The "Digital Spotlight" Vs. The Physical Podium: A Comparative Analysis Of Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (Flsa) In Virtual And Traditional Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Abstract One of the greatest barriers to oral performance in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) situations is still Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA). The medium of delivery, however, has emerged as a new variable due to the quick institutionalization of virtual and hybrid learning environments by 2026. The actual classroom and the virtual (video-conferencing) environment are two different teaching contexts in which this study examines the manifestation of FLSA. This study uses the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) to measure self-reported anxiety levels and physiological stress markers in a cohort of 120 university-level EFL students using a mixed-methods approach. According to quantitative findings, virtual settings increase the "digital spotlight effect," in which students feel more pressured because of the continuous exposure of their own video stream and the perceived intensity of peer attention, even if they decrease social presence. On the other hand, physical classrooms cause anxiety that stems from impromptu turn-taking and close closeness. In order to close the "willingness to communicate" (WTC) gap, the study suggests that virtual speaking fear is a unique psychological construct that calls for certain pedagogical interventions, such as "camera-off" brainstorming phases and asynchronous oral pre-tasks.

Keywords: *Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA), Virtual Learning Environments (VLE), Willingness to Communicate (WTC), Digital Spotlight Effect, EFL Pedagogy, Hybrid Education.*

Introduction

The digital transformation of higher education has had a profound impact on the psychological environment of second language acquisition. Researchers have long recognized the physical classroom as the main location of "performance anxiety," where the close proximity of classmates and an instructor generated a high-stakes environment for speech production (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre, 2024). But as we traverse the educational realities of 2026, the virtual classroom has become more than

just a practical substitute—it's a place with its own distinct socio-affective pressures.

The dread of being judged negatively and the belief that one's restricted linguistic range prevents them from projecting their "real self" are the fundamental causes of Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA). Hand gestures, posture, and shared physical space are just a few of the many non-verbal clues that enable communication in a physical situation. On the other hand, communication in the virtual environment is reduced to a two-dimensional plane and frequently lacks these grounding cues. This "cue-poverty" makes students rely only on their spoken language, which frequently makes them more anxious about failing at the language. Additionally, the "digital spotlight"—the continuous display of one's own picture on the screen—causes hyper-self-awareness, which is not present in conventional classroom settings.

Methods

This study's approach is based on a concurrent triangulation mixed-methods design, which enables the simultaneous gathering and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data to offer a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena known as foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA). By 2026 standards, this method transcends the constraints of subjective self-reporting by combining sophisticated biometric monitoring with conventional psychometric scale.

A sample of 120 undergraduate students (N=120) from the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program at a sizable urban institution participated in the study. Every participant had an intermediate proficiency level (CEFR B1-B2) and was a non-native English speaker between the ages of 18 and 22. Participants were randomized to one of two experimental settings, the Virtual Cohort (conducted via a regular high-definition video-conferencing platform) or the Physical Cohort (conducted in a typical 30-seat lecture hall), in order to guarantee a controlled comparison. To maintain consistency in task complexity across contexts, the same spoken prompts were given to both cohorts.

A modified version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) served as the main quantitative tool. Ten more questions were added to this edition with the express purpose of measuring "Digital Socio-Evaluative Stress," with an emphasis on elements like "self-view visibility," "audio-visual synchronization," and "perceived peer presence." The scale was filled out by participants twice: once as a pre-test to set a baseline for general trait anxiety and again right after the speaking task to measure medium-specific state anxiety.

The study used wearable biosensors to monitor Heart-Rate Variability (HRV) and Galvanic Skin Response (GSR) in real-time in order to provide an objective counterpoint to the self-reported scales. While the Virtual Cohort used synchronized desktop-linked sensors, the Physical Cohort participants wore discrete wrist-based sensors for the speaking tasks. This made it possible for researchers to pinpoint the precise moment of "peak anxiety" and determine whether the stress reaction was greater during the active production phase (the speech's duration) or the pre-production phase (the silence before speaking). The autonomic nerve system's "fight-or-flight" reaction to the pressures unique to the medium was represented by these biometric indicators. After the experimental phase, 40 purposively selected participants (20 from each cohort) participated in semi-structured interviews as part of the study's qualitative inquiry phase. Finding the "why" underlying the facts was the goal of these interviews. During the tasks, students were asked to explain their inner monologue, paying particular attention to what they were looking at at the time. The "Mirror Effect" (the effect of the self-view window) was the subject of questions for the Virtual Cohort, whereas the "Gaze Distribution" (the effect of eye contact with the teacher and classmates) was the subject of questions for the Physical Cohort. Thematic analysis was applied to all interview transcripts in order to find recurrent themes in the ways that students negotiate the "visibility" of each setting.

