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The Relationship between Students Speaking Achievement and Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety

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Abstract

This study set out to examine the key factors that contribute to speaking anxiety and to explore how such anxiety relates to students' performance in oral communication. A total of 135 grade 12 students, drawn randomly from both the social science and natural science streams at Hawassa Addis Ketema Preparatory and Secondary School, participated in the study. Data were collected using a 28-item Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (FLSAS) questionnaire alongside an achievement test designed by the researcher. The achievement test served to measure speaking performance, while Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Coefficient was employed to determine the relationship between anxiety and performance. In addition, an Independent Samples t-test was applied to assess whether significant differences exist between male and female students in terms of anxiety levels and achievement scores. Findings revealed four main causes of speaking anxiety: oral examinations, learners' self-evaluation of speaking ability, comparison with peers, and fear of being negatively judged. Results further indicated a strong negative correlation between students' speaking anxiety and their speaking performance. However, no statistically significant gender differences were found in either anxiety levels or achievement outcomes.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

English has established itself as a global medium of communication due to its widespread use in international trade, diplomacy, telecommunications, scientific writing, and entertainment. It functions as a lingua franca among both native and non-native speakers, making competence in English communication an essential skill worldwide.

In the education sector, English holds a particularly influential role. As Brown (2001) noted, since English is integral to the academic system, decisions regarding quality instruction must align with the broader educational goals. Similarly, Awol (1999) emphasized that students' future prospects are largely tied to their performance in English, while the Ethiopian Ministry of Education (2002) underscored the language's significance within the Ethiopian education system. Consequently, in most Ethiopian schools, English is taught as a subject beginning in grade one and becomes the primary medium of instruction from grade five onwards.

Effective communication skills are vital for cultural transmission, personal development, and active participation in society. English language teaching, therefore, aims to build learners' communicative competence and foster interest in learning the lan-

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guage. Instruction typically covers the four macro-skills listening, reading, speaking, and writing with students expected to apply English both inside and outside the classroom. Language learning does not occur in isolation but is embedded in social and situational contexts, where speakers rely on linguistic and communicative competence to interact successfully (Guyueguo, 1988). According to Cummins (1994), oral communication is a core element of ESL development, though many learners perceive speaking as more difficult than the other language skills. Levelt (1993) states that talking is one of the dearest occupations, people spend hours a day convincing, telling stories, teaching people and, of course, speaking to other people.

Speaking itself is a highly complex activity that integrates cognitive, linguistic, and motor processes, and it plays a central role in communication. Developing oral skills not only supports learning but also strengthens social interactions (Dorgham, 2011). In line with this, Alia (2007) described speaking as a challenging mental and productive process. Brown (2001) also defined speaking as an interactive act that requires producing, receiving, and processing information. Harmer (2001) explained that oral communication involves both accuracy correct use of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation and fluency, or the ability to express ideas spontaneously.

Scholars in second/foreign language education widely agree that speaking proficiency lies at the heart of language learning (Biggs & Move, 1993; Ellis, 1988; Liu, 2001). However, learners' speaking skills are often shaped by a variety of factors, with anxiety being one of the most critical affective elements (Gardner, 1985; Horwitz & Cope, 1986; Gardner, Tremblay, & Masgoret, 1997). Studies, particularly in Western contexts, have consistently examined how foreign language anxiety relates to speaking proficiency and achievement. Horwitz (1986) and MacIntyre & Gardner (1994), for example, reported that such anxiety is linked to negative emotional responses in language learning. Horwitz and Cope (1986) further argued that while communicative competence should be the focus of language classes, anxious learners often find this emphasis especially difficult to manage.

Anxiety in language classrooms is a widespread phenomenon. Basic (2011) described speaking anxiety as a fear of oral expression that hinders student performance. Learners experiencing such anxiety often struggle to concentrate, worry about making mistakes, and may remain silent during group discussions instead of participating actively.

