Gender Differences in EFL Speaking Anxiety: A Study in Ethiopian Higher Education

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Abstract	Article Information
Speaking anxiety is a major affective barrier in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, with gender and contextual factors shaping its intensity. While global research shows moderate to high levels, little is known about its specific patterns among Ethiopian EFL students. This study investigated gender differences in speaking anxiety in Ethiopian higher education and explored key contributing factors. A mixed-methods design involved 240 first-year EFL students from three public universities. Quantitative data were gathered using an adapted Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), and qualitative insights were derived from semi-structured interviews. Findings indicated that 66.2% of students experienced moderate to high speaking anxiety. Independent samples t-tests revealed that female students reported significantly higher anxiety than males, especially in psychological (t = –3.45, p = .001) and perception-related dimensions (t = –2.14, p = .043). Interviews identified seven main triggers: fear of negative evaluation, limited vocabulary, low confidence, cultural pressures, minimal classroom interaction, and teacher feedback styles. Female students showed greater internalized anxiety and self-perception challenges. The study highlights the need for gender-sensitive pedagogy, low-stakes speaking activities, private feedback, and peer support. Limitations include reliance on self-reports and a sample drawn from three universities.	 *Corresponding Author: Mitiku Tasisa E-mail: mitiku1tasisa@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

In the realm of foreign language learning, speaking is often considered the most anxiety-provoking skill, especially for learners in EFL contexts. Horwitz et al. (1986) identified foreign language anxiety as a distinct form of anxiety that interferes with the acquisition and performance of a new language, with speaking anxiety being a particularly prominent component. This type of anxiety can hinder learners' willingness to communicate, reduce classroom participation, and ultimately impair oral proficiency development.

- (Hz, 2022; Mohtasham & Farnia, 2017; Tien, 2018). Gender has been increasingly recognized as a potential factor influencing EFL learners' speaking anxiety. While both male and female students may experience anxiety, studies have shown inconsistent findings regarding gender-based differences. Some studies suggest that female students report higher levels of speaking anxiety due to greater self-consciousness and fear of negative evaluation (Long et al., 2019; Tien, 2018; Zulkiflee & Nimehchisalem, 2022). Others, however, indicate that male students may also

experience comparable or even higher anxiety levels in certain communicative contexts (Caingal et al., 2024; Fauzi & Asi, 2023; Masruroh & Rusmawaty, 2025; Okyar, 2023). These variations suggest the need for context-specific investigations that consider cultural, educational, and linguistic backgrounds.

In the Ethiopian higher education landscape, English serves as the medium of instruction, especially in universities, making oral English proficiency a critical component of academic success. However, many EFL students in Ethiopia face considerable challenges in speaking English due to limited exposure, inadequate practice, and fear of making mistakes in public. Cultural factors and educational practices also play a significant role in shaping students' anxiety levels, with gender expectations often influencing classroom behavior and participation patterns. Despite the prevalence of EFL speaking anxiety in Ethiopian universities, empirical studies specifically exploring gender-based differences remain limited.

Speaking English is increasingly important in both academic and professional domains. Since speaking anxiety is a common psychological barrier, it is vital to understand how gender influences students' experiences in the EFL classroom. This study investigates the gender-related dimensions of speaking anxiety among EFL students in Ethiopian higher education. The findings aim to contribute to more equitable and responsive language teaching practices.

Statement of the Problem

Speaking anxiety has long been recognized as one of the most pervasive affective barriers in EFL learning. Among the four language skills, speaking is often associated with the highest level of learner apprehension, largely due to its spontaneous and performance-based nature (Alsowat, 2016; Ezzi, 2012; Horwitz et al., 1986; Mohtasham & Farnia, 2017; Zulkiflee & Nimehchisalem, 2022). In Ethiopian higher education, English is the medium of instruction in most disciplines. Speaking fluently and confidently is vital not only for

academic success but also for employability and social interaction. However, anecdotal evidence and recent studies suggest that a significant proportion of Ethiopian university students exhibit high levels of EFL speaking anxiety (Gerencheal, 2016).

In order to investigate gender disparities in EFL speaking anxiety in Ethiopian higher education, this study is based on well-established theories of language anxiety and second language acquisition. The Socio-Educational Model (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991), the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Theory (Horwitz et al., 1986), and research on gender and affective factors in foreign language learning are the main sources of inspiration for the framework.

Horwitz et al. (1986) established anxiety in foreign language classrooms as a situation-specific construct that is distinct from other types of anxiety. They discovered three interconnected elements: dread of a poor evaluation, exam anxiety, and communication apprehension. Among these, communication concerns are especially pertinent to speaking assignments since students sometimes worry about their ability to communicate eloquently in front of others. According to FLCA theory, significant anxiety has a detrimental impact on learners' confidence in speaking the target language, motivation to engage, and final performance results (Horwitz, 2001). According to this paradigm, one of the things that causes Ethiopian students the greatest anxiety in the classroom is speaking English as a foreign language.