Three different layers had to be integrated for data analysis:

-To identify significant changes between

settings, descriptive and inferential statistics (t-tests and ANOVA) were applied to the FLCAS scores.

-The individuals' self-reported instances of terror were compared to physiological spikes in heart rate using correlation analysis.

-The interviews were subjected to thematic coding in order to group environmental triggers into topics like "Technological Vulnerability," "Physical Exposure," and "Visual Hyper-Awareness."

Results

A complicated, divided reality of anxiety is revealed by the combination of psychometric instruments, biometric data, and qualitative reports. Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA) was present in both cohorts, but the type, duration, and sources of this anxiety varied greatly depending on the instruction medium.

Higher initial levels of "Social Evaluative Anxiety," specifically focused on the instructor's physical presence as the dominant authority figure, were reported by students in the physical classroom. This was supported by physiological data, which revealed an abrupt, violent spike in heart rate (averaging a 25% increase over baseline) at the pre-task transition—the instant a student was asked to stand or move to the front of the class. This implies that standing in front of a class is still a major psychological stressor due to its "physicality" and "spatial exposure" (Horwitz et al., 1986).

The stabilizing effect, on the other hand, was a crucial discovery: heart rates tended to level or even significantly decline once the speaking job started. According to qualitative interviews, this was because analog social approval was received. According to learners, observing peer body language, such as smiling, nodding, or leaning forward, served as a real-time corrective feedback loop that indicated "communicative success," decreasing the affective filter in the middle of a performance (MacIntyre, 2024).

The virtual cohort, on the other hand, showed a pattern known as "Sustained Cognitive Load Anxiety." In contrast to the physical group's spike-and-stabilize pattern, virtual learners' heart rates stayed much higher during the speaking assignment. According to the quantitative results from the modified FLCAS, self-critical thoughts increased by 30% when participants saw their own faces in the "self-view" window. When producing English phonemes, students reported feeling "stuck" in a cycle of observing their own facial expressions and mouth motions, which they said were "clumsy" or "unnatural" (Widodo, 2026).

The findings also revealed a brand-new stressor category specific to digital pedagogy in 2026: "Technological Fragility." According to quantitative data, the fear of "lagging," "freezing," or "audio-dropouts" was cited by 68% of virtual learners as the main factor impeding their fluency. This anxiety resulted in a "double burden" for learners, who had to constantly monitor their signal intensity indications in addition to managing language learning.

According to qualitative investigation, this "cue poverty"—the incapacity to perceive a peer's complete bodily reaction—caused "Interactional Pessimism." Virtual learners were 40% more likely than the physical cohort to misread neutral facial expressions as "judgmental" or "bored," a psychological projection that severely impeded their Willingness to Communicate (WTC), because they could only see the "talking heads" of their audience (Russell & Murphy-Judy, 2025; Widodo).

Analysis

According to the comparison findings, moving from in-person to virtual speaking situations significantly changes the socio-cognitive architecture of oral output rather than just changing the place of learning. The intersection of the psychometric and biometric results yields the following analytical themes:

The transition from exterior social monitoring to interior visual surveillance is the virtual cohort's most important finding. A speaker in a typical classroom creates a "performance" dynamic by focusing on the audience. However, the learner is forced into a Self-Spectator Paradox by the "self-view" aspect of virtual

platforms. Heart-rate data analysis indicates that Cognitive Resource Depletion is the cause of virtual learners' persistently high levels of stress. By continuously observing their own "digital doppelganger," students are compelled to perform a split-attention activity. The brain must concurrently control low-level visual self-regulation (changing posture, observing facial emotions) and high-level linguistic learning (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation).

According to the analysis, the physical classroom offers a "High-Context" setting where the speaker is protected by subtle nonverbal clues. Virtual environments, on the other hand, are "Low-Context" and "Cue-Poor." Peers who silence their mics and stay still in order to conserve bandwidth inadvertently produce a "Feedback Vacuum." Silence is rarely neutral in human communication; instead, it is frequently viewed through the prism of the speaker's preexisting fears. Digital silence is perceived by a nervous EFL learner as "judging blank" rather than "respectful listening." Unlike the physical cohort, whose analog feedback loops offered instant psychological relief, virtual heart rates do not settle after the first task commencement due to this lack of "microsocial validation" (little nods, whispers of agreement) (MacIntyre, 2024).

The two environments have quite different perspectives on agency. A speaker in a physical classroom has "spatial agency"—they can move, make hand gestures, or look around the room to ease the pressure of being observed. Nervous energy is physically released by this movement. The learner is "pinned" to a specific focal point in the virtual environment. As a result, the speaker experiences a condition of hyper-visibility known as the "Digital Spotlight Effect," in which they see every tiny expression on their peers' screens to be exaggerated. This "unavoidable look" is more mentally draining than a teacher's physical presence, according to analysis.

