

Strategies Employed by Nepalese EFL Students to Overcome English-Speaking Anxiety

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Abstract

English, being a foreign language in the context of Nepal, has ever remained a challenge due to limited authentic exposure, especially in speaking. Adopting the phenomenological research design, this study uncovers Nepalese EFL learners' lived experiences on anxiety in speaking English and the strategies they adopt to tackle the anxiety. The study employed semi-structures in-depth interviews among four purposively chosen Master level students of English Education and the collected data were analyzed using thematic approach as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). The findings reveal that the students experience anxiety primarily due to fear of making mistakes and negative evaluation, limited exposure to English, and overemphasis on accuracy. To cope with these challenges, the participants reported to have employed such strategies as self-directed practice, preparation and rehearsal, positive self-talk, relaxation techniques, and engagement in supportive learning environments.

Keywords: EFL learners, English-speaking anxiety, self-drected practice, speaking strategies

Introduction

Nepal is a multiethnic, multicultural and multilingual country (Yadava, 2014) having 124 languages been spoken as mother tongues (CBS, 2021). Educational policy of Nepal portrays a dual orientation toward multilingualism and communicative English competence. National frameworks such as School Sector Development Plan (SSDP), on the one hand, advocate mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE), on the other hand simultaneously accommodate the growing demand for English medium instruction (EMI) as a means of enhancing global communication skills (British Council, 2018). Within these frameworks, English is established as a compulsory subject and a medium of instruction across school levels to enhance communicative ability of students (Khadka, 2024). Yet, there remains a tension between theory and practice at implementation level.

While policies promote communicative competence and speaking development, factors such as limited teacher training, exposures, resource materials and inconsistent EMI application often hinder effective oral skill development in English (Kadel, 2024).

English, being a dominant global lingua franca today, has been playing a key role in domains such as education, business, science, technology and intercultural communication (House, 2018). English, in Nepal, lies in the expanding circle according to Kachru's model (Mohammad, 2019) and is extensively believed as a language of opportunity ensuring access to higher education, international communication and better employment prospects (Dhobi, 2024). Nepal being English as a foreign language (EFL) context, learners have access of limited exposure resulting insufficient competence which constrains their opportunities for authentic communication practice and hence struggling to develop their communicative and speaking ability. Consequently, Nepalese learners of English are suffering fear and anxiety to participate in speaking activities.

English in Nepal is taught and learnt as a foreign language and a compulsory subject from primary to higher education, and is a major/elective subject in higher education. Despite learning English for long years, even many university students feel anxiety in speaking. This suggests that English-speaking anxiety (ESA) is a common problem to many Nepalese EFL learners. ESA in non-native English contexts such as Nepal seems to be grounded on the notion of foreign language anxiety (FLA) proposed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) which is a key affective factor influencing second language acquisition (SLA). FLA is a complex of self-perceptions, beliefs and feelings arising from the unique process of language learning (Nguyen, 2025) that create psychological barriers hindering second/foreign language learning.

ESA is one of the serious problems among many learners of English in foreign language contexts like Nepal that they feel stressed to maintain real-time processing, immediate responses and public performance (Nguyen, 2025). As system of education in Nepal has traditionally focused on grammatical accuracy and writing based instruction and examination over communicative and speaking ability, communicatively less competent learners are being produced. Such instructional imbalances contribute to heightened anxiety, especially in speaking tasks where learners fear of making mistakes and being negatively judged by peers and teachers (Bekleyen (2009). This form of situation-specific anxiety is characterized by fear, apprehension, and physiological arousal when required to speak English, particularly in academic settings (Horwitz et al., 1986).

While existing research has well-documented the causes of foreign language anxiety (FLA) globally and within Nepal (Bhandari, 2019; Adhikari, 2021), comparatively little attention has been paid to the strategies learners themselves adopt to cope with and overcome English-speaking anxiety. These studies have pointed exam pressure, limited opportunities for practice and teacher-centered pedagogy as major sources of anxiety in speaking English. However, these studies have unaddressed the strategies for coping anxiety. Thus, this study focuses types of anxiety in speaking English and the solutions for the anxiety,

especially seeking the answers to the following research questions.

- What types of anxiety do the Nepalese EFL students experience when speaking English?
- What strategies do the Nepalese EFL students use to reduce their English-speaking anxiety?

