

Disrupted Communication: Understanding How Bullying-Related Anxiety Interferes with Students' Speaking Class Proficiency

Syahrudin M. ¹, Rosmawati Abdul Maing ², Darmawati Azis Bausad ³, M. Dahlan Bahang ⁴, A. Rizal ⁵

¹ Universitas Muslim Maros, Indonesia; syahrudinmahmud@umma.ac.id

² Universitas Bosowa, Indonesia; rosmawati@universitasbosowa.ac.id

³ Universitas Mega Reski Makassar, Indonesia; darmawatimrs@unimerz.ic.id

⁴ STKIP Yayasan Pendidikan Ujung Pandang Makassar, Indonesia; mdahlan.hbahang@gmail.com

⁵ Universitas Bosowa, Indonesia; a.rizal@universitasbosowa.ac.id

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Abstract

Bullying remains a persistent issue in educational settings, with serious consequences for students' emotional well-being and academic engagement. This study examines the impact of bullying on students' willingness to speak, identifies the specific aspects of speaking most affected, and explores the coping strategies employed by victims. A qualitative descriptive case study was conducted with five purposively selected students who had experienced bullying. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews to explore the students' classroom anxiety in depth. The findings reveal that bullying-induced anxiety significantly reduces students' willingness to participate in classroom discussions and impairs their verbal communication skills, particularly pronunciation, vocabulary use, and overall confidence. Coping responses varied, with some students relying on self-affirmation while others adopted proactive strategies to manage their anxiety, highlighting the complexity of individual adaptation. This study, though limited to a small sample, provides valuable insights into the nuanced experiences of bullying victims in a higher education context. The results emphasize the importance for English language educators to create supportive classroom environments, implement anxiety-reducing speaking activities, and for institutions to develop anti-bullying initiatives. These implications contribute to both pedagogical practice and policy development aimed at fostering inclusive and resilient learning spaces.

Keywords

Anxiety; Bullying; Students Speaking

Corresponding Author

Syahrudin M.

Universitas Muslim Maros, Indonesia; syahrudinmahmud@umma.ac.id

1. INTRODUCTION

Bullying remains a pervasive problem in educational contexts worldwide and is consistently associated with adverse psychological and academic outcomes for victims (Halliday et al., 2021). Meta-analytic and review studies have documented that peer victimization correlates with a range of psychosocial maladjustments, including anxiety, depression, social withdrawal, and reduced academic engagement (Hawker & Boulton, 2000). Bullying's repeated, power-imbalanced nature means victims frequently endure ongoing negative social feedback (Olweus, 2009), which can shape their expectations



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about future peer interactions and create enduring sensitivity to social threat (Cavioni, n.d.).

Within the domain of language learning, anxiety is a central affective construct that undermines learners' capacity to perform in communicative tasks (P. MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012). Classic work on foreign language anxiety frames it as a specific form of anxiety tied to language use and communicative contexts, often producing avoidance behaviors and impaired performance in speaking tasks (P. D. MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). More general cognitive theories of anxiety—such as Processing Efficiency Theory and its successors—explain the mechanism by which worry reduces working memory capacity and attentional control, thereby disrupting complex, time-pressured tasks such as spontaneous speaking (Eysenck, 2013). These theoretical perspectives together suggest a plausible pathway: bullying → elevated social/language anxiety → reduced working memory/attentional control during speaking → poorer spoken performance.

Empirical research has established associations between bullying and broader academic and emotional outcomes (Juvonen et al., 2003) (Juvonen et al., 2005), and between language anxiety and speaking performance (Goyal et al., 2022). However, comparatively few studies have explicitly linked bullying experiences with foreign-language speaking performance in higher education settings. Juvonen's work illustrates how peer dynamics shape school engagement and academic trajectories, but studies that trace the pathway from bullying-related social threat to moment-to-moment disruptions in spoken language performance are limited. At the same time, emerging models of social anxiety (e.g., Hofmann's cognitive model) help explain why negative social evaluations—such as ridicule or exclusion—can crystallize into anticipatory fear and self-focused attention during public speaking or classroom participation, resulting in measurable decrements in fluency and lexical retrieval.

