

Understanding the Role of Cooperative Learning Groups in Reducing Speaking Anxiety among EFL Students

 <https://doi.org/10.31004/jele.v11i3.2424>

*Putri Alivia, Feri Ferdiyanto, Nina Agus Hariati^{abc} 

¹²³Zainul Hasan Genggong Islamic University, Indonesia.

Corresponding Author: Putrialivia2023@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the role of cooperative learning groups in reducing speaking anxiety among EFL students at SMPN 2 Gading. This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design involving 18 ninth-grade students selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through classroom observations, questionnaires, and documentation during three cooperative learning sessions. Data were analysed using thematic analysis based on the Miles and Huberman model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. The findings indicate that students initially experienced high levels of speaking anxiety, characterized by hesitation, low self-confidence, and fear of negative judgment. However, after participating in cooperative learning groups, students became more comfortable, active, and confident in speaking. The main factors contributing to the reduction in anxiety included peer support, sharing opinions, emotional comfort, frequent speaking practice, and shared responsibility. This study concludes that cooperative learning is an effective pedagogical strategy for reducing speaking anxiety and creating a supportive learning environment in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom.

Keywords: *Cooperative Learning, Speaking Anxiety, EFL Students, Speaking Skill, Qualitative Research.*

Article History:

Received 23th April 2026

Accepted 08th May 2026

Published 28th May 2026



INTRODUCTION

English is widely acknowledged as an international language that is essential for communication, education, and professional development in the age of globalization. In educational environments, English literacy is regarded as a critical skill that allows students to pursue greater academic possibilities and engage in global communication. Speaking is widely regarded as the most important of the four language skills because it represents students' capacity to use language in real-life situations. Brown (2023) defines speaking as an interactive process of meaning construction that includes information production, reception, and processing. Similarly, Harmer (2022) defines speaking as the ability to utilize words effectively in social situations. As a result, speaking is about more than just creating words; it is also about successfully and meaningfully communicating ideas to others. For EFL students, mastering speaking becomes a primary goal in language acquisition.

Speaking is sometimes seen as the most difficult ability to learn in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), owing to students' limited opportunities to utilize English outside the classroom. Unlike reading or listening, speaking requires learners to use vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and fluency all at once in spontaneous communication. According to Brown (2004) as cited by Ilham et al. (2024), speaking performance consists of numerous key components, including pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, fluency, and comprehension. Students who lack one or more of these components may hesitate or avoid communicating. As a result, even with adequate passive knowledge, many EFL students struggle to communicate ideas orally. This issue frequently results in limited classroom involvement and limits possibilities for speaking practice. As a result, students' communication skills may develop slowly.

Speaking is one of the most important skills in learning English, especially for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students. However, many students still experience speaking anxiety, which affects their ability to communicate effectively in the classroom. Students often feel afraid of making mistakes, being negatively evaluated, or being judged by others. As a result, they tend to be passive and lack confidence during speaking activities (Novela Ananda & Hastini, 2023). In addition, speaking skills play a crucial factor in developing students' communicative competence, allowing them to express ideas, share opinions, and interact with others in real-life situations. In the context of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), speaking skills are often considered one of the most challenging skills because they require not only linguistic knowledge but also confidence and fluency (Jalal et al., 2022). Therefore, mastering speaking skills is essential for students to communicate fluently in English.

Speaking constitutes a single of the most essential elements of learning English, particularly for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students. However, many students continue to feel speaking anxiety, limiting their ability to communicate successfully in the classroom. Students are frequently terrified of making mistakes, receiving unfavourable evaluations, or being judged by others. As a result, they tend to be passive and lack confidence during speaking activities (Novela Ananda & Hastini, 2023). Furthermore, speaking skills are essential for increasing students' communication competence since they allow them to convey ideas, exchange opinions, and engage with others in real-life circumstances. Speaking abilities are sometimes regarded as one of the most difficult aspects of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), as they demand not just linguistic understanding but also confidence and fluency. Thus, acquiring speaking abilities is critical for pupils to communicate fluently in English.