MacIntyre and Gardner's (1991) socio-educational approach, which builds on the affective aspects of language learning, emphasizes how motivation, attitudes, and anxiety interact during the acquisition of a second language. According to this paradigm, linguistic anxiety is a negative emotional reaction that obstructs input, processing, and output. It prevents students from internalizing language skills and limits their willingness to speak (MacIntyre, 1995). Therefore, speaking anxiety is a barrier to long-term communication competence as well as a short-

term performance concern. In Ethiopia, where English serves as the primary language of education but is still a foreign language to most students, this viewpoint is essential.

It is well known that linguistic anxiety varies by gender. According to a few studies, speaking anxiety is frequently higher among female students than among male students (Piechurska, 2012; Park & French, 2013). Sociocultural norms, gendered communication patterns, and disparities in one's own assessment of one's own language proficiency are some of the explanations. For example, male students may underreport anxiety because of societal norms around emotional expression, whereas female students may be more likely to internalize self-consciousness and dread of receiving a poor grade (Yan & Horwitz, 2008). The significance of localized studies, like the higher education environment in Ethiopia, is highlighted by the fact that patterns differ depending on the context.

Although it is the medium of instruction in higher education, English is taught as a foreign language in Ethiopia. Students have difficulties because of having to learn the language and use English for academic purposes at the same time. Speaking anxiety can seriously impair classroom engagement, academic performance, and communicative confidence in this setting. This study offers a theoretically grounded method for comprehending how speaking anxiety is experienced and managed by male and female EFL students in Ethiopian universities by applying the socio-educational model and the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) theory and by looking at them through the prism of gendered experiences.

Gender has been identified globally as a potential factor that mediates language anxiety, yet the findings are inconsistent. Some studies suggest that female learners experience higher speaking anxiety, often linked to fear of negative evaluation and societal expectations (Geckin, 2020; Hz, 2022; Pristiyaputri et al., 2023). Other studies, however, report no significant gender differences or even higher anxiety among males, depending on the context. These mixed results indicate that gender-based differences in speaking anxiety may be context-dependent and shaped by sociocultural dynamics, language policy, and classroom interactional patterns.

In Ethiopia, though few studies have highlighted EFL learners' speaking challenges and general anxiety, research explicitly examining gender differences in EFL speaking anxiety at the tertiary level remains scarce. With increasing emphasis on learner-centered and gender-inclusive teaching in Ethiopian universities, it is important to understand how male and female students experience speaking anxiety differently. Such understanding is necessary not only to bridge achievement gaps but also to foster psychologically safe and inclusive language classrooms.

Thus, the current study addresses a clear empirical gap by investigating gender differences in EFL speaking anxiety among Ethiopian university students, focusing on both the magnitude and contributing factors of this phenomenon. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of gender-sensitive interventions that reduce speaking anxiety and improve oral communication skills in EFL contexts.

Research questions

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. What is the level of higher education EFL students in speaking English?
2. Does gender significantly influence the level of speaking anxiety experienced by EFL students?
3. What are the major contributing factors to EFL speaking anxiety among Ethiopian higher education students?

MATERIALS AND METHODS
Research Design

This study utilized a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to offer a comprehensive understanding of gender

differences in EFL speaking anxiety among Ethiopian university students. The quantitative phase measured the levels and gender-based variations in speaking anxiety, while the qualitative phase explored the underlying causes in greater depth.

Research Settings

This study was carried out at three public universities in Ethiopia: Wolkite University, Wachamo University, and Jimma University, where English is taught as a foreign language at the tertiary level. The participants were first-year undergraduate students from a range of academic disciplines who were enrolled in the Communicative English Skill II course during the 2024 academic year.

Participants and Sampling Techniques

A stratified random sampling method was used to ensure gender balance across the three universities. From each institution, 40 male and 40 female students were selected, totaling 240 participants. From this group, 21 students (11 males and 10 females) were purposively chosen based on their FLCAS scores for in-depth interviews. Stratifying by gender allowed the study to capture the experiences of both male and female learners. This strengthened the validity and reliability of gender-based comparisons in speaking anxiety.

Instruments

Data were collected through a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. An adapted version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) by Horwitz et al. (1986) was used. The questionnaire measured the frequency and intensity of speaking anxiety among first-year EFL students. Special attention was given to gender-based differences in Ethiopian higher education.

The adapted FLCAS consisted of 38 closed-ended Likert-type items, organized into five dimensions of foreign language anxiety: communication apprehension (items 1–8), fear of negative evaluation (9–16), classroom speaking

anxiety (17–24), social environmental factors (25–31), and perception-related factors (32–38). Each item was rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), allowing for a detailed assessment of anxiety severity.

