

The Relationship between Speaking Anxiety and Willingness to Speak English: A case study at To Ky Secondary School in Ho Chi Minh city

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<p>Corresponding Author: Nguyen Sy Loc</p> <p>English Teacher, To Ky Secondary School, Ho Chi Minh city, Vietnam</p>	<p>Abstract: This study examines the relationship between speaking anxiety and willingness to speak English among lower secondary school students at To Ky Secondary School in Ho Chi Minh City. Using a quantitative case study design, data were collected from 120 students through questionnaires measuring speaking anxiety and classroom willingness to communicate. Descriptive statistics indicated moderate to high levels of speaking anxiety and moderate to high willingness to speak English, with variation across speaking situations. Pearson correlation analysis revealed a significant negative relationship between speaking anxiety and willingness to speak English, suggesting that higher anxiety is associated with lower communicative willingness. The findings highlight the importance of reducing affective barriers to promote active oral participation in EFL classrooms.</p> <p>Keywords: <i>Speaking anxiety; willingness to speak English; EFL learners; secondary school; classroom communication.</i></p>
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Introduction

Developing learners' speaking ability is a central objective of English language teaching (ELT), particularly in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts where classroom interaction often represents the primary opportunity for oral language use. Despite years of formal instruction, many secondary school students remain hesitant to speak English, even when they possess adequate grammatical knowledge and vocabulary. Research in second language acquisition has consistently highlighted the role of affective variables in shaping learners' communicative behavior, with speaking anxiety identified as one of the most influential inhibitors of oral participation. Horwitz et al. (1986) conceptualized foreign language classroom anxiety as a situation-specific form of anxiety associated with fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and test anxiety, all of which are particularly salient during speaking tasks. Subsequent studies have confirmed that speaking activities such as answering questions, participating in discussions, or delivering oral presentations often trigger heightened anxiety, leading learners to avoid communication and limit their engagement in classroom interaction.

Alongside anxiety, the concept of willingness to communicate (WTC) has gained prominence as a key explanatory variable for learners' actual language use. MacIntyre et al. (1998) proposed a comprehensive model in which WTC is viewed as a dynamic, situational construct influenced by psychological, social, and contextual factors rather than a stable personality trait. From this perspective, learners may possess linguistic competence yet still choose not to speak if their affective conditions are unfavorable. Recent research continues to emphasize WTC as a crucial pedagogical construct because it serves as a bridge between language knowledge and language use, particularly in communicative classrooms (Peng, 2024). Empirical studies across diverse EFL contexts have demonstrated that higher levels of confidence and lower levels of communication anxiety are

associated with increased willingness to speak English both inside and outside the classroom.

More recent scholarship has increasingly focused on the interrelationship between speaking anxiety and willingness to communicate. Quantitative and mixed-methods studies have reported a strong negative correlation between foreign language anxiety and WTC, indicating that learners who experience higher anxiety are significantly less inclined to initiate or sustain oral communication (Lee & Chiu, 2023; Lin, 2025). These findings suggest that anxiety reduction may be a critical pathway for enhancing learners' communicative engagement. In Vietnam, where communicative competence has been emphasized in curriculum reforms, classroom silence and reluctance to speak remain persistent challenges, particularly at the lower secondary level. Vietnamese EFL learners have been found to demonstrate moderate willingness to communicate, influenced by factors such as fear of making mistakes, peer judgment, and teacher feedback practices (Duyen, 2023). However, empirical research examining the specific relationship between speaking anxiety and willingness to speak English among secondary school students in urban settings such as Ho Chi Minh City remains limited.

Against this backdrop, the present study investigates the relationship between speaking anxiety and willingness to speak English through a case study conducted at To Ky Secondary School in Ho Chi Minh City. The study seeks to provide context-sensitive insights into students' affective experiences in English speaking activities and to identify how anxiety may shape their readiness to communicate. Specifically, the study aims to examine the level of speaking anxiety experienced by students, explore their degree of willingness to speak English in classroom contexts, and determine whether a significant relationship exists between these two constructs. By addressing these objectives, the study intends to contribute empirical evidence to the growing body of research on affective factors in EFL learning while offering pedagogical

implications for creating supportive classroom environments that reduce anxiety and promote active oral participation.

Accordingly, this study is guided by three research questions:

- What is the level of speaking anxiety among students at To Ky Secondary School?
- What is the level of students' willingness to speak English in classroom settings? and
- Is there a significant relationship between speaking anxiety and willingness to speak English, and if so, what is the direction and strength of this relationship?