Literature Review

The review of literature indicates that English speaking anxiety is a common phenomenon in foreign language context. This section presents the review of the relevant empirical literature carried out in the global and the local contexts.

The literature on foreign language anxiety has gradually shifted from conceptualizing it as a general personality trait to understanding it as a context-specific psychological construct. Researches across different educational settings stress a consistent interplay between learners' cognitive potential and their affective state. For example, Liu and Jackson's (2008) study showed that majority of Chinese EFL learners experience anxiety during spontaneous speaking tasks. This indicates that the classrooms are the sites where encounter the fear of negative judgment that discourages learners to participate in communicative tasks. Similarly, examining Indonesian junior high school students, Mayangta's (2013) study demonstrated the fear of negative evaluation, perfectionist learning beliefs, teacher-student dynamics, spontaneous speaking tasks, and self-perceived language insufficiencies as key sources of anxiety in learning English. The study also showed that the students adopted positive self-talk, preparation, relaxation, and acceptance as anxiety reducing mechanisms. Similarly, Tati et al. (2016) explored the psychological and linguistic challenges encountered by non-native English speakers in Malaysian community colleges. Their study revealed that limited vocabulary and intense fear of being negatively evaluated by peers and teachers hindered students' speaking performance. To manage the anxiety, the students used imitation strategies by modeling the speech of native English speakers through various forms of media.

Within Nepalese context, researches reflect learners' reluctance to participate actively in English-medium classrooms. For example, Bhandari's (2019) survey, among the university students in Kathmandu, reported that 76% students experienced high level of foreign language anxiety. The study revealed that the anxiety was largely associated with fear of negative evaluation as the students viewed the classroom as a setting where they risked criticism and social embarrassment rather than a supportive environment for language learning. Similarly, Adhikari (2021) pointed that students from rural Nepalese contexts faced greater levels of anxiety due to a lack of technological exposure and fewer opportunities for real-world English exposures compared to urban counterparts. Extending this discourse, Shrestha's (2012) study showed stuttering, sweating, and freezing during classroom presentations as the most significant indicators of English-speaking anxiety.

Theoretical Understanding

We have employed several theoretical lenses to understand complex nature of English

speaking anxiety in the classrooms. The most influential framework for understanding language anxiety was proposed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), who conceptualized Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) as a situation-specific construct distinct from general anxiety. FLCA is the tension and apprehension associated with language learning in classroom contexts (Chen & Guo, 2026) encompassing components such as communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety (Yu, 2024). Recently, FLCA is defined from dynamic and socio-cognitive perspective. Accordingly, it is not merely perceived as an individual trait but a context-sensitive emotional state that emerges from interactions among learners, tasks and classroom environments (Chen & Guo, 2026) that interferes with language processing at input, processing, and output stages, thereby reducing learners' ability to speak fluently and confidently (Huang and Liu, 2025). This shows that anxiety does not only affect emotional states but also disrupts cognitive functioning during oral communication.

More recently, FLCA is situated within broader affective and motivational perspective. Accordingly, it is understood as part of network of interacting emotions that shape learner engagement, self-perception, and performance over time (Han, Li & Haider, 2022) that signifies the higher level of anxiety with lower achievement, reduced willingness to communicate and negative self-evaluations (Chen & Guo, 2026). Furthermore, FLCA is defined from the ecological and socially situated nature. Accordingly, anxiety is anchored with classroom variables such as teacher practices, peer interaction, task complexity, and cultural expectations (Gannoun & Deris, 2023).

Krashen's affective filter hypothesis also offers an theoretical perspective for understanding English-speaking anxiety. This hypothesis posits that anxiety is a key factor that inhibits learners' willingness to engage in communication and take linguistic risks. In other words, when learners experience high levels of anxiety, they tend to avoid participating in classroom interactions and become reluctant to experiment with the target language. As a result, they receive fewer opportunities for meaningful language input and corrective feedback hindering language acquisition (Gass & Selinker, 2008). Consequently, in English speaking situations, learners, with high levels of anxiety, may fail to demonstrate effective speaking ability whether they have adequate or inadequate linguistic ability.

Methods and Procedures

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of Nepalese EFL students, especially how selected students perceive and make meaning of their experiences on anxiety as affective factor in learning English. As articulated by Creswell and Poth (2018), phenomenology provides an appropriate methodological framework for studies seeking to understand the essence of human experiences from the participants' own perspectives.