Concerning the major contributing factors to EFL speaking anxiety, three open-ended questions were incorporated into the questionnaire. These qualitative items enabled students to express, in their own words, specific sources of anxiety, such as limited vocabulary, fear of making mistakes, peer pressure, and teacher-related issues.

Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted to further explore the underlying causes of speaking anxiety, particularly those aspects not fully captured by the questionnaire. The interviews aimed to elicit students' personal perspectives and lived experiences during English-speaking activities.

A total of 240 first-year EFL students, seven from each of the three participating universities (Wolkite University, Wachamo University, and Jimma University), were purposively selected for the interviews. Participants were chosen to ensure diversity in gender and academic background, allowing for a broad representation of views. The interviews employed open-ended questions that explored learners' emotional responses, classroom experiences, peer dynamics, teacher behavior, and confidence-related challenges during speaking tasks.

Each interview lasted approximately 20 to 30 minutes. With informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded using a smartphone to ensure accuracy during transcription and analysis. The semi-structured format allowed for follow-up questions, facilitating a richer and more nuanced understanding of the context-specific and gender-related factors contributing to EFL speaking anxiety.

Validity and Trustworthiness

The content validity of the questionnaire and interview protocol was confirmed through expert review. Two TEFL PhD holders from Addis

Ababa University reviewed the instruments. Each had over 25 years of experience teaching English at Ethiopian public universities. They examined the tools for clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study's objectives. Every item was checked for its ability to measure EFL speaking anxiety and gender-related aspects. Based on their feedback, unclear or redundant items were revised or removed. The overall structure was refined to ensure logical flow and full coverage of key dimensions: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, classroom speaking anxiety, social-environmental factors, and perception factors.

After the expert review, a pilot study was conducted with a small group of first-year EFL students and teachers from the three universities. The pilot identified remaining issues such as unclear terms, overlapping questions, or formatting problems. It also tested the instruments' usability in the local context. Students completed the questionnaire and gave feedback on item clarity. The interview guide was tested for flow and coverage. Minor edits followed to improve wording, refine theme order, and clarify instructions for both respondents and interviewers.

To quantify the reliability of the adapted questionnaire, Cronbach's alpha was calculated using pilot data, yielding coefficients above 0.90 for each anxiety dimension and an overall alpha of 0.92. These figures confirm excellent internal consistency and justify the instrument's deployment in the main study. For the semi-structured interviews, reliability was further ensured through a standardized protocol: all interviews were conducted face-to-face in the participants' mother tongue, recorded (with informed consent) via smartphone, and later transcribed verbatim. This consistent approach facilitated rich, authentic responses and bolstered the credibility of the qualitative findings.

Data Collection Procedures

This study investigated gender differences in EFL speaking anxiety among first-year Ethiopian university students. A mixed-methods approach was used. Quantitative data came from an adapted version of the FLCAS. Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews. Both instruments were carefully administered to ensure data quality and ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. The FLCAS questionnaire was distributed during regular class hours for broad representation. Semi-structured interviews were held in quiet, private settings. With permission, interviews were audio-recorded for accurate transcription and detailed analysis.

The first phase used the adapted FLCAS. It was given to a stratified sample of first-year students. These students were enrolled in Communicative English Skills courses. Data were collected at Wolkite University, Wachamo University, and Jimma University. The questionnaire was distributed in person during class sessions. Instructors and academic coordinators supported the process. Their cooperation ensured smooth data collection.

The second phase involved semi-structured interviews with selected students. These interviews provided rich qualitative data. They revealed the underlying causes of speaking anxiety. Special focus was given to gender-related factors. Contextual dynamics in Ethiopian higher education were also explored.

Methods of Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS (Version 23). Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency) were used to determine the overall level of speaking anxiety. An independent samples t-test was employed to examine gender differences in anxiety levels.

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Codes and categories emerged inductively, and themes related to the causes of speaking anxiety were identified and triangulated with quantitative findings to strengthen result credibility.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

  Results

To address the first research question: *What is the level of higher education EFL students' anxiety in speaking English?* Descriptive statistics were computed for the participants' responses to the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for EFL Speaking Anxiety Levels among Students (N = 240)

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Total Speaking Anxiety Score	240	98.64	17.21	58	135

As shown in Table 1, the mean speaking anxiety score of the students was 98.64 (SD = 17.21), on a scale with a possible score range from 33 to 165. This suggests that, on average, Ethiopian university EFL students experience a moderate to high level of speaking anxiety in English classes. The wide standard deviation also reflects considerable variability among students in their anxiety levels.

Table 2

Frequency and percentage of EFL students' total scores at their levels

Total scores	Level	Frequency	Percentage
More than 116	High	10	4.2
87 – 116	Moderate	147	62
Less than 87	Low	80	33.8

Table 2 presents the distribution of students' speaking anxiety levels. The majority of the students (62%) were found to have a moderate level of anxiety, while 33.8% experienced low anxiety. Only 4.2% of the students exhibited a high level of speaking anxiety. This indicated that most EFL students in the study experienced speaking anxiety to a moderate extent.

