Farasyah: Journal of Linguistics and Language Education
E-ISSN: 3124-7008
Volume 1, Issue 2, July 2026, pp. 100-109
DOI:

Experiencing Foreign Language Anxiety in Arabic Speaking (*Muhādathah*): Evidence from Non-*Pesantren* University Students

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Article Information:
Received: 24 December 2025
Revised: 11 July 2026
Accepted: 15 July 2026
Published: 27 July 2026

Keywords:
Foreign Language Anxiety, Arabic Speaking, *Muhādathah*, Non-*Pesantren* Students, Communication Apprehension.

Abstract

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) significantly impacts Arabic language acquisition, particularly in speaking skills (*Muhādathah*) among non-*pesantren* university students in Indonesia. Unlike *pesantren* counterparts immersed in Arabic-speaking environments, non-*pesantren* students face unique challenges from limited exposure to Arabic oral communication. This mixed-methods study investigated speaking anxiety manifestation, sources, and intensity among 120 non-*pesantren* undergraduate students at Universitas Islam Internasional Darullughah Wadda'wah (UII DALWA) in Pasuruan, East Java. Using the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and semi-structured interviews, findings revealed moderate to high speaking anxiety levels, primarily driven by fear of negative evaluation (M = 3.78), communication apprehension (M = 3.61), and test anxiety (M = 3.34). Pronunciation difficulties, limited vocabulary, lack of practice opportunities, and comparative self-assessment with *pesantren*-educated peers constituted primary anxiety triggers. The absence of Arabic-speaking environments outside formal classes intensified students' apprehension during *Muhādathah* activities. Results underscore institutional context's profound influence on anxiety formation and highlight the need for targeted pedagogical interventions accommodating anxious learners while building linguistic competence in non-immersive Islamic university settings.

How to Cite this Article: Husein, A. F., Hasan, H., & Qaleesha, N. I. (2026). Experiencing Foreign Language Anxiety in Arabic Speaking (Muhādathah): Evidence from Non-Pesantren University Students. *Farasyah: Journal of Linguistics and Language Education*, *1*(2), 100–109.

INTRODUCTION

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) has emerged as one of the most significant affective variables influencing second and foreign language acquisition, particularly in productive skills such as speaking (Horwitz, 2001; Xu & Xie, 2024). In the Indonesian context, Arabic language learning presents unique challenges due to its distinct phonological system, complex morphological structures, and cultural-religious significance. While extensive research has examined foreign language anxiety in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, studies focusing on Arabic as a Foreign Language (AFL) anxiety remain relatively limited, especially concerning specific learner populations such as non-*pesantren* university students.

At Universitas Islam Internasional Darullughah Wadda'wah (UII DALWA) in Pasuruan, East Java, students enrolled in Arabic language education programs predominantly come from non-*pesantren* backgrounds. Unlike *pesantren* students who typically benefit from immersive Arabic-

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speaking environments where the language is used extensively in daily communication, religious instruction, and social interactions (Ahmad Zaki et al., 2021; Hehsan et al., 2024), UII DALWA students predominantly encounter Arabic within formal classroom settings, resulting in limited opportunities for authentic communicative practice. This environmental disparity creates differential anxiety patterns that warrant systematic investigation within this specific institutional context.

Speaking anxiety, specifically conceptualized as foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA), represents a distinct phenomenon characterized by apprehension, nervousness, and fear experienced when communicating in a target language (Horwitz et al., 1986). Within Arabic language education at UII DALWA, *Muhādathah* (Arabic conversation) activities constitute critical pedagogical components for developing communicative competence. However, these activities simultaneously serve as primary anxiety-inducing situations, particularly for learners lacking extensive exposure to Arabic oral communication (Mohamed Mokhtar, 2020; Zawawi et al., 2023).

Recent research in Asian contexts has demonstrated that Arabic language learners experience considerable speaking anxiety across various educational levels (Alamri & Qasem, 2024; Radzi et al., 2022). Studies conducted in Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, and other contexts have revealed that even students with formal Arabic training exhibit moderate to high anxiety levels when engaging in oral communication (Attia & Algazo, 2025). However, these investigations have not specifically examined the unique context of Indonesian Islamic universities like UII DALWA, where students combine Islamic higher education with intensive Arabic language training without prior *pesantren* immersion.

