

FOREIGN LANGUAGE ANXIETY AND LEARNER AUTONOMY IN EFL IMPROMPTU SPEAKING

Cicih Kurniasih¹, Muh. Aprianto Budie Nugroho²

English Education Study Program
Faculty of Teacher Training and Education
Universitas Kuningah
ckurniasih@gmail.com¹

ABSTRACT

Penelitian kualitatif ini mengkaji bagaimana pembelajar EFL (English as a Foreign Language) di Indonesia mengalami *Foreign Language Anxiety* (FLA) ketika melakukan tugas berbicara secara spontan (*impromptu speaking*) serta bagaimana mereka mengatasinya secara mandiri. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur terhadap 13 siswa SMA dari SMAN 2 Kuningan dan dianalisis secara kualitatif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa FLA dalam konteks berbicara spontan ini terutama dipicu oleh rasa takut terhadap penilaian dari teman sebaya, bukan dari guru, serta termanifestasi dalam bentuk hambatan kognitif dan gejala fisiologis. Sebagai respons terhadap kecemasan tersebut, para pembelajar menunjukkan spektrum pembelajaran mandiri (*self-directed learning*) yang beragam, mulai dari strategi proaktif hingga resistensi pasif, serta mengembangkan teknik regulasi diri alami. Temuan penelitian ini mengindikasikan adanya hubungan yang dinamis, di mana kecemasan dapat berfungsi sebagai pemicu maupun penghambat pembelajaran mandiri. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa lingkungan kelas yang suportif serta pelatihan strategi yang eksplisit sangat diperlukan untuk menumbuhkan otonomi belajar sebagai mekanisme penting dalam mengatasi kecemasan berbicara.

Kata kunci: kecemasan berbahasa asing, otonomi pembelajar, berbicara secara spontan, ketakutan evaluasi negatif, pembelajar EFL Indonesia

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores how Indonesian EFL learners experience Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) when doing impromptu speaking task and how they independently overcome it. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 13 high school students from SMAN 2 Kuningan and was analyzed qualitatively. The findings showed that FLA in this impromptu speaking context, students was primarily triggered by fear of peer evaluation, rather than teacher evaluation, and they were manifested as cognitive barriers and physiological symptoms. In response, learners demonstrated a spectrum of self-directed learning, ranging from proactive strategies to passive resistance, and developed natural self-regulation techniques. The findings indicate a dynamic relationship in which anxiety can either trigger or inhibit self-directed learning. The study concludes by emphasizing the need for a supportive classroom environment and explicit strategy training to foster learner autonomy as an important mechanism for coping with speaking anxiety. The study emphasizes that a supportive learning environment and explicit strategy instruction play a crucial role in developing learner autonomy for managing speaking anxiety.

Keywords: foreign language anxiety (FLA), learner autonomy, impromptu speaking, fear of negative evaluation, indonesian efl learners

INTRODUCTION

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) has long been recognized as a major affective factor that hinders the acquisition of speaking skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. The concept of FLA, defined as "a feeling of nervousness and specific concerns related to the context of foreign language learning" (Horwitz et al., 1986), often peaks in situations that demand spontaneity, such as impromptu speaking activities. Impromptu speaking, or speaking spontaneously without preparation, is a form of academic activity that requires learners to suddenly formulate and convey their thoughts in the target language. This activity often takes the form of short presentations, responses to sudden questions, or participation in unstructured discussions. Its main pedagogical objectives are to train fluency, spontaneity, and communicative adaptability by simulating real-world conversation conditions where time for planning is very limited (Zahro' et al., 2025).

At the same time, learners' ability to regulate and direct their own learning process, known as autonomous learning (Holec, 1981), becomes crucial as a coping mechanism for dealing with these psychological challenges.