Table 3

Independent Samples t-Test Comparing Male and Female Students' Speaking Anxiety Scores

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Male	120	95.42	16.89	-3.127	238	0.002**
Female	120	101.86	16.94			

    **$p < 0.01$

As presented in Table 3, female students (M = 101.86, SD = 16.94) reported significantly higher levels of speaking anxiety compared to male students (M = 95.42, SD = 16.89). The result of the independent samples t-test indicated that this difference was statistically significant ($t(238) = -3.127, p = 0.002$). This finding suggests that gender plays a significant role in students' levels of speaking anxiety, with female students exhibiting greater anxiety in English-speaking tasks.

Table 4

Descriptive statistics for EFL speaking anxiety and gender

Item	Gender	N	Mean	SD
ESL Speaking Anxiety	Male	120	95.63	17.43
	Female	120	102.07	17.26

Table 4 shows the descriptive statistics for EFL speaking anxiety based on gender. Female students (N = 120) had a higher mean anxiety score (M = 102.07, SD = 17.26) compared to male students (N = 120), who had a mean score of 95.63 (SD = 17.43). This indicated that, on average, female students experienced greater speaking anxiety in EFL settings than their male counterparts.

Table 5

T-test Results for EFL Speaking Anxiety and Gender

EFL Speaking Anxiety	Levene's Test for Equality of Variance		t-test for Equality of Means		
	F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Equal variances assumed	-	-	2.769	235	0.006**
Equal variances not assumed	0.024	0.877	2.762	181.159	0.006

** $p<0.01$

Table 5 presents the results of the independent samples t-test examining gender differences in EFL speaking anxiety. Levene's Test for Equality of Variance showed no significant difference in variance between male and female groups ($F = 0.024$, $p = 0.877$), indicating that the assumption of equal variances was met.

The independent samples t-test revealed a statistically significant difference in speaking anxiety scores between male and female students, $t(235) = 2.769$, $p = .006$, $p < .01$. This finding indicates that female students experienced significantly higher levels of speaking anxiety than their male counterparts within the EFL context of Ethiopian higher education.

Table 6

Factors that Contribute to EFL Speaking Anxiety in terms of Gender

Contributory Factor of EFL Speaking Anxiety	Mean		SD		Sig.(p)
	Male	Female	Male	Female	0.043
Psychological Anxiety	2.87	3.12	0.60	0.59	0.000
Fear of Negative Evaluation	2.50	2.86	0.66	0.77	0.061
English Classroom Speaking Anxiety	3.21	3.32	0.67	0.65	0.093
Social-Environmental Factor	3.36	3.20	0.81	0.70	0.798
Perception Factor	4.30	4.33	0.71	0.77	0.043

* $p<0.01$

The data in Table 6 indicate that gender differences existed in several factors contributing to EFL speaking anxiety. Female students reported significantly higher levels of psychological anxiety (M = 3.12) compared to males (M = 2.87), with a highly significant difference ($p = 0.000$, p < 0.01). A significant difference was also found in the perception factor, where females (M = 4.33) scored slightly higher than males (M = 4.30), with $p = 0.043$.

Although females also had higher mean scores in fear of negative evaluation and classroom speaking anxiety, the differences were not statistically significant ($p = 0.061$ and $p = 0.093$, respectively). Interestingly, males reported slightly higher levels in social-environmental factors, but the difference was negligible ($p = 0.798$).

Therefore, the results suggest that female students experienced more anxiety, particularly in psychological and perception-related domains.

Interview Results

Research Question: *What are the major contributing factors to EFL speaking anxiety among Ethiopian higher education students?*
Interview data from 21 interviewees (12 females, 9 males) revealed five major factors contributing to EFL speaking anxiety: psychological anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, English classroom speaking anxiety, social-environmental factors, and perception factors. Below is a synthesis of 20 participants' responses, with representative quotes and patterns.

Psychological Anxiety

16 out of 20 participants reported internal emotional stress and nervousness when speaking English, particularly in public settings.

"*Before I even open my mouth, I feel panic, and my hands shake. My heart beats fast, and my mind goes blank. I fear judgment so much that I sometimes avoid speaking altogether in class.*" (Female, Interviewee 1)

"*When I hear the teacher call on me, I completely forget everything I prepared.*" (Male, Interviewee 2)

"*My mind goes blank, and I start sweating. It's like I lose control of my thoughts and body, making it impossible to speak clearly or confidently in front of others, which only increases my anxiety.*" (Female, Interviewee 3)

These responses indicate that psychological tension significantly interferes with verbal performance. Female participants expressed more intense and frequent emotional symptoms.

Fear of Negative Evaluation

17 participants described anxiety due to fear of judgment or embarrassment in front of others.

