

Social Judgment and Its Effect on EFL Students' Confidence to Speak English in the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Confidence in speaking is a fundamental aspect of learning English as a foreign language (EFL); however, learners often experience anxiety triggered by the verbal feedback they receive during speaking activities. Although previous literature often highlights language anxiety in general, studies focusing specifically on how direct feedback affects students' confidence remain limited. This study investigates the effect of verbal feedback on the speaking confidence of students in the English Education Study Program at Brawijaya University. Using a descriptive qualitative design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically. The findings reveal that corrective feedback delivered directly and publicly can act as a cognitive disruptor, reducing focus and fluency while increasing fear of negative evaluation. Conversely, delayed, constructive, and supportive feedback can enhance students' confidence and willingness to communicate. This study concludes that the impact of verbal feedback is strongly determined by its timing, tone, and delivery, highlighting the importance of psychologically safe classroom interactions in developing EFL speaking skills.

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INTRODUCTION

A lot of EFL students have trouble speaking because they don't know enough words, the language structure is hard for them, or they are afraid of making mistakes. This condition shows that speaking is one of the most important skills for learning English as a foreign language (EFL). To speak English well, you need to be able to speak it well and be brave and confident enough to do so in front of others. Elisathusilawani (2023) asserts that the difficulties faced by EFL students in speaking arise not solely from linguistic constraints but also from psychological factors that inhibit their willingness to perform before an audience, indicating that linguistic proficiency is insufficient without corresponding mental preparedness for communication.

Ulpa et al., (2025) emphasize that how teachers think about helping students feel more confident in speaking is very important. This is because students who feel safe from negative judgment tend to be more willing to take risks when speaking. As a result, social evaluation in the classroom can significantly hinder the development of speaking skills. These findings are in line with research by (Elisathusilawani, 2023), which identified the main challenges faced by learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) in speaking classes, namely lack of confidence, pronunciation errors, and limited vocabulary, which are often exacerbated by social responses from classmates and instructors. Students who make mistakes are often ridiculed or criticized, which makes them more fearful and less willing to participate.

Bakhtiar & Suwandi (2022) also found that psychological factors like anxiety, shyness, and low self-confidence have a big effect on how well people speak. Learners with low self-confidence often refrain from speaking due to apprehension of negative evaluation, whereas those with high self-confidence exhibit a greater propensity to engage in communicative risks. These results support the idea that social evaluation is a major cause of speaking anxiety.

Moreover, Muzni & Aji Budiman (2021), in their studies of Social Judgment Theory, elucidate that social judgment is shaped by ego involvement, which affects the individual's process of accepting or rejecting messages. In the context of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in the classroom, this suggests that learners are more inclined to accept positive feedback that aligns with their self-perception, while they are likely to reject or perceive negative feedback as a threat when it is deemed inconsistent with their perceived competence. Thus, social evaluation influences not only the willingness to speak but also the learners' overall attitudes toward language acquisition.

In line with the findings of (Elisathusilawani, 2023), which indicate that the main challenges for EFL learners in speaking classes are lack of confidence, pronunciation errors, and limited vocabulary, which are often exacerbated by social reactions from the classroom environment. Students experienced anxiety when speaking due to fear of making mistakes and negative evaluation from peers and teachers, which often causes them to remain silent in class (Robiatul Adawiyah et al., 2021). When learners make mistakes, they are often laughed at or commented on, which increases their fear and reduces their participation. Bakhtiar & Suwandi (2022) also emphasize that psychological factors such as anxiety, embarrassment, and low self-confidence have a significant impact on speaking skills; learners with low self-confidence are more likely to avoid speaking for fear of negative judgment.

According to the research of (Elisathusilawani, 2023), the biggest problems EFL students have in speaking classes are not being confident, making mistakes in pronunciation, and having a limited vocabulary. These problems are often made worse by how other students react in the classroom. When students make mistakes, people often laugh at or talk about them, which makes them more scared and less likely to participate. Bakhtiar & Suwandi (2022), assert that psychological factors, including anxiety, embarrassment, and diminished self-confidence, profoundly influence speaking abilities; individuals with low self-confidence are predisposed to refrain from speaking due to apprehension of negative evaluation.

Therefore, the experience of EFL learners to speak due to fear of social judgment is not an isolated occurrence; it arises from the interplay of psychological factors (anxiety, self-confidence), social factors (peer judgment, teacher feedback), and pedagogical factors (learning strategies). Social evaluation significantly influences learners' emotional state and their willingness to use the target language.