Despite various efforts by the Ethiopian government to improve English language teaching, the overall achievement of preparatory school students remains unsatisfactory. Tesfaye (2012) highlighted serious concerns about students' proficiency, noting that many who enter universities and colleges lack adequate communicative competence in English. Alarmingly, even some teachers at primary, secondary, and higher education levels demonstrate insufficient English skills.

In general, Ethiopian students and in particular grade 12 learners at Hawassa Addis Ketema Preparatory School face persistent challenges in English, with speaking being one of the weakest skills. Many students experience heightened anxiety when required to present their work or engage in classroom discussions. Therefore, this study aims to examine the relationship between speaking anxiety and speaking performance, guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the major causes of speaking anxiety for Grade 12 students?
2. Is there a correlation between students' speaking achievement and speaking anxiety?
3. Is there any statistically significant mean difference between male and female students speaking anxiety and achievement?

1.2 Review of related literature

Defining Language Anxiety

Anxiety is generally described as a state of mental uneasiness characterized by restlessness and worry. Spielberger (1983, cited in Awan *et al.*, 2010) defined it as "a subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with arousal of the autonomic nervous system." Similarly, Sillamy (1996, cited in Idri, 2012) viewed it as an emotional condition marked by insecurity

and general distress. Within the field of second or foreign language learning, anxiety is considered a negative emotional reaction that emerges when learners are expected to perform in the target language (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993). These different perspectives illustrate that researchers have not reached a single, unified definition, which makes the concept broad and multifaceted.

Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety

Over the past several decades, extensive research has examined anxiety in foreign language learning, addressing its underlying causes, consequences, and possible coping mechanisms (Brown, 1974; Horwitz *et al*., 1986; Krashen, 1985; Oxford, 1999; Aida, 1994; Idri, 2012). Increasing attention has been directed toward anxiety in oral communication, as speaking is frequently identified as the most anxiety-inducing skill in second or foreign language learning (Cheng *et al*., 1999; Subaşı, 2010; Kitano, 2001; Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Liu, 2007; Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2009; Fang-peng & Dong, 2010). For many students, using a foreign language orally evokes strong apprehension and uneasiness (Cheng *et al*., 1999).

Foreign language classrooms that emphasize oral performance frequently trigger nervousness among students. According to Horwitz *et al*. (1986), learners with speaking anxiety often experience fear, worry, and unease when required to speak, believing that they must communicate flawlessly. Comparing themselves with native speakers, they may feel inadequate, especially in terms of pronunciation. Kitano (2001) noted that speaking is usually the first skill learners evaluate in comparison with peers, teachers, or native speakers. Anxiety symptoms may include physical reactions such as sweating, trembling, or even nausea (Boyce *et al*., 2007). In some cases, highly anxious students may skip lessons, withdraw from class participation, or even abandon language study altogether.

Although speaking anxiety presents a serious challenge to language learning, it can be addressed. Identifying its sources enables teachers to create more supportive classroom environments that reduce pressure and encourage learners to participate actively. Providing low-stress opportunities for practice is key to improving speaking performance.

Theoretical Perspectives on Language Anxiety

Research on foreign language anxiety has produced several theoretical frameworks.

Horwitz *et al*.'s Framework

Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) described foreign language anxiety as a unique affective factor that poses a serious obstacle to language learning. To assess this, they created the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), a 33-item tool that has since been widely applied in research. Their framework highlights three major sources of anxiety: (1) communication apprehension, or difficulty conveying ideas; (2) fear of negative evaluation (FNE), the concern of being judged by others; and (3) test anxiety, linked to pressure from examinations and assessments. These dimensions can discourage learners from participating actively in class and, in some cases, may even result in students abandoning language learning.

Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis

Krashen (1985) proposed the Affective Filter Hypothesis, which highlights the role of emotions such as anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence in second language acquisition. According to him, high anxiety creates a "mental block" that prevents linguistic input from being processed effectively. In other words, when the affective filter is raised, learners struggle to acquire the language, regardless of the input they receive. Krashen emphasized the importance of maintaining a supportive, low-stress classroom environment, avoiding excessive correction, and minimizing situations that might embarrass students in front of peers.