"*When I speak, I feel everyone is judging my grammar and accent.*" (Female, Interviewee 4)

"*Making a mistake in front of classmates makes me feel ashamed.*" (Male, Interviewee 5)

"*I prefer to stay silent rather than be corrected publicly. It's humiliating.*" (Female, Interviewee 6)

"*Even a small laugh from classmates can stop me from trying again; it makes me feel embarrassed and incapable, as if my effort isn't taken seriously. That moment stays with me and kills my confidence.*" (Female, Interviewee 7)

This fear, often rooted in past negative experiences, was reported as more intense among female students.

English Classroom Speaking Anxiety

All 20 interviewees expressed anxiety, specifically during classroom-based oral tasks, such as answering questions or giving presentations.

"*Presentations make me panic more than anything else in class because I feel all eyes on me, and the pressure to perform perfectly overwhelms me, causing my confidence to drop completely.*" (Female, Interviewee 8)

"*I feel fine speaking casually, but not when I'm being evaluated.*" (Male, Interviewee 9)

"*The moment I stand in front of others, I forget even simple words.*" (Female, Interviewee 10)

"I avoid volunteering because I'm scared I'll be asked follow-up questions that I might not be able to answer, which would make me feel embarrassed and expose my weaknesses in front of my classmates." (Male, Interviewee 11)

This shows that structured classroom activities, especially those involving performance or assessment, trigger anxiety in nearly all students.

Social-Environmental Factors

14 participants emphasized the influence of classroom culture, teacher attitudes, and peer behavior.

"In mixed-gender classes, I feel nervous to speak because the boys dominate the discussion." (Female, Interviewee 12)

"Sometimes teachers favor fluent students and ignore us who struggle." (Male, Interviewee 13)

"When classmates giggle at someone's mistake, it creates fear in the rest of us, making everyone hesitant to speak up because we worry about being laughed at or embarrassed in front of the whole class." (Female, Interviewee 14)

"As a girl, I was taught to listen quietly and not to speak confidently in public, which has made it very difficult for me to express myself freely in class or participate actively in discussions." (Female, Interviewee 15)

These insights show how gendered classroom dynamics and cultural norms discourage female participation and heighten anxiety.

Perception Factors

18 students linked their anxiety to negative self-perceptions about their English skills and speaking ability.

"I don't believe I speak well, so I always doubt myself when I open my mouth. I constantly worry about making mistakes, and that fear holds me back from participating, even when I know the answer." (Male, Interviewee 16)

"I think I'm the worst speaker in class. That alone makes me anxious because I feel like everyone notices my mistakes, and it makes me want to avoid speaking altogether." (Female, Interviewee 17)

"Even when I understand the content, I'm afraid I won't express it correctly. I worry that my grammar or pronunciation will confuse others, so I often stay silent rather than risk embarrassment." (Female, Interviewee 18)

"I compare myself with students who speak fluently and feel inferior. Their confidence makes me question my own ability, and I start to believe that no matter how hard I try, I won't measure up." (Male, Interviewee 19)

"I overthink pronunciation and grammar, which increases my fear of speaking. I constantly rehearse sentences in my mind, afraid of making mistakes, and this hesitation makes me even more nervous when it's my turn." (Female, Interviewee 20)

Negative self-appraisal was particularly common among female respondents, revealing internalized linguistic insecurity.

The interview data indicate that EFL speaking anxiety in Ethiopian universities is driven by psychological tension, fear of negative evaluation, classroom performance pressure, socio-cultural influences, and poor self-perception. Notably, female students consistently reported more intense anxiety across all dimensions, suggesting that gendered expectations and classroom dynamics play a significant role in shaping affective responses to speaking tasks. These findings point to the need for gender-sensitive instructional strategies, inclusive classroom practices, and emotional support systems to reduce speaking anxiety and foster communicative confidence among learners.

Discussions

What is the level of higher education EFL students in speaking English?

The present study aimed to examine the overall level of speaking anxiety among first-year EFL students in three Ethiopian public universities. Descriptive analyses of the adapted FLCAS scores (M = 98.64, SD = 17.21, range = 58–135) show

that most participants experienced moderate to high levels of speaking anxiety (62% moderate; 4.2% high). The substantial standard deviation indicates pronounced individual differences, suggesting that while some learners handle speaking tasks with relative ease, others face considerable challenges.

