

What Makes Students Feel Safe to Speak? A Thematic Analysis in EFL Classrooms

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Abstract

Psychological safety has become an important issue in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms because students often experience anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and lack of confidence during speaking activities. This study aimed to explore the factors that make students feel psychologically safe to speak English in EFL classrooms. The research employed a qualitative descriptive approach using thematic analysis. The participants consisted of 20 fourth-semester students enrolled in the Pedagogy of Speaking course in the English Education Study Program. Data were collected through open-ended questionnaires distributed via Google Form. The collected data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis procedures. The findings revealed four major themes influencing students' psychological safety in speaking classrooms. First, supportive lecturer behavior played a significant role in increasing students' confidence and comfort during speaking activities. Encouragement, constructive feedback, and non-intimidating communication helped students feel emotionally secure. Second, fear of negative evaluation reduced students' willingness to speak, particularly during public speaking activities and direct correction situations. Third, positive peer support encouraged students to participate more actively because respectful classmates created a more comfortable learning environment. Finally, a relaxed, interactive, and non-judgemental classroom atmosphere supported students' participation and reduced speaking anxiety. The findings indicate that psychological safety is strongly influenced by emotional, interpersonal, and classroom environmental factors. Students are more willing to communicate when they feel respected, supported, and free from fear of humiliation or excessive judgment. Therefore, lecturers should create supportive and communication-focused classroom environments to encourage students' speaking participation and confidence. This study contributes to the discussion of psychological safety in Indonesian EFL higher education contexts and provides practical insights for creating more inclusive and emotionally supportive speaking classrooms.

Keywords: Digital reading books, reading comprehension, students' interest.

INTRODUCTION

Speaking is considered one of the most essential skills in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) because it enables students to communicate ideas, express opinions, and participate actively in classroom interaction. In higher education, speaking competence becomes increasingly important since university students are expected to engage in discussions, presentations, collaborative learning, and academic communication. However, despite the importance of speaking skills, many EFL students still experience difficulties and hesitation when speaking English in classroom settings. Students often feel anxious, afraid of making mistakes, or worried about being negatively evaluated by lecturers and classmates. These emotional experiences may reduce students' confidence and willingness to participate in speaking activities.

In EFL learning, psychological factors play a significant role in shaping students' communication behavior. One important concept related to this issue is psychological safety. Psychological safety refers to individuals' perceptions of feeling safe to express ideas, ask questions, or make mistakes without fear of embarrassment, humiliation, or punishment. In classroom contexts, psychologically safe learning environments encourage students to participate more actively because they feel respected, supported, and emotionally secure. According to Tu (2021), classroom culture and psychological safety significantly influence students' engagement and participation in EFL classrooms. Students who perceive the classroom environment positively are more likely to communicate confidently and engage actively in learning activities.

Recent studies have increasingly emphasized the importance of supportive classroom interaction and positive lecturer behavior in language learning. Hu and Wang (2023) found that positive teacher-student interaction and supportive communication significantly contribute to students' willingness to communicate and classroom engagement in EFL contexts. Supportive lecturers who provide encouragement, respectful feedback, and positive reinforcement may help students reduce anxiety and develop communication confidence. Similarly, Alrabai (2021) argued that positive classroom environments and autonomy-supportive teaching influence students' motivation and active participation in EFL classrooms. These findings indicate that emotional and interpersonal aspects strongly influence students' speaking experiences and classroom participation.

Research on speaking classrooms has also highlighted that many students experience speaking anxiety due to fear of making grammatical mistakes, pronunciation errors, or receiving negative evaluation from others. Such conditions often make students reluctant to participate in oral communication activities. Wahyuningsih and Afandi (2020) reported that Indonesian EFL learners commonly experience psychological barriers in speaking activities, including fear of mistakes, low confidence, and anxiety during classroom interaction. These emotional barriers may prevent students from practicing speaking skills effectively, even when they possess adequate language knowledge.

