

INVESTIGATING THE ROLE OF HAND PUPPETS IN REDUCING SPEAKING ANXIETY AMONG JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL EFL STUDENTS

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received : Feb 24, 2026

Revised : Apr 14, 2026

Accepted : May 27, 2026

Available online : May 30, 2026

Keywords:

speaking anxiety, hand puppets, EFL students, qualitative case study, English speaking

ABSTRACT

This study focuses on investigating the role of the hand puppet as a teaching medium in reducing speaking anxiety among junior high school EFL students through a qualitative study approach. The sample of this study was eight eighth-grade students from a junior high school in Surabaya who were purposively selected based on their experience of speaking anxiety in English classes. The students were involved in English speaking activities assisted by hand puppets during classroom instruction. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and reflective journals to explore students' perceptions and reflections on the use of hand puppets in English-speaking lessons. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes related to

students' emotional responses, confidence, and anxiety levels. The findings revealed that most students perceived hand puppets positively, as they helped create a more enjoyable and less intimidating learning environment. The use of hand puppets was found to reduce students' fear of making mistakes, lower their anxiety, and enhance their confidence in speaking English. Although a small number of students expressed neutral or less positive responses due to personal preferences, the overall results indicate that hand puppets can function as an effective instructional medium to support students' emotional comfort and engagement in speaking activities. Therefore, this study concludes that hand puppets have strong potential as an alternative teaching medium to reduce speaking anxiety and foster a supportive speaking environment for junior high school EFL learners.

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INTRODUCTION

English is widely regarded as the most influential international language, functioning as a global lingua franca across various domains such as education, technology, business, and diplomacy (Aziza, 2020). Even though English in Indonesia still has an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) status, proficiency in English remains important for Indonesian students in academic and global context. Hence, English is one of the primary courses in the education curriculum of Indonesia, which has to be taught from elementary school to college. To support this, the Indonesian government addressed the requirement for English

and determined to make English an obligatory subject in the teaching and learning procedure for primary school until university starts from the academic year 2027/2028, as stated in *Permendikbudristek No. 12 Tahun 2024*.

In learning a second language (L2), speaking is considered one of the most crucial and challenging skills to acquire. Thus, speaking skills are a vital feature of learning English. (Saputra et al., 2021a) state that speaking skills are the capability to articulate words to convey ideas and thoughts. Speaking is required in society's life. It is the component of everyday communication that helps us to blend into a universal culture. Despite the importance of speaking, many learners in Indonesia have difficulties in learning to speak a foreign language due to anxiety in language learning (Sari & Ningsih, 2022).

Speaking anxiety can be considered to be a substantial affective factor that hinders speaking development. Anxiety is a feeling of worry or fear when you are in a tough or scary situation. People often feel anxious because they are afraid their friends will tease or laugh at them, which stops them from practicing the language. According to Krashen (1982), fear of making errors in speaking can delay language study progress. In the Indonesian context, this idea is supported by the study of (Djahimo, 2018) that reveal anxiety has a substantial correlation with the speaking performance of Indonesian EFL students.

To address this challenge, teachers need to use creative and innovative learning media. The researcher used hand puppets as a medium for the English learning process for junior high school EFL learners in this study. A hand puppet is a kind of doll that is moved by hand inside the puppet so that the puppet's expressions and actions can be controlled easily. (Purnamansyah & Putra, 2021) state that the usage of hand puppets can inspire students' imagination and help them find the right words to state their ideas. In addition, hand puppets can create a more enjoyable classroom environment (Elia et al., 2025). For this reason, the researcher believes that hand puppets are the right choice to use as a teaching medium for students.

Several studies has been conducted to examine the effect of utilizing hand puppets to improve students' language skills and mostly, all of them had a positive effect (Agustira Rasyid & Hastuti, 2021a; Faradilla & Moka, 2024; Prabhakaran & Yamat, 2017a; Ramadhania & Kristiantari, 2021). There is a small amount of research on using puppets as a teaching medium to reduce speaking anxiety. Most of the research focuses on the elementary level student. In addition, the number of studies that are conducted in the (EFL) English as a Foreign Language is still limited. The second gap is that the study that existed only highlighted the influence of the hand puppet on students' speaking or listening skills.

