



From Anxiety to Ability: A Narrative Exploration of Speaking Anxiety in EFL Contexts

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Abstract

This study explores the experience of an EFL undergraduate student in managing speaking anxiety to improve speaking skills. Involving a single participant, the research seeks to provide an in-depth and comprehensive account of the participant's lived experience. Data were collected through document analysis and semi-structured interviews. Document analysis focused on identifying the characteristics of speaking anxiety through the observation of kinesic behaviours. Meanwhile, the semi-structured interview was conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences and the strategies implemented to address speaking anxiety. The findings reveal that specific kinesics patterns are associated with speaking anxiety. Additionally, the study confirms the importance of applying coping strategies to manage anxiety effectively. It can be concluded that recognising the characteristics of speaking anxiety and employing appropriate solutions can assist students in overcoming anxiety and enhancing their speaking performance.

Keywords: Speaking Anxiety, Characteristics, Solutions, Speaking Ability, Narrative Inquiry

A. Introduction

As English becomes a lingua franca, many people around the world are trying to increase their ability to speak English. Even so, speaking has been known as a highly multifaceted ability by many English learners since it involves three aspects as follows: (1) knowledge of language and discourse (pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and discourse); (2) major speaking skills (chunking, signaling intention, and turn-taking); and (3) communication strategies (paraphrasing, rephrasing, and approximation) (Goh & Burns, 2012). Furthermore, speaking is believed to be an essential skill, especially for non-native English learners, in order to interact and communicate effectively (Abrar et al., 2022; Santiana & Marzuki, 2022). Therefore, it is necessary for English learners to have good speaking ability.



However, it is found that many EFL learners are struggling to improve their speaking ability. Many of them experience anxiety when they are required to speak or communicate using English in public (Hanifa, 2018). In learning English as a foreign language, EFL learners often face the sensation of nervousness and even fear (Muthmainnah, et al., 2022; Syafryadin & Santiana, 2023), which leads them to experience common characteristics of speaking anxiety such as shivering, sweating, blankness, fast heartbeat, squeaky voice, etc. (Rajitha & Alamelu, 2020). The presence of speaking anxiety in EFL undergraduate students' learning experience can hinder their speaking ability to improve. Consequently, it is needed to discover the characteristics of speaking anxiety as well as its solutions in order to enhance students' speaking ability.

For many EFL learners in Indonesia, speaking is regarded as an anxiety-provoking activity. Especially in the first year of university in English education departments, speaking is very important as there will be many courses and activities which require the students to demonstrate their speaking ability. This might be extremely scary for students who are dealing with speaking anxiety. Hence, it is essential to identify whether a student experiences the characteristics of speaking anxiety and to find out the solutions to overcome. The first aim of this study is to explore the characteristics of speaking anxiety experienced by a first-year EFL undergraduate student. Second, the solutions employed by the student will also be investigated. The findings from this study will be beneficial for both EFL teachers and students as they can utilize the solutions to reduce or even solve speaking anxiety. As a result, students' speaking ability can be improved and they can benefit from mastering a foreign language.

So far, anxiety is one of the most studied topics in the SLA milieu (MacIntyre & Vincze, 2017). Anxiety itself refers to the negative feelings experienced by a person in uncomfortable situations, leading them to feel nervous, worried, and scared (Hussain et al., 2021). The most common anxiety felt by EFL students is speaking anxiety. Speaking anxiety results from several factors including low confidence, lack of understanding, poor preparation, and fear of making mistakes, which lead to poor oral performance (Syahfutra & Wibowo, 2021). According to Öztürk and Gürbüz (2014), speaking is reported to be the most anxiety-provoking experience for EFL students.



There have been a substantial number of studies exploring speaking anxiety, from its sources, impacts, characteristics, and solutions. Related to its solutions, Nurfirdaus et al. (2019) conducted a study uncovering the strategies employed by ESL learners in Malaysia and identified gender-based differences in coping mechanisms. The most utilized solution found was group work with classmates. More recently, Aripin et al. (2020) examined the characteristics of speaking anxiety through kinesics or non-verbal communication. The result showed that kinesics enabled students to use gestures, facial expressions, and eye contact during speaking performance. Maharani (2021) also explored strategies that EFL students can use to face speaking anxiety through a qualitative descriptive study, applying both open-ended and close-ended questionnaires. The findings revealed three key strategies: preparation, positive thinking, and peer-seeking.