In addition, several recent studies have shown that supportive and interactive speaking activities may help students improve confidence and speaking performance. Wahyuni et al. (2025) found that storytelling activities contributed positively to students' speaking confidence and classroom participation among first-year English Education students at Universitas Negeri Makassar. The study emphasized that supportive speaking environments and interactive activities help students feel more comfortable expressing ideas orally. Similarly, Amaliah,

Wahyuni, and colleagues (2025) reported that AI-assisted podcast creation not only improved students' speaking fluency but also helped reduce foreign language anxiety among EFL learners. These findings suggest that emotional comfort and supportive classroom conditions are important factors influencing students' speaking participation.

Although previous studies have explored speaking anxiety, classroom interaction, and speaking strategies, research specifically focusing on psychological safety in EFL speaking classrooms remains limited, particularly in Indonesian higher education contexts. Most previous studies mainly focused on students' anxiety levels, speaking performance, or instructional techniques without deeply examining the factors that make students feel psychologically safe to speak. In fact, understanding students' perceptions regarding psychological safety is important because emotional comfort may strongly influence students' willingness to communicate and participate in speaking activities.

This study focuses on fourth-semester students enrolled in the Pedagogy of Speaking course. These students are considered appropriate participants because they frequently engage in oral presentations, classroom discussions, and interactive speaking activities. Their experiences are expected to provide meaningful insights into the classroom conditions that encourage or hinder students' willingness to speak English.

Using a qualitative descriptive approach and thematic analysis, this study aims to explore students' perceptions regarding psychological safety in EFL classrooms. Data are collected through open-ended questions distributed via Google Form to allow participants to express their experiences and opinions freely. Ultimately, this research seeks to identify the factors that make students feel safe, comfortable, and confident to speak English in EFL classrooms. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of more supportive, inclusive, and psychologically safe speaking classrooms in higher education contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Psychological Safety in EFL Classrooms

Psychological safety refers to an individual's perception of feeling safe to express opinions, ask questions, and make mistakes without fear of embarrassment, rejection, or negative consequences (Edmondson, 2019). In educational contexts, psychological safety is considered an important factor influencing students' participation, engagement, and learning experiences. In language classrooms, psychological safety becomes highly relevant because students are frequently required to communicate using a language they are still learning. Speaking activities often expose students to interpersonal risks, such as making grammatical errors, incorrect pronunciation, or receiving negative evaluation from lecturers and peers.

Recent studies have shown that psychologically safe learning environments positively influence students' classroom participation and emotional engagement. Tu (2021) found that psychological safety significantly contributes to students' engagement in EFL classrooms because supportive classroom environments encourage learners to participate more confidently. Students who feel emotionally secure are more willing to express ideas and participate in classroom interaction. Similarly, Hu and Wang (2023) reported that positive teacher-student interaction and supportive communication behaviors improve students' willingness to communicate and academic engagement in EFL learning contexts. These findings suggest that

supportive classroom environments play an important role in facilitating students' speaking participation.

Psychological safety is also closely related to classroom atmosphere and interpersonal relationships. Lecturers who demonstrate empathy, encouragement, and respectful feedback may help students reduce anxiety and build confidence in speaking English. Positive peer interaction also contributes to students' emotional comfort during speaking activities. When students feel accepted and supported by classmates, they are more likely to participate actively without fear of humiliation or ridicule.

In recent years, educational research has increasingly emphasized the importance of emotional well-being and positive psychology in language learning. Emotional factors such as enjoyment, confidence, comfort, and motivation are considered important elements supporting successful language acquisition. Therefore, psychological safety is viewed as an essential component of effective EFL speaking classrooms.

Speaking Anxiety in EFL Learning

Speaking anxiety is one of the most common psychological barriers experienced by EFL learners. Horwitz et al. (1986) introduced the concept of Foreign Language Anxiety, referring to feelings of tension, nervousness, and worry associated with language learning situations. Although anxiety may occur in all language skills, speaking is often regarded as the most anxiety-provoking activity because students must perform orally in front of others.

Students frequently experience fear of making mistakes, incorrect pronunciation, and negative evaluation during speaking activities. These fears often influence students' willingness to communicate and classroom participation. Wahyuningsih and Afandi (2020) found that Indonesian EFL learners commonly experience psychological barriers such as fear of errors, low self-confidence, and nervousness during speaking activities. These emotional challenges may prevent students from participating actively even when they possess adequate language knowledge.