Speaking anxiety is one of the most significant factors influencing pupils' speaking performance. Speaking anxiety refers to feelings of fear, uneasiness, and tension that occur when speaking a foreign language orally (Parawangsa et al., 2024). Elaine Horwitz defines foreign language anxiety as a unique set of self-perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and behaviours associated with classroom language learning. This anxiety is manifested when kids are compelled to speak in front of professors or classmates. They may be terrified of making mistakes, getting laughed at, or receiving unfavourable feedback. As a result, children frequently avoid making eye contact, speaking quietly, or remaining silent during speaking activities. This psychological condition has a negative impact on their motivation and speaking performance.

Speaking anxiety has become a common issue that can hinder student participation and limit their opportunities to practice English. If not handled properly, the issue can negatively impact students' speaking skills and their overall language development (Liu, 2023). Furthermore, students who experience high levels of speaking anxiety tend to avoid participating in classroom activities. They may hesitate to answer questions, avoid speaking in front of the class, or rely heavily on their peers. This not only limits their opportunities to practice speaking but also slows down their language acquisition process (Han et al., n.d.). As a result, students may continue to struggle with their speaking skills over time. Therefore, it is important for teachers to implement effective teaching strategies that can create a supportive and less stressful learning environment.

Teachers in modern education are expected to address affective variables in language learning as well as improve students' linguistic proficiency. Cooperative learning is an excellent teaching method that can assist eliminate speaking anxiety. Cooperative learning is a teaching strategy in which students collaborate in small groups to achieve common objectives. Cooperative learning, as defined by David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson as cited by Yang (2023), emphasizes positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face engagement, social skills, and group processing. This technique promotes active engagement and mutual support among learners. Thus, cooperative learning fosters a more student-centered and collaborative learning environment.

Cooperative learning in EFL classes allows students to practice speaking in more relevant and less intimidating circumstances. Small groups allow students to express ideas, ask questions, and support one another without the burden of speaking in front of the entire class (Faridah Laili, Abd. Aziz Wahab, 2023). Peer connection and emotional support may increase pupils' comfort and confidence. Furthermore, repeated speaking practice in groups can increase fluency and minimize the anxiety of making mistakes. According to recent research, cooperative learning helps to reduce speaking fear and increase classroom involvement. Thus, cooperative learning is regarded as a potentially useful technique for reducing speaking anxiety among EFL students (Zulfikar, 2023).

Cooperative learning also builds a sense of shared responsibility, so students do not feel pressured to perform well individually. By working in groups, students can learn from one another, receive immediate feedback, and gradually build self-confidence. This collaborative environment helps reduce tension and creates a more relaxed atmosphere, which is beneficial for students who feel anxious when speaking.

The association between cooperative learning and speaking anxiety can also be explained using theoretical frameworks. Stephen Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis contends that emotional elements such as anxiety can stymie language acquisition when students are anxious or uninterested. A low-anxiety setting allows students to receive and process language instruction more effectively (Jalal et al., 2022). Meanwhile, Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory emphasizes the role of social interaction in cognitive development and language learning. Cooperative learning groups promote social connection and emotional support, which might help students lower their affective filters. As a result, these theories lend support to the use of cooperative learning to reduce public speaking anxiety.

Several earlier research examined the use of cooperative or collaborative learning in English speaking instruction. Yuldasheva (2025), discovered that cooperative learning increases students' fluency, confidence, and classroom participation. Meanwhile, Nguyen Hong Hanh and Phan Minh Huyen (2024) found that collaborative learning activities like STAD, Jigsaw II, and Think-Pair-Share lessen speaking fear. However, the majority of previous research has focused on statistically assessing effectiveness or discussing general speaking improvement. Few research has investigated how cooperative learning groups reduce speaking fear. Thus, more research into students' experiences and interactions is required.