The theoretical framework underpinning this study draws from Horwitz et al.'s (1986) conceptualization of foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) as situation-specific anxiety arising from unique demands of language learning processes. Their tripartite model identifies three interrelated components: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. These components collectively manifest in foreign language speaking contexts, particularly during *Muhādathah* sessions where students must spontaneously produce comprehensible utterances while managing cognitive, linguistic, and social pressures.

Despite growing recognition of FLA's detrimental effects on language learning outcomes, several gaps persist in current literature. First, limited empirical attention has been directed toward Arabic speaking anxiety among Indonesian non-*pesantren* university students at institutions like UII DALWA. Second, institution-specific investigations remain scarce, hindering comprehensive understanding of how particular educational environments shape anxiety experiences. Third, specific manifestations and triggers of speaking anxiety during *Muhādathah* activities at non-immersive Islamic universities require deeper exploration to inform targeted pedagogical interventions.

This research addresses these gaps by investigating foreign language speaking anxiety among non-*pesantren* students at UII DALWA. Specifically, the study examines: (a) levels and manifestations of speaking anxiety experienced during *Muhādathah* activities, (b) primary sources and triggers of this anxiety, (c) how students' non-*pesantren* educational backgrounds influence anxiety experiences, and (d) coping strategies students employ to manage speaking anxiety. By elucidating these dimensions within UII DALWA's specific context, this research contributes theoretical insights

into context-specific anxiety formation and practical implications for Arabic language pedagogy in non-immersive Islamic university environments.

Foreign language anxiety represents a complex psychological construct extensively theorized and empirically investigated since the 1980s. MacIntyre (1999) defined language anxiety as worry and negative emotional reactions aroused when learning or using a second language. This conceptualization extends beyond general anxiety by emphasizing FLA's situation-specific nature, which manifests uniquely in language learning contexts rather than constituting a personality trait (Horwitz, 2017; Kim, 2023).

The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), developed by Horwitz et al. (1986), has become the most widely utilized instrument for measuring language anxiety, demonstrating high reliability across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts (Botes et al., 2022). The scale comprises 33 items assessing three primary dimensions: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Subsequent validation studies have confirmed the scale's psychometric properties while identifying additional anxiety factors specific to particular skills and contexts (Park, 2014).

Among four language skills, speaking consistently emerges as most anxiety-inducing for foreign language learners across various contexts (Liu, 2018; Su, 2021). Speaking anxiety stems from multiple sources including pronunciation concerns, grammatical accuracy pressures, vocabulary limitations, cultural differences in communication patterns, and the immediate, public nature of oral performance (Dewaele, 2019). Unlike written communication, speaking requires real-time language production without revision opportunities, intensifying cognitive demands and anxiety levels.

Research examining speaking anxiety has identified several consistent patterns. First, anxiety levels correlate negatively with speaking proficiency, with less proficient learners experiencing higher anxiety (Hu et al., 2024). Second, unprepared speaking tasks generate significantly more anxiety than prepared speeches (Grieve et al., 2021). Third, fear of making mistakes and receiving negative evaluation from teachers and peers constitutes the predominant anxiety trigger (Hanifa, 2018). Fourth, individual differences in personality traits, learning styles, and self-efficacy mediate anxiety experiences (Zhang, 2019).

Studies investigating anxiety in Arabic language learning reveal similar patterns to research in other foreign languages while highlighting language-specific challenges. The Arabic phonological system, featuring emphatic consonants, pharyngeal sounds, and intricate pronunciation rules, poses substantial difficulties for non-native speakers, contributing to pronunciation anxiety (Elkhafaifi, 2005). Additionally, Arabic's rich morphological system and diglossia phenomenon create additional cognitive burdens during spontaneous speech production.