The exploration of the effect of a hand puppet on students' speaking anxiety is still not deep enough, even though it is a major problem for EFL learners. Lastly, there is still a lack of a qualitative approach that examine about the usage of hand puppets as a medium. The previous study mostly used a quantitative design, which still provides limited insight into students' perception and reflection towards the hand puppet.

To address these gaps, this current study fills those gaps by using a qualitative case study approach to investigate in what way hand puppets can help lower speaking anxiety among junior high school EFL learners. This study seeks to offer deeper insights into the potential of using a hand puppet not only as a tool for improving speaking skills but also as a medium for increasing students' confidence and comfort in using English in the classroom.

RESEARCH METHOD

A descriptive qualitative case study was chosen for this current study to examine students' perceptions and reflections on the use of a hand puppet. A case study is widely used because it enables the researcher to investigate the phenomenon from the perspective of the participant (Priya, 2021). In the case of understanding the natural habits without the experiment, this case study was used. Most importantly, it can provide a rich, detailed examination of their learning process involving hand puppets.

This study used purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is commonly used due to its effectiveness to choose participant that is suitable for the research (Campbell et al., 2020). With this, it can provide a deeper, on-point data related to the research objectives

Eight 8th-grade EFL students from a junior high school in Surabaya were selected. The participants were selected through purposive sampling with specific criteria.

1. Students were enrolled in the English class that used a puppet as a teaching medium
2. Students have signs of speaking anxiety. Identified by the observation and English teacher based on previous class participation.
3. Students were willing to participate in the research, answering interviews and filling the reflective journal at the end.

These criteria were essential to ensure that participants had direct experience with hand puppet activities and experienced speaking anxiety, which is EFL student that experience speaking anxiety in the hand puppet class that is relevant to the research objectives.

The data collection technique in this study was semi-structured interviews followed by a reflective journal. This method was selected to get a deeper understanding of the students' perception and reflection in the hand puppet class.

The interviews were particularly aimed at identifying students' emotional responses before and after the use of hand puppets, especially their fear of making mistakes and overall comfort when speaking English. These aspects are closely related to fear of negative evaluation, which is a key component of Foreign Language Anxiety. After the hand puppet class ended, interviews were conducted in Indonesian to allow students to express their thoughts comfortably. The purpose is to examine their perception of the hand puppet as a medium in class, in addition to exploring the themes consistently

In addition to semi-structured interviews, reflective journals were also used as a data collection method in this study. According to Sudirman et al. (2021), a reflective journal can make learners express their critical thinking and their perspective on the phenomenon. Reflective journals were used as a tool for student to describe their reflection before and after joining the hand puppet class. The aspect includes fear of making mistakes, fear of negative evaluation, and confidence in speaking English. With this, students are expected to give a deeper insight into their personal reflection on the use of a hand puppet as a teaching medium.

The data of this study were analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was used to focus on identifying and analyzing the data based on the reporting themes found in the data (Lochmiller, 2021). The analysis process was guided by Horwitz (1986) Foreign Language Anxiety theory, with emphasis on fear of negative evaluation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Students' perceptions of using hand puppets as a teaching medium

1. Students' Speaking Anxiety in English Classroom Activities

Due to purposive sampling, all students reported experiencing anxiety when speaking English. Eight students admitted feeling shy and not confident during the English class, especially in speaking activities. As an example, Student 1 stated that he felt afraid of making mistakes when speaking in front of the class. Likewise, Student 3 mentioned that he felt shy because she was worried about saying the word incorrectly. This finding is aligned with Krashen's (1985) theory that fear of negative evaluation is harming language acquisition.