2 Research Design and Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study adopted a correlational research design to explore the association between students' speaking anxiety and their speaking performance. Such a design was chosen because it allows investigation in natural classroom contexts, unlike experimental designs that are often conducted under controlled

conditions. Thus, the correlational approach offered an opportunity to examine the relationship between variables in real-life educational settings.

2.2 Subjects of the Study

The research targeted grade 12 students at Hawassa Addis Ketema Comprehensive and Preparatory School. A total of 135 learners (74 females and 61 males) from both natural science and social science streams took part. Participants were randomly selected, and although the female group was slightly larger, the sample as a whole provided balanced representation of both genders.

2.3 Instruments of Data Collection

Two main tools were employed to gather data: the Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (FLSAS) and a speaking achievement test. The FLSAS, originally designed by Huang (2004) and later adapted by Hassan (2009), was used to measure students' anxiety levels. It contained two parts: one section collected demographic information such as age, gender, and stream, while the second focused on statements about foreign language speaking anxiety. Participants responded on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strong agreement to strong disagreement.

The speaking achievement test was designed to assess students' oral proficiency. In line with Knight's (1992) suggestions for evaluating speaking, the test incorporated a rubric based on criteria such as pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar accuracy, fluency, communication, and interaction. Each criterion was scored using descriptive performance levels (e.g., excellent, satisfactory, needs improvement).

For this study, the speaking test was adapted from the Grade 12 English for Ethiopia textbook (old edition, p. 40). Students were asked to narrate a short story based on a series of four pictures depicting the familiar fable of the rabbit and the tortoise. Their responses were videotaped to ensure accurate and repeated evaluation.

In this particular study, Knight's (1992) criteria were used. These criteria are:

- Communicating clearly and effectively without making practically any mistakes in all aspects (9 - 10 points).
- Making few mistakes in pronunciation, intonation, vocabulary, grammar, fluency and interaction (7 -8 points).
- Making more mistakes and not clear some of the time to be heard (5 - 6 points).
- Making lots of mistakes in all aspects and very hard to understand (3 - 4 points).
- Unable to perform the task at all (1 - 2 point).

2.4 Data Gathering Procedure

First, the speaking test from the old English for grade 12 students' textbook was administered. As mentioned earlier, the test was narrating the story in the picture. While students' were narrating the story, they were videotaped. This was done to help the researcher watch the video so many times and evaluate the students' performance. After the students finished the test, 135 students were asked to rate the foreign language classroom speaking anxiety scale (FLSAS). For the administration of the questionnaire, first, the teacher with his colleague who teaches in the same school gathered the students in a school hall. Then gave a brief explanation of the main objectives of the questionnaire and asked them to respond honestly and frankly and then all the questionnaires were collected.

2.5 Method of data analysis

The data were processed using SPSS version 20. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were employed to summarize students' responses from the FLSAS. To explore the association between speaking anxiety and performance, Pearson's product–moment correlation was calculated. In addition, an independent samples t-test was carried out to identify any statistically significant differences in speaking anxiety and achievement between male and female participants.

3 Results

Two groups of students from the same school participated in the study. The first consisted of 70 students from the natural science stream, while the second included 65 students from the social science stream, all at grade 12 level in Hawassa Addis Ketema.

Data were collected through two instruments: the Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Scale (FLSAS) and a speaking achievement test. The questionnaire responses were analyzed item by item to identify the main sources of speaking anxiety. Some of the FLSAS items were negatively worded; therefore, these were reverse scored to ensure consistency in interpretation.

To classify levels of anxiety, scores were grouped into three categories: low, moderate, and high. Considering that the minimum possible score was 28 and the maximum 140, the total range (112) was divided into three equal parts. A score up to 65.3 represented low anxiety, between 65.3 and 102.6 indicated moderate anxiety, and above 102.6 reflected high anxiety (Hanssen, 2009).