These findings are consistent with research in comparable EFL contexts, where speaking is typically the most anxiety-inducing skill compared to reading, writing, or listening (Mohtasham & Farnia, 2017; Pristiyaputri et al., 2023; Tien, 2018; Zulkiflee & Nimehchisalem, 2022). For instance, Mohtasham and Farnia (2017) reported moderate anxiety among Iranian EFL students, while Tien (2018) documented variability linked to individual learner factors. The Ethiopian findings thus align with international patterns, confirming that speaking anxiety is a pervasive affective barrier in EFL classrooms.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the predominance of moderate anxiety suggests both challenge and opportunity. On one hand, moderate anxiety can stimulate focused attention and preparation; on the other, if not managed, it may tip into debilitating fear that hinders participation (Horwitz et al., 1986). Given that one-third of students still report low anxiety, best practices could involve peer mentoring or triadic speaking activities, where low-anxiety students model strategies for their more anxious peers. Such peer scaffolding has been shown to foster gradual confidence gains without overwhelming learners (Fauzi & Asi, 2023; Okyar, 2023).

Nonetheless, these results should be interpreted in light of certain limitations. First, the cross-sectional design captures anxiety at a single point in time; fluctuations over the semester, particularly around high-stakes assessments, remain unexplored. Second, although the sample encompasses three universities, it may not fully represent the diversity of institutional contexts across Ethiopia. Finally, self-report measures like the FLCAS, while widely validated, depend on learners' introspective accuracy, which can vary.

Future research could adopt a longitudinal design to monitor how speaking anxiety evolves with increased exposure and instructional interventions. Moreover, qualitative follow-up, such as focus groups, could unpack the specific classroom incidents that tip moderate anxiety into high anxiety for a minority of students. Investigating the role of instructional variables (e.g., class size, teacher feedback style) would also deepen understanding of contextual triggers.

Thus, this study confirms that first-year Ethiopian EFL students experience speaking anxiety at levels comparable to those reported internationally, with most reporting moderate anxiety. Addressing this issue will require pedagogical strategies that balance the motivating aspects of moderate anxiety with supportive practices such as structured peer collaboration and scaffolded speaking tasks to prevent anxiety from escalating and to promote more confident oral participation across the student body.

Does gender significantly influence the level of speaking anxiety experienced by EFL students?

The present study revealed a statistically significant gender difference in EFL speaking anxiety among first-year students in three Ethiopian universities. Female students reported higher overall anxiety (M = 101.86, SD = 16.94) than male students (M = 95.42, SD = 16.89), t (238) = –3.127, p = .002. Factor-level analyses indicated that psychological factors such as worry and tension, and perception-related factors such as self-evaluations of speaking ability, contributed most strongly to this disparity. These findings highlight that while both male and female students experience speaking anxiety, female learners appear to be disproportionately affected, particularly in domains that involve internal self-judgment and evaluative concerns.

These findings align with research in diverse EFL contexts documenting elevated speaking anxiety among female learners, often linked to fear of negative evaluation and heightened self-consciousness (Geckin, 2020; Hz, 2022;

Pristiyaputri et al., 2023; Zulkiflee & Nimehchisalem, 2022). The prominence of psychological and perception factors echoes the FLCA model's emphasis on internal worry and self-judgment as core to language anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986). Simultaneously, other studies have reported no gender differences or even higher male anxiety, underscoring the influence of contextual and cultural factors on anxiety dynamics.

Drawing on key theoretical perspectives, the findings can be better understood through the intersection of affective, sociocultural, and motivational dimensions. According to Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, heightened anxiety among female learners likely raises their affective filter, which in turn obstructs the intake of linguistic input and hinders the development of fluent oral skills. From a Sociocultural Theory perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), Ethiopian gendered participation norms, classroom expectations, and interactional dynamics appear to amplify female students' self-imposed pressure to perform flawlessly, thereby heightening evaluative anxiety. Complementing these views, Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) suggests that elevated anxiety may arise from unmet psychological needs for competence and autonomy in speaking contexts, where scrutiny and limited opportunities for supportive, low-stakes practice undermine intrinsic motivation and reinforce persistent anxiety.

In the Ethiopian higher-education setting, societal expectations and gender norms may amplify female students' internalized pressure to perform flawlessly in English, thereby increasing psychological anxiety. High perception scores suggest that female learners critically evaluate their own speaking ability, possibly due to limited low-stakes opportunities to practice oral skills and build confidence. Male students, while still experiencing moderate anxiety, may benefit from social norms that tolerate risk-taking and public speaking errors. Classroom dynamics, including teacher feedback styles, participation norms, and peer interactions, likely interact with gendered expectations to shape students' anxiety experiences.

Several alternative hypotheses should be considered. First, the FLCAS, though validated internationally, may exhibit differential item functioning by gender, potentially inflating anxiety scores for female students. Second, sampling effects may play a role; although the study included three universities, institutional, regional, and linguistic differences across Ethiopia could influence outcomes. Finally, students' linguistic self-efficacy, their confidence in using English, may mediate anxiety independently of gender, suggesting a multifactorial explanation for the observed differences.

