CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Speaking anxiety is a defining challenge in English debate classes, where students are required to speak spontaneously, defend arguments, and respond publicly under continuous evaluative pressure (Horwitz, 2020; MacIntyre, 2021; Alrabai, 2022). While debate is pedagogically intended to cultivate critical thinking, argumentation skills, and persuasive communication (el Majidi et al., 2021; Rochmah et al., 2022), it often becomes a site of intense psychological strain for EFL learners (Sukprasert et al., 2023; Sukkaew et al., 2025). Unlike routine speaking activities that allow preparation and rehearsal, debate demands immediate verbal performance and real-time cognitive processing, making anxiety not merely a by-product of speaking tasks but a central factor shaping students' classroom participation and academic achievement (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2022; Teimouri et al., 2023). As a result, many students who demonstrate adequate linguistic knowledge and logical reasoning ability remain silent, hesitant, or cognitively blocked during debate sessions due to heightened anxiety and fear of negative evaluation (Bensalem, 2021; Ozturk & Gurbuz, 2024).

International research has consistently identified speaking anxiety as a critical affective factor influencing EFL learners' oral performance, particularly in contexts that require public speaking and spontaneous language use. Recent studies conducted across Asian, Middle Eastern, and European EFL settings indicate that speaking anxiety significantly undermines learners' fluency, accuracy, and

willingness to communicate in English (Dewaele et al., 2022; Saito et al., 2023; Alamer & Lee, 2021). These studies report that anxious learners tend to avoid speaking opportunities, experience cognitive interference during oral tasks, and demonstrate reduced communicative confidence despite having sufficient linguistic knowledge. Such findings confirm that speaking anxiety is not merely an emotional response but a persistent barrier affecting learners' engagement and performance in EFL classrooms.

More specifically, international studies focusing on evaluative and performance-based speaking tasks have demonstrated that anxiety intensifies when learners are required to speak in front of an audience and receive immediate judgment. Baran-Łucarz (2022) found that EFL students experienced significantly higher anxiety during academic oral performances, such as presentations and discussions, due to fear of negative evaluation and perceived audience expectations. Similarly, Oteir and Al-Otaibi (2021) reported that instructor feedback and peer comparison were primary sources of anxiety that disrupted learners' fluency and spontaneous speech production. These findings suggest that speaking anxiety in academic contexts is closely linked to the social and evaluative nature of classroom interaction rather than to linguistic deficiency alone.

Recent research has also begun to examine argumentative and debate-oriented speaking activities, revealing that these tasks impose distinct psychological demands on EFL learners. Rahimi and Zhang (2023) showed that argumentative speaking tasks triggered higher anxiety levels than rehearsed speaking activities because students were required to generate ideas, organize arguments, and respond spontaneously under time pressure. In a similar vein, Sato (2024) reported that

debate-based speaking activities heightened learners' apprehension due to public reasoning, spontaneous rebuttal, and fear of logical as well as linguistic errors. Although repeated exposure to debate was found to gradually enhance confidence, learners initially experienced intense anxiety that limited their participation and verbal engagement.

Despite the growing body of international research on speaking anxiety, most existing studies have predominantly employed quantitative approaches and standardized anxiety scales to measure anxiety levels. Al-Hoorie et al. (2024) argue that while such instruments are effective in capturing the intensity of anxiety, they offer limited insight into how learners subjectively experience anxiety and how they cope with it during complex speaking tasks. Consequently, learners' personal perceptions, emotional responses, and coping strategies in debate classrooms remain insufficiently explored, particularly in EFL contexts where debate involves both linguistic performance and public intellectual engagement.

To address the limitations of previous studies and to capture the complexity of speaking anxiety in debate contexts, this study is grounded in McCroskey's Communication Apprehension (CA) theory and Lazarus' Coping theory. McCroskey (1984) conceptualizes communication apprehension as an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with others. Importantly, McCroskey explicitly positions public speaking anxiety as a core component of communication apprehension, emphasizing that apprehension is most salient in situations involving oral performance before an audience, such as speeches, presentations, and debates (McCroskey, 1977; McCroskey, 1984). Within the context of English debate classes, CA is particularly

relevant because debate requires public speaking, spontaneous verbal responses, and continuous interaction under evaluative conditions, all of which are primary triggers of communication apprehension (MacIntyre, 2021). By applying McCroskey's framework, this study seeks to examine how speaking anxiety manifests cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally during debate activities, rather than treating anxiety as a generalized classroom phenomenon.