As shown in Table 1, several items for the moderately and highly anxious groups had median scores of 4.00 or above, suggesting strong agreement with those statements. In contrast, only a few items received such high ratings from the low-anxiety group. This indicates that students with higher levels of anxiety were more likely to view multiple classroom situations as stress-inducing.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the responses of low, moderately and highly anxious participants to 28 items on the FLSAS

Item No	Min.	Max.	Median	Min.	Max.	Median	Min.	Max.	Med.
1. I feel anxious while speaking English in class	1	2	1	1	5	4	1	5	4
2. I feel less nervous about speaking in English in front of others when I know them. (+)	3	4	4	1	5	4	4	5	5
3. I feel very relaxed about speaking in English class when I study the planned contents before the class. (+)	3	5	3.5	2	5	4	4	5	5
4. I am anxious in class when I am the only person answering the question asked by my teacher in English class. (+)	1	2	1	1	5	3	4	5	5
5. In English class I start to panic when I know I will be graded in oral activities.	1	1	1	1	5	4	5	5	5
6*. I fear giving a wrong answer while answering questions in English class.	1	1	1	1	5	3	1	5	5
7. I enjoy English class when I know that we are going to discuss in English. (-)	1	4	4	1	5	3	1	5	5
8. I feel very embarrassed when I speak in English at the front of the class. (+)	1	2	2	1	5	3	1	5	5
9. Because of being corrected by my teacher, I am afraid of going to the speaking class. (+)	1	1	1	1	5	3	3	5	5
10. I feel nervous when I take part in a group discussion in class. (+)	1	3	2	1	5	3	3	5	5
11. I think my classmates speak English better than me, I am nervous about speaking in oral activities.	1	2	1	1	5	3	1	5	4
12. I worry about oral presentation tests in English.	1	4	2.5	1	5	4	2	5	4
13. I would feel better about speaking in English if the class were smaller. (+)	1	4	4	2	5	4	1	5	4
14. I get anxious when I cannot express my thoughts effectively while speaking English	1	2	1.5	1	5	4	3	5	4
15. I am more willing to speak in English class when I know the scheduled oral activities. (+)	1	4	3.5	1	5	4	3	5	4
16*. I feel relaxed in pair-work activities (-)	1	3	1.5	1	5	3	4	5	5
17*. I like going to class when I know that oral tasks are going to be performed. (-)	1	4	2.5	1	5	3	4	5	4
18*. I know that everyone makes mistakes while speaking in English, so I am not afraid of being laughed at by others. (-)	1	4	2.5	1	5	3	4	5	4
19*. I like to volunteer answers in English class. (-)	1	1	1	1	5	3	1	5	4
20. I am more willing to get involved in class when the topics are interesting. (+)	3	4	4	2	5	4	1	5	4
21. I don't feel tense in oral tests if I get more practice speaking in class. (+)	1	4	2	1	5	4	1	5	3
22. I feel uncomfortable when my teacher asks other students to correct my oral practice in class. (+)	1	4	1	1	5	3	4	5	3
23*. I do not feel pressure when my teacher corrects my oral mistakes in class. (-)	1	4	3.5	1	5	2	1	5	3
24. Gong to English conversation class makes me more nervous than going to other class.	1	4	1.5	1	5	1	4	5	5
25. I worry about oral presentation tests in English class.	1	4	1.5	1	5	1	3	5	5
26. I feel nervous in group work activities. (+)	1	4	2.5	1	5	2.5	3	5	5
27*. During an oral test, I do not feel nervous. (-)	3	4	3.9	1	5	4	2	5	5
28. Even if I am well prepared for the planned contents, I feel anxious about speaking English. (+)	1	2	1	1	5	2	3	5	5

* The items which were reversely scored.