Recent research continues to demonstrate the negative effects of speaking anxiety on students' speaking performance and communication confidence. Students with high anxiety levels tend to avoid classroom interaction, hesitate to express ideas, and remain silent during discussions. Lecturer behavior and classroom environment significantly influence students' emotional responses in speaking classrooms. Negative experiences such as ridicule, excessive correction, and unsupportive feedback may increase anxiety, while supportive learning environments help students feel more relaxed and confident.

The concept of psychological safety provides a broader perspective in understanding speaking anxiety. Instead of focusing solely on fear and nervousness, psychological safety emphasizes classroom conditions that encourage students to participate comfortably and confidently. Therefore, exploring psychological safety may provide deeper insights into students' speaking experiences in EFL classrooms.

Willingness to Communicate

Willingness to Communicate (WTC) refers to learners' readiness to initiate communication using a second or foreign language (MacIntyre et al., 1998). In EFL contexts, willingness to communicate is influenced not only by language proficiency but also by psychological and

situational factors. Students may have sufficient vocabulary and grammatical knowledge but still hesitate to speak because they feel anxious, embarrassed, or afraid of being judged.

Classroom environment is considered one of the major factors influencing students' willingness to communicate. Supportive lecturer behavior, collaborative learning, and positive peer interaction may increase students' confidence to participate in oral communication activities. Conversely, classrooms characterized by criticism, mockery, or threatening atmospheres may discourage students from speaking English.

Recent studies highlight the importance of supportive classroom environments in increasing students' willingness to communicate. Lubis and Lubis (2023) found that Indonesian EFL students tend to participate more actively when classroom interaction is supportive and non-threatening. Positive classroom experiences may strengthen students' confidence and encourage more active communication. On the other hand, negative speaking experiences may create long-lasting fear and communication avoidance.

Willingness to communicate is important because active participation provides opportunities for language practice and communication development. Students who frequently participate in speaking activities are more likely to improve speaking fluency and communication confidence. Therefore, lecturers need to establish classroom conditions that support students' willingness to communicate without fear of negative judgment.

Storytelling and Supportive Speaking Environment

Interactive speaking activities such as storytelling may contribute positively to students' confidence and classroom participation. Storytelling encourages students to express ideas creatively and communicate in meaningful contexts. Supportive storytelling activities may also reduce students' anxiety because students focus on delivering stories rather than worrying excessively about linguistic accuracy.

Wahyuni et al. (2025) reported that storytelling activities positively influenced students' speaking confidence and classroom participation among English Education students. The study revealed that interactive and supportive classroom activities help students feel more comfortable expressing ideas orally. Similarly, Amaliah et al. (2025) found that AI-assisted podcast creation reduced students' foreign language anxiety and improved speaking fluency among EFL learners. These studies indicate that emotionally supportive learning environments contribute significantly to students' speaking confidence and willingness to communicate.

Previous Studies and Research Gap

Previous studies in EFL speaking classrooms have mainly focused on speaking anxiety, communication barriers, and speaking strategies. Many researchers have investigated the effects of anxiety, confidence, and classroom interaction on students' speaking performance. Other studies emphasized the importance of supportive feedback and interactive learning activities in improving students' communication confidence.

However, research specifically exploring psychological safety in EFL speaking classrooms remains limited, particularly in Indonesian higher education contexts. Most previous studies discussed speaking anxiety and classroom participation separately without examining how psychologically safe environments may encourage students to speak more confidently.

Therefore, this study attempts to fill this gap by exploring students' perceptions regarding the factors that make them feel safe to speak in EFL classrooms through thematic analysis.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore students' perceptions regarding psychological safety in EFL speaking classrooms. Qualitative descriptive research is appropriate for studies that aim to understand participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of a particular phenomenon in natural settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach allows researchers to describe participants' perspectives in detail and capture meaningful insights related to classroom experiences and emotional responses.

The study specifically used thematic analysis to analyze the collected data. Thematic analysis is a qualitative analytical method used to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This method was selected because it provides flexibility in exploring students' experiences and perceptions regarding factors that make them feel safe or unsafe when speaking English in EFL classrooms. Through thematic analysis, the researcher was able to organize students' responses into meaningful themes representing common experiences and perceptions.