Research specific to foreign language speaking anxiety in Indonesia has grown in recent years, documenting that Indonesian EFL learners frequently experience apprehension in speaking classes due to fear of making mistakes, poor vocabulary, and negative peer responses (Robah & Anggrisia, 2023). Several Indonesian case studies find that speaking anxiety constrains participation and is often mediated by students' self-efficacy and classroom climate (Indarto, 2024). National and regional reviews also note that bullying—both offline and online—remains a documented issue in Indonesian schools and campuses, with potential downstream effects on mental health and engagement (UNICEF/Indonesia reports and recent surveys). These local studies establish that the components of our theoretical pathway (bullying → anxiety → speaking difficulty) are present in Indonesian contexts, but they stop short of systematically exploring how bullying-related anxiety operates within speaking-class interactions at the university level.

A small but growing body of Indonesian scholarship has examined speaking anxiety and coping strategies among university students, identifying diverse individual responses—ranging from internal self-reassurance to active skills practice—and the mitigating role of supportive peers and lecturers (Mustagis & Sukarno, 2024). These studies underscore the value of context-sensitive coping and pedagogy: interventions that are effective in one cultural or institutional setting may not directly translate to another without accounting for local norms about face-saving, deference, and communal support. At the same time, international literature on the dynamics of language anxiety highlights that emotional states are dynamic and multi-layered; contemporary reviews call for research that captures intra-individual processes and context-dependent triggers (Gee-Whai Kho & Ting, 2025).

Despite these contributions, three gaps remain. First, although many studies document speaking anxiety and many others document bullying's psychosocial effects, relatively few studies trace the direct experiential link from bullying incidents to real-time disruptions in speaking performance—especially in higher education. Second, Indonesian research has produced rich case studies of speaking anxiety. Still, there is limited work that explicitly centers bullying-related anxiety as the primary antecedent for reduced speaking willingness and performance. Third, while several works recommend generic “supportive environments” and anti-bullying policies, there is a need for concrete, classroom-level

pedagogical strategies tailored to local university contexts—strategies that lecturers can practically implement in speaking classes to reduce anxiety and re-engage victims of bullying. Recent reviews on FLA emphasize the need for context-rich, mixed-methods, and case-based studies that can inform targeted interventions, reinforcing the timeliness of research that connects lived bullying experiences with pedagogical responses (West, 2019).

This study, therefore, responds to these gaps by focusing specifically on English Department students at Maros Muslim University—an under-researched Islamic higher-education context in Indonesia where students have reported bullying experiences in both physical classrooms and online platforms. Situating the investigation early within the local setting is essential: cultural norms about group harmony, face, and religious-institutional values can shape both the form bullying takes and the kinds of coping students consider acceptable. By employing an in-depth, qualitative case-study approach, this research aims to capture the nuanced ways in which bullying-related anxiety undermines the willingness to speak, identify which speaking subskills (e.g., pronunciation, lexical retrieval, fluency) are most affected, and examine the coping strategies students deploy in response. The case-study method is appropriate here because it enables close, contextualized analysis of individual narratives—valuable when the phenomenon is complex, situated, and under-theorized in the local literature.

Concretely, the study pursues the following objectives: (1) to examine how bullying-related experiences contribute to social and language anxiety among English Department students at Maros Moslem University; (2) to identify which aspects of speaking proficiency are most disrupted by that anxiety (e.g., pronunciation, vocabulary retrieval, fluency, interactional strategies); and (3) to document students' coping strategies and derive pedagogically actionable recommendations for lecturers and institutional policymakers. In doing so, this research aims to make three contributions: methodologically, by providing a focused qualitative case study in an underrepresented institutional context; conceptually, by foregrounding the bullying → anxiety → speaking-performance pathway; and practically, by offering context-sensitive classroom strategies and policy suggestions tailored to Indonesian university settings.