The study employed four M.Ed. students from Central Department of Education, T.U, Kirtipur, Kathmandu as the participants of the study. The participants were chosen using

purposive sampling. The selected participants were interviewed using thematic interview guideline and the collected data were analyzed using thematic approach suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) believing that this approach is appropriate for in-depth understanding of the phenomenon.

Results and Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the common types of anxiety in speaking faced by M.Ed. students of English and the strategies they employ to overcome the anxiety. Thus, this section presents common types of English-speaking anxiety they faced and the strategies used to overcome the anxiety.

The Common Types of Anxiety in Speaking

Here, we present the common types of anxiety experienced by M.Ed. students of English in Nepal. The responses from the students demonstrate two types of anxiety, which are discussed in the following sub-sections.

Fear of Making Mistakes. The responses from the participants reveal that students' English speaking anxiety primarily lies in their perceived inadequacy in linguistic competence, particularly in grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary. The participants also reported that they were concerned with producing grammatically correct and accurately pronounced utterances rather than concentrating on communicating meaning effectively that ultimately resulted hesitation, self-correction and reduced fluency in speaking.

For example, one participant (S2) remarked, "I am afraid of the situations whether I might be wrong in sentence structures and pronunciation...So, I often stay back from speaking activities". Likewise, another participant (S4) explained:

I frequently practice at home... Yet, I have fear of speaking English as I am worried about my grammar... Also I do not have native like pronunciation ...even very poor... So, it is difficult for me to speak fluently...perhaps because English is a foreign language for us and we do not have enough opportunities for speaking practice.

These excerpts from participants demonstrate that Nepalese learners of English are preoccupied with grammatical correctness and accuracy in pronunciation, which constrain their ability to speak spontaneously. The data also show that the students face cognitive overload by monitoring linguistic accuracy instead of communicating the ideas. These infer that excessive self-monitoring hinders the flow of communication, resulting slower speech, frequent pauses and avoidance to participation.

These findings are consistent with the concept of Foreign Language Anxiety proposed by Horwitz et al. (1986), which characterizes language anxiety as a situation-specific form of anxiety arising in language learning contexts. The participants' concern with grammatical and phonological accuracy also supports Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, which posits that high levels of anxiety functions as a psychological barrier that restricts language

acquisition by limiting both language input and output. Furthermore, the findings confirm Chen and Guo's (2026) argument that heavy concern about making mistakes reduces learners' willingness to take communicative risks resulting reduced opportunities for meaningful interaction and practice.

Fear of Negative Judgment. Building upon the previous theme, the responses demonstrate that students' fear of making mistakes is closely linked with their fear of negative evaluation by others. The responses also indicate that students' speaking anxiety is influenced not only by concerns about grammatical and linguistic accuracy but also by anticipation of being negatively judged by teachers and classmates. For many learners, speaking English in the classroom is perceived as a socially vulnerable activity, where even minor mistakes may invite criticism and ridicule. As a result, the classroom environment is experienced as evaluative rather than purely communicative, intensifying their self-consciousness while speaking. For example, S2 shared: "I think if I made a mistake while speaking, my friends might say something, or they might laugh at me ... This probable situation often discourage me to participate in speaking activities".

Similarly, S3 stated, "When I try to participate in speaking, I always have a fear that...if I make mistakes while speaking in English, my friends may give me negative comments". In consonance with S2 and S3, S1 shared, "Initially, I was very afraid of what people would say if I made a mistake, and what my teacher would think about me ... how my friends would tease me ... such situations often demotivated me to speak in English.

These excerpts show that the students experience English speaking anxiety by anticipating probable negative perceptions and responses from their friends and teachers. For example, the possibilities of being laughed at and negatively criticized transform speaking situations into judgment rather than opportunities. Consequently, students intentionally avoid their participations in speaking activities as a self-defending strategy so that they may not feel anxiety.