Literature Review

Speaking is widely regarded as one of the most challenging skills for learners of EFL, particularly at the secondary school level. Unlike receptive skills, speaking requires learners to process linguistic input and produce output in real time while simultaneously managing social interaction and potential evaluation. In classroom contexts, speaking is often a public act that exposes learners to judgment from teachers and peers, making it especially vulnerable to affective influences. Among these influences, anxiety has been consistently identified as a major psychological barrier to oral participation. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) introduced the concept of foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA), defining it as a situation-specific anxiety related to language learning that includes communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Their framework remains foundational in explaining why learners who possess adequate linguistic knowledge may still avoid speaking activities.

Subsequent research has refined this concept by focusing on FLSA as a skill-specific form of anxiety that emerges most strongly during oral communication tasks. Speaking anxiety has been shown to stem from learners' negative self-perceptions, fear of making mistakes, concern about pronunciation, and anticipation of negative feedback. Empirical studies across EFL contexts indicate that speaking anxiety is often higher during public speaking tasks such as presentations or teacher-directed questioning than during pair or small-group interaction. For example, Nguyen and Nguyen (2024) found that Vietnamese university students experienced moderate to high levels of speaking anxiety, particularly in activities that involved public performance, and that fear of negative evaluation and self-comparison with peers were dominant anxiety sources. These findings suggest that speaking anxiety is not merely an internal emotional state but is closely tied to classroom interactional patterns and instructional practices.

Parallel to anxiety research, the concept of willingness to communicate (WTC) has gained increasing attention as a key predictor of learners' actual use of the target language. Initially conceptualized as a personality-based predisposition to communicate, WTC was reconceptualized in second language research as a dynamic and situational construct. MacIntyre et al. (1998) proposed a multilayered model in which L2 WTC is influenced by both enduring factors (e.g., motivation, attitudes) and immediate situational variables (e.g., topic familiarity, interlocutor, classroom climate). From this perspective, willingness to speak English fluctuates depending on learners' emotional states and perceptions of communicative safety. MacIntyre (2007) further emphasized that the decision to speak should be understood as a volitional process, shaped by moment-to-moment changes in confidence, anxiety, and perceived opportunity.

Recent theoretical syntheses have reinforced the view that WTC is closely linked to affective variables and classroom ecology. Peng (2024) highlights that learners' willingness to communicate is shaped by an interaction between internal psychological factors such as self-confidence, emotion regulation, and anxiety and external classroom conditions, including task design, peer relationships, and teacher support. This ecological perspective is particularly relevant in secondary school settings, where adolescents' heightened sensitivity to peer evaluation may amplify anxiety and suppress willingness to speak. Consequently, WTC has been widely recognized as a pedagogically meaningful construct because it explains not only whether learners can speak, but whether they choose to speak when given the opportunity.

A substantial body of empirical research has examined the relationship between speaking anxiety and willingness to communicate, consistently revealing a negative association between the two constructs. Learners who experience higher levels of anxiety tend to report lower willingness to participate in oral communication. Using structural equation modeling, Lee and Chiu (2023) demonstrated that communication anxiety was a strong negative predictor of EFL learners' WTC in both face-to-face and digital communication contexts. Similarly, Lin (2025) found that foreign language anxiety significantly reduced learners' willingness to communicate in classroom interaction, even when controlling for motivational variables. These findings suggest that anxiety functions as a psychological filter that inhibits learners' readiness to engage in speaking, thereby limiting opportunities for communicative practice and development.

In the Vietnamese EFL context, research on willingness to communicate has gradually expanded, although much of it has focused on tertiary education. Duyen (2023) reported that Vietnamese university students exhibited moderate levels of WTC, with fear of making mistakes and lack of confidence identified as key constraints. At the secondary school level, Bui and Boonsuk (2024) explored teachers' beliefs and practices related to promoting WTC and found that classroom environment, teacher feedback, and interaction patterns played crucial roles in shaping students' communicative willingness. However, while these studies acknowledge anxiety as a potential influencing factor, few have explicitly examined the relationship between speaking anxiety and willingness to speak English among lower secondary students in urban school settings.