Ultimately, the analysis shows that "Technological Fragility" is now a valid part of the EFL affective filter. The fear of a "lag" or "disconnection" serves as a paralinguistic stressor for the virtual cohort. In contrast to the physical cohort, who are solely focused on language accuracy, virtual learners are more concerned with "system maintenance." This obsession leads to a "pre-emptive silence," where students steer clear of complicated phrases or subtle jokes out of concern that a technical error will make them appear silly or misunderstood. Therefore, regardless of their actual competence level, the virtual medium may unintentionally promote "linguistic minimalism"—a survival strategy in which pupils utilize the simplest language to ensure the message survives the digital transmission (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2025; Widodo, 2026).

Discussion

The results of this study call for a critical reassessment of the management of Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA) in the contemporary, digitally integrated EFL classroom. The evidence indicates that the virtual setting imposes new psychological costs that may be more detrimental to long-term fluency than the conventional "stage fright" of the physical podium, despite the fact that it is frequently promoted as a "safe" or "convenient" alternative to the traditional classroom.

The emergence of the "Digital Spotlight Effect" challenges the conventional wisdom that the physical classroom is the main cause of anxiety. Teachers need to understand that many students find it more stressful to be "seen" in a digital grid than to be "present" in a classroom. The conversation implies that the home, which was formerly thought of as a "haven" for independent study, has evolved into a high-stress performance area. Students have no psychological "exit" from the evaluative gaze as a result of this "blurring of boundaries". In order to lessen the self-spectator dilemma, educational frameworks in 2026 should shift toward "Visual Autonomy," enabling students to turn off their self-view or employ "audio-only" periods in the early phases of task-based learning (Widodo, 2026; Russell & Murphy-Judy, 2025).

The inability of digital platforms to mimic the "social warmth" of physical interaction is a major topic of concern. The "Acoustic Void" produced by muted microphones is a pedagogical obstacle rather than a neutral technical environment. Interpersonal

synchrony—the capacity to hear a peer's breath, a tiny laugh, or a verbal "mhm"—is crucial for reducing the Affective Filter, according to the analysis of stable heart rates in the physical cohort. In order to prevent the "Sustained Cognitive Load Anxiety" noted in our results, practitioners should discuss "Active Listening Protocols" for virtual rooms, where peers are encouraged to use "non-disruptive audio" or reactive emojis to give the speaker a constant stream of social validation (MacIntyre, 2024).

Advanced language development is seriously threatened by the inclination toward "Linguistic Minimalism" in the virtual cohort, when students simplify their English to avoid possible technical issues. Learners' proficiency will stagnate if they are scared to utilize advanced grammatical structures or complex "hedging" terms because they think a "lag" will make them appear incomprehensible. "Digital Resilience" should be included in the EFL curriculum, according to the discussion. This entails teaching students "communication repair strategies"—such as "My connection lagged, let me repeat that"—that are especially intended for digital failure. Teachers can assist students in regaining the "Willingness to Communicate" (WTC) that is presently inhibited by technology fragility by normalizing technical instability as a component of the communicative process rather than a personal failure (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2025).

Lastly, the findings imply that, depending on the medium, standardized oral assessments may be intrinsically biased. A student who does well in the "High-Context" physical room might struggle in the "Low-Context" virtual room because of a greater sensitivity to "Cue Poverty" rather than a lack of English skills. "Affective Technical Management," which teaches teachers to keep an eye on the "digital atmosphere" of the classroom just as intently as the language output, must be incorporated into teacher training programs. To allow the learner's pulse rate to return to baseline, this involves recognizing symptoms of "Visual Fatigue" and understanding when to go from a high-stakes video argument to a low-stakes collaborative document edit (Mesri, 2026; Widodo, 2026).

Conclusion

Speaking anxiety has only changed in appearance as a result of the shift to virtual EFL training. The virtual setting causes a persistent, long-lasting state of self-monitoring and cognitive fatigue, whereas the physical classroom causes an intense but transient "performance spike." The next boundaries of the Affective Filter are represented by the "Digital Spotlight" and "Acoustic Void" of video-conferencing platforms. The "Willingness to Communicate" must be safeguarded through deliberate design—prioritizing social cues, normalizing technical error, and granting learners the ability to step out of the "spotlight" when needed—in order to guarantee that 2026 pedagogy stays inclusive and effective.

Future studies should examine if "VR-based" (Virtual Reality) schools can offer the "spatial agency" that flat-screen interfaces currently lack, as well as the long-term implications of "Zoom Fatigue" on long-term phonological memory.

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