For the purpose of analysis, only items that met certain response thresholds were considered. Specifically, for the moderately anxious group, items with an agreement rate (agree/strongly agree) of 50% or more were selected. For the highly anxious group, items with a combined agreement/disagreement rate of 70% or higher were included in the analysis. Items reflecting facilitating conditions (such as items 2, 3, 13, 15, 20, and 21) were excluded, since they do not directly represent sources of anxiety. The subsequent table summarizes the items selected for examining both moderate and high levels of anxiety.

Table 2: Median scores and percentages of the responses to the items that were chosen to analyze for the two anxiety levels

Moderately anxious				**Highly anxious**			
	Item Number	Median	%		Item Number	Median	%
14.	I got anxious when I cannot express my thoughts effectively while speaking English.	4.00	73.3	5.	In English class, I start to panic when I know I will be graded in oral activities.	4.00	93.3
27*.	During an oral presentation test, I do not feel nervous.	4.00	65.6	27*.	During an oral presentation test, I do not feel nervous.	4.00	87
12.	I worry about oral presentation test in English.	4.00	62.2	1.	I feel anxious while speaking English in class.	4.00	78.4
1.	I feel anxious while speaking English in class.	4.00	59.7	11.	If I think my class mates speaking English better than me, I am nervous about speaking in oral activities.	4.00	84
				14.	I get anxious when I cannot express my thoughts effectively while speaking English.	4.00	82
				25.	I stumble when I answer questions in English.	4.00	80.3
				12.	I worry about oral tests in English class	4.00	78.4
				6.	I fear giving a wrong answer while answering questions in English class.	4.00	74
				24.	Going to English conversation class makes me more nervous than going to other class.	4.00	71.4

* The items which were reversely scored

Considering the finding in table 2, when the data from the highly anxious group were examined, nine major classroom situations emerged as significant triggers of speaking anxiety.

The highest-rated causes were linked to oral examinations, particularly being graded during oral activities (item 5) and oral tests in general (item 27). This was further reinforced by responses to item 12, which also addressed oral presentations.

Another common factor was general classroom speaking anxiety (item 1), as many students expressed unease when required to speak in front of others. Related to this, several participants reported discomfort about conversation classes (item 24) and about answering questions during class discussions (item 25).

Comparison with others also surfaced as an important issue. Responses to item 11 revealed that students often felt anxious when they believed their classmates spoke better English than they did. Similarly, item 14 indicated that students' self-assessment of their speaking ability influenced their confidence, with negative self-evaluation leading to heightened anxiety. Finally, item 6 reflected the fear of giving an incorrect answer, which can be associated with the fear of negative evaluation.

For the moderately anxious group, four main situations were identified, all of which overlapped with those of the highly anxious students. The most significant was difficulty in expressing ideas effectively (item 14). Oral tests (items 27 and 12) were also major concerns, along with general anxiety about speaking in class (item 1).

Taken together, the results suggest that both moderately and highly anxious learners are influenced by four central factors: oral examinations, self-assessment of speaking ability, comparison with peers, and fear of negative evaluation. Items such as 1, 24, and 25 were considered broader indicators of general speaking anxiety rather than distinct categories.

In order to check the correlation between speaking achievement and speaking anxiety, the scattered plot was used. The scattered plot is a plot that is used to check the relation of two variables.