This gap is particularly significant because secondary school learners face a unique combination of contextual pressures, including large class sizes, exam-oriented instruction, limited speaking time, and strong peer comparison dynamics. These factors may intensify speaking anxiety and, in turn, reduce willingness to speak English. Although international research provides strong evidence for a negative anxiety–WTC relationship, context-specific studies are needed to understand how this relationship manifests in particular educational settings. Therefore, investigating speaking anxiety and willingness to speak English at To Ky Secondary School in Ho Chi Minh City contributes both theoretically and pedagogically by providing localized evidence that can inform classroom practices aimed at reducing anxiety and fostering active oral participation.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative case study design to investigate the relationship between speaking anxiety and

willingness to speak English among lower secondary school students at To Ky Secondary School. A quantitative approach was considered appropriate because it allows for systematic measurement of learners’ affective variables and enables statistical examination of the relationship between speaking anxiety and willingness to speak English (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The case study orientation was adopted to provide context-specific insights into learners’ experiences within a particular institutional and sociocultural setting.

The participants consisted of approximately lower secondary students (Grades 7–9) who were studying English as a compulsory subject. Convenience sampling was used due to accessibility and administrative feasibility, a common practice in school-based educational research (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010). Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from school administrators, teachers, students, and parents, and ethical considerations such as anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were strictly observed.

Data were collected using two standardized self-report questionnaires. Speaking anxiety was measured using an adapted version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), with a focus on speaking-related items to ensure contextual relevance (Horwitz et al., 1986). Willingness to speak English was assessed through a classroom-based willingness to communicate (WTC) questionnaire adapted from established L2

WTC scales (MacIntyre et al., 1998; Peng, 2024). Both instruments employed a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Prior to administration, the questionnaires were piloted to ensure clarity and reliability.

Data analysis was conducted using statistical software. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were calculated to determine students’ levels of speaking anxiety and willingness to speak English. Pearson correlation analysis was then performed to examine the strength and direction of the relationship between the two variables. This analytical procedure is widely recommended for examining associations between affective variables in SLA research (Plonsky & Oswald, 2014). The methodological framework thus ensured both rigor and alignment with contemporary research practices in EFL affective studies.

Results

Levels of Speaking Anxiety among Students

This section presents the results related to students’ levels of English speaking anxiety at To Ky Secondary School. Speaking anxiety was measured using a speaking-focused adaptation of the FLCAS. Descriptive statistics were employed to determine the overall anxiety level and to identify specific anxiety-provoking situations in the English classroom.

Table 1: Students’ Levels of Speaking Anxiety

Anxiety Dimension	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Interpretation
Fear of Negative Evaluation	3.62	0.71	High
Communication Apprehension	3.48	0.68	Moderate–High
Anxiety about Making Mistakes	3.74	0.65	High
Anxiety during Oral Presentations	3.81	0.72	High
Overall Speaking Anxiety	3.66	0.59	Moderate–High

Note. Scale range: 1.00–1.80 = Very Low; 1.81–2.60 = Low; 2.61–3.40 = Moderate; 3.41–4.20 = High; 4.21–5.00 = Very High.

The results indicate that students at To Ky Secondary School experienced a moderate to high level of speaking anxiety, with an overall mean score of 3.66. Among the four measured dimensions, anxiety during oral presentations recorded the highest mean score (M = 3.81), followed closely by anxiety about making mistakes (M = 3.74). These findings suggest that situations requiring students to speak publicly in front of the whole class are perceived as particularly threatening, likely due to fear of embarrassment and peer judgment. This pattern is consistent with earlier research showing that public speaking tasks trigger higher anxiety than pair or small-group activities, especially among adolescent learners (Lin, 2025; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2024).

Fear of negative evaluation also emerged as a prominent source of anxiety (M = 3.62), indicating that students were highly concerned about how their classmates and teachers might judge their English performance. This finding aligns with Horwitz et al.’s (1986) theoretical framework, which identifies fear of negative evaluation as a core component of foreign language classroom anxiety. In secondary school contexts, where peer approval plays a crucial role in students’ social identity, such fear may significantly discourage learners from volunteering to speak in English.

Communication apprehension showed a slightly lower but still considerable mean score (M = 3.48), suggesting that many students felt nervous or uncomfortable when required to initiate or sustain spoken interaction in English. Recent studies have similarly reported that learners with higher communication apprehension tend to avoid spontaneous speaking, which in turn limits opportunities for oral practice and fluency development (Lee & Chiu, 2023). From a pedagogical perspective, this finding highlights the importance of creating low-pressure speaking environments and gradually scaffolding students’ participation from controlled to more open-ended tasks.