Addressing gendered disparities in EFL speaking anxiety requires holistic and culturally sensitive interventions. Implementing low-stakes speaking activities, such as brief pair discussions, journal sharing, and structured group exercises, can help female learners gradually build confidence. Providing private and constructive feedback, rather than public correction, may reduce fear of judgment and psychological tension. Peer support networks and mentorship programs, which pair female learners with more confident peers, create safer environments for risk-taking and practice. Integrating reflective practices, including self-assessment journals and guided reflection, can guide students toward balanced self-evaluation and improved self-perception. Teacher training is also critical, as instructors need to recognize gendered participation norms and adopt inclusive feedback strategies. At the policy level, universities can further support learners by implementing gender-sensitive, learner-centered pedagogies, reducing class sizes for speaking-intensive courses, and establishing institutional programs specifically aimed at mitigating speaking anxiety.

This study has several limitations. The cross-sectional design captures speaking anxiety at a single point in time, limiting insight into fluctuations during the semester or around high-stakes assessments. Self-reported FLCAS data rely on learners' introspective accuracy, which may

vary. The sample, though drawn from three universities, may not represent all Ethiopian EFL contexts.

To address these disparities, teachers should incorporate low-stakes speaking activities, provide private and constructive feedback, and foster reflective practices to enhance female learners' confidence. Peer mentorship and gender-sensitive teacher training can normalize error-making and reduce anxiety. At the institutional level, reducing class sizes and embedding learner-centered, gender-responsive pedagogies are key strategies to support equitable oral participation.

What are the major contributing factors to EFL speaking anxiety among Ethiopian higher education students?

This study investigated the major contributing factors to EFL speaking anxiety among Ethiopian university students, with particular attention to gender-based patterns. Thematic analysis of interview data revealed five interrelated sources of anxiety: psychological distress, fear of negative evaluation, classroom-based speaking anxiety, socio-environmental influences, and negative self-perceptions. Across these dimensions, female students consistently reported higher levels of anxiety, underscoring the gendered nature of the phenomenon.

Psychological anxiety emerged as the most salient theme, with students describing panic, mental blocks, and somatic symptoms when required to speak English, particularly in evaluative or public contexts. Such responses illustrate the deeply affective dimension of oral language use, where performance pressure can trigger both cognitive interference and physiological arousal. Fear of negative evaluation further compounded these experiences, as many students preferred silence over risking embarrassment caused by grammatical or pronunciation errors. Importantly, such fears were often linked to past negative classroom encounters, including public correction and peer ridicule, which left long-lasting effects on learners' willingness to participate.

These findings are consistent with existing literature in EFL contexts. Previous studies have shown that psychological symptoms of speaking anxiety are widespread and often more pronounced among female learners (Caingal et al., 2024; Fauzi & Asi, 2024; Long et al., 2019; Okyar, 2023; Suparlan, 2021). Similarly, the strong impact of fear of negative evaluation echoes the conclusions of Geckin (2020), who emphasized how public correction can undermine learner confidence. Classroom-related anxiety observed in this study also aligns with Fauzi and Asi (2023), who argued that structured performance-based tasks, particularly presentations, intensify students' fear of failure. Moreover, gendered classroom dynamics mirror the findings of Zulkiflee and Nimehchisalem (2022), highlighting how sociocultural expectations silence female voices and restrict their participation. Finally, the influence of negative self-perceptions corroborates Pristiyaputri et al. (2023), who reported that linguistic insecurity reinforces avoidance behaviors and exacerbates speaking anxiety.

Taken together, these results emphasize that speaking anxiety among Ethiopian EFL learners is multifaceted, with gender intersecting psychological, social, and cultural dimensions. From a pedagogical standpoint, the findings suggest the need for strategies that reduce evaluative pressure while fostering supportive classroom environments. Teachers may benefit from minimizing public correction, providing constructive and private feedback, and implementing scaffolded speaking activities that build confidence incrementally. In addition, incorporating gender-sensitive practices, such as ensuring balanced participation and addressing cultural barriers that silence female students, could play a pivotal role in reducing disparities in classroom engagement.

Despite its contributions, the study has certain limitations. First, the sample was limited to students from a few Ethiopian universities, which may constrain the generalizability of the findings

to other institutional or cultural contexts. Second, the study relied exclusively on interview data; thus, triangulation with survey measures such as the FLCAS or classroom observations might have provided a more comprehensive picture. Finally, since qualitative interviews capture perceptions at a single point in time, they do not reveal how speaking anxiety fluctuates across academic semesters or in response to instructional changes.

Future research could adopt a mixed-methods design, combining self-report scales with longitudinal qualitative data to capture both prevalence and evolving experiences of speaking anxiety. Investigations into the impact of specific instructional practices, such as peer collaboration, teacher feedback styles, and the integration of technology-supported speaking activities, would also enhance understanding of effective pedagogical responses. Moreover, gender-focused comparative studies across diverse Ethiopian universities could provide deeper insights into how cultural and institutional contexts shape the experience of speaking anxiety.