"I was afraid of the wrong meaning... and I felt shy." (S1)

"I was afraid because I couldn't arrange the words." (S3)

Other students associated their anxiety with low self-confidence and discomfort when speaking in front of others. Student 5 mentioned feeling nervous when speaking English, and Student 8 stated that he felt less confident.

"I was a little bit nervous when speaking English." (S5)

"A bit nervous, less confident." (S8)

Overall, these responses indicate that speaking anxiety was a common issue experienced by students prior to the implementation of hand puppet activities.

2. Fear of Negative Evaluation as the Source of Speaking Anxiety

This section will provide an understanding that students' speaking anxiety was closely related to fear of negative evaluation. This type of fear is one of the main components of foreign language anxiety proposed by Horwitz et al. (1986). Many students were worried about making mistakes, being judged by their classmates, or receiving negative reactions when speaking English.

Several students explicitly stated that their anxiety stemmed from fear of producing incorrect English. Student 1 mentioned being afraid of conveying the wrong meaning when speaking, which made her feel shy in class.

"I was afraid of the wrong meaning... and I felt shy." (S1)

These statements indicate that students were worried about the accuracy of their speech, which reflects fear of being evaluated based on their performance. This fear was not limited to linguistic difficulty, but also involved emotional responses such as shyness and anxiety.

Other students described feelings of nervousness and awkwardness when speaking English, especially in classroom situations where they had to speak in front of others. Student 5 mentioned feeling nervous, while S6 described speaking English as awkward.

"I was a little bit nervous when speaking English." (S5)

"It felt awkward when speaking English with friends." (S6)

These feelings suggest discomfort related to speaking publicly rather than speaking privately, which aligns with the concept of fear of negative evaluation proposed by Horwitz et al. (1986). In this context, students' anxiety appears to stem from concern about how their spoken English might be perceived by others, even if this concern was not explicitly stated as fear of ridicule or negative comments.

Overall, the interview data support the presence of fear of negative evaluation as a source of speaking anxiety, primarily reflected through students' fear of making mistakes, feelings of shyness, nervousness, and discomfort during oral English activities.

3. The Role of Hand Puppets in Reducing Speaking Anxiety, specifically Fear of Negative Evaluation

The finding in this subsection explores how the use of hand puppets in English class can influence the students' speaking anxiety. Interestingly, based on the reflective journal, after the hand puppet appeared, students had some mixed responses. Six out of eight students stated that they feel more comfortable and less anxious when the puppet is present. For instance, Student 3 stated that he felt less anxious when speaking with the puppet. In addition, Student 7 reported that he felt less afraid said something wrong.

"Less nervous... because I was speaking through the puppet." (S3)

"More confident, not afraid of being wrong anymore." (S7)

In terms of the learning experience, some students described speaking with the puppet as less intimidating. For example, Student 5 stated that speaking with "Max" is like speaking to a friend. Similarly, Student 1 explained that it is less awkward when speaking with the puppet.

"Speaking English with Max is like speaking with a friend." (S5)

"If the teacher uses the puppet, it's less awkward." (S1)

Nonetheless, despite those positive attitudes, one student reported a less positive opinion related to the puppet. Student 2 mentioned that based on her individual preferences, the puppet's voice felt a bit weird and that the puppet appeared a bit scary, which made her uneasy compared to the conventional class.

"The voice is a bit weird." (S2)

"Yes." (S2) When the student asked, "is hand puppet scary?"

"I Kind of afraid of communicating with it." (S2)

Based on the findings in this subsection, the hand puppet had a big influence on reducing students' speaking anxiety. Even though a small number of participants reported a less positive attitude, Most participants demonstrated positive attitudes toward the use of hand puppets in English classes, regardless of their speaking anxiety levels.

To conclude, the findings answer the first research question, which showed that the use of a hand puppet contributed positively to reducing students' speaking anxiety. Even though two students did not report positive benefits, the hand puppet did not produce any significant negative impact. Furthermore, the majority of the students perceived that a hand puppet can create a more enjoyable environment that makes it easier to learn in English

class. Their answer highlighted that using a hand puppet as a media, it indicates a positive impact on their confidence.