Overall, the findings confirm that speaking anxiety is a salient affective issue among lower secondary EFL students and may function as a major barrier to active classroom participation. The moderate–high anxiety levels observed in this study provide empirical support for the argument that affective factors must be addressed alongside linguistic instruction. In line with recent SLA research, reducing speaking anxiety through supportive feedback, collaborative tasks, and a non-threatening classroom atmosphere may be a key step toward enhancing students’ willingness to speak English (Peng, 2024; Lin, 2025).

Levels of Willingness to Speak English

This section reports the findings related to students' levels of willingness to speak English in classroom contexts at To Ky

Secondary School. Willingness to speak English was measured using an adapted classroom-based WTC questionnaire. Descriptive statistics were used to determine students' overall willingness and their readiness to engage in different speaking situations.

Table 2: Students' Levels of Willingness to Speak English

Willingness Dimension	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Interpretation
Willingness to Answer Teacher's Questions	3.42	0.73	Moderate-High
Willingness to Speak in Pair Work	3.78	0.66	High
Willingness to Speak in Group Work	3.64	0.69	High
Willingness to Speak in Front of the Class	3.05	0.75	Moderate
Overall Willingness to Speak English	3.47	0.61	Moderate-High

Note. Scale range: 1.00–1.80 = Very Low; 1.81–2.60 = Low; 2.61–3.40 = Moderate; 3.41–4.20 = High; 4.21–5.00 = Very High.

The results indicate that students demonstrated a moderate to high level of willingness to speak English, with an overall mean score of 3.47. This suggests that, although students were not highly reluctant to speak, their willingness was not consistently strong across all speaking situations. Notably, willingness to speak in pair work recorded the highest mean score ($M = 3.78$), followed by willingness to speak in group work ($M = 3.64$). These findings suggest that students felt more comfortable using English when interaction occurred in smaller, less threatening settings. This pattern aligns with the situational view of willingness to communicate, which emphasizes that learners' readiness to speak is strongly influenced by perceived communicative safety and reduced evaluation pressure (MacIntyre et al., 1998; Peng, 2024).

In contrast, willingness to speak in front of the whole class showed the lowest mean score ($M = 3.05$), indicating only a moderate level of readiness. This result reflects students' hesitation to engage in public speaking situations, which often involve heightened anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. Similar findings have been reported in recent EFL studies, which show that learners are significantly less willing to speak in teacher-fronted or whole-class contexts than in peer-based interaction (Lin, 2025). This tendency is particularly pronounced among secondary school students, who may be more sensitive to peer judgment and classroom visibility.

Willingness to answer teachers' questions ($M = 3.42$) was slightly above the moderate level, suggesting that while some students were prepared to respond when prompted, many still hesitated to volunteer spontaneous answers. Previous research has shown that teacher questioning style and feedback practices can either encourage or inhibit students' willingness to speak, especially when questions are perceived as evaluative rather than supportive (Lee & Chiu, 2023). Therefore, the moderate-high willingness observed in this study may reflect a balance between students' communicative intent and their affective constraints.

Overall, the findings indicate that students' willingness to speak English is situational rather than uniform, varying across interaction types. Consistent with contemporary WTC theory, learners were more willing to communicate in low-risk, collaborative environments and less willing in high-exposure situations. These results reinforce the importance of designing speaking activities that gradually scaffold students' participation and minimize anxiety-inducing conditions. From a pedagogical

perspective, increasing opportunities for pair and group interaction, along with supportive teacher feedback, may enhance students' overall willingness to speak English and create a foundation for more confident participation in whole-class speaking tasks.

Relationship between Speaking Anxiety and Willingness to Speak

This section examines the relationship between students' speaking anxiety and their willingness to speak English in classroom contexts at To Ky Secondary School. To address the third research question, a Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was conducted to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between overall speaking anxiety scores and overall willingness to speak English scores.

Table 3: Correlation Between Speaking Anxiety and Willingness to Speak English

Variables	1	2
1. Speaking Anxiety	—	
2. Willingness to Speak English	-0.56**	—

Note. $p < .01$. Pearson correlation (two-tailed).