Although previous studies have highlighted the benefits of cooperative learning, most of them have focused on its impact on student achievement and speaking skills in general. Research that specifically explores students' emotional experiences particularly speaking anxiety in the context of cooperative learning at the junior high school level remains limited. Therefore, it is important to conduct further research that focuses on students' perspectives and feelings during the learning process. This method creates a positive learning environment in which students are more willing to participate and are more willing to take risks when speaking (Meilasari et al., 2023). However, more research is needed to understand how cooperative learning is implemented in real classroom settings and how it affects students' emotional responses during speaking activities. Therefore, this study aims to examine the role of cooperative learning in reducing speaking anxiety among EFL students at SMPN 2 Gading, with a focus on students' experiences, interactions, and emotional responses during the learning process.

Despite numerous studies highlighting the benefits of cooperative learning in improving students' speaking skills and reducing anxiety, most previous research has focused primarily on measuring its effectiveness quantitatively. These studies tend to emphasize outcomes rather than the learning process itself. Consequently, understanding of how and why cooperative learning groups help reduce speaking anxiety remains limited, particularly regarding students' emotional experiences, peer interactions, and group dynamics within the actual classroom context. Furthermore, research specifically exploring speaking anxiety in cooperative learning at the junior high school level is still rare. Therefore,

this study aims to fill this gap by providing an in-depth qualitative exploration of students' experiences, interactions, and emotional responses during cooperative learning activities.

Based on the explanation above, the purpose of this study is to better understand the function of cooperative learning groups in reducing speaking anxiety among EFL students at SMPN 2 Gading. This study focuses on how cooperative learning groups perform in classroom speaking exercises and what characteristics of group interaction contribute to anxiety reduction. This study will use a qualitative approach to provide a more in-depth and contextual understanding of students' feelings, experiences, and participation in cooperative learning. The study's findings are intended to contribute theoretically to research on affective variables in language learning, as well as practically to English teachers constructing supportive speaking activities. Finally, this research may contribute to a more pleasant and engaged EFL classroom atmosphere.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design (Ayton, 2023) to investigate students' speaking anxiety and their experiences with cooperative learning during English speaking activities. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of students' feelings, perceptions, interactions, and responses in a natural classroom setting. This study was conducted at SMPN 2 Gading and involved 18 ninth-grade students selected through purposive sampling. Participants were chosen based on their active involvement in speaking activities and their relevance to the research focus. The study was carried out over three class sessions during one week, during which students were divided into small cooperative learning groups consisting of three to four members.

Research Instruments

This study utilized three main instruments: observation, questionnaires, and documentation. First, classroom observation was conducted using an unstructured observational approach to capture students' natural behaviors during cooperative learning activities. The researcher recorded student participation, interaction patterns, confidence levels, and anxiety indicators through field notes. Students' verbal responses during classroom interactions and questionnaire comments were also noted to support the findings. Second, a questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions that allowed students to describe their experiences, perceptions, and feelings regarding speaking anxiety during cooperative learning activities. The questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms after the learning session. Several questionnaire comments and responses were also used to strengthen the thematic findings. Third, documentation in the form of photographs was collected to support and validate the observational data.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data were analyzed thematically using the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The researcher identified recurring themes related to students' speaking anxiety, classroom participation, confidence development, peer support, and cooperative interaction. Questionnaire data were used to support and strengthen the qualitative findings obtained from classroom observations and documentation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Function of Cooperative Learning Groups in Reducing Speaking Anxiety

According to the study's findings, cooperative learning groups were successful in lowering students' speaking anxiety during English-speaking exercises. Students first showed high levels of fear when speaking English on their own, according to classroom observations, surveys, and documentation. Nonetheless, students progressively got more engaged, at ease, and self-assured in sharing their thoughts after taking part in cooperative

learning exercises. Additionally, the introduction of cooperative learning fostered a more encouraging classroom environment where students were encouraged to contribute without undue fear of making mistakes.