By addressing these aims, the study fills an empirical and practical need: it links well-established psychological mechanisms of anxiety and cognition to the lived realities of university EFL students who have experienced bullying, and it generates locally grounded insights that educators—in Maros Moslem University and similar contexts—can use to make speaking classes safer, more inclusive, and more productive.

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing a case study approach, to explore the influence of bullying-related anxiety on students' speaking proficiency. The research was conducted at the English Department of Maros Muslim University, which provided a relevant academic context as several students reported experiences of bullying both in online and offline settings.

Participants and Sampling

Five student participants were recruited through purposive sampling. The selection criteria required that participants (1) were active students in the English Department, (2) had self-reported experiences of being victims of bullying, either directly or indirectly, and (3) expressed difficulties related to speaking activities as a result of such experiences. To ensure credibility, the identification of participants as “victims of bullying” was based on their personal narratives, corroborated with informal confirmation from academic advisors. This purposive sampling enabled the researcher to capture rich and relevant perspectives.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews using open-ended questions. The interviews focused on three main areas: (1) how bullying-related anxiety affected students' willingness to participate in classroom speaking activities, (2) the specific aspects of speaking proficiency most impacted (such as fluency, vocabulary, and pronunciation), and (3) the coping strategies employed by students to manage their anxiety. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted in a confidential setting to promote comfort and openness.

Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitivity of the research topic, strict adherence to ethical protocols was ensured. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection, ensuring they were aware of the research aims, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity through the use of pseudonyms. Additionally, the study received approval from the university's ethics committee, and permission was obtained from relevant academic authorities to conduct the research.

Data Analysis

The interview data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. This process involved familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of themes, review and refinement of themes, definition and naming of themes, and production of the final report. Thematic analysis was chosen for its suitability in capturing patterns of meaning related to students' lived experiences of bullying and anxiety.

Trustworthiness of Data

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, several strategies were employed. Member checking was carried out by returning interview summaries to participants for confirmation of accuracy. Peer debriefing with fellow researchers was also conducted to minimize researcher bias. Additionally, triangulation was applied by comparing students' interview responses with field notes taken during the data collection process. These strategies enhanced the trustworthiness and credibility of the research.

Context of the Study

This study was conducted at the English Department of Maros Moslem University, a private higher education institution located in Maros, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. The department hosts students from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, including both urban and rural areas, which provides a rich context for exploring the interplay between bullying experiences and language learning. Participants were active undergraduate students enrolled in various academic levels within the department, all of whom had self-reported experiences of bullying in either online or offline environments. This setting is particularly relevant because it combines a formal academic environment with a diverse student body, allowing the study to capture nuanced perspectives on how social interactions and cultural factors influence students' speaking proficiency and anxiety.

Research Questions

Based on the research objectives, the study was guided by the following questions:

- RQ1: In what ways does bullying-related anxiety influence students' willingness and confidence to participate in speaking activities within classroom settings?
- RQ2: Which specific dimensions of speaking proficiency—such as fluency, vocabulary usage, and pronunciation—are most affected by bullying-induced anxiety?

RQ3: What coping strategies do students employ to manage bullying-related anxiety, and how effective are these strategies in supporting the development of their speaking skills?

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Through the interviews with five participants from Maros Moslem University, several key themes emerged regarding the impact of bullying-related anxiety on students' willingness to participate in speaking classes.

Findings

Anxiety as a Barrier to Participation

All participants emphasized that bullying-related anxiety discouraged them from engaging in class discussions. Interviewee 1 admitted, "I became passive if I felt uncomfortable with my classmates' exaggerated reactions," while Interviewee 5 shared, "I became increasingly quiet and less active in class discussions." These accounts illustrate how past negative experiences have shaped participants' reluctance to speak.