Despite the growing number of studies on speaking anxiety, there is still a lack of research focusing on individual lived experiences that explore both the characteristics and coping strategies in detail. Most studies tend to provide a general overview, leaving a gap in understanding how specific learners manage speaking anxiety in real-life contexts. Additionally, research integrating kinesics as an analytical lens remains scarce. This study aims to fill that gap by investigating a first-year EFL undergraduate student's experiences in overcoming speaking anxiety, including the strategies employed and the kinesic characteristics observed. The unit of analysis is one student enrolled in an English education department in Indonesia.

The rest of this article is structured as follows: the next section presents a review of related literature, followed by the methodology used in this study. The findings and discussion are then elaborated in detail. Finally, the conclusion summarises the study and offers pedagogical implications.

B. Research Methodology

The study investigated characteristics and solutions of an undergraduate EFL student's speaking anxiety by utilizing a qualitative method and narrative inquiry as its design. Narrative inquiry was chosen because it enabled the researcher to explore the lived experiences and stories of the participant in dealing with speaking anxiety as well as in



improving her speaking skill. As Mahmudi and Anugerahwati (2021) pointed out, narrative inquiry was considered the best way to understand experiences. Moreover, the researcher also applied kinesics analysis to find out the characteristics of speaking anxiety experienced by the participant. Kinesics, often known as non-verbal communication, referred to the study of hand, arm, body, and face movements through which information is delivered (Hans & Hans, 2015).

The target population of this study was first-year students in English Education Department, Siliwangi University, and the research context took place in an English Camp activity. The unit of analysis was one female undergraduate student who had experienced speaking anxiety both before and during her early university years. The researcher selected the participant using purposive sampling, as she had been experiencing speaking anxiety before entering university and had attempted several solutions to overcome it. While purposive sampling limits generalizability, it allowed for a detailed and focused investigation of the phenomenon.

The sampling method used was purposive sampling, and the target sample size was one participant, selected based on specific criteria. As this is a narrative inquiry, the aim was not to generalize but to provide an in-depth understanding. The data were collected through document analysis and semi-structured interviews. First, the researcher collected a video recording of the participant during her speaking performance at an English program named English Camp. Second, a semi-structured interview was conducted to gain deeper insights into her experiences and the strategies she used to manage speaking anxiety.

The data analysis process followed the narrative inquiry framework by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), which involved analyzing the participant's story through three dimensions: past, present, and future. This framework allowed the researcher to identify patterns, changes, and developments in the participant's speaking anxiety journey. In addition to narrative analysis, kinesics analysis was conducted by observing the participant's non-verbal behaviours, such as hand movements, facial expressions, and body posture during the speaking performance. These behaviours were then linked to the participant's narrative data to interpret the characteristics of anxiety more accurately.



While the small sample size limited generalizability, the rich data generated from multiple sources (video and interview) ensured credibility and depth of the findings. Overall, this methodology provided a comprehensive view of the student's speaking anxiety and the solutions she implemented, allowing future educators and researchers to better understand how to support EFL learners in similar contexts.

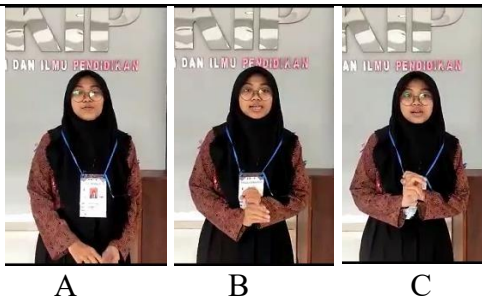
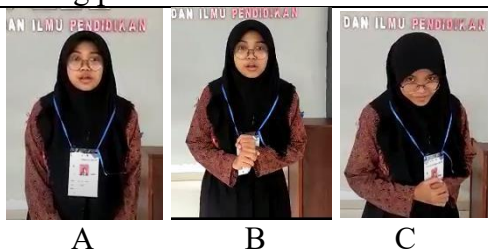
C. Results and Discussion

1. Results

a) The Characteristics of Speaking Anxiety

After investigating the video of speaking performance done by an EFL undergraduate student, it was found that there were several characteristics or symptoms of speaking anxiety showed in her kinesics when the student performed the speech. Viewing the characteristics from the non-verbal messages are important as they provide emotional function as well as an effective media to detect anxiety experienced by EFL students (Richmond & McCroskey, 2000; Singelis, 1994; Gregersen, 2005). In her speaking performance video, the EFL undergraduate student showed several characteristics of speaking anxiety including the gestures of rubbing her own hands, standing rigidly, bowing her head and gaze, and minimum facial expression.