Initial Speaking Anxiety

Many students displayed obvious symptoms of speaking anxiety during English-speaking exercises at the start of the observation sessions. When responding to the teacher's inquiries, students frequently avoided making eye contact, lowered their voices, hesitated before speaking, and gave very brief answers. Even if they understood the questions, several students chose to keep mute out of fear of making grammatical or pronunciation errors.

The results of the questionnaire also showed that the majority of pupils were anxious and unconfident when speaking English in front of the class. Students acknowledged that they were afraid of their classmates making fun of them or passing judgment on them.

Student 1 said:

"I was uncomfortable speaking in front of the class, therefore I felt guilty."

Student 2 said:

"Because I rarely speak English, I'm not sure what to say in English."

These answers show that low self-confidence and fear of receiving a poor grade had a significant impact on students' speaking anxiety. The results also imply that students' perceptions of speaking English as a hard classroom task contributed to the emergence of speaking anxiety, in addition to their inadequate vocabulary or grammar proficiency.

Table 1. Initial Speaking Anxiety

Theme	Observation Findings
Fear of Making Mistakes	During speaking, students were concerned about using poor language and pronunciation.
Low Self-Confidence	During speaking assignments, students avoided making eye contact and spoke softly.
Passive Participation	Several students preferred silence rather than answering questions.
Nervous Reactions	Students seemed uneasy and frequently halted when speaking.

Students initially encountered several forms of speaking anxiety during English-speaking activities, as presented in Table 1. The most prevalent issue was students' reluctance and reduced willingness to communicate due to their fear of making mistakes, particularly in grammar and pronunciation. In addition, many students exhibited low self-confidence, as reflected in their soft voices, avoidance of eye contact, and hesitation to respond actively to questions. The findings also indicate that speaking anxiety negatively affected students' classroom participation, as some preferred to remain silent rather than risk making mistakes while speaking English. Furthermore, anxiety-related behaviors were frequently observed during individual speaking activities, including repeated pauses, nervous smiles, and visible signs of discomfort. These findings suggest that students' speaking anxiety was influenced not only by limited language proficiency but also by emotional and psychological pressure experienced during classroom speaking activities.

Behavioral Changes During Cooperative Learning

Students' speaking activities showed notable behavioural changes following the implementation of cooperative learning groups. Speaking exercises were carried out jointly rather than individually, which gradually increased students' willingness to participate in class discussions. Students communicated more actively and interacted with classmates more naturally during group discussions. Initially passive students started asking questions, expressing basic thoughts in English, and responding to comments. Even while some students continued to mix English and Indonesian, they seemed more self-assured and less fearful of making mistakes.

Student 3 said:

"I was a little nervous at first, but with the support of my friends, I became more comfortable."

Student 4 commented:

"It helped a little, but I was still nervous."

Since they rarely felt alone during speaking assignments, these results show that cooperative learning decreased students' psychological stress. Students placed more emphasis on teamwork and peer communication than on individual accomplishment.

Increased Confidence Through Group Interaction

The steady increase in students' confidence following their involvement in cooperative learning activities is another significant discovery. Students improved their spoken English proficiency through repeated engagement and group speaking exercises.

Students seemed calmer and more expressive during speaking exercises, according to observations made in the classroom. Without explicit instructor guidance, a number of kids actively responded to queries from their peers and made an effort to voice their ideas. Pupils who were reluctant to participate at first eventually started speaking up during class discussions.

Student 5 clarified:

"Now I feel more confident because I always practicing with my group."

Student 6 said:

"If I make a mistake, I don't feel too embarrassed because my friends are learning too."

These finding imply that cooperative learning produced a relaxed setting where students may practice speaking without undue concern about receiving a poor grade. Because errors were viewed as a necessary component of learning rather than as failures, students' confidence grew over time.