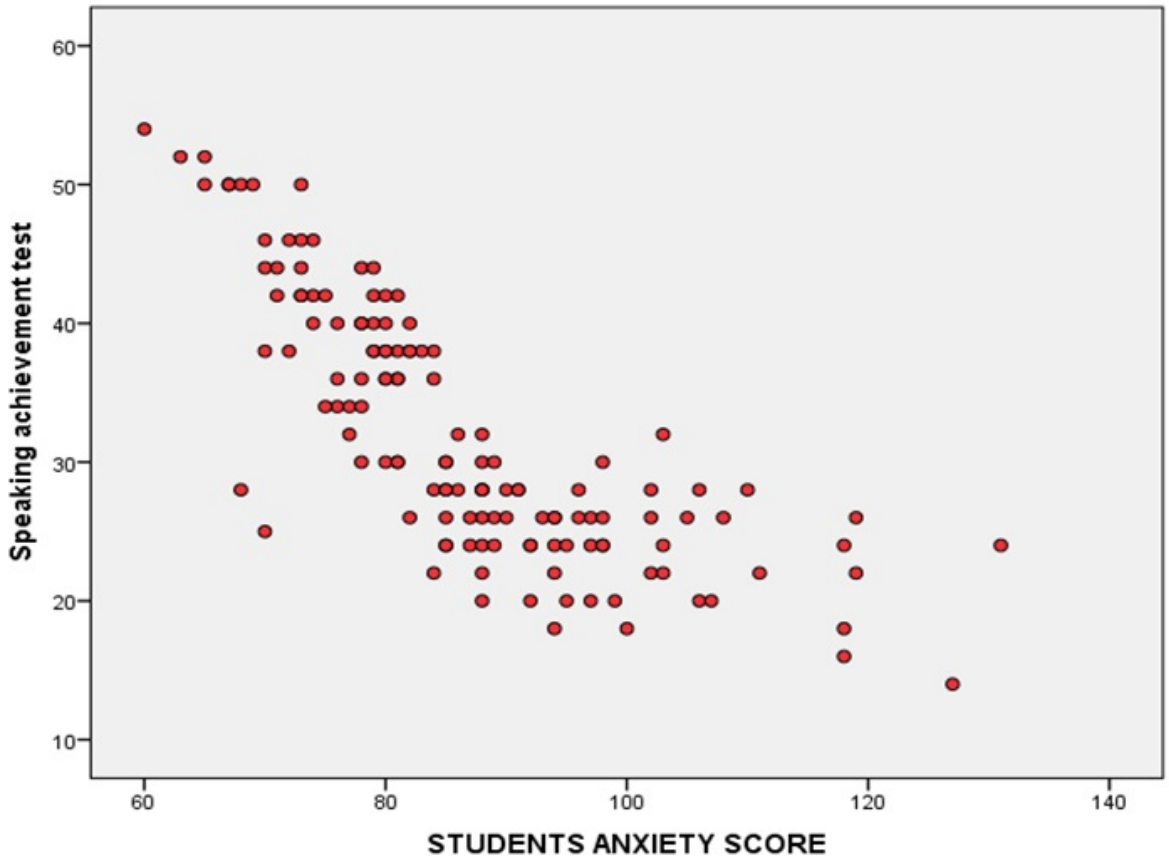

Figure 1: Descriptive statistics of male and female on the result of achievement and anxiety

The scatter plot illustrates a clear negative relationship between speaking test performance and foreign language speaking anxiety across the sample. Students who obtained higher scores on the speaking comprehension test (displayed on the vertical axis or 'y') generally showed lower levels of anxiety (represented on the horizontal axis or 'x'). Conversely, students with lower achievement scores tended to report higher levels of speaking anxiety. The pattern in the plot demonstrates that as one variable (speaking test score) increases, the other (anxiety score) decreases. In other words, lower test performance is associated with greater anxiety. This trend confirms the presence of a negative correlation between the two measures, justifying the use of a Pearson product-moment correlation to analyze their relationship.

Table 3: Correlation coefficient between language anxiety and English speaking achievement

Students anxiety score	Pearson Correlation	1	-.759**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	135	135
Speaking proficiency test	Pearson Correlation	-.759**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	135	135

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Based on Table 3, the correlation coefficient was found to be -.759, which is statistically significant at the 0.05 level. This negative correlation suggests that higher levels of anxiety are associated with lower achievement. In statistical terms, when the correlation is negative and the significance level falls below the threshold, it implies that anxiety has a detrimental effect on students' performance. The present study confirmed that anxiety hinders the achievement of grade 12 students, a result consistent with previous research in this area.

The third research question examined whether male and female students differ significantly in their speaking anxiety and performance. To address this, an independent samples t-test was employed. Table 4 indicated that the mean and standard deviation for male students' anxiety level was 100.57 and 14.82. The mean and standard.