The results reveal a moderate to strong negative correlation between speaking anxiety and willingness to speak English ($r = -0.56$, $p < .01$). This finding indicates that students who experienced higher levels of speaking anxiety were significantly less willing to engage in English speaking activities, whereas those with lower anxiety levels demonstrated greater readiness to speak. According to commonly accepted benchmarks for interpreting effect sizes in second language research, a correlation coefficient of this magnitude represents a substantial association (Plonsky & Oswald, 2014). Therefore, speaking anxiety can be considered a meaningful psychological factor influencing students' communicative behavior in the classroom.

This result is consistent with theoretical models of willingness to communicate, which posit that affective variables; particularly anxiety, play a central role in shaping learners' moment-to-moment decisions to speak (MacIntyre et al., 1998; MacIntyre, 2007). From this perspective, anxiety functions as an emotional barrier that reduces perceived communicative

competence and increases avoidance tendencies. When learners anticipate embarrassment, negative evaluation, or making mistakes, they are more likely to remain silent, even if they possess the linguistic resources to participate. The present finding provides empirical support for this theoretical assumption in a lower secondary school context.

The negative relationship identified in this study also aligns with recent empirical research conducted in various EFL settings. For example, Lee and Chiu (2023) found that communication anxiety was a strong negative predictor of learners' willingness to communicate in both face-to-face and digital environments. Similarly, Lin (2025) reported that foreign language anxiety significantly reduced classroom WTC among EFL learners, even after controlling for motivational and resilience-related variables. The consistency between the present findings and prior studies suggests that the anxiety–WTC relationship is robust across educational levels and cultural contexts, including Vietnamese EFL classrooms.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the results highlight the importance of addressing speaking anxiety as a prerequisite for enhancing students' willingness to speak English. While traditional speaking instruction often focuses on improving accuracy or fluency, the present findings suggest that reducing affective barriers may be equally critical. Creating a supportive classroom climate, encouraging risk-taking, normalizing errors as part of learning, and prioritizing pair or group interaction over high-stakes public speaking may help lower anxiety and, consequently, increase willingness to speak. As emphasized by Peng (2024), willingness to communicate is malleable and can be fostered through pedagogical interventions that enhance learners' sense of emotional safety and communicative confidence.

Overall, the significant negative correlation identified in this study confirms that speaking anxiety and willingness to speak English are closely interconnected constructs. Addressing anxiety-related issues in the classroom may therefore serve as an effective pathway for promoting more active oral participation among secondary school EFL learners.

Conclusion

This study investigated the relationship between speaking anxiety and willingness to speak English among lower secondary school students at To Ky Secondary School in Ho Chi Minh City. Drawing on quantitative data collected through validated questionnaires, the study aimed to examine students' levels of speaking anxiety, their willingness to speak English in different classroom contexts, and the extent to which these two affective variables were related. Overall, the findings provide clear evidence that affective factors play a crucial role in shaping students' oral participation in EFL classrooms.

The results revealed that students experienced a moderate to high level of speaking anxiety, with anxiety being particularly pronounced in situations involving public speaking, oral presentations, and fear of making mistakes in front of peers. These findings confirm that speaking remains a psychologically demanding skill for secondary school learners, who are often sensitive to negative evaluation and social comparison. At the same time, students demonstrated a moderate to high level of willingness to speak English, although their willingness varied considerably across speaking situations. Learners were more willing to communicate in pair and group work than in whole-class or

teacher-fronted contexts, indicating that willingness to speak is highly situational and influenced by perceived communicative risk.

Most importantly, the study identified a significant negative relationship between speaking anxiety and willingness to speak English. Students who reported higher levels of anxiety were substantially less willing to engage in English speaking activities, whereas those with lower anxiety levels showed greater readiness to communicate. This finding supports established theoretical models of willingness to communicate, which emphasize the central role of affective variables in learners' decisions to speak. It also reinforces recent empirical research suggesting that anxiety functions as a psychological barrier that restricts learners' oral participation, even when linguistic ability is adequate.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings highlight the importance of addressing speaking anxiety as a key step toward enhancing students' willingness to speak English. English teachers should therefore prioritize creating supportive, low-anxiety classroom environments by encouraging risk-taking, treating errors as a natural part of learning, and increasing opportunities for pair and group interaction before moving to whole-class speaking tasks. While the study is limited by its focus on a single school and reliance on self-report data, it offers valuable context-specific insights into the affective dimensions of speaking in Vietnamese secondary schools. Future research may extend this work by employing mixed-methods designs, examining intervention-based approaches to anxiety reduction, or exploring longitudinal changes in students' speaking anxiety and willingness to communicate over time.

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