Changes in Classroom Atmosphere

During speaking exercises, the use of cooperative learning also altered the classroom environment. Due to students' fear of being the center of attention when speaking alone, the classroom atmosphere was initially tense and quiet. Nonetheless, the classroom became more engaging and encouraging during cooperative learning exercises. During group conversations, students spontaneously laughed, shared their thoughts, and supported one another. Because students were more concerned with teamwork than teacher evaluation, the classroom environment became less threatening.

Student 4 said:

"I feel more comfortable studying in a group than speaking alone in front of the class."

Student 7 explained:

"When I'm with my friends, I don't get as nervous because im not alone."

These finding show that cooperative learning effectively produced a nurturing learning atmosphere that lessened students' emotional strain during speaking exercises.

Table2. Changes in Classroom Atmosphere

Theme	Observation Findings
Supportive Environment	During speaking exercises, students supported one another.
Interactive Classroom	Discussions became livelier and more conversational.
Relaxed Learning Situation	Students seemed less anxious and more at ease.
Reduced Psychological Pressure	Speaking in groups was more comfortable for students than speaking alone.

The behavioural changes seen following the introduction of cooperative learning groups during speaking exercises are shown in Table 2. The results show that students progressively increased their level of activity and willingness to engage in class discussions. Compared to the first observations in the classroom, there was a noticeable increase in participation as more students offered suggestions and participated in discussions.

Additionally, the table demonstrates that students engaged with their peers more organically, resulting in a more laid-back communication approach during speaking exercises. Additionally, pupils showed less reluctance as they were less concerned about making mistakes when voicing their ideas in English. Cooperative learning helped students to interact more confidently and cooperatively, as seen by their active participation during discussions. These findings show that cooperative learning effectively lessened students' emotional strain and produced a more encouraging atmosphere for speaking practice.

Aspects of Cooperative Learning Activities that Contribute to Anxiety Reduction

The findings showed that a number of cooperative learning activities considerably reduced students' speaking fear. These elements consistently surfaced from student interactions during speaking exercises, questionnaire responses, and classroom observations. Peer support, emotional comfort, shared accountability, idea exchange, and more speaking opportunities are the key elements found in this study.

PeerSupport

One of the most effective factors in reducing anxiety was shown to be peer support. Students regularly assisted one another during group conversations by offering vocabulary guidance, correcting pronunciation, and encouraging peers who were anxious during speaking exercises. Compared to the teacher, students were more at ease asking questions and asking for assistance from their classmates. Students experienced emotional safety as a result of this interaction because they believed that making errors was a normal aspect of group learning.

Student 8 commented:

"Yes, it helped that my friend's comment and remind me to keep studying."

These findings show that peer support enabled students to participate more confidently in speaking activities and decreased their anxiety of being judged negatively.

Emotional Comfort

Emotional comfort is another significant factor found in this study. Because speaking in small groups was less daunting than speaking in front of the entire class, students felt more at ease. Students seemed more at ease and engaged in group conversations more organically, according to observations. Students' anxiety of direct instructor evaluation was lessened and they were able to converse more freely in small groups.

Student 3 said:

"I feel more comfortable talking to my friends than speaking in front of the class."

These findings imply that students' anxiety levels were significantly reduced and their involvement in speaking activities was encouraged by emotional ease.

Shared Responsibility

Additionally, the findings showed that students' speaking pressure during cooperative learning activities decreased when they shared responsibility. Because speaking assignments were distributed cooperatively among group members, students did not feel personally accountable for doing them.

This circumstance encouraged students to participate more actively in class discussions and lessened their fear of failing.

Student 5 said:

"I don't feel stressed out by the tasks when I work in a group."

Student 9 explained:

"I feel more confident because I have friends to help me."

These findings show that by dividing up speaking duties among the group, cooperative learning lessened individual pressure.