This study aims to investigate the phenomenon of social judgment and its impact on EFL students' confidence in speaking English in the classroom. This study aims to identify the types of social evaluation that transpire during classroom interactions and to analyse the impact of these experiences on students' confidence in speaking English. These results are anticipated to offer guidance for educators and practitioners in fostering a more supportive and non-judgmental atmosphere, thereby enhancing students' confidence in English communication.

METHOD

This study used descriptive qualitative research that aims to understand social phenomena from the perspective of participants, rather than simply measuring numbers or statistical data (Creswell, 2014). This approach was chosen because this study aimed to understand the meaning, perceptions, and subjective experiences of students in facing social judgment and how this affects their confidence when speaking English in class. This method allows researchers to capture reality as it is without manipulating variables, so that students' experiences can be described naturally and in depth. Thus, this study focuses on students' authentic experiences and opinions, showing how they respond to social judgments from peers and lecturers, and how these experiences influence their courage to speak up.

Respondents

The participants in this study were 10 students of the English Education Study Program at Brawijaya University. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, based on their willingness to participate and share their experiences openly and in depth. Their

participation was invaluable, as it enabled researchers to obtain rich, relevant, and in-depth data related to the phenomenon under study.

Instruments

This study utilized semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are less organized than structured interviews, and their success is determined by how participants respond to questions or topics provided by researchers (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017). This research instrument adapts the FLCAS (Horwitz et al., 1986) to explore the dimensions of fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and test anxiety. In addition, two additional questions about coping strategies were added based on literature recommendations (Ulpa et al., 2025; Young, 1991) to enrich the qualitative data.

Procedures

The data collection process was carried out in several stages. First, the researcher conducted a pilot test with two respondents to assess the validity and reliability of the interview instrument. Second, after the instrument was deemed feasible, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten students selected through purposive sampling. The interviews were conducted face-to-face with due regard for research ethics, including providing information about the purpose of the research, obtaining participant consent, and recording data carefully. The interviews were recorded and transcribed to ensure data accuracy.

Data Analysis

The data obtained were analysed using thematic analysis techniques. The interview transcripts were read repeatedly to identify patterns, themes, and categories relevant to the research focus, namely social judgment and its influence on students' speaking performance in EFL classes. The analysis process was conducted inductively, by organizing the data into main themes that emerged from the participants' experiences. Thematic analysis was chosen because it was suitable for exploring students' subjective perceptions and experiences, and allowed researchers to interpret the meaning contained in their narratives (Malik et al., 2025).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Social Judgment as Cognitive Disruption

The findings indicate that social judgment operates as a cognitive disruptor during speaking performance. Participants described how peer reactions, such as smiling mockingly, whispering to friends, nudging classmates, or displaying dismissive facial expressions, immediately shifted their attention away from content delivery.

One participant explained:

"Well, that expression made me lose my focus, so I got even more nervous, and my speech became even more chaotic."

This statement illustrates that social evaluation does not merely create nervousness; it interferes with cognitive processing. The loss of focus suggests that students' working memory becomes overloaded by self-monitoring. Instead of organizing ideas and constructing sentences, attention is redirected toward interpreting audience reactions. Consequently, fluency decreases and speech becomes fragmented.

This finding aligns with the concept of fear of negative evaluation in the Foreign Language Anxiety framework proposed by Elaine K. Horwitz, where evaluative pressure leads to heightened self-consciousness and perceived performance decline. Importantly, the disruption described by participants reflects a perceived inability rather than actual lack of competence, indicating that social judgment affects self-perception more than linguistic knowledge itself.

Social Judgment as Identity Threat

Beyond performance anxiety, participants revealed that speaking English also involves social identity negotiation. One participant stated:

"Afraid of being laughed at, afraid of being called pretentious."

Here, the fear extends beyond grammatical errors. The phrase "sok Inggris" reflects anxiety about being perceived as pretentious or socially inappropriate. Thus, speaking English fluently may risk peer labelling or subtle social exclusion. This suggests that evaluation in EFL classrooms is not purely academic; it intersects with group belonging and social positioning.

Such findings expand existing literature (Elisathusilawani, 2023; Rifqi Bakhtiar & Suwandi, 2022) by demonstrating that anxiety emerges not only from linguistic inadequacy but also from identity-based stigma. Students regulate their participation to avoid social misinterpretation. In this sense, social judgment becomes a mechanism of social control within peer dynamics.

Social Judgment as Participation Regulator

The emotional and identity-based pressures described above frequently resulted in withdrawal behaviour. As one participant admitted:

"In the end, I just kept quiet more often and waited for other friends to be chosen."

This finding demonstrates a direct behavioural consequence of social judgment: reduced participation. Rather than risking embarrassment, students prefer silence. This avoidance pattern indicates that anxiety does not remain internal but shapes classroom interaction pattern. Another participant described experiencing an exaggerated sense of visibility:

"I felt all eyes were on me."