Perception of Judgment

Fear of being ridiculed was a recurring concern. Interviewee 2 stated, "I was often laughed at due to my nervousness during presentations," and Interviewee 3 confessed, "I was afraid of making mistakes, which would invite ridicule." Such perceptions of judgment led students to avoid participation and maintain minimal interaction with peers.

Impact on Speaking Skills

Participants also reported specific difficulties in their speaking performance. Interviewee 1 highlighted how anxiety disrupted "pronunciation and vocabulary usage," while Interviewee 2 described episodes of "forgetting vocabulary" during class. These experiences reveal the connection between anxiety and diminished cognitive as well as linguistic performance.

Coping Strategies

Students employed various strategies to deal with their anxiety. Interviewee 1 relied on self-reassurance, stating, "I assured myself that I could manage if I weren't anxious." Meanwhile, Interviewee 5 took an active approach by improving vocabulary and controlling negative thoughts. These accounts reflect different coping orientations—internal reassurance versus proactive skill development.

Role of Support Systems

Peer and teacher support played a significant role in easing anxiety. Interviewee 2 mentioned, "Support from some friends made me more confident," while Interviewee 4 suggested that teachers should help students develop coping strategies. These reflections underscore the importance of supportive networks in alleviating classroom anxiety.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that bullying-related anxiety serves as a significant barrier to students' willingness to participate in speaking classes at Maros Moslem University. Consistent with the foundational theories of language anxiety (Foley, 2024) Participants reported that negative past experiences with bullying diminished their motivation to engage in classroom discussions and created avoidance behaviors. This aligns with previous research showing that students exposed to ridicule or peer aggression often withdraw from oral communication tasks, thereby limiting opportunities for language practice and improvement (Porter, 2014). Moreover, Orosz et al. (2018) and Vaillancourt et al.

(2017) have documented that persistent peer victimization can generate chronic stress responses, impairing attention, working memory, and verbal reasoning—skills essential for effective communication in second-language learning. In the Indonesian higher education context, where classroom participation is highly valued as an indicator of communicative competence, the withdrawal observed in this study underscores the profound impact of emotional disturbances on academic performance and personal development (Halder & Squires, n.d.).

Fear of Judgment and Social Evaluation Anxiety

The fear of being judged emerged as a central theme among participants, many of whom expressed reluctance to speak due to concerns about ridicule or laughter from peers. This finding resonates strongly with Hofmann et al.'s (2018) social anxiety framework, which emphasizes the role of negative evaluation in shaping avoidance behaviors. In classroom contexts, particularly language classrooms where mistakes are inevitable, the anticipation of mockery can trigger heightened anxiety and silence learners. Similar patterns have been identified in Indonesian classrooms, where learners often hesitate to use English for fear of making errors and facing embarrassment (Yavuz, 2023) (Miller, 2020).

Beyond Indonesia, comparable evidence has emerged in other Asian educational contexts. Tran (2016) reported that Vietnamese students frequently refrain from speaking English in class due to cultural norms surrounding “face,” which discourage risk-taking in public (Xuan Mai et al., 2024). Likewise, Yashima (2002) argued that Japanese learners’ willingness to communicate is shaped by a desire to maintain social harmony, often resulting in communicative reticence (Ruane, 2015). The findings of this study thus extend these insights by showing how the fear of ridicule, when intensified by experiences of bullying, becomes not merely an obstacle but a persistent psychological barrier that reshapes students’ willingness to engage in oral communication.

Further supports this view, noting that collectivist cultural values tend to amplify the effects of peer evaluation (Hengsaddeekul et al., 2014). In Maros Moslem University, where community relationships are tightly knit, the social repercussions of embarrassment are magnified, making students even more cautious. Therefore, interventions in such contexts must not only address individual confidence but also foster classroom cultures that minimize judgment and cultivate empathy.

Anxiety and Speaking Performance Deficits

The effect of anxiety on speaking skills was clearly evident in participants’ difficulties with pronunciation, vocabulary, and fluency. These disruptions are well explained by Krashen’s (1982) affective filter hypothesis, which posits that negative emotions act as cognitive barriers to language processing. Empirical studies confirm that students under high anxiety conditions often struggle with lexical retrieval, stammering, and reduced phonological accuracy (Mounia & Douaa, 2022).