Idea Sharing

Sharing ideas has also grown to be a significant factor in lowering anxiety. Before speaking, students worked together to create ideas and share perspectives during group discussions. During speaking exercises, this method lessened pupils' hesitancy and helped them plan their answers. Because they weren't expected to generate ideas on their own, students seemed more confident and prepared.

Student 2 said:

"I can think of things to say during our conversations"

Student 10 explained:

"When my friends give me feedback, it's easier for me to speak up."

These findings show that by enhancing their speaking preparation, group idea sharing assisted students in lowering fear.

Increased Speaking Opportunities

The findings also showed that students had more opportunity to actively practice speaking English when they participated in cooperative learning. Cooperative learning made it possible for the majority of students to participate in speaking exercises more frequently than in typical classroom environments where a small number of students dominated engagement.

Students' speaking nervousness significantly decreased as a result of regular speaking practice, which also helped them grow more comfortable with English communication.

Student 1 said:

"Practice speaking more often so I won't be so afraid."

Student 5 commented:

"I'm happy because in this class everyone has change to speak."

The findings show that students' nervousness and hesitation during speaking activities were considerably reduced by repeated speaking exposure.

Table3. IncreasedSpeakingOpportunities

Theme	Observation Findings
Daily Practice of Speaking	During conversations, students frequently practiced their English
Equitable Involvement	The majority of kids were given the chance to speak.
Enhanced Communication	Students used English to engage in active interaction.
Decreased Fear of Speaking	Students gained confidence with repeated practice.

After engaging in cooperative learning activities, students' behaviour significantly changed, as seen in Table 3. In contrast to the first observations made in the classroom, the results demonstrate that students progressively grew more engaged and active throughout speaking exercises. Students' desire to share ideas, react to the viewpoints of their peers, and participate in group discussions more regularly were all indicators of increased engagement. During group projects, students who had previously been quiet and unwilling to speak started to participate more organically. This suggests that because cooperative learning took place in a supportive group setting rather than through individual performances in front of the entire class, students' anxiety of speaking was lessened.

Additionally, the table shows that students' communication became more comfortable and participatory as a result of cooperative learning. Students showed less hesitancy as their fear of making mistakes when speaking English decreased. During conversations, students seemed more assured and engaged with their peers more easily. Active participation in class interactions indicates that cooperative learning was successful in motivating students to engage in group projects and communicate more openly. All things considered, these results show that cooperative learning was crucial in lowering psychological stress and increasing students' desire to engage in speaking exercises.

Discussion

The Function of Cooperative Learning Groups in Reducing Speaking Anxiety

The findings of this study show that by fostering a more encouraging, cooperative, and less intimidating learning environment, cooperative learning groups were successful in lowering speaking anxiety among EFL students. Prior to the introduction of cooperative learning activities, speaking assignments often caused students to feel anxious, fearful, hesitant, and insecure. The majority of students were reluctant to speak English on their own because they feared making grammar or pronunciation errors and were concerned about receiving unfavourable feedback from teachers and classmates. However, there were discernible improvements in the students' engagement, self-assurance, and classroom interaction following their involvement in cooperative learning groups.

Elaine Horwitz's idea of foreign language anxiety as cited by Gregersen (2023), including communication apprehension and fear of unfavourable evaluation, helps explain the decrease in speaking anxiety observed in this study. According to Horwitz, students frequently feel anxious when they are under pressure to speak in a foreign language verbally, particularly when they are afraid of being judged or embarrassed. Because students first saw speaking exercises as stressful classroom performances rather than chances for conversation, the study's findings significantly reflect this state. Students' reluctance to talk, avoidance of eye contact, and preference for silence are signs of emotional strain brought on by social criticism and failure anxiety.

However, because speaking exercises were no longer focused on individual performance, the introduction of cooperative learning progressively altered this situation. Rather, students engaged with peers in a more casual setting while communicating cooperatively in small groups. This finding is consistent with Lev Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory as cited by Rahman (2024), which highlights how social interaction and group meaning-making foster learning. Students were able to build understanding together through cooperative learning while getting emotional and verbal support from their peers. Students' emotional burden was lessened by the group interaction procedure since they no longer felt personally accountable for sustaining flawless language performance.