The research focused on psychological safety in speaking classrooms because speaking activities often involve interpersonal risks, such as fear of making mistakes, negative evaluation, and embarrassment. Therefore, understanding students' perspectives regarding safe speaking environments is important for improving classroom interaction and students' willingness to communicate.

Research Participants

The participants of this study were 20 fourth-semester students enrolled in the Pedagogy of Speaking course in the English Education Study Program. The participants were selected using purposive sampling because they were considered suitable for providing information relevant to the research objectives. Purposive sampling allows researchers to select participants who possess specific experiences and characteristics related to the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Fourth-semester students were chosen because they had already experienced several speaking-related courses and classroom speaking activities. In the Pedagogy of Speaking course, students regularly participated in oral presentations, classroom discussions, peer interaction, and speaking practices. Therefore, they were considered capable of reflecting on their speaking experiences and classroom environments critically.

The participants were informed about the purpose of the study before participating in the research. Participation was voluntary, and students were assured that their responses would remain confidential and used only for research purposes. To maintain participants' privacy, pseudonyms or participant codes were used during data analysis and reporting.

Research Instrument

The primary instrument used in this study was an open-ended questionnaire distributed through Google Form. Open-ended questions were selected because they allow participants to express their thoughts, feelings, and experiences freely using their own words. This type of instrument is appropriate for qualitative studies because it enables researchers to collect rich and detailed data regarding participants' perceptions and emotional experiences.

Google Form was used as the data collection platform because it is practical, accessible, and efficient for collecting qualitative responses. In addition, online questionnaires may help participants feel more comfortable expressing personal experiences and opinions compared to face-to-face interviews.

The questionnaire consisted of several open-ended questions related to students' speaking experiences and classroom environments. The questions explored factors influencing students' feelings of safety, comfort, confidence, anxiety, and willingness to speak English in class. Examples of the questions included:

1. How do you usually feel when speaking English in class?
2. What makes you feel comfortable and safe when speaking English in the classroom?
3. What lecturer behaviors help you feel confident or safe to speak English in class?
4. What classroom situations make you feel nervous, anxious, or afraid to speak English?
5. How do your classmates influence your confidence in speaking English?
6. Describe a positive classroom experience that made you feel confident speaking English.
7. Describe a negative classroom experience that made you reluctant or afraid to speak English.
8. How does lecturer feedback influence your confidence in speaking English?
9. What kind of classroom atmosphere encourages students to speak more actively?
10. In your opinion, what should lecturers do to create a psychologically safe speaking classroom?

These questions were designed to encourage participants to provide reflective and detailed responses regarding their classroom experiences.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process was conducted after obtaining permission from the lecturer and informing participants about the research objectives. The Google Form link was distributed to the participants through the class communication platform. Before answering the questionnaire, participants were provided with a brief explanation regarding the purpose of the study and confidentiality of their responses.

Participants were given sufficient time to complete the questionnaire to ensure they could provide thoughtful and detailed answers. The researcher encouraged participants to answer honestly based on their real experiences in speaking classrooms. Since the questionnaire used open-ended questions, participants were able to elaborate on their feelings, perceptions, and classroom experiences freely.

After all responses were collected, the researcher reviewed the data carefully to ensure completeness and relevance before proceeding to the analysis stage.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021). Thematic analysis was selected because it is suitable for identifying patterns and themes related to students' perceptions and emotional experiences.

The analysis followed six stages of thematic analysis. The first stage involved familiarizing with the data by reading participants' responses repeatedly to gain a deeper understanding of the content. The second stage involved generating initial codes by identifying important words, phrases, or statements related to psychological safety, speaking confidence, anxiety, and classroom experiences.

The third stage involved searching for themes by grouping similar codes into broader categories. The researcher identified patterns emerging from the participants' responses and organized them into meaningful themes. The fourth stage involved reviewing themes to ensure that the themes accurately represented the data and were relevant to the research objectives.