Table 4: Descriptive statistics of independent samples t-test

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Anxiety score of male	61	80	171	100.57	14.826
Speaking proficiency test of male	61	20	52	33.44	8.680
Anxiety score of female	74	75.00	142.00	102.6757	14.19831
Speaking proficiency test of female	74	14.00	54.00	30.9595	9.67760

Table 4, indicated that the mean and standard deviation for male students' anxiety level was 100.57 and 14.82. The mean and standard deviation for female students' anxiety level was 102.67 and 14.19. The mean and standard deviation for male students' speaking achievement was 33.44 and 8.68. The mean and standard deviation for female students' speaking achievement was 30.95 and 9.67.

Table 5: Independent samples t-test of males and females in tests of speaking achievement and anxiety of speaking

Independent Samples Test										
		Lerner's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	Df.	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% CI of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Students anxiety score	Equal variances assumed	.259	.612	-.839	133	.403	-2.102	2.505	-7.057	2.853
	Equal variances not assumed			-.836	125.879	.405	-2.102	2.516	-7.080	2.876

As shown in Table 5, the t-test value for anxiety level is -.848, and the significant value is .398. The t-test value for achievement is 1.579, and the significant value is .117. Since the significant value for both anxiety and achievement is greater than .05, it can be concluded that there is no statistically significant difference between male and female students' anxiety level and achievement.

4 Discussions

The first research question aimed to identify the main sources of speaking anxiety. The results indicated four broad factors contributing to students' anxiety: oral presentation tests, self-evaluation of their speaking ability, comparisons with peers, and fear of negative judgment. These outcomes are consistent with the works of Horwitz *et al*. (1986) and MacIntyre & Gardner (1994), who argued that language anxiety plays a significant role in triggering students' negative emotions toward language learning. The results also align with Horwitz and Cope (1986), who emphasized that focusing on the oral component of language forces students to comprehend what others say and attempt to express themselves in the target language. Nevertheless, because English is the medium of learning, the demand for communicative competence creates notable challenges, especially for anxious learners.

The second research question examined the relationship between students' speaking anxiety and their speaking performance. Findings revealed a strong negative correlation between the two variables, showing that higher anxiety is associated with lower achievement. This result mirrors the conclusions of Horwitz (1986) and MacIntyre & Gardner (1994), who reported that foreign language anxiety produces unfavorable emotional responses in learners. It also supports Horwitz and Cope's (1986) claim that focusing on spoken aspects of language requires students to process what others say while articulating their own thoughts in English an expectation that becomes especially demanding for those experiencing high levels of anxiety.

The third research question investigated whether gender differences exist in speaking anxiety and performance. The analysis showed no statistically significant difference between male and female students regarding either variable. This finding corroborates Hassan (2009), who likewise observed that gender does not significantly influence speaking anxiety or achievement levels.

5 Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the primary causes of speaking anxiety and to explore its relationship with speaking performance among grade 12 students at Hawassa Addis Ketema. The findings identified four main sources of anxiety: oral examinations, peer comparison, self-evaluation of speaking ability, and fear of negative assessment. Students' responses to the questionnaire further revealed that linguistic challenges (such as pronunciation difficulties and limited vocabulary), teachers' approaches, and large class sizes also contributed to their speaking anxiety in this context. Since anxiety is recognized as a critical factor influencing second language learning, its negative impact on students' language performance has long been acknowledged. Therefore, reducing speaking anxiety is essential to improving learners' oral performance.

The results also demonstrated a strong negative relationship between students' speaking anxiety and their speaking achievement, with a correlation coefficient of .759, which was statistically significant at the 0.05 level. Regarding gender, the analysis showed that female students exhibited slightly higher anxiety levels (.403) compared to males (.405). However, this variation was not statistically significant.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Ethical approval

Consent was sought form the research participants. Confidentiality was maintained in reporting information.

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