The findings concord with the construct of "the fear of negative evaluation" as a major aspect of Foreign Language Anxiety as proposed by Horwitz et al. (1986), which posits that learners' fear about being judged by others in language classrooms as a major source of anxiety. The findings also agree with MacIntyre and Gardner's (1989) and Yu's (2024) argument that students' worries about negative judgment crucially narrow their readiness to participate in communicative activities that directly affect language performance. These findings indicate that insufficiency in communicative experience challenges students' confidence, making them more susceptible to evaluative anxiety, and reinforcing a cycle of avoidance and communicative inhibition.

Strategies for Overcoming Speaking Anxiety

In this section, we discuss the strategies the M.Ed. students used to counter their anxiety to participate in English speaking activities, which serve as mechanisms to reduce anxiety and enhance their participation in speaking English. The commonly observed strategies are discussed in the following sections.

Self-directed Practice. The findings demonstrate that students enthusiastically adopt self-directed practice as a strategy to manage and reduce their anxiety in speaking English. Instead of depending exclusively on classroom interactions, the participants reported practicing independently to enhance their speaking ability and build confidence. For example, one participant (S2) shared:

Before getting engaged in speaking tasks, I often record myself ... and when I have enough time, I practice speaking being in front of a mirror thinking that my fear of speaking in English reduces ... and ... I improve my speaking by seeing and evaluating myself.

Similarly, another participant (S4) noted:

Usually, I practice myself ... because ... I worry that my mates may make fun of me if I practice in pair or group with them. Now I remember a specific case ... when I was in the first semester of my M.Ed. program, my teacher assigned me a topic for presentation ... It was my first ever presentation ... and I had tremendous fear ... and ... To avoid the fear, I repeatedly practiced at home ... I recorded practice on my mobile phone ... I watched the recording several times ... and continued rehearsing on my own ... Through these repeated practices, I, gradually, gained confidence and ... Finally, became able to deliver my presentation without fear.

The above excerpts show that students view independent practice not merely as a means of improving linguistic competence but also as an effective psychological strategy for coping with English-speaking anxiety. The data also point that recording oneself, practicing in front of a mirror and repeated rehearsal provided learners with a non-threatening environment in which they could monitor their own performance, recognize their strengths and weaknesses and gradually develop self-confidence. Such strategies, as Oxford (1990) argues, reflect a metacognitive approach to learning that monitor, evaluate and regulate students' own performance.

The excerpts also show that self-regulated strategies play crucial role in reducing improbability and increasing students' willingness to participate in English speaking activities. This finding agrees with Mayangta's (2013) argument that preparation and repeated practice are useful strategies to lessen anxiety in English speaking activities. This finding points that students counter their English speaking anxiety by having prepared in advance. As a whole, the findings advocate that students' independent rehearsal and self-reflection can play crucial role to challenge speaking anxiety and encourage their confident participation in English-speaking activities.

Preparation and Rehearsal. The works of literature on Foreign Language Anxiety advocate that thoughtful preparation and rehearsal are effective strategies to cope up with English-speaking anxiety and improve students' oral performances. Regarding this concern, the participants described preparation as a systematic process that is not simply concerned

with memorizing content but understanding the topic, organizing ideas, selecting appropriate vocabulary and rehearsing their responses before participating in classroom speaking activities. For example, S3 explained, “First, I try to understand the topic and content that I am going to speak about. Then, I practice speaking it aloud. I also write down the key points so that I can remember them and stay on track while speaking”. Similarly, S1 shared:

The first thing I do is read materials related to my topic and think about what I want to say in the introduction. Then, I look at the keywords for my subject. After that, I search the synonyms for the keywords and rehearse speaking using alternative words so that I do not repeat the same word ... and make my vocabulary richer when I am speaking.

The above interview excerpts show that the students employ purposefully structured approach of preparation in advance so that they reduce their anxiety in English-speaking. They claimed that they hesitate to participate in speaking activities due to their deficiencies in content knowledge and language knowledge. They reported that they become familiar with the content and language by thoroughly understanding the topic, identifying the key concepts, expanding vocabularies, and rehearsing aloud. Such preparation appears to reduce the cognitive demands of spontaneous speech by allowing students to anticipate potential linguistic challenges and develop greater control over their performance. The excerpts also demonstrate that preparation and rehearsal do not only enhance content and language familiarity but also increases students’ confidence in speaking activities.