Students' Reflections on Using Hand Puppets during English Speaking Lessons

1. Students' Emotional and Learning Experiences During the Hand Puppet Activity

Based on the journal writing, students experienced a variety of emotions before the class began. Several participants reported a positive feeling before the activity. As stated by Student 2, she felt happy because she liked English. Similar to that, Student 5 also said that she was happy because English is her favorite subject. Student 7 added that he cannot wait to do the activity.

"I am so happy because I like English." (S2)

"I'm so happy because the lesson that will start is English. English is my favorite subject." (S5)

"I cannot wait to do the activity." (S7)

However, in comparison, some students reported negative or uncertain emotions before the activity. As Student 4 mentioned, speaking English felt boring and hard. It indicated that she did not want to speak English before the lesson. Other than that, Student 6 reported that he had doubts before the activity.

"I feel bored, like speaking is boring and hard. I don't know how to speak English before the activity." (S4)

"I have my own doubts." (S6)

Students showed some positive emotional experiences. Based on Student 3's statement, she felt happy while speaking with the puppet. Student 8 added a similar statement that he feels happy because the puppet named "Max" is present. Similarly, Student 4 highlighted that his emotion change. He explained that speaking with a puppet made the lesson more enjoyable. However, not all students felt completely comfortable. Student 2 described that speaking with a puppet made her feel a little bit awkward.

"I feel still happy." (S3)

"I am so happy because Max is present." (S8)

"I feel good, speaking with the puppet is funny because the puppet make class enjoy and fun." (Student 4)

"I feel awkward while speaking with Max." (S2)

Students' response towards the learning experience is varied. Some students find that the learning process is easier with a puppet. As mentioned by Student 5, the easiest part of the lesson is speaking with the puppet. However, several students identified speaking English as the most difficult aspect. Some of them struggled with the grammar.

"Easiest: speaking English with Max." (S5)

"Hardest: speaking English." (S3)

"Most difficult: speaking English." (S7)

"Hardest: memorizing regular and irregular verbs." (S8)

2. Students' Reflection on Confidence and Self-Realization

Positive change in confidence is reported by some of the participant that learn in the hand puppet class. Several students point out that the puppet presence makes them easier when speaking English. The statement by Student 5 clearly said that the puppet helped him feel more confident in speaking English. Further explained by Students 7 and 8, who wrote that their confidence increased after the hand puppet lesson.

"Max helps me feel more confident." (S5)

"More confident." (S8)

"I am more confident." (S7)

Some reflection regarding their growth was also explained with some unique answers. Student 1 wrote that maybe he feels more confident, but added "I'm sure I can," suggesting emerging self-belief. Student 4, on the other hand, clearly stated that the puppet added some humor to the activity and made her feel more enjoying the class. The answer of Student 6's answer added that she feels a positive change; she began to enjoy the English-speaking activity.

"Maybe." (S1)

"Maybe not learning but I am sure I can." (S1)

"The puppet make enjoy and funny. Puppet make me confident." (Student 4)

"Speaking with puppet is helped for everywant public speaking or something else." (S4)

"I become love speaking english." (S6)

Overall, the reflective journals indicate that the use of hand puppets encouraged students to reflect on their abilities and develop greater confidence in speaking English. Even when confidence gains were not strong or immediate, students demonstrated increased self-awareness and a growing belief in their capacity to participate in English-speaking activities.

DISCUSSION

Foreign language speaking anxiety has been recognized as a big concern in second and foreign language acquisition research. Several studies have argued that learners often experience anxiety when required to speak in a foreign language, particularly due to fear of making errors, low self-confidence, and fear of negative evaluation (Erdiana et al., 2020; Horwitz et al., 1986). The findings of the current study confirm that speaking anxiety was genuinely experienced by all participants before the use of hand puppets, as students

reported feelings of nervousness, fear of being wrong, shyness, and lack of confidence when speaking English in class. This condition reflects the core part of foreign language speaking anxiety proposed by Horwitz et al., which is fear of negative evaluation.