Horwitz et al. and Aida further emphasized that language anxiety is multifaceted, including communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety—all of which may converge during speaking activities (Zhou, 2011).

In the Indonesian context, Yusuf and Widyaningsih (2021) found that higher levels of speaking anxiety were associated with lower oral proficiency among English majors (Yusuf, 2021). Astuti and Lestari (2022) similarly demonstrated that language anxiety significantly correlated with diminished vocabulary usage and reduced fluency in student presentations (Putra, 2023). This study adds another layer by explicitly linking bullying-related anxiety with these deficits, suggesting that social stressors intensify the already well-documented effects of language anxiety.

The findings also resonate with Eysenck et al.’s (2007) attentional control theory, which posits that anxiety consumes cognitive resources, impairing performance on demanding tasks such as second language communication (Eysenck et al., 2007). More recently, highlighted that high anxiety reduces learners’ willingness to engage in tasks requiring creativity and risk-taking, both of which are essential

for spontaneous oral communication (Bouhenika, 2015). Thus, the compounded impact of bullying-induced anxiety not only disrupts language processing but also discourages learners from practicing, perpetuating a cycle of avoidance and skill stagnation.

Coping Strategies: Emotion-Focused and Problem-Focused

Despite these challenges, students in this study reported diverse coping strategies, ranging from self-reassurance to proactive vocabulary improvement. This reflects Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) coping theory, which distinguishes between emotion-focused and problem-focused strategies. Some participants relied on internal reassurance and prayer to manage their emotional distress, while others engaged in targeted practice to minimize mistakes in class (Baker & Berenbaum, 2007).

These findings mirror Rahmawati's (2019) study, which found that Indonesian learners often use self-talk, religious practices, and rehearsal as coping strategies for speaking anxiety (Nisa, 2025). Similarly, Rizki showed that Korean students employed self-encouragement and preparation as ways to manage their fear of speaking (Rizki & Golubović, 2020). Tsiplakides and Keramida also reported that Greek high school students benefited from cooperative learning, where group solidarity helped them face anxiety more constructively (Darmi, 2014).

Mbato (2013) categorized such strategies as part of learners' metacognitive regulation, whereby individuals actively monitor their emotions and adopt behaviors to improve learning outcomes (Mbato, 2013). This study contributes to the literature by illustrating how coping behaviors are not uniform but shaped by cultural orientations toward perseverance, faith, and communal responsibility. It also underscores the importance of educators designing flexible pedagogical interventions that accommodate diverse coping styles rather than imposing one-size-fits-all solutions.

Role of Supportive Networks

The role of supportive networks emerged as particularly salient in alleviating anxiety. Participants noted that encouragement from peers and empathetic teachers helped reduce their fear of speaking and motivated them to participate more actively. This aligns with Garcia and O'Connor's (2022) findings that peer and teacher support buffers the harmful effects of bullying on academic engagement.

In Indonesia, where communal learning is deeply ingrained, Hidayati (2021) observed that collaborative learning and teacher empathy significantly lowered foreign language anxiety (Hidayati & Dirmaya, 2024). Saputra (2020) similarly noted that structured peer mentoring enhanced confidence in English oral performance (Saputra, 2020). Cross-cultural studies support these observations: Phan (2014) found that mentorship programs in Vietnam fostered resilience among anxious learners, while Dörnyei (2019) argued that group cohesion and motivational climates are decisive in shaping classroom participation (Dörnyei & Muir, 2019).

This study confirms these insights while also emphasizing the importance of intentional pedagogical strategies—such as cultivating inclusive classroom climates, promoting peer collaboration, and providing safe practice opportunities. These measures ensure that learning spaces are not only cognitively stimulating but also emotionally supportive, thus addressing the dual challenges of language anxiety and bullying.