Recent studies in the Indonesian context have consistently revealed the complexity of speech problems and anxiety faced by students. Studies show that speaking difficulties are not only linguistic in nature (such as vocabulary and grammar) but are greatly influenced by psychological factors such as shyness, fear of making mistakes, and lack of confidence (Ghafar & Raheem, 2023; Kondo & Ratuwongo, 2023; Kusumastuti & Utami, 2022). More specifically, in the context of impromptu speaking, students' anxiety manifests itself in the form of nervousness, fear of negative judgement, and feelings of unpreparedness (Maulida et al., 2024; Shalehah & Rahmawati, 2025). On the other hand, it was found that students naturally develop various coping strategies to overcome these psychological problems, such as relaxation, positive thinking, and seeking peer support (Bagaskara, 2024). These strategies are inherently a manifestation of Autonomous Learning or self-regulation in learning.

However, there is a significant gap in the existing literature. The majority of previous studies, as identified in the analysis document, tend to focus on identifying and listing the factors that cause anxiety or difficulty speaking separately (Geria, 2022; Jon et al., 2022). Meanwhile, in-depth and integrative qualitative explorations of how the subjective experience of FLA is experienced, developed, and dynamically overcome through students' own Autonomous Learning strategies are still very limited. In other words, there is still little research that specifically delves into students' personal narratives to understand the dialectical relationship between anxiety pressure in impromptu speaking situations and their agency practices in managing learning.

This study aims to: 1) describe students' experiences of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) in the context of impromptu speaking and 2) identify the Autonomous Learning strategies used by students in coping with FLA in the context of impromptu speaking.

This study is significant in contributing to a richer understanding of the dynamic interaction between affective factors (AF) and self-regulation capacity (Autonomous Learning) in language learning, while also testing the relevance of theoretical frameworks such as Garrison's Self-Directed Learning model (1997) in the local context. Practically or pedagogically, the research findings will provide an empirical "map" of students' experiences of anxiety and natural coping strategies. This can serve as a basis for teachers to design more empathetic interventions, develop contextualized independent learning strategy training, and create a more psychologically supportive classroom environment.

METHOD

This study utilized a descriptive qualitative approach with a single case study design to explore the complexity of students' subjective experiences (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2018). Participants consisted of 13 high school students in SMAN 2 Kuningan who were purposively selected based on their experiences in impromptu speaking tasks. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews focusing on experiences of anxiety

(FLA) and strategies for overcoming it. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis was conducted thematically (Thematic Analysis) following the stages outlined namely: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) initial coding, (3) theme searching, (4) theme review, (5) theme definition, and (6) report writing. The analysis process produced main themes related to the manifestation of FLA and Autonomous Learning strategies. Credibility was maintained through member checking and thematic discussions. Research ethics principles were applied by obtaining participant consent and ensuring the confidentiality of their identities and data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Subjective Experience of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) in Impromptu Speaking

Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed that all participants (N=13) experienced varying degrees of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) when performing impromptu speaking. This anxiety manifested clearly in the three core components of Horwitz et al.'s (1986) framework, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Manifestations of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) in Impromptu Speaking

FLA Component	Sub-Themes Emerging from the Data	Number of Participants (n = 13)	Key Quote Examples (Extract)
Communication Apprehension	Vocabulary Constraints	12	Extract 1
	Grammar and sentence formulation barriers	11	Extract 2, 3
	Interference from native language thinking patterns (SPOK structure)	7	Extract 3

Fear of Negative Evaluation	Fear of being judged or ridiculed by peers	11	Extract 4, 5
	Pressure from friends with higher speaking skills	9	Extract 5
	Concerns about assessment in the digital realm (video recordings)	3	Extract 6
Test/Performance Anxiety	Initial reaction of shock or surprise	9	Extract 7
	Physiological symptoms (e.g., palpitations, excessive sweating)	10	Extract 8
	Cognitive symptoms: blank mind or loss of ideas	11	Extract 9

Cognitive and Linguistic Barriers in Spontaneous Communication

The component of communication apprehension does not only manifest as general nervousness when communicating, but specifically results in an inability to access and process the language system in real time. The majority of participants (12 out of 13) reported that vocabulary gaps and grammatical uncertainty were the main obstacles. They described a mental process that was stilted and fragmented, in which attempts to retrieve words took place under considerable time pressure. This situation not only hindered fluency, but also significantly reinforced negative perceptions of perceived incompetence.