The fifth stage involved defining and naming themes by providing clear descriptions for each identified theme. Finally, the sixth stage involved writing the report by presenting the themes systematically and supporting them with participants' quotations to strengthen the credibility of the findings.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, the researcher applied several strategies. First, the researcher carefully reviewed participants' responses multiple times to maintain accuracy during coding and theme development. Second, participants' quotations were included in the findings to support interpretations and increase credibility. Third, the researcher maintained consistency between research objectives, data collection, and analysis procedures to ensure the dependability of the study.

In addition, reflexivity was applied during the analysis process. The researcher remained aware of personal assumptions and interpretations to minimize bias while analyzing participants' responses. By applying these strategies, the study aimed to produce credible and meaningful findings regarding psychological safety in EFL speaking classrooms.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study aimed to explore factors that make students feel psychologically safe to speak English in EFL classrooms. Using thematic analysis, several themes emerged from the participants' responses regarding their experiences, emotions, and perceptions in speaking classrooms. The analysis revealed four major themes: (1) supportive lecturer behavior, (2) fear of negative evaluation, (3) positive peer support, and (4) relaxed and interactive classroom atmosphere. These themes demonstrate that psychological safety is strongly influenced by emotional, interpersonal, and classroom environmental factors.

Theme 1: Supportive Lecturer Behavior Creates Psychological Safety

One of the strongest themes emerging from the participants' responses was the importance of supportive lecturer behavior in creating a psychologically safe speaking classroom. Many participants emphasized that lecturers who encouraged students, respected mistakes, and avoided intimidating behavior helped them feel more confident and comfortable speaking English.

One participant stated:

“I like lecturers who say, ‘Put grammar aside for now. The important thing is that people understand what you are trying to say.’ Hearing this motivates me to speak more confidently.”

Another participant explained:

“Certainly not intimidating students in speaking in front of an audience.”

Similarly, another participant stated:

“Give positive encouragements.”

These responses indicate that students highly value lecturers who prioritize encouragement and communication rather than excessive correction. Supportive lecturer behaviors reduce students’ fear of making mistakes and help them participate more actively in classroom interaction. Students feel psychologically safer when lecturers allow them to express ideas freely without immediate criticism or interruption.

Several participants also mentioned that constructive feedback positively influenced their speaking confidence. One participant stated:

“When lecturers correct mistakes in a supportive way and do not embarrass students, I feel more motivated to learn.”

This finding suggests that the manner in which lecturers provide feedback significantly affects students’ emotional responses. Feedback delivered respectfully and supportively may increase students’ confidence, while harsh correction may increase anxiety and reluctance to participate.

These findings support previous studies emphasizing the importance of positive teacher-student interaction in EFL learning. Hu and Wang (2023) found that supportive teacher communication positively influences students’ willingness to communicate and classroom engagement. Similarly, Alrabai (2021) argued that supportive teaching practices contribute significantly to students’ motivation and emotional comfort in language learning environments.

Furthermore, these findings align with Edmondson’s (2019) concept of psychological safety, which emphasizes that individuals are more willing to participate when they feel safe from embarrassment or humiliation. In EFL speaking classrooms, supportive lecturer behavior helps students feel emotionally secure and accepted despite linguistic limitations.

The findings also indicate that students prefer communication-oriented learning environments rather than perfection-oriented classrooms. Many students expressed that they were more comfortable speaking when lecturers focused on understanding and communication instead of immediately correcting grammar mistakes. This suggests that excessive emphasis on linguistic accuracy may negatively influence students’ speaking confidence, especially among learners who already experience anxiety in speaking English.

Theme 2: Fear of Negative Evaluation Reduces Students’ Confidence

Another dominant theme identified in this study was fear of negative evaluation. Many participants reported feeling nervous, anxious, or afraid when speaking English in front of others. Public speaking situations, classroom silence, and direct correction often triggered students’ anxiety.

One participant stated:

“The situation when we have to go up one by one in front of our friends makes me very nervous.”

Another participant explained:

“All eyes on me.”

Similarly, another participant mentioned:

“I usually feel nervous when the classroom becomes very quiet.”

These responses indicate that students often associate speaking activities with feelings of pressure and fear of judgment. Speaking in front of classmates exposes students to public evaluation, making them more self-conscious about their grammar, pronunciation, and speaking performance.

