduce my nervousness in speaking English.

Student Readiness (SR)

SR1. Doing relaxation exercises before or during online classes (e.g., productive self-talk, breathing exercises) helps reduce my fears in speaking English.

SR2. If fluency, not accuracy, is emphasized in online speaking tasks, I will not be so nervous about speaking English.

SR3. I feel relaxed about speaking English in online classes if I know that mistakes are normal and made by everyone learning a language.

Teacher Attitude (TA)

TA1. Teachers' encouragement through online platforms (e.g., chat, verbal praise, emojis) makes me feel relaxed when speaking English.

TA2. A humorous teacher in an online class helps reduce my nervousness in speaking English.

TA3. A patient teacher who gives me enough time to respond online helps reduce my nervousness in speaking English.

TA4. I feel relieved about speaking English in online classes if my teacher corrects my mistakes indirectly (e.g., by rephrasing in chat or repeating the right form) instead of pointing out errors directly.

Vocabulary Familiarity (VF)

VF1. When the teacher provides a vocabulary list or glossary before the online speaking task, I feel less anxious about speaking English.

VF2. If the teacher allows us to watch a short video clip with key vocabulary before the online speaking activity, I feel more confident and less nervous.

VF3. Practicing new vocabulary in chat or short warm-up activities before speaking online helps reduce my speaking anxiety.