Therefore, this study demonstrates that EFL speaking anxiety among Ethiopian university students arises from a complex interplay of psychological, social, and self-perceptual factors, with female learners disproportionately affected. By situating these findings within international literature, the study highlights the universal yet context-specific nature of speaking anxiety. Addressing this challenge requires sensitive, supportive, and gender-responsive pedagogical practices aimed at fostering inclusive learning environments where all learners can participate with confidence.

CONCLUSIONS

The study revealed that first-year Ethiopian EFL students experienced predominantly moderate levels of speaking anxiety, with a smaller proportion reporting high anxiety. Substantial individual differences suggested that while some learners managed speaking tasks effectively, others faced considerable challenges. These findings align with international research,

confirming that speaking is consistently the most anxiety-inducing skill in EFL contexts.

The study demonstrated a significant gender difference in EFL speaking anxiety among first-year students in three Ethiopian universities, with female learners reporting higher overall anxiety than male students. Psychological factors such as worry and tension, along with perception-related factors like self-evaluation of speaking ability, were the most prominent contributors to this disparity. The findings indicated that female learners were disproportionately affected by internal self-judgment and evaluative concerns, which could hinder their oral performance and language development.

Theoretical perspectives provided a deeper understanding of these patterns. Elevated anxiety in female learners appeared to raise the affective filter, reducing their ability to process language input and develop fluency. Gendered norms, classroom expectations, and interactional dynamics in the Ethiopian context seemed to amplify self-imposed pressures for flawless performance, thereby intensifying evaluative anxiety. Additionally, unmet psychological needs for competence and autonomy, compounded by limited low-stakes speaking opportunities and critical scrutiny, appeared to undermine intrinsic motivation and reinforce persistent anxiety among female learners. Overall, these frameworks suggested that gendered differences in speaking anxiety were shaped not only by individual affective factors but also by broader social, cultural, and motivational influences.

The findings indicated the main factors contributing to EFL speaking anxiety among Ethiopian university students, focusing on gender differences. The analysis identified five key sources of anxiety: psychological distress, fear of negative evaluation, classroom-based speaking anxiety, socio-environmental influences, and self-perception-related factors. These findings showed that speaking anxiety was multifaceted, shaped by cognitive, emotional, social, and cultural factors.

Psychological anxiety and fear of negative evaluation were the strongest contributors. Female

students reported higher levels of worry, mental blocks, and physical tension during evaluative speaking tasks. Classroom factors, such as presentations and question-answer sessions, increased anxiety by creating pressure to perform well, while casual conversations caused less stress. Social-environmental factors, including peer interactions, teacher behavior, and gendered classroom norms, also influenced anxiety. Female students often felt marginalized in male-dominated discussions. Negative self-perceptions about competence and fluency further reinforced anxiety, especially among women.

The results highlighted the gendered nature of EFL speaking anxiety. Female learners experienced more intense anxiety across all areas. Affective, social, and cultural factors combined to create specific challenges for women in language classrooms. These findings emphasized the need for holistic and culturally responsive interventions that addressed both emotional and environmental dimensions of speaking anxiety.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several targeted recommendations are proposed to address EFL speaking anxiety in Ethiopian higher education. Instructors are encouraged to implement scaffolded group work, promote peer interaction, and provide constructive, private feedback that reinforces students' efforts and progress. Speaking tasks should be designed to increase gradually in complexity, accompanied by consistent emotional support to help learners navigate performance-related stress. Curriculum designers should integrate psychological and affective support mechanisms into EFL speaking modules, embedding authentic communicative activities such as interviews, role-plays, and debates that reflect real-life contexts and enhance learners' confidence. Teacher education programs must equip both pre-service and in-service teachers with the skills to identify and respond to speaking anxiety, with particular attention to its gendered dimensions. Such training should emphasize the creation of psychologically safe

classroom environments where all learners feel supported. At the institutional level, universities and policymakers should ensure the availability of accessible counseling services and promote gender equity through academic support structures. Policy development must be guided by empirical evidence and aligned with a holistic approach that integrates emotional, pedagogical, and structural interventions to foster more inclusive and supportive language learning environments.

Credit Authorship Contribution Statement

Mitiku Tasisa: Conceptualization, Data Collection, Model Development and Analysis & Writing Original Draft, Supervision. **Esayas Teshome:** Data Analysis & Model Validation. Supervision, Review & Editing.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The authors affirm that there are no conflicts of interest associated with this publication.

Ethical Approval
Throughout both phases of data collection, ethical principles were diligently upheld to ensure the protection and rights of all participants. Informed consent was obtained before their participation, with clear explanations provided regarding the purpose of the study and their role in it. Participants were explicitly informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without any consequences. All data collected were treated with strict confidentiality and used solely for academic research purposes. Furthermore, the study protocol was thoroughly reviewed and approved by the research and ethics committees of the respective participating universities, ensuring compliance with established ethical standards.

Data Availability

The data supporting this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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