These findings significantly concord with Bandura’s (1997) concept of “self-efficacy”, which posits that individuals’ confident ability to perform a task depends upon their successful preparation in advance. The findings also suggest that advance preparation and repeated rehearsal are believed as key mechanisms to reinforce students’ positive beliefs resulting reduced anxiety and increased willingness to speak. The findings are also concordance with Mayangta’s (2013) findings that expanding vocabularies enhance lexical flexibility and organizing ideas and rehearsal contribute to fluent and coherent speaking tasks. As a whole, the findings point that systematic preparation does not only advance speaking performance but stands as an influencing strategy in reducing foreign language speaking anxiety.

Use of Relaxation Technique. Relaxation is believed to be one of the influencing techniques to regulate psychological and physiological symptoms of English-speaking anxiety such as nervousness and bodily tension. Advocating relaxation as an effective strategy to overcome English-speaking anxiety, S2 shared, “When I have fear to participate in English speaking activities, I do deep breathing exercise ... I have experienced it quite supportive to prepare myself as English speaker ... I take deep breath twice or thrice before I begin to speak ... When I do so, I feel my nerves be calmed”. Similarly, S4 notated, “Every morning I do pushups ... When I do pushups, my blood circulation goes faster ... and ... I feel that boosts my confidence”.

The above excerpts from the interview show that students employ practical and self-regulated strategies to manage their anxiety before they begin speaking tasks. Here, S2's account points that deep breathing ease nervousness and help him regain self-control. Similarly, S4's response indicates that his physical exercise helps him release his tension and develop confidence. Despite emphasizing different strategies, they believed physical regulation as an operative technique of preparing themselves emotionally speaking tasks. The students' experience indicates that reduced physiological symptoms supports increased classroom communication with greater confidence. This indicates that reducing physical tension contributes to psychological calmness resulting confident English-speaking performance in speak.

At the same time, the students also reported that they do not only rely on immediate relaxation techniques but also on regular meditation and exercises. For instance, S1 reported, "I have not yet tried any relaxation techniques ... specifically, right before speaking performance ... but ... I regularly do meditation ... I have experienced ... regular meditation has helped me be calm ... as well as confident ... the whole day". S1's account points that anxiety in English-speaking can be managed through long-term practices. Collectively, the students reported that they employ varied self-regulatory strategies such as deep breathing, physical exercise and meditation to manage speaking and maintain emotional control. These findings support the concept of Affective Filter Hypothesis proposed by Krashen (1982), which posits that heightened anxiety can hinder language learning by reducing learners' willingness to communicate. By employing relaxation techniques to lessen stress and increase confidence, students effectively lowered their affective filter creating more favourable conditions for active and confident participation in speaking.

Conclusion

The study explored the common types of English-speaking anxiety that M.Ed. students experienced and the strategies they adopted to cope those anxieties.

Based on the findings, we conclude that fear of making mistakes and fear of negative judgment from their friends and teachers are the common types of anxieties the M.Ed. students of English experienced while participating in English-speaking activities. According to their perspectives, these anxieties stem on their self-perceived insufficiency in grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation along with content that made students hesitant to participate in English-speaking tasks and lessened opportunities for oral practice. Their experiences indicate that such fear invite psychological barriers (their fear to participate in speaking activities) and physiological barriers (such as increased heart rate and a reddened and sweaty face, cognitive concerns like memory blanks).

To counter various forms of anxiety, the students of M.Ed. English employ efficient practical strategies. Their experiences signal that they actively employ self-directed practices like speaking in front of a mirror so that they can improve pronunciation, fluency and self-confidence. Likewise, their responses infer that they use thoughtfully structured

preparation and rehearsal to organize ideas and expand vocabularies so that they become familiar with both content and language. Their responses, additionally, point that they use relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, meditation, regular exercise, and positive self-talk to control their psychological and physiological symptoms of anxiety. The findings also indicate that the students remain tranquil, improve concentration and minimize the cognitive difficulties. The study shows that these strategies help students remain calm, improve concentration and minimize the cognitive distractions that often occur during speaking tasks.

Finally, we recommend some implications based on our findings. At the practice level, English language teachers are recommended to create learner supportive environments in classrooms considering psychological state demonstrating effective strategies for managing speaking anxiety. Addressing the policy makers, we recommend that they can include the activities that the learners can, without any anxiety, perform their speaking tasks. Finally, we recommend to the future researchers to find the gaps and conduct the researches for further exploration considering our research.

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