Furthermore, the analysis revealed that first language thinking patterns (L1) as a cognitive factor that exacerbates anxiety. Some participants realized that they were still "locked" into the

Indonesian sentence structure (S-P-O-K) and had to perform a complex mental translation process before speaking. This process not only consumed valuable cognitive time, but also created a layered fear of grammatical errors that could embarrass them.

Extract 1 (S9): "The first one was definitely a huge shock. Then usually the answers are slow because I have to think about the vocabulary first. I don't have a large vocabulary, so the difficulty is in the vocabulary."

Extract 2 (S4): "What I feel is that I have difficulty finding the words. Like, 'What's the English for this?' So it's a bit difficult and I need time to think first. I don't grasp it immediately."

Extract 3 (S6): "I'm still stuck with Indonesian grammar... I try to construct sentences, but I construct them using Indonesian grammar. So I'm afraid the grammar will be wrong."

Fear of Negative Judgement from Peers

The most consistent and striking finding in this study was the shift in the main source of affective pressure from authority figures (teachers) to peers. A total of 11 out of 13 participants explicitly identified fear of judgement, ridicule, or social comparison from their classmates as the biggest trigger of anxiety. Impromptu speaking situations that are public and open make every linguistic mistake very obvious, thereby increasing students' social vulnerability.

This anxiety intensifies in classroom environments that are perceived as having heterogeneous and competitive competencies. Participants who felt they were in a class with high-achieving students ("the best class") reported higher levels of pressure because they were worried that their performance would be judged as inadequate compared to the group standard. This phenomenon even extends to the realm of digital learning, where speaking assignments recorded on video give rise to concerns about negative comments that are permanent and can be repeated (digital footprint of failure).

Extract 4 (S3): "I'm most afraid of my friends."

Extract 5 (S11): "The thing is, my class happens to be considered the best class in the year. So all the smart kids are gathered there. If I have to speak spontaneously, I'm actually afraid. I'm afraid of making mistakes in front of them."

Extract 6 (S5): "If I'm asked to speak English for a video, I'm actually afraid, because if I make a mistake, my friends will comment on it."

Symptoms of Anxiety and Their Impact on Performance

The impromptu speaking situation was clearly perceived by almost all participants as a high-stakes performance test, rather than just a routine exercise. This perception triggered anxiety responses that followed a predictable pattern of escalation. The most common initial reaction is "surprise" or "shock", reflecting the mismatch between the sudden demands of the task and the students' mental preparedness.

From this initial psychological response, anxiety then manifests physiologically. Symptoms such as a racing heart ("palpitations"), sweating ("perspiration"), and feelings of tension ("tightness") were reported by many participants. These physiological symptoms are not merely emotional responses, but further disrupt cognitive function. This disruption peaks in the most frequently reported symptom: a "blank" or "mind going blank" condition, which is a sudden loss of access to vocabulary, ideas, or logical flow. This sequential pattern of shock → physiological symptoms → cognitive blankness shows how impromptu situational pressure can quickly debilitate students' speaking capacity, creating a cycle of failure that can reinforce FLA in the future.

Extract 7 (S5): "I was shocked. But I had no choice but to answer... When I think about how to construct the sentence, I find it difficult..."

Extract 8 (S8): "What I feel is like I'm completely blank... So I stop talking and try to remember again."

Extract 9 (S7): "Honestly, I feel nervous and scared because I don't have a large vocabulary yet. Sometimes I go blank too."

Capacity and Strategies for Autonomous Learning in Facing FLA

Research findings reveal that students respond to FLA in impromptu speaking with varying levels and forms of autonomous learning capacity. This capacity is not a dichotomy, but rather a spectrum that varies from proactive to responsive and even resistant strategies. Based on the three-dimensional interactions in Garrison's (1997) model: self-management, self-monitoring, and self-motivation, participants can be classified into five main profiles, as summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Profiles and Autonomous Learning Strategies in Responding to FLA

