

# Students' Speaking Anxiety during Online Learning: Causal Factors and Strategies to Overcome Them

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## Students' Speaking Anxiety during Online Learning: Causal Factors and Strategies to Overcome Them

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### Abstract

Anxiety has been considered as one of the obstacles in learning English and a common issue in the EFL teaching and learning. In speaking, it also debilitates the opportunity of English Foreign Language (EFL) students to speak English. Several studies have been conducted to discover the causes and strategies to overcome them in traditional classroom. To date, not many studies have focused on students' anxiety in online learning. Therefore, this study was designed to reveal the causal factors of the students' speaking anxiety and strategies to overcome them during online learning at Islamic senior secondary school setting. The study employed narrative inquiry approach and used interview as the main instrument of data collection. Four students of Islamic Senior Secondary School (MAN) Insan Cendekia Gowa whom selected to be the participants of the study using purposive sampling technique. The result of this study establishes two main findings. Firstly, the causal factors of students' speaking anxiety during online learning were divided into internal and external factors. The internal factors consisted of lack of confidence, shyness, fear of making mistake, and feeling insecure. The external factors consisted of lack of preparation, limited vocabulary, friends or classmates, embarrassment, teachers' teaching style. The study found that the external factors are indicated as the most dominant causes of students' speaking anxiety. Furthermore, the study highlights several strategies used by the students to overcome their speaking anxiety, namely: good preparation (lecture note), peer seeking, keeping silent or calm, practice speaking at home, turning the camera off, using 'google translator', and limiting speaking duration.

**Keywords:** Speaking, Anxiety, Online learning, Causal factors, Students' strategies

## **Introduction**

Anxiety becomes a problem especially for the English Foreign Language (EFL) students in conveying a message and developing communication environment. One of the main factors to make the students be afraid in speaking is anxiety (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). If the students get nervous in speaking, they will be confused, shy, and do not know what to say. They feel so difficult to express their thought even in a simple form of dialogue to their friends.

According to Suleimenova (2013), anxiety is a state of uneasiness and distress of mind due to fear of misfortune or danger. Students feel anxious regardless of their preparation of learning a language. Whatever its cause and its level of anxiety, we can be sure of one thing: anxiety will affect students' performance (Saito & Samimy, 1996).

Some studies have been conducted at this concern. Studies conducted by Akbar, Sofyan, and Damayanti (2018) that concern about factors causing students speaking anxiety and also strategies to cope with students anxiety conducted by . Kondo and Ying-Ling (2004); Monika (2017); Nuranifar (2014); and Sulastri and Ratnawati (2018) reveals variety findings at this concern. These previous studies were conducted in face-to-face in regular learning meeting with different method.

This paper focuses on the exploration of causal factors and strategies to overcome students' speaking especially during online learning by using narrative inquiry approach to explore people story about particular concern to find out different findings and new perspectives on the elements, causes, or strategies where breakout of Covid-19 pandemic threatens the whole world as well as educational field that requires all teaching and learning processes to be carried out via online meeting. This study addresses the two research questions below:

**RQ 1:** What are the causal factors of students' speaking anxiety experienced by the students at MAN Insan Cendekia Gowa during online learning?

**RQ 2:** What are the strategies that the students at MAN Insan Cendekia Gowa applied to overcome their speaking anxiety during online learning?

Speaking is a delivering message activity. It is a two-way process between speaker and listener. It's a crucial part for foreign language students. According to Chaney and Burk (1998), speaking is building and sharing meaning process by using verbal or nonverbal symbol for variety context.

Speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning through producing and receiving and processing information (Burns & Joyce, 1997). Morrow and Johnson (1981) state that speaking as a popular term in oral communication is an activity between two or more people where the listeners and speakers have to react to what they hear and make their contributions to convey or receive the meaning.

According to Horwitz et al. (1986) anxiety is “the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system”. Anxiety is an affective factor in language learning, is a frequently observed issue which arguably influences students’ performance and their academic achievement (Gardner, Tremblay, & Masgoret, 1997).

Nevid, Rathus, and Greene (2005) state that anxiety is characteristic of physical dependent. Apprehension is a state of worry that something bad will happen. It means that anxiety is a state where one is physically dependent because of an unpleasant feeling of tension and a feeling of fear that something bad will happen. In addition, anxiety is an aggressive emotional feeling categorized as apprehension and tension (Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2013). Furthermore, Carlson (2009) defined anxiety as “a sense of apprehension or doom that is accompanied by certain physiological reactions, such as accelerated heart rate, sweaty palms, and tightness in the stomach”.

Nevid et al. (2005) reveal some factors that make people feel anxiety, they are over self-prediction toward fear, irrational faith, over sensitivity toward threat, the sensitivity of anxiety, wrong attribution body signal, and low self-efficacy.

Horwitz et al. (1986) establish three factors of language anxiety as: (1) Communication apprehension (a type of shyness characterized by anxiety and fear about interaction with people or difficulty speaking in groups and oral communication in public, (2) Test Anxiety (test-anxious students often put unrealistic demanding on themselves and feel that anything less than a perfect test performance is failure), and (3) Fear of negative evaluation (the apprehension about other peoples’ evaluations).

Furthermore, Fatma (2012) classify two factors causing students’ speaking anxiety, they are: (1) Internal Factors such as lack of confidence, shyness, motivation, and fear of making mistake, (2) External Factors such as lack of preparation, limited vocabulary, friends or classmates, and embarrassment.

Learning strategies may help students to become independent learners in order that they can effectively learn foreign language. Oxford (1990) describes that learning strategies as any action by students to make the learning process simpler, quicker, more effective, more self-directed, more enjoyable and more transferable to the new learning process.

A study conducted by Kondo and Ying-Ling (2004) in in Japan, designed a typology of techniques to reduce students’ anxiety consists of preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, peer seeking, and resignation types to overcome

language anxiety. In addition, a study conducted by Mohammad (2014) finds some strategies to reduce students' speaking anxiety, they are believing in themselves that they could do anything and conquer their fear, speaking themselves at home as training, trying to be more calms when the teacher explains the material, assuming that all their friends also feel the same way, trying to say what comes to their mind.

Online learning has become a wide-spread practice over the years as an integrated technology in education. Feldman and Zucker (2002) explain that the online teaching-learning process is one of the new perceptions through the internet. They assume that instruction based online covered wherever and whenever communication.

In addition, Bowers and Kumar (2015) state that online courses offer numerous advantages to students such as convenience, flexibility and access to education. Due to their busy lifestyles, students are looking for convenience for when to read, when to complete the assignments, when to watch videos, part time workers are on "stand by" for hours and many students have two jobs- the need for time is essential.

Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, and Jones (2009) also states that online learning as a learning that takes place partially or entirely over the Internet.

## **Method**

This study applied narrative inquiry approach as a part of qualitative research. Narrative inquiry research is similar with life history, even the distinction between both research is not always obvious (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Narrative inquiry is an approach that emphasize the use of stories as data. "At the heart of narrative inquiry is a story or a collection of stories" .

Purposive sampling technique was employed in selecting the participants based on the researchers' daily life experienced who observed and followed their daily activity in dormitory with close emotional attachment as their English teacher. To keep