More specifically, the use of hand puppets helped to lower students' speaking anxiety by shifting the attention away from the students themselves. Instead of speaking directly in front of classmates and the teacher, they perceived the activity as communicating with the puppet, which they described as similar to talking with a good friend. This finding supports Horwitz's (1986) idea that anxiety is increased when learners feel evaluated or judged. As a connecting object, the hand puppet can reduce the fear of negative evaluation.

The hand puppet has a unique role, which is as a medium to connect students and teachers in less formal interaction. It is due to the hand puppet help student shift their focus away from the individual speaker. From that, students can feel less tension when they speak English. This finding is consistent with Krashen's Affective Filter (1985); lower anxiety will positively impact second language acquisition. This anxiety reduction is due to the hand puppet, which can create a less stressful environment during speaking activities.

As can be seen in the previous studies, the use of hand puppet reported positive result such as enhancements in speaking skills (Ramadhania & Rini Kristiantari, 2020; Rosa, 2021; Saputra et al., 2021), listening skills (Agustira Rasyid & Hastuti, 2021), and especially reducing speaking anxiety (Prabhakaran & Yamat, 2017). The findings of the current study also support and extend the similar previous study by (Prabhakaran & Yamat, 2017) by providing a more detailed explanation related to the hand puppet that can influence students' speaking anxiety.

From the reflective journal, students mostly showed a positive response regarding the hand puppet usage. The findings indicate that students also have changes in emotions and confidence during the activity. Even though before the lesson started, some students felt bored during and before the activity, many students described feeling happier and more comfortable in class. This positive emotional experience may have contributed to increased confidence and reduced anxiety when speaking English.

From these reflections, it can be argued that hand puppets create a positive learning environment. From the reflective journal, several students describe the activity as a less pressured experience. Such a result is supported by a study by Ismayilli (2025) that emphasized that positive emotional experience is essential to make students willing to communicate. The meta-analysis by Botes et al. (2022) further support these finding by showing that enjoyment in foreign language learning is closely related to lower anxiety.

On the other hand, in the reflective journal, it can be seen that not all students experience great emotional changes. A small number of participants clearly stated neutral or minimal effect. This indicates that the hand puppet did not work effectively on some learners who have different preferences. The result might depend on individual learner preference. Despite the differences, the overall pattern of data remains positive because most students experienced emotional benefit.

In general, the students' reflective journals indicate that the use of a hand puppet can be seen as good teaching media to reduce speaking anxiety. Few students reported a limited and neutral attitude; however, the data do not show a negative impact on most of the participants. These findings offer valuable insight about students' reflections after the hand puppet class experience, not only as numerical data but also deeper student opinions.

In summary, this current study strengthens the previous existing study that already examined the positive influence of the hand puppet. And with the interview, the data that is collected is deeper compared to quantitative that show the numerical results.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study shows that hand puppets have the potential to reduce students' speaking anxiety and improve their confidence and engagement in English speaking lessons. From the findings can be seen that students responded positively to learning with a hand puppet. With the puppet that have new character and voice, the classroom atmosphere can turn into a less formal environment. As a result, students can pay more attention in class because they can be entertained and less bored. Even though some students felt that the activity did not significantly affect them, the majority showed positive emotional responses toward the use of hand puppets

Despite the positive findings, this study had several limitations. Firstly, the implementation period of the hand puppet activities was relatively short. This may not have been sufficient to observe the effect of hand puppets on students' speaking anxiety in the long term. Secondly, this study primarily focused on students' speaking anxiety and their responses rather than measuring the improvement in their speaking skills. Therefore, it remains unclear whether this reduced anxiety directly contributes to the improvement of speaking proficiency. In addition, the study involved a relatively small number of participants from only a single class setting, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Therefore, future studies are encouraged to observe the long-term effects of hand puppets and examine their impact not only on speaking anxiety but also on students' speaking proficiency with bigger number of sample data.

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