Learner Profile	Primary Dimension (Garrison, 1997) & Characteristics	Number of Participants (n=13)	Key Quote Examples (Extract)
Proactive Autonomous Learners	Strong self-management and self-monitoring. Anticipate anxiety with strategic planning (e.g., making notes, finding independent learning resources). View tasks as manageable challenges.	4	Extract 10, 11
Reactive Learners	Limited and situational self-management and self-monitoring.	3	Extract 12, 13

Learner Profile	Primary Dimension (Garrison, 1997) & Characteristics	Number of Participants (n=13)	Key Quote Examples (Extract)
Dependent Learners	Responding to anxiety in real-time with simple emotion regulation strategies (e.g., taking deep breaths, code-mixing). Strategies are reactive, not anticipatory.	3	Extract 14, 15
Resistant Learners	Low self-management, dependent on external structure. Primary strategies involve memorizing full scripts or requesting direct assistance. Minimal self-regulation initiative and highly dependent on teacher/peer support.	2	Extract 16

Learner Profile	Primary Dimension (Garrison, 1997) & Characteristics	Number of Participants (n=13)	Key Quote Exam ples (Extract)
	Tend to be passive and lack clear coping strategies.		
Resilient Learner	Self-motivation & adaptive self-management. Maintaining motivation and using creative socio-affective self-regulations (e.g., humor) to manage pressure despite being aware of competency limitations.	1	Extract 17

Spectrum of Independent Learning Capacity

Analysis shows a wide variation in students' self-directed learning capacity, forming a spectrum of responses to FLA. This spectrum reflects differences in mastery of the three key dimensions of self-directed learning according to Garrison (1997): self-management, self-monitoring, and self-motivation.

At the most effective end of the spectrum, proactive learners demonstrate a strong integration of strategic planning (self-management) and metacognitive awareness (self-monitoring). They not only respond to anxiety, but actively anticipate it by preparing a framework for thinking before speaking tasks. Their initiative goes beyond classroom requirements, seeking out independent learning resources to build confidence. This strategy reflects the perception that impromptu

speaking is a challenge that can be controlled through preparation.

Extract 10 (S4): "I'm usually spontaneous, but I still write down the important points first. So, like, what I want to discuss. Then, during the presentation, I just elaborate on those points."

Extract 11 (S9): "At home, I read English journals and do exercises from the internet. That's what I usually do."

Responsive learners are in the middle of the spectrum. Their self-management and self-monitoring capacities are situational and more limited, activated mainly when anxiety arises. Their strategies focus on emotional regulation and real-time linguistic adaptation to stabilize their psychological state at that moment. Although they show initiative, these strategies are less anticipatory and more of a direct mitigation effort.

Extract 12 (S1): "Try to relax, take a breath, enjoy a drink."

Extract 13 (S7): "Be quiet for a moment. Then try to speak a little bit in English, adding Indonesian as well, mixing the two languages."

Meanwhile, dependent learners show a high dependence on external structures. Their self-management is minimal, with their main strategy being to memorize entire scripts, an approach that is contrary to the demands of spontaneity. This low level of independence makes them very dependent on validation and direct assistance from teachers or friends, demonstrating extrinsic self-motivation.

Extract 14 (S2): "It has to be memorized, Miss. Sometimes I write it down first... Then when I'm ready, I speak based on those notes."

Extract 15 (S5): "It has to be written down and memorized first."

At the less empowered end of the spectrum, resistant learners describe a condition in which FLA has paralyzed their capacity for learning agency. The three dimensions of independent

learning, self-management, self-monitoring, and self-motivation are virtually non-existent, replaced by internalized feelings of helplessness. The absence of clear strategies reflects a cycle of passivity that reinforces anxiety.

Extract 16 (S13): "Overcoming it... **I don't know, Ma'am.** But yes, I can overcome it even though I don't know how."

Separately, one participant demonstrated a unique resilient learner profile. Despite being aware of their limited competencies, strong self-motivation and adaptability enabled them to develop creative socio-affective strategies, such as using humor, to manage pressure and maintain engagement in tasks.

Extract 17 (S12): "I usually mix it up with jokes."