While McCroskey's theory explains the nature and sources of speaking anxiety, it does not fully account for how learners respond to or manage anxiety during high-pressure speaking situations. Therefore, this study integrates Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Coping theory, which views anxiety as a result of individuals' cognitive appraisal of stressful situations and their perceived ability to cope with those demands. In debate classes, students must rapidly assess the difficulty of speaking tasks, the expectations of audiences, and the potential consequences of failure. Lazarus' framework is crucial for understanding how students interpret these stressors and what coping strategies they employ, such as preparation, avoidance, positive self-talk, or seeking peer support, when facing speaking anxiety (Shao et al., 2020; Pawlak et al., 2021).

Building on this theoretical grounding, the present study seeks to make a meaningful contribution by exploring students' lived experiences of speaking anxiety in debate class at Universitas Muhammadiyah Ponorogo, a context that has received limited scholarly attention in existing literature. While international research has extensively examined speaking anxiety in general EFL classrooms, fewer studies have investigated how anxiety is experienced in advanced speaking courses, particularly debate classes within Indonesian English Education programs.

By adopting a qualitative approach, this study foregrounds students' perspectives, capturing how they experience anxiety during debate sessions, how it affects their willingness to speak, and how they attempt to cope with anxiety in real classroom interactions.

Furthermore, this study contributes pedagogically by offering descriptive insights for lecturers in the English Education Department at Universitas Muhammadiyah Ponorogo and similar institutions. The findings are expected to inform teaching practices by identifying specific anxiety triggers in debate activities, such as public evaluation, spontaneous rebuttal, and peer comparison, as well as the coping strategies students employ to manage these challenges. Ultimately, this research aims to support the development of more supportive and psychologically responsive debate instruction that not only enhances students' speaking proficiency but also strengthens their confidence and resilience as future English educators.

1.2 Statement of Problem

Based on the background of the study above, the statement of the problems are as follows:

1. How is speaking anxiety manifested among students during debate class activities?
2. What are the causes of students' speaking anxiety in the debate class?
3. How do students overcome speaking anxiety in debate class?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

Based on the statement of the problems, the purposes of the study are as follows:

1. To explore how students experience speaking anxiety in the debate class.

2. To investigate the causes of students' speaking anxiety in the debate class.

3. To find out how students overcome speaking anxiety in debate class

1.4 Contribution of the Study

The result of the study is expected to be used theoretically and practically.

1. Theoretical Contribution

   Theoretically, this study is expected to enrich the existing body of knowledge on speaking anxiety in EFL contexts, particularly in high-stakes and performance-oriented speaking activities such as English debate classes. By employing McCroskey's Communication Apprehension theory, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of speaking anxiety as a form of communication apprehension that manifests cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally during public and spontaneous speaking tasks. In addition, the integration of Lazarus' Coping theory extends theoretical discussions by highlighting how learners cognitively appraise anxiety-provoking situations and employ coping strategies when facing communicative pressure.

2. Practical Contribution

   Practically, the findings of this study are expected to assist lecturers in the English Education Department, particularly those teaching debate and advanced speaking courses, in identifying common sources and manifestations of speaking anxiety among students. By understanding how anxiety emerges during debate activities and how students attempt to cope with it, lecturers can design more supportive instructional practices, such as scaffolding debate tasks,

managing evaluative pressure, and fostering a psychologically safe classroom environment.

1.5 Scope and Limitation

The scope of this research focuses on students' speaking anxiety in the context of debate activities. The study involves 21 of third-semester students in the debate class at the English Education Department of Universitas Muhammadiyah Ponorogo. The discussion is centered on exploring students' experiences and perceptions related to speaking anxiety during debate sessions.

The limitation of this research lies in the fact that only ten of third-semester students were selected as informants for the interview. Furthermore, the research was conducted exclusively at the English Education Department of Universitas Muhammadiyah Ponorogo, thus excluding students from other departments or universities. The findings are also restricted to the specific context of debate classes and may not comprehensively represent speaking anxiety in other English learning situations.

1.6 Definition of Key terms

In order to clarify the key terms used in this study, some definitions are needed to put below.

Speaking Anxiety : refers to learners' fear or apprehension during oral communication, particularly in evaluative speaking situations, which is conceptualized as a manifestation of Communication Apprehension as proposed by

McCroskey and discussed in recent EFL anxiety research (Al-Hoorie et al., 2022).

Communication Apprehension : defined as an individual's anxiety associated with real or anticipated communication with others, especially public speaking, as originally theorized by McCroskey. (MacIntyre, 2021).

Coping Strategies : refers to cognitive and behavioral efforts used by learners to manage speaking-related stress through appraisal and regulation processes, based on Lazarus' coping framework as interpreted in recent EFL research (Pawlak et al., 2021).