Table 1: The Characteristics of Speaking Anxiety

Categories of Kinesics	Nonverbal Cues	Description
1. Body gestures (Emblem)	 A B C Figure 1 Picture 1 (0.13): The EFL undergraduate student made hand gestures several times when she made mistakes in opening her speech. Picture 2 (0.17): The student hold her own hands after she said a wrong sentence in her speech. Picture 3 (0.33): The EFL student clasps her hands together throughout the speaking performance.	Figure 1 showed an example of speaking anxiety characteristic, which is the use of hand gestures. This signifies that the student tried to control her anxiety especially when she made mistake in her speech. It was also found in the speaking performance video that the student utilized emblems (hand movements) most all the time.
2. Head movement and posture	 A B C Figure 2 Picture A (0.15): The EFL undergraduate student standing rigidly as she tried to recall the materials. Picture B (0.50): The EFL student slightly bowed midway through her speech performance as she was stuttering to remember the right sentences. Picture C (1.07): The EFL student bends and bows her head for some time before her speaking performance ended.	Based on Figure 2, the student didn't change her body posture in significant way. Most of the time, her posture was rigid.

Categories of Kinesics	Nonverbal Cues	Description
3. Eye contact	 A B Figure 3 Picture A (0.30): The EFL undergraduate student slightly looked down as she thought of the continuation of her speech. Picture B (1.05): The EFL student completely looked down as she finished her speaking performance.	Figure 3 illustrated that the EFL undergraduate student avoid direct eye-contact with the audience. Most of the time, she slightly looked down or looked down. While sometimes, she looked at the camera but her focus was not on the camera.
4. Facial expression	 Figure 4 Picture (0.29): The facial expressions of the EFL student stayed to be flat throughout her speech performance especially when she pauses or tried to remember her words.	As seen in Figure 4, the student did not try to be expressive with her facial expression as her face tend to be tense and flat without any emotion.

b) The Solutions in Dealing with Speaking Anxiety Done by The EFL Undergraduate Student

After investigating the characteristics of speaking anxiety experienced by an EFL undergraduate student, a semi-structured was conducted to find out in detailed information about the solution employed by the student in overcoming speaking anxiety and improving her speaking ability. The findings of this study were explained using Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) narrative frameworks: past, present, and future dimensions of a story.

Past Experiences

The initial inquiry to the participant's lived experiences was about how she started her



journey in learning English, especially speaking, and how she experienced speaking anxiety for the first time. It is truly interesting to find out the starting point of the student's learning journey.

Excerpt 1

At first, I learned and liked English because the way English teachers in elementary school teaching English were very fun. When I was in elementary school, I also took English courses that had a lot of learning activities while playing, so I began to like English at that moment. In the English course, it focused more on speaking activities. It was not uncommon for me to have to speak to the front of the class and watched by my friends. One class in the course consisted of only a few students, who were all my friends, so at that time I could freely express myself comfortably.

When the researcher asked about her past experience learning English, the student shared that she started to love English since she was in elementary school. However, as the time goes by, the student felt more anxious when she had to speak in front of many people.

Excerpt 2

The external environment was very supportive for me to improve my speaking skills. But, from myself there are many obstacles. Every time I wanted to come to the front of the class I was shaking, my hands were cold, everything I had prepared was gone and I went blank. I don't know why, I felt so uncomfortable being the center of attention and getting stared at by the crowd. Especially when I didn't make maximum preparations. For me, this feeling of uncomfortable and nervousness led me to make mistakes in my pronunciation and grammar.

The EFL undergraduate student shared that she experienced speaking anxiety for the first time when she was in Junior High School. It was very different with her experience in elementary school, she had to face many audiences and it made her trembling.

Excerpt 3

I remember it was in Junior High School. I had to do English speech in front of many people including my classmates, seniors, and also my teachers. It was almost all people in the school! Because so many people watched me, it made me scared. I was trembling and I had a stomachache. I had to go back and forth to the toilet. My palms were sweating and became incredibly cold until my friends ask me, "Are you



okay?" It was so different with when I was in English course back when I was in elementary school.