The findings also show that students' behaviour in the classroom was considerably altered by cooperative learning. During speaking exercises, students who were initially passive eventually started to participate more actively. They increased their willingness to participate in class discussions, respond to peers, and voice their ideas. This implies that cooperative learning gave pupils the chance to participate without being overly afraid of making mistakes. Students were able to view speaking exercises as shared communication processes rather than individual assessments because of the collaborative environment.

According to David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson's Cooperative Learning Theory as cited by Yang (2023), which contends that supportive interaction and positive interdependence promote active engagement and lessen individual pressure, is directly linked to this behavioural shift. During speaking exercises in this study, students felt shared responsibility, which reduced anxiety and raised participation. Because peers consistently offered support, clarification, and encouragement throughout discussions, students no longer felt alone during speaking assignments.

The steady increase in students' confidence as a result of frequent group contact is another significant discovery. Despite their language barriers, students were more at ease speaking in English as they spoke more often in encouraging groups. Students were able to grow more confident over time and emotionally adjust to oral communication through repeated exposure to speaking exercises. After a while, students who had previously shied away from speaking were more eager to participate in class debates and interactions.

This finding validates Stephen Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis as cited by Li & Zhou (2023), which explains how emotional obstacles like stress, anxiety, and fear can impede language learning. Krashen asserts that when students feel emotionally safe and at ease, language acquisition is more successful. According to the study's findings, cooperative learning reduced students' affective filters by fostering a welcoming and encouraging

communication environment. Students' willingness to actively engage in speaking activities increased as emotional strain subsided.

Additionally, findings demonstrate that cooperative learning helped to improve the classroom environment. Speaking exercises initially produced a hostile, teacher-cantered atmosphere where students felt under pressure to do well. On the other hand, the classroom environment grew more encouraging, engaged, and communicative during cooperative learning sessions. Students spontaneously shared ideas, supported one another, and saw errors as opportunities for growth rather than as failures. Students' psychological stress during speaking exercises was significantly lessened by this encouraging classroom environment.

However, the findings also show that not all students experienced anxiety reduction in the same way or at the same time. Even while the majority of students felt more at ease during group conversations, a few remained hesitant when they had to talk in English on their own or lacked vocabulary. This shows that while cooperative learning was beneficial in lowering emotional strain, students' speaking performance was still significantly influenced by their linguistic proficiency. As a result, speaking anxiety among EFL students should be viewed as a complex problem influenced by linguistic and psychological elements.

Overall, the findings indicate that cooperative learning groups served as social and emotional support networks in addition to being instructional tools that helped students gradually lessen their speaking anxiety. Through collaborative interaction, shared participation, and supportive communication, students experienced greater emotional comfort, increased confidence, and more active engagement during English speaking activities.

Aspects of Cooperative Learning Activities that Contribute to Anxiety Reduction

The findings of this study showed that a number of cooperative learning activities considerably reduced students' speaking fear. Peer support, emotional solace, shared accountability, intellectual exchange, and more speaking chances are some of these elements. When combined, these components produced a cooperative learning atmosphere that inspired students to speak up more boldly.

Peer support is one of the most important factors found in this study. Students regularly assisted one another throughout cooperative learning activities by offering vocabulary support, correcting pronunciation, elucidating concepts, and supporting peers who were anxious during speaking assignments. Students' fear of making mistakes decreased as a result of these interactions because they understood that speaking challenges were shared rather than individual.

The ideas of Johnson and Johnson's Cooperative Learning Theory as cited by Yang (2023), which highlight positive interdependence and promotive contact as crucial elements of cooperative learning, are highly supported by this research. Students in this study looked to their friends for both emotional support and intellectual help. Students felt safer and more accepted during speaking exercises thanks to the encouraging peer interaction, which eventually decreased nervousness and boosted engagement.