Naturally Developed Self-Regulation Strategies

Regardless of their position on the spectrum of independent capacity, most students organically develop and apply various self-regulation strategies to cope with FLA. These strategies, which are socio-affective, practical metacognitive, and compensatory in nature, are generally not taught formally, but arise from direct experience and personal experimentation in dealing with the pressure of spontaneous speaking.

Practical socio-affective and metacognitive strategies are widely used to manage internal and external environments. These include self-calming techniques (self-talk, deep breathing), manipulating focus to reduce social threats, and using humor as a coping mechanism. These strategies serve as tools for regulating emotional states and creating psychological safety in stressful situations.

Extract 18 (S6): "If I focus on a certain person, I get scared. But if I don't want to focus on them, then I just ignore them. So I focus on my close friends to make myself more comfortable." (Metacognitive strategy: regulating attention focus)

On the other hand, compensatory strategies and resource management are used to directly address

linguistic limitations. Students utilize resources around them, such as song lyrics, films, or the internet to increase their exposure to and informal practice of the language. They also engage in code-mixing as a communication bridge to maintain the flow of conversation when their English vocabulary or grammar is limited.

Extract 19 (S11): "I like singing, Miss. Sometimes I look at the lyrics on my mobile phone. From there, I start to memorize the words little by little." (Resource management strategy: learning through hobbies)

These findings emphasize that students, in their diverse capacities, are not passive recipients of anxiety. They are active agents who strive to regulate their learning and psychological conditions. However, there are critical differences in the independence and sustainability of these strategies. Reactive and dependent strategies tend to merely alleviate temporary symptoms of anxiety, while proactive strategies based on planning and resource management have greater potential to build long-term resilience to FLA.

This study reveals the dynamic relationship between Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) and Autonomous Learning in the context of impromptu speaking. The findings confirm and add new nuances to the existing theoretical framework, with important implications for pedagogical practice in the Indonesian context.

FLA in Spontaneous Pressure: Cognitive Load and Social Pressure

Findings confirm that impromptu speaking situations activate all three components of FLA (Horwitz et al., 1986), but with specific characteristics. First, Communication Apprehension manifests primarily as acute cognitive load. Tight time constraints simultaneously burden the processes of word retrieval, grammar construction, and speech production, which is consistent with the concept of high cognitive load in spontaneous oral tasks (Skehan, 1998). This explains why symptoms of blanking or mind blanks, as a form of working memory access failure, are the most commonly reported manifestations of anxiety.

Secondly, consistent findings indicate that the primary source of Fear of Negative Evaluation is peers, not teachers. This phenomenon reinforces the findings of Maulida et al. (2024) and provides a new emphasis, shifting the general narrative in the literature. In the collective social context of Indonesia, the pressure to save face and gain group acceptance appears to have a stronger affective impact than evaluation by authority figures (Kondo & Ratuwongo, 2023). This situation becomes even more complex when students feel that their competence is below the class average, creating feelings of inferiority and exacerbating anxiety (Ghafar & Raheem, 2023). Thus, FLA in an impromptu context is not only psychological-individual in nature, but also a social phenomenon shaped by the dynamics of inter-student relationships in the classroom.

Learning Autonomy as a Spectrum of Responses

Findings regarding student strategies support Garrison's (1997) model that independent learning is a dynamic interaction between self-management, self-monitoring, and self-motivation. More importantly, this study shows that the capacity for autonomy is not a dichotomy, but rather a spectrum. This spectrum ranges from proactive students who are able to anticipate anxiety through strategic planning and seeking independent learning resources to resistant students, where anxiety has turned into passivity and feelings of helplessness, which is in line with Bagaskara's (2024) findings on long-term psychological effects.

In the middle of the spectrum are responsive and dependent students. Although they show initiative in self-regulation, their strategies, such as deep breathing or code-mixing, tend to be reactive and unstructured. However, the emergence of various natural strategies, such as code-mixing, attention focus regulation, and the use of digital media, shows that students actively strive to be agents in their own learning, albeit with varying capacities and metacognitive awareness. These practices reflect independent efforts to manage the learning environment and emotions, as also identified in studies on Indonesian students' independent learning practices (Sabilla & Kaniadewi, 2025; Surani et al., 2023).