Present experiences

The research also investigates the student's present experiences of dealing with her speaking anxiety. In the interview, she told the researcher about a public speaking program named English Camp which became the first step of her in reducing her speaking anxiety.

Excerpt 4

I joined the English Camp program at the beginning when I was a new student in the English Education Department. It was very early in college, I also just got to know other friends. My speaking anxiety was very high at that time. My hands are cold and my heart beat really fast because I have to perform speaking in front of new friends and seniors. I remember when I had to perform a speech in this program, my friends said that my gestures were too much. It happened because I was so nervous. All my friends and some seniors looked at me, it was also being filmed by a camera.

Even though she faced speaking anxiety when she had to perform a speech in English Camp program, the student admitted that the program contributed a lot as a first step in reducing her speaking anxiety.

Excerpt 5

It was early days in my college life. I met new people but I had to speak in front of them. Because of that, it made me to start getting used to speaking in front of people, especially that it held two times in a week.

Aside from joining English Camp program, the student shared that she gained many new knowledge and solutions to her speaking anxiety in speaking courses she took in her first and second semester. She was so happy in the courses as she was given many opportunities to practice her speaking and reducing her speaking anxiety, as well as given many feedbacks from her lecturer.



Excerpt 6

I took Survival English course in the first semester and Public Speaking course in the second semester. In the course, there are really many times we were told to come forward and speak in front of the class. The number of students in that class was quite large and at the beginning we still didn't know each other. There were 35 students in Survival English course and 45 students in Public Speaking course. But as I got used to it, my anxiety started to be reduced. In the course, we were also told to record ourselves doing speaking practice and then we watched the video repeatedly to find if there was a mistake in pronunciation, grammar, etc. I think this is very useful for me in improving my speaking skills. The lessons were so fun. In every lesson, the lecturer always provides opportunities for me and other friends to try to practice speaking in front of the class and encourage us to dare to try. In addition, the lecturer always gives constructive feedback after we try to practice in front of the class. For example, what words should not be included in speech, etc. Although he gave feedback when we were still in front of the class, I personally didn't feel hurt at all because the way he gave feedback was very nice. The lecturer always appreciates our efforts and say the good things first before letting us know what part we need to improve. I feel very happy because the lecturer not only sees my shortcomings in speaking, but also appreciates what is already good.

During the interview, the student added an explanation about solutions of speaking anxiety that she did by herself, which is personal practice and practice with peers.

Excerpt 7

I practice a lot on my own to do speaking, especially when I have an assignment to make a speaking video or want to practice in front of the class. I remember when the Public Speaking course, at that time the material was Speech of Acceptance. At that time, I rehearsed with one of my friends before performing. I think helping each other with friends is very important because we can tell each other the advantages and disadvantages of each other. It helps me a lot to reduce my speaking anxiety.

The student also shared her progress in overcoming speaking anxiety at the present moment after she joined speaking events and courses and practice by her own.

Excerpt 8

I think my mispronunciation reduced. In the past, I always make filler words a lot when I speak, but now I didn't make too much of them. My gestures are also improving, while in the past I usually can't stand in proper posture (I always like to



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Volume: 1 Number 2 2025
Page: 77-96

move from here and there) but now I can manage it. Moreover, now I'm more enjoy when I am speaking in front of people. I'm not avoiding when I have to come forward. Even though my palms are still sweating when I am nervous, now I'm not trembling anymore. Everything is improving. I can say that the solutions are effective and work for me.



Future expectations

At the end of the interview in the data collection process, the researcher questioned about the student's future goals and expectations related to her speaking skills and her problem with speaking anxiety. This was done in order to explore the student's future goals after investigating her learning experiences.

Excerpt 9

Hopefully in the future my speaking skills can improve and when I speak in front of many people, I don't want to have any slightest anxiety. In my opinion, speaking anxiety is very important to be tackled because it prevents me from being able to improve and develop my speaking skills. I myself still experience speaking anxiety right now, but it is much less than I used to when I hadn't implemented the solution I mentioned.

The student shared that she got motivation to improve her speaking skills from her dream job to be an English teacher in the future. In addition, she has role models from her surroundings, friends and seniors, who are good with their speaking skills.