Some participants also explained that interruptions and immediate correction negatively affected their confidence. One participant stated:

“When I am corrected while I am still speaking, I sometimes lose confidence and become afraid of making mistakes.”

This finding demonstrates that excessive correction may interrupt students' communication flow and increase anxiety. Students may become overly focused on avoiding mistakes instead of expressing ideas naturally. Consequently, they may hesitate to participate in speaking activities.

Another participant explained that unpredictable classroom situations also increased anxiety:

“When lecturers randomly make up questions that they have prepared and we have no idea about the plan, I become stressed and afraid to speak English.”

This response suggests that uncertainty and lack of preparation may intensify students' nervousness during speaking activities. Students often feel psychologically unsafe when they fear being unable to answer correctly in front of others.

These findings are consistent with Horwitz et al. (1986), who identified fear of negative evaluation as one of the main components of foreign language anxiety. Students tend to experience anxiety when they worry about being judged negatively by lecturers or classmates. Similarly, Wahyuningsih and Afandi (2020) found that Indonesian EFL students commonly experience fear of making mistakes and low self-confidence during speaking activities.

The findings also support MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) theory of Willingness to Communicate, which emphasizes that emotional factors strongly influence students' readiness to speak. Even students with adequate language knowledge may avoid participation if they feel anxious or fear negative evaluation.

Interestingly, students' anxiety was not solely caused by linguistic limitations but also by classroom atmosphere and social interaction. Silence, serious classroom conditions, and judgmental responses created emotional pressure that reduced students' willingness to speak. Therefore, psychological safety appears to be closely connected to students' emotional experiences in speaking classrooms.

Theme 3: Positive Peer Support Encourages Students to Speak

Peer support emerged as another important factor influencing students' psychological safety in EFL classrooms. Many participants explained that supportive classmates increased their confidence and encouraged them to participate more actively in speaking activities.

One participant stated:

“My classmates have a strong influence on my confidence. When they listen carefully and do not laugh at my mistakes, I feel more confident speaking English.”

Another participant mentioned:

“There is someone who always pushes me to speak English without judge, I feel safe and confident.”

Similarly, another participant stated:

“Having friends that never underestimate someone’s skill.”

These findings suggest that positive peer interaction contributes significantly to students’ emotional comfort and communication confidence. Students are more willing to speak when they feel accepted, respected, and supported by classmates.

Conversely, negative peer behavior may reduce students’ confidence and create psychological discomfort. One participant explained:

“Making jokes about people’s pronunciation.”

This response indicates that ridicule and negative peer reactions may create fear and embarrassment among students. Mocking pronunciation mistakes may discourage students from participating because they fear humiliation.

The findings support Tu (2021), who emphasized that supportive classroom interaction and emotional safety positively influence students’ engagement in EFL classrooms. Positive peer relationships help students reduce anxiety and feel more comfortable expressing ideas in English.

These findings also align with social constructivist perspectives, which emphasize the importance of interaction and social support in learning processes. Language learning occurs more effectively when students feel emotionally supported within the classroom community.

Interestingly, several participants mentioned that group discussions and collaborative activities made them feel more comfortable speaking English. One participant explained:

“When I discuss with the group it makes me feel more secure speaking English.”

This finding suggests that collaborative learning environments reduce individual pressure and create safer communication spaces. Students may feel less anxious when speaking with peers in smaller groups compared to speaking individually in front of the entire class.

Overall, the findings indicate that peer support plays an important role in shaping psychologically safe speaking classrooms. Respectful and encouraging peer interaction helps students build confidence and participate more actively in communication activities.

Theme 4: Relaxed and Interactive Classroom Atmosphere Supports Participation

Another important theme identified in this study was the significance of relaxed, interactive, and enjoyable classroom atmosphere. Many participants described psychologically safe classrooms as environments that were fun, active, non-judgmental, and interactive.

One participant stated:

“A classroom atmosphere that encourages students to speak more actively is one that is relaxed, non-judgmental, and full of interaction.”

Another participant explained:

“Interactive, active, and fun.”

Similarly, another participant stated:

“Make the classroom feel exciting, not heavy.”