The findings also show that emotional comfort emerged as a key element in the alleviation of anxiety. Speaking in small groups was consistently more comfortable for students than speaking in front of the class as a whole. Because students engaged with known peers during small-group conversations instead of immediately performing under teacher evaluation, the learning environment became less daunting.

Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis as cited by Li & Zhou (2023) also provides an explanation for this situation. Students' mental stress and worry of being judged negatively were lessened by the encouraging group environment. Students were more inclined to interact and take chances when speaking English when they felt emotionally secure. As a result, emotional ease served as a crucial psychological basis that encouraged students to engage more fully in speaking exercises.

This study also found shared accountability to be a significant factor. Speaking exercises were carried out cooperatively as opposed to separately during cooperative learning activities. Students collaborated to develop answers, talk about concepts, and resolve communication issues. As a result, speaking assignments were no longer seen by pupils as personal challenges that required flawless completion on their own.

According to David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson's the Social Interdependence Theory as cited by Ma et al., (2022), which argues that cooperative goals promote collaboration and lessen individual stress during learning activities, is consistent with this observation. Because mistakes and difficulties were handled collaboratively inside groups, shared responsibility reduced students' fear of failing. As a result of sharing communication responsibilities among all group members, students felt more comfortable participating in conversations.

The findings also show that sharing ideas was a major factor in lowering hesitancy when speaking. Before speaking in front of an audience, students prepared answers, produced ideas, and shared their perspectives through group discussions. Through this method, students were able to better organize their thoughts and communicate orally with less confusion. Because they were not required to develop ideas on their own under pressure, students grew more prepared and self-assured.

Additionally, more speaking opportunities were found to be a significant factor in lowering nervousness. The majority of students were able to practice speaking more often because to cooperative learning, as contrast to traditional teacher-cantered classrooms where a small number of students dominate engagement. Students' anxiety during oral interactions eventually decreased as a result of repeated speaking exposure, which also helped them grow more comfortable with English communication.

The concepts of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as stated by Dell Hymes then as cited by Putri (2025), which place a strong emphasis on meaningful communication and active language use as essential elements of language learning, are strongly tied to this discovery. Instead of just robotically answering teacher questions, pupils used English as a communication tool during real-world contact through cooperative learning. Students were able to improve their fluency, confidence, and emotional preparedness during speaking exercises by engaging in frequent communicative practice.

The findings also show that different pupils responded differently to these factors. While some kids still needed more encouragement and language coaching, others rapidly adjusted because they participated in group activities. This implies that even while cooperative learning offers significant emotional and social advantages, teachers must nonetheless carefully encourage involvement and offer sufficient language support to students who lack confidence.

Overall, the findings show that a number of interrelated factors affected how well cooperative learning reduced speaking fear. In order to establish a supportive communicative atmosphere where students felt safer, more confident, and more driven to participate in English speaking activities, peer support, emotional comfort, collaborative accountability, idea sharing, and repetitive speaking practice were all combined.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that cooperative learning groups are effective in reducing speaking anxiety among EFL students at SMPN 2 Gading. Initially, students exhibited anxiety-related behaviours such as reluctance to speak, low confidence, fear of making mistakes, and avoidance of eye contact during speaking activities. However, participation in cooperative learning activities gradually increased their confidence, comfort, and willingness to communicate in English. The small-group environment provided emotional support and reduced psychological pressure, enabling students to participate more actively in speaking tasks. Key factors contributing to anxiety reduction included peer support, collaborative idea sharing, frequent speaking practice, emotional comfort, and shared responsibility. Among

these, peer support emerged as the most influential factor, helping students overcome linguistic difficulties and build confidence. The findings support Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, and Johnson and Johnson's Cooperative Learning Theory. Therefore, cooperative learning can serve as both an instructional strategy and a psychological support system for enhancing students' speaking confidence and participation in EFL classrooms.

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