Excerpt 10

I get motivation to reduce my speaking anxiety and improve my speaking skills from my dream job because I always want to be a teacher since a long time. I believe that a teacher should have a good speaking skill to transfer the knowledge to the students. Besides, I also got motivated by my parents, my friends and my seniors who are already confident with their speaking skills. I want to be like them.

Lastly, the researcher inquired about the benefits of overcoming speaking anxiety and improving speaking skills experienced by the EFL undergraduate student.

Excerpt 11

I feel more confident with my speaking skills as I reduced my speaking anxiety. Now, I can speak more comfortably even though I am still a little bit nervous. But if I compare it to my speaking anxiety before, I made such a big progress. I feel that reducing speaking anxiety is important because there are many tasks which requires speaking skills, such as presentation for example. I believe that speaking skills will



also be beneficial for my career in the future. That's why, I will always practice to improve my speaking skills and reduce my speaking anxiety.

The findings of this study revealed that the EFL undergraduate student displayed multiple non-verbal indicators of speaking anxiety during her performance in the English Camp programme, including repetitive hand gestures, rigid posture, downward gaze, and minimal facial expression. These physical cues aligned with existing literature that highlights kinesics as a significant component in identifying anxiety among language learners. Observations from the video analysis were further supported by relevant theoretical perspectives, indicating that such behaviours are commonly associated with nervousness and discomfort in public speaking situations.

To address her anxiety, the student employed various coping strategies, including joining structured programmes like English Camp, engaging in regular classroom speaking practices, and seeking peer collaboration for rehearsal. She also benefited from constructive feedback provided by lecturers, which helped her build confidence gradually. Over time, these experiences contributed to noticeable improvements in her performance and comfort in speaking publicly. Her journey underscores the importance of supportive learning environments and consistent practice in reducing speaking anxiety among EFL learners.

2. Discussion

Kinesics, or body language, includes body gestures, head movements, posture, eye contact, and facial expressions are non-verbal cues can reveal students' emotional states, especially in situations that trigger anxiety, such as speaking tasks. Previous research has highlighted the role of kinesics in identifying anxious behaviours during oral performances. Body gestures are among the most observable signs of anxiety. Numerous studies have reported that anxious learners often exhibit fidgety hand movements, such as rubbing palms together, wringing fingers, or tightly clasping hands (Gregersen, 2005; Indah et al., 2018). These gestures often serve as a means of releasing internal tension or self-soothing during high-pressure speaking tasks. In contrast, some studies suggest that gestures may also function as compensatory strategies for vocabulary limitations. While Gregersen (2005) associates such gestures with emotional discomfort, other researchers, like Sukying (2021), highlight that they can also assist learners in conveying meaning when they struggle with



language production. Therefore, it is important to recognize that gestures are not solely indicators of anxiety but may serve dual purposes—both expressing unease and helping with communication.

Similarly, posture and head movements offer insights into a speaker's emotional state. Previous research has shown that rigid or slumped postures are often linked to nervousness or emotional withdrawal (Indah et al., 2018). This finding is consistent with the study's participant, who exhibited a tense posture during speaking tasks. However, studies such as Daud et al. (2019) emphasize that the effect of posture on speaking anxiety can vary depending on the learner's familiarity with the topic or the speaking context. In contrast, when learners feel more prepared or familiar with the content, their posture tends to become more relaxed, suggesting a direct connection between emotional regulation and physical expressions.

Eye contact also plays a significant role in kinesics, with anxious learners often avoiding eye contact as a means of reducing their perceived exposure to judgment. As noted by Sulistyorini (2018), eye contact avoidance is a common coping mechanism, allowing students to feel less vulnerable in public speaking situations. However, this may negatively affect the learner's perceived confidence and connection with their audience. This study supports the notion that anxiety can lead to eye contact avoidance, but it also raises the question of whether students can train themselves to maintain eye contact in order to improve their speaking performance.

Despite these findings, there is a noticeable gap in research regarding kinesics in informal speaking contexts. Most studies, including those by Daud et al. (2019), focus on formal presentations or public speaking events. However, this study reveals that signs of anxiety, such as fidgeting and limited eye contact, also appear in informal settings like casual conversations with peers. This highlights that speaking anxiety is not confined to formal occasions but can affect learners' everyday communication. Furthermore, this study suggests that anxiety manifests differently depending on the context, with more structured settings possibly intensifying the signs of discomfort.