These responses suggest that emotionally supportive classroom atmospheres encourage students to participate more actively in speaking activities. Relaxed learning environments reduce students’ tension and create opportunities for meaningful interaction.

Some participants also highlighted the importance of interaction during speaking activities. One participant explained:

“Once the question and answer session starts, I become less nervous because people interact with me.”

This finding indicates that interactive communication reduces feelings of isolation and performance pressure. Students feel more comfortable when speaking activities involve two-way interaction rather than one-way performance.

Several participants also viewed strict and serious classroom situations negatively. One participant described negative classroom conditions as:

“Gloomy and overall strict situations.”

Another participant stated:

“Silent in a very stiff setting.”

These findings indicate that rigid classroom environments may increase students’ anxiety and reduce classroom participation. Students tend to feel psychologically unsafe when classroom interaction becomes overly formal or tense.

The findings are consistent with Wahyuni et al. (2025), who found that interactive and supportive speaking activities positively influence students’ confidence and participation. Similarly, Amaliah et al. (2025) reported that supportive learning environments help reduce foreign language anxiety among EFL learners.

From the perspective of positive psychology, emotionally enjoyable classroom experiences contribute to students’ motivation and engagement. Relaxed classroom atmospheres may help students focus on communication rather than fear of making mistakes. Consequently, psychologically safe classrooms encourage students to participate more confidently and actively in speaking activities.

Overall, the findings of this study demonstrate that psychological safety in EFL speaking classrooms is influenced by multiple interconnected factors, including lecturer behavior, peer interaction, classroom atmosphere, and emotional experiences. Students feel safer to speak when classrooms are supportive, respectful, interactive, and non-judgmental. These findings highlight the importance of creating emotionally supportive speaking environments to encourage students’ willingness to communicate and classroom participation.

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the factors that make students feel psychologically safe to speak English in EFL classrooms. Using a qualitative descriptive approach and thematic analysis, the findings revealed that psychological safety is strongly influenced by lecturer behavior, peer support, classroom atmosphere, and students’ emotional experiences during speaking activities.

The study identified four major themes. First, supportive lecturer behavior plays an important role in creating psychologically safe speaking classrooms. Students felt more confident when lecturers provided encouragement, constructive feedback, and respectful communication instead of intimidation or excessive correction. Second, fear of negative evaluation was found to be one of the major factors reducing students’ confidence and willingness to speak. Situations such as public speaking, strict classroom conditions, and immediate correction often triggered anxiety and nervousness among students.

Third, positive peer support contributed significantly to students' speaking confidence. Students felt safer and more comfortable participating in speaking activities when classmates listened respectfully, provided encouragement, and avoided mocking mistakes or pronunciation errors. Finally, a relaxed, interactive, and non-judgmental classroom atmosphere was found to encourage more active participation in speaking activities. Students preferred classrooms that were enjoyable, communicative, and emotionally supportive rather than rigid or overly formal learning environments.

Overall, the findings suggest that psychological safety is an essential aspect of EFL speaking classrooms because it influences students' willingness to communicate, confidence, and classroom participation. Students are more likely to speak actively when they feel emotionally secure and supported by both lecturers and peers. Therefore, lecturers should create classroom environments that prioritize encouragement, respectful interaction, and communication-focused learning rather than excessive emphasis on linguistic perfection.

This study also contributes to the growing discussion of psychological safety in EFL learning, particularly in Indonesian higher education contexts where research on this topic remains limited. The findings may provide practical insights for lecturers in developing more inclusive and supportive speaking classrooms that help reduce students' anxiety and improve their communication confidence.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The study involved only 20 participants from one class in a single university, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. In addition, data were collected through open-ended questionnaires rather than in-depth interviews, which may limit the depth of participants' responses. Therefore, future studies are recommended to involve larger participant groups, different educational contexts, and additional qualitative methods such as interviews or classroom observations to gain deeper insights into psychological safety in EFL speaking classrooms.

In conclusion, creating psychologically safe speaking classrooms is important for supporting students' emotional well-being and communication development. Supportive lecturers, positive peer relationships, and interactive classroom environments may help students overcome fear and participate more confidently in English speaking activities.

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