Although actual evaluation may have come from only a few individuals, the perception of being observed by everyone intensified self-consciousness. This spotlight effect magnified the emotional burden of speaking. As a result, classroom participation became a high-risk activity rather than a learning opportunity.

Public correction further amplified insecurity. One participant explained:

"The one who suddenly brings me down is the one who comments in front of a crowd."

Correction delivered publicly was interpreted as exposure rather than guidance. This supports the idea that evaluation can shift into what Social Judgment Theory describes as a latitude of rejection, where feedback is perceived as threatening and ego-involving.

Feedback as Emotional Regulator

Despite the negative effects described above, the data also reveal that evaluation can function as a confidence enhancer when delivered appropriately. Participants showed strong preference for delayed and constructive feedback:

"I prefer... if the feedback comes after we've finished talking."

Delayed feedback allows students to complete their thoughts without interruption, preserving cognitive flow and reducing embarrassment. This indicates that timing significantly influences how evaluation is interpreted.

Validation also emerged as a powerful moderating factor. One participant recalled:

"It's okay. You've got guts, you know."

Another emphasized the importance of validation:

"Probably like validation."

Recognition of effort, especially bravery in speaking shifted evaluation into the latitude of acceptance. Students felt acknowledged rather than judged. In line with (Ulpa et al., 2025), supportive feedback encourages risk-taking and strengthens speaking confidence.

Thus, evaluation itself is not inherently harmful. Its psychological impact depends on delivery, tone, and classroom climate. When framed constructively, feedback promotes growth. When framed publicly and critically, it reinforces fear and withdrawal. These statements indicate that acknowledgment of effort is more impactful than correction of error.

When bravery is recognized, evaluation shifts into the latitude of acceptance, strengthening self-efficacy and willingness to communicate.

The data therefore demonstrate a consistent pattern:

Micro-expressions (smiles, whispers, nudges) trigger self-doubt. Fear of social labelling intensifies anxiety.

Anxiety leads to cognitive disruption and avoidance behaviour.

Public correction amplifies ego threat.

Validation and delayed feedback restore confidence.

Taken together, these findings reinforce the framework of Foreign Language Anxiety while extending it by highlighting the social-identity dimension of evaluation. Social judgment in EFL classrooms operates not only as academic assessment but as a mechanism of social positioning. Students regulate their participation based on how safe or threatening that social space feels.

Thus, speaking confidence cannot be separated from classroom social climate. Linguistic competence alone is insufficient if students perceive the environment as evaluative and stigmatizing. A psychologically safe classroom, characterized by respectful peer interaction, delayed constructive feedback, and validation of effort transforms evaluation from a threat into a developmental resource.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that social judgment affects students primarily through psychological mechanisms: fear of negative evaluation, perceived ability decline, and self-comparison. While individual resilience and coping strategies moderate these effects, classroom atmosphere and feedback practices play a decisive role in shaping speaking confidence. These results highlight that improving EFL speaking performance requires attention not only to linguistic instruction but also to the emotional and social dynamics of classroom interaction.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that social judgment plays a multidimensional role in shaping EFL students' speaking confidence, functioning not merely as external evaluation but as a cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social force within classroom interaction. Peer reactions such as whispering, mocking smiles, or dismissive expressions act as cognitive disruptors, shifting students' attention from language production to self-monitoring, thereby causing loss of focus and fragmented speech—extending the concept of fear of negative evaluation by showing that anxiety arises not only from formal assessment but also subtle peer micro-expressions. Additionally, speaking anxiety is closely tied to social identity, as students fear being labeled “sok Inggris” or perceived as pretentious, indicating that English use is socially negotiated rather than purely academic. Social judgment also regulates participation, as anxiety leads to avoidance, silence, and reduced engagement; in line with Social Judgment Theory, negative feedback falls within students' latitude of rejection, increasing ego threat and withdrawal. However, when delivered constructively through delayed feedback, acknowledgment, and validation, evaluation can shift into the latitude of acceptance, fostering resilience and willingness to communicate. Thus, social judgment is not inherently harmful but depends on classroom climate and relational dynamics. Theoretically, this study positions social judgment as both a psychological and social mechanism mediating speaking confidence, while pedagogically it highlights the need for a safe, non-judgmental environment where mistakes are normalized and peer support is encouraged. Ultimately, speaking confidence cannot be separated from social climate; when evaluation becomes supportive rather than threatening, the classroom transforms into a space for growth. Nonetheless, the study is limited by its small sample size and single institutional context, suggesting that future research should involve more diverse participants, multiple settings, and possibly explore how digital environments influence social judgment in EFL classrooms.

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