One of the key factors contributing to speaking anxiety is the fear of making mistakes. As noted by Omar (2023), this fear often results from concerns over pronunciation, grammar,



or vocabulary errors. While the fear of miscommunication is common across studies, this study extends the discussion by focusing on how the fear of errors intersects with the physical and emotional signs of anxiety. According to Daud et al. (2019), low self-esteem plays a critical role in amplifying anxiety. Learners who doubt their language abilities are more likely to avoid speaking opportunities, reinforcing their cycle of anxiety. However, as Maharani (2021) suggests, learners can reduce this fear by preparing in advance and practising with peers. This approach helps learners gain more control over their speaking tasks, decreasing anxiety and boosting their confidence.

External factors, particularly the role of teachers, are crucial in mitigating anxiety. According to Rafada and Madini (2017), providing regular speaking practice and constructive feedback are effective strategies for helping students overcome anxiety. Positive reinforcement can guide learners through their mistakes without making them feel discouraged. This approach fosters an environment where mistakes are viewed as part of the learning process, rather than a source of shame. This contrasts with previous research, which often underscores the negative impact of traditional error correction methods on students' emotional well-being. The supportive approach recommended by Ansari (2015) empowers learners to face their anxieties in a more constructive manner.

In addition to teacher support, students must also develop their own coping strategies. Self-management, such as preparation and peer practice, plays a pivotal role in overcoming speaking anxiety. According to Prasetyaningrum et al. (2020), personalized strategies allow learners to take ownership of their anxiety, fostering a sense of control over their speaking experiences. This study aligns with Maharani's (2021) argument that practice with peers provides a safe environment for students to rehearse and build confidence without fear of judgment. The combination of self-regulation and peer support is crucial in helping learners reduce their anxiety.

The role of motivation cannot be overstated. As noted by Ritonga and Rahman (2020), motivated learners are more likely to engage actively in speaking tasks, leading to improved speaking skills over time. This study echoes the importance of intrinsic motivation, such as a personal desire to become fluent in English or pursue a career that requires strong speaking skills. Motivation encourages learners to take risks, make mistakes, and view



challenges as opportunities for growth. This positive attitude towards mistakes reduces anxiety, making learners more willing to engage in speaking activities and practice more regularly.

In conclusion, overcoming speaking anxiety in EFL learners is a complex process that involves both internal and external factors. While teachers play an essential role in providing support and feedback, students must also develop personal strategies for managing anxiety. Moreover, motivation is a key driver in reducing speaking anxiety and improving language proficiency. By combining these strategies, learners can overcome their fears, build their confidence, and improve their speaking abilities.

D. Conclusion and Suggestion

This research aims to know the characteristics of student's speaking anxiety through kinesics and the solutions of speaking anxiety employed by the student in order to enhance the speaking ability. The result shows that the student has several characteristics when facing speaking anxiety, including making too much hand gestures, slumped body posture, avoid direct eye contact, flat and tense facial expression. These characteristics proved that the student experience speaking anxiety when required to perform her speaking in front of a lot of people. To overcome speaking anxiety, it is needed to employ several strategies. The EFL undergraduate student shared her personal solutions or strategies in dealing with speaking anxiety, such as joining activities and courses which allows her to practice her speaking, practice and prepare before speaking performance, have a supportive peer to correct each other's mistake and learn to cope with speaking anxiety together. More importantly, it is also essential to have motivation to learn and improve speaking anxiety in overcoming speaking anxiety. The EFL undergraduate student pointed out her motivation in learning speaking as follows: her dream job to be an English teacher, friends and seniors who are confident with their speaking ability, and her parents who always support her. With the presence of motivation, the student can get the trigger to start taking real actions so that she can overcome her speaking anxiety and enhance speaking ability. This study offers insightful contributions to the understanding of speaking anxiety; however, it is necessary to recognize that the use of narrative inquiry limits the scope to one participant's personal experience. Future research



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Volume: 1 Number 2 2025

Page: 77-96

may benefit from employing varied methodologies, such as case studies or large-scale surveys, to provide a more comprehensive and diverse perspective on the issue.



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Sikola: Journal of Instruction Studies
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Page: 77-96

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