The Dynamic Interaction between Anxiety and Autonomy

The relationship between FLA and Autonomous Learning is mutually influential and not static. For students with proactive and resilient profiles, feelings of anxiety can actually serve as a trigger that mobilizes self-management strategies. This mechanism is supported by adequate motivation and self-efficacy, so that challenges are perceived as surmountable.

Conversely, for students with dependent and resistant profiles, high FLA acts as an inhibitor that paralyzes initiative. Intense anxiety narrows the cognitive resources needed for planning and self-evaluation, creating a negative cycle: anxiety reduces agency, and low agency reinforces anxiety. These findings underscore the importance of self-perception and mindset as determining factors. Students who view difficulties as part of a learning process that can be developed (growth mindset) tend to respond with more adaptive strategies.

Implications for Theory and Teaching

Theoretically, this study enriches our understanding of FLA by demonstrating the unique dominance of peer pressure in the Indonesian context and the diversity of learning agency manifestations through the lens of autonomy. The finding that students' natural coping strategies are a form of self-regulation supports a stronger integration between the study of affective factors in language learning and the theory of self-directed learning and self-regulation in educational psychology (Khotimah et al., 2023).

Pedagogically, the following implications can be considered:

1. **Building a Supportive Classroom Climate:** Since peer pressure is a dominant source of FLA (Ghafar & Raheem, 2023; Kondo & Ratuwongo, 2023), the main intervention should focus on reconstructing classroom norms to be more collaborative and reducing the threat of social judgement. Techniques such as structured peer assessment and joint classroom contract creation can build the psychological safety necessary for language risk-taking.

2. Explicit and Contextual Strategy Training: Teachers need to teach metacognitive and socio-affective strategies directly and contextually, especially for impromptu speaking (Oxford, 1990). Training in keyword note-taking, rapid brainstorming techniques, stalling devices, and breathing regulation can provide students with more effective cognitive and emotional "tools", converting natural reactive coping strategies into proactive learning strategies.
3. Differentiated Support Based on Autonomy Profiles: Recognizing the spectrum of student autonomy capacities (as identified through Garrison's model, 1997) enables more appropriate scaffolding. Proactive students can be facilitated with expanded learning resources. Responsive and dependent students require modelling and more structured scaffolding strategies. Meanwhile, the approach to resistant students needs to begin with a focus on building self-confidence and positive relationships to break the cycle of helplessness before emphasizing linguistic aspects (Bagaskara, 2024).
4. Integration of Informal Learning Resources: Digital-based independent learning practices and student hobbies (such as learning through films, songs, or online platforms) that have been carried out naturally need to be recognized, validated, and integrated into the formal learning framework (Surani et al., 2023). This not only enhances relevance and motivation but also optimizes and raises awareness of the self-management strategies students already possess.

CONCLUSION

This study seeks to uncover the dialectic between Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) and Autonomous Learning in the context of impromptu speaking among Indonesian EFL learners. Based on qualitative data analysis, it can be concluded that spontaneous speaking situations effectively trigger complex manifestations of FLA, with fear of negative evaluation from peers (Fear of Negative Evaluation) as the dominant component, rather than evaluation from teachers. This highlights the strong socio-affective dimension of language anxiety in the Indonesian context.

Meanwhile, students respond to this pressure with a spectrum of autonomous learning capacities, ranging from proactive to resistant, indicating that they are not passive recipients of anxiety but active agents who develop self-regulation strategies, albeit often in an unstructured manner. The relationship between FLA and autonomy is dynamic: anxiety can serve as a trigger for strategies for confident students, but also become a crippling obstacle for those with negative self-perceptions.

This study has several limitations, particularly in terms of generalization, as it uses a single case study design with a limited number of participants from one location, as well as its reliance on self-report data. For future research, it is recommended to expand the scope of the context and the number of participants, apply a mixed-methods or longitudinal approach to observe developments, and design and test specific pedagogical intervention models based on these findings to reduce FLA while fostering learning autonomy in the context of spontaneous speaking.

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