The Broader Contribution to Literature

Taken together, this study contributes to the broader literature by highlighting the intersection of bullying-induced anxiety and language learning in a localized Indonesian context. While much of the prior research on language anxiety has emerged from Western classrooms, this study underscores how cultural and relational dynamics in collectivist societies amplify the impact of social evaluation. The novelty lies in demonstrating that bullying not only raises anxiety levels but also specifically disrupts oral communication, a skill central to English language mastery.

This finding complements Li's (2013) work on Chinese learners, which showed that collectivist cultural pressures heightened learners' reluctance to speak (S. Hodgkinson & E. Poropat, 2014). Similarly, Matsuda and Gobel (2004) noted that Japanese students' classroom silence often stemmed from concerns about peer judgment rather than lack of competence (Maher, 2023). By situating these dynamics within Maros Moslem University, this study offers a culturally grounded perspective on how bullying, anxiety, and speaking performance intersect in non-Western higher education contexts.

Pedagogical and Policy Implications

In practical terms, the findings suggest several pedagogical and policy interventions. For language educators, designing classroom practices that minimize ridicule and emphasize mutual respect is critical. Strategies may include:

- a. Establishing explicit classroom norms for constructive feedback.
- b. Integrating cooperative activities that foster peer trust.
- c. Providing workshops on anxiety management for language learners.

At the institutional level, universities should implement comprehensive anti-bullying policies and strengthen student counseling services. Prior interventions combining social skills training, peer mentoring, and teacher facilitation have shown positive outcomes in reducing anxiety and improving participation (Quintero, 2024). Embedding such programs into language curricula can create holistic learning environments where psychological well-being and academic performance mutually reinforce each other.

Conceptual and Methodological Contributions

Finally, this study offers both conceptual and methodological contributions. Conceptually, it bridges two previously separate fields—bullying research and language anxiety—by demonstrating their combined effects on speaking proficiency. Methodologically, it employs a qualitative case study design, allowing for nuanced insights into students' lived experiences that are often overlooked in large-scale quantitative research.

Future research should expand this inquiry by including diverse institutions and employing mixed-method approaches that capture both statistical correlations and personal narratives. Longitudinal studies could also investigate how bullying-related anxiety evolves, how it interacts with academic performance, and which interventions have the most lasting effects. Such directions would not only enrich scholarly understanding but also inform practical efforts to support vulnerable learners in higher education contexts worldwide.

This study reveals that bullying-related anxiety is a significant barrier to students' participation in speaking activities and adversely affects key aspects of their speaking proficiency, including fluency, vocabulary, and pronunciation. The unique contribution of this research lies in highlighting how experiences of bullying intersect with language anxiety within the Indonesian higher education context, where collectivist cultural norms and peer evaluation amplify social and emotional pressures. By directly linking these social stressors to oral communication difficulties, this study extends the existing literature on language anxiety and provides culturally grounded insights. The findings underscore the importance of supportive peer and teacher networks, as well as targeted pedagogical and institutional interventions, in mitigating anxiety and fostering both academic and emotional development.

4. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the significant influence of bullying-related anxiety on students' speaking proficiency, particularly among English department students at Maros Moslem University. Findings show that experiences of bullying trigger fear and avoidance, which in turn hinder students'

participation in speaking activities and affect key aspects of language performance such as pronunciation, vocabulary use, and self-confidence.

In practical terms, these findings necessitate specific actions within the local higher education context. English lecturers can implement supportive classroom strategies such as structured peer feedback, anxiety-reducing speaking activities, and counseling referrals for vulnerable students. At the institutional level, universities should develop anti-bullying mechanisms and targeted student support programs to foster a safe learning environment.

Academically, this research contributes by providing insights from a local Islamic university context that remains underrepresented in existing literature, adding cultural and institutional nuance to the broader discussion of bullying, anxiety, and language learning. Future studies should expand the participant base and compare different institutional settings to understand better how context-specific interventions can mitigate the negative effects of bullying on speaking proficiency.

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