Research conducted in Malaysian contexts demonstrates that Arabic language learners experience moderate to high speaking anxiety levels (Mohamed Mokhtar, 2020; Zawawi et al., 2024). Mohamed Mokhtar's (2020) study with secondary students revealed significant concerns regarding test anxiety, communication apprehension, and fear of negative evaluation when speaking Arabic. Similarly, recent studies found negative correlations between oral language anxiety and Arabic learning outcomes, indicating anxiety's detrimental impact on performance.

Indonesian contexts present additional complexity due to the multilingual landscape where students navigate Indonesian, regional languages, English, and Arabic. Recent studies examined Arabic learning challenges in Islamic higher education (Muassomah et al., 2023), revealing that

speaking anxiety occupies a prominent position from students' perspectives, and students demonstrate inconsistency in practicing Arabic in daily communication contexts.

The distinction between *pesantren* and non-*pesantren* educational environments significantly influences Arabic language learning experiences in Indonesia. *Pesantren* institutions typically implement Arabic as a medium of instruction for religious subjects and encourage its usage in dormitory settings, creating semi-immersive environments (Ahmad Zaki et al., 2021). This continuous exposure facilitates natural language acquisition, reduces foreign-ness perception, and provides abundant practice opportunities potentially mitigating speaking anxiety.

Conversely, non-*pesantren* students at institutions like UII DALWA encounter Arabic primarily through limited classroom contact hours with minimal opportunities for authentic communication outside instructional contexts. This restricted exposure intensifies Arabic's foreign-ness perception, reduces automaticity in language processing, and limits confidence development through practice. Consequently, non-*pesantren* students may experience heightened anxiety when confronting *Muhādathah* activities demanding spontaneous oral production (Ritonga et al., 2021).

Studies indicate that *pesantren* graduates demonstrate greater confidence and fluency in Arabic speaking compared to non-*pesantren* peers, attributable to environmental factors rather than innate ability differences (Sholihah et al., 2020). However, systematic investigations specifically targeting anxiety experiences at non-*pesantren* Islamic universities like UII DALWA remain limited, representing a significant gap this study addresses.

METHOD

This study employed a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), combining quantitative survey data with qualitative interview insights to comprehensively investigate Arabic speaking anxiety among non-*pesantren* students at UII DALWA. The quantitative phase assessed anxiety levels and identified primary sources, while the qualitative phase explored students' lived experiences and coping strategies.

Participants comprised 120 undergraduate students (48 males, 72 females) enrolled in the Arabic Language Education program at UII DALWA, Pasuruan, East Java, Indonesia. All participants were in their second or third year ($M = 20.1$ years, $SD = 1.3$), had completed at least four semesters of Arabic coursework at UII DALWA, and reported no prior *pesantren* educational experience. Purposive sampling ensured participants met the non-*pesantren* criterion while representing diverse regional and linguistic backgrounds across East Java province.

The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS; Horwitz et al., 1986) served as the primary quantitative instrument. The 33-item scale employs a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), assessing communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. The Indonesian translation was adapted following established back-translation procedures and validated through pilot testing with 25 UII DALWA students not included in the main study. Cronbach's alpha coefficient demonstrated high internal consistency ($\alpha = .91$).

A supplementary questionnaire gathered demographic information and Arabic learning history specific to UII DALWA students. For the qualitative component, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 purposively selected participants representing diverse anxiety levels based on FLCAS scores. Interview protocols explored anxiety manifestations during specific *Muhādathah*

activities, perceived anxiety sources, comparative experiences with *pesantren*-educated classmates, and coping strategies employed.

Data collection occurred during the first semester of the 2023/2024 academic year at UII DALWA. Quantitative surveys were administered online through Google Forms during regular class sessions, requiring approximately 15–20 minutes. Qualitative interviews lasted 35–50 minutes each, were conducted in a private room at the UII DALWA language laboratory, audio-recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim. Ethical approval was obtained from the UII DALWA Research Ethics Committee, and informed consent was secured from all participants.

Quantitative data analysis employed SPSS version 27. Descriptive statistics characterized overall anxiety levels and individual items. Anxiety levels were categorized as: 33–75 (low), 76–118 (moderate), and 119–165 (high). Independent samples t-tests examined anxiety differences based on gender and year of study, while Pearson correlations explored relationships between anxiety and self-reported proficiency.

Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. After familiarization through multiple transcript readings, codes were systematically generated, collated into potential themes, reviewed and refined for coherence, then defined and interpreted in relation to existing literature and UII DALWA's institutional context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Non-*pesantren* students at UII DALWA experienced moderate to high levels of Arabic speaking anxiety (M = 104.2, SD = 19.4). Specifically, 18% exhibited low anxiety (n = 22), 61% demonstrated moderate anxiety (n = 73), and 21% experienced high anxiety (n = 25). These findings align with previous research documenting elevated speaking anxiety among Arabic learners in non-immersive contexts (Mohamed Mokhtar, 2020; Radzi et al., 2022).

Analysis of FLCAS subscales indicated varying anxiety intensities. Fear of negative evaluation yielded the highest mean (M = 3.78, SD = 0.79), suggesting concerns about peer and teacher judgment constituted the primary anxiety source. Communication apprehension demonstrated comparable levels (M = 3.61, SD = 0.83), reflecting substantial nervousness regarding spontaneous Arabic communication. Test anxiety exhibited relatively lower scores (M = 3.34, SD = 0.91).

Individual item examination revealed specific anxiety manifestations. The item "I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in Arabic class" recorded highest agreement (M = 4.23, SD = 0.68). High means were also observed for: "I get nervous when I don't understand what the teacher is saying in Arabic" (M = 3.94), "I am afraid the other students will laugh at me when I speak Arabic" (M = 3.82), and "I always feel that the other students speak Arabic better than I do" (M = 3.89).

Qualitative analysis identified five primary themes: pronunciation difficulties, vocabulary limitations, comparative self-assessment, lack of practice opportunities, and classroom environment factors. Pronunciation emerged as the most frequently cited challenge, with participants expressing difficulty with Arabic phonemes absent in Indonesian and Javanese. One participant articulated: "When I try to pronounce emphatic letters like ṣād or ṭāʾ in *Muhādathah* class, I feel everyone is judging my accent. Many classmates from *pesantren* backgrounds pronounce these sounds naturally, but for me it's very difficult and embarrassing."

Vocabulary limitations constituted another significant anxiety source. Participants reported insufficient lexical knowledge hindering spontaneous expression. One student explained: "During *Muhādathah* sessions, I often know what I want to say in Indonesian or Javanese, but can't find Arabic words quickly enough. By the time I construct a sentence, the conversation has moved on, and I feel frustrated."

Comparative self-assessment emerged as a particularly salient anxiety trigger. Although most students share non-*pesantren* backgrounds, participants compared their abilities unfavorably to the minority with *pesantren* experience. One participant noted: "There are a few students who studied at *pesantren*. They speak so fluently in *Muhādathah* class. This makes me very anxious because I feel inferior and worry about making mistakes in front of them."

The absence of Arabic-speaking environments outside classes intensified anxiety by limiting practice opportunities. One participant observed: "At UII DALWA, we only use Arabic during *Muhādathah* classes. Outside the classroom, even on campus, we speak Indonesian or Javanese. There's no Arabic-speaking dormitory culture like in *pesantren*. When *Muhādathah* class starts, switching to Arabic feels unnatural, which makes me anxious."

Classroom environment factors also influenced anxiety. Participants identified anxiety-inducing situations: being called unexpectedly, performing before the entire class, engaging in complex exchanges with native Arabic-speaking lecturers, and participating in formal debates (munāẓarah). Conversely, supportive lecturer feedback, small-group pair work, structured practices with preparation time, and graduated difficulty levels were associated with reduced anxiety.

Independent samples t-tests revealed no statistically significant differences in overall anxiety between male and female participants ($t = 1.18$, $p = .241$). However, item-level analyses indicated females reported significantly higher fear of negative evaluation, while males exhibited greater test anxiety. Comparison between second-year and third-year students yielded no significant differences ($t = 0.92$, $p = .361$), suggesting anxiety reduction requires targeted interventions beyond mere exposure.

This study illuminates complex manifestations and sources of foreign language speaking anxiety among non-*pesantren* students at UII DALWA. Moderate to high anxiety levels align with previous research documenting speaking anxiety as prevalent in foreign language learning (Horwitz, 2001; Zhang, 2019), while extending knowledge by explicating context-specific factors shaping anxiety experiences at this Indonesian Islamic university lacking immersive Arabic-speaking environments.

Fear of negative evaluation's prominence as primary anxiety component reflects fundamental social-evaluative concerns inherent in oral performance. This resonates with self-presentation theory, positing individuals experience anxiety when concerned about others' impressions while perceiving limited control (Leary & Kowalski, 1995). At UII DALWA, non-*pesantren* students face dual evaluative threats: linguistic competence assessment by native Arabic-speaking lecturers and comparison with more proficient *pesantren*-educated peers.

Pronunciation difficulties and vocabulary limitations as primary anxiety sources underscore linguistic foundations' importance for speaking confidence in non-immersive contexts. These challenges reflect cognitive demands of real-time speech production, where learners must simultaneously access lexical items, apply morphosyntactic rules, and coordinate articulatory

movements while managing communicative intent (Levelt, 1989). For UII DALWA Arabic learners, demands intensify due to Arabic's complex phonological inventory and rich morphological system.

The environmental constraint theme highlights how UII DALWA's institutional context profoundly shapes anxiety formation. Students' limited exposure to Arabic speaking beyond formal classes prevents comfort and confidence development through naturalistic practice. The absence of dormitory-based Arabic-speaking communities means students lack low-stakes practice opportunities where mistakes occur without evaluative consequences, creating a cyclical pattern where anxiety inhibits practice, which maintains anxiety.

The absence of significant anxiety reduction between second and third-year students suggests anxiety persistence requires targeted intervention rather than passive exposure. This supports research indicating anxiety and proficiency maintain complex, bidirectional relationships where anxiety impedes proficiency development while insufficient proficiency perpetuates anxiety (Hu et al., 2024). Breaking this cycle necessitates explicit anxiety management strategies alongside continued language instruction.

These findings yield several pedagogical implications for Arabic instruction at UII DALWA and similar non-*pesantren* Islamic universities. First, educators should implement anxiety-reduction strategies including gradual exposure to *Muhādathah* tasks, adequate preparation time, and small-group activities reducing public performance pressure (Attia & Algazo, 2025). Second, creating psychologically safe classroom environments where mistakes are normalized as learning opportunities can mitigate fear of negative evaluation. Third, explicit pronunciation training and systematic vocabulary building, combined with extensive structured practice, can address linguistic foundations underlying speaking anxiety.

Additionally, UII DALWA should consider implementing supplementary programs extending Arabic practice beyond formal classes. Establishing Arabic conversation clubs, peer tutoring systems, and optional Arabic-speaking dormitory floors could provide low-stakes practice environments. Integration of technology-enhanced learning, such as speech recognition applications and digital *Muhādathah* platforms, might offer additional practice opportunities accommodating anxious learners (Ritonga et al., 2022).

This study's limitations should be acknowledged. The single-institution focus limits generalizability to other non-*pesantren* Islamic universities. Cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences about anxiety's developmental trajectory. Future research should investigate longitudinal anxiety patterns and intervention effectiveness. Comparative studies examining anxiety differences between UII DALWA students and those at *pesantren*-based universities would illuminate institutional environment's role in shaping anxiety experiences.

CONCLUSION

Non-*pesantren* students at Universitas Islam Internasional Darullughah Wadda'wah experience substantial foreign language speaking anxiety during Arabic *Muhādathah* activities. Fear of negative evaluation, pronunciation challenges, vocabulary limitations, comparative self-assessment with *pesantren* peers, and insufficient practice opportunities constitute primary anxiety sources. These findings underscore UII DALWA's educational environment's profound influence on anxiety formation and highlight the need for targeted pedagogical interventions accommodating anxious learners while building linguistic competence and communicative confidence in non-

immersive Islamic university settings. Results provide evidence-based foundations for developing anxiety-sensitive pedagogical approaches enhancing learning outcomes for non-*pesantren* students in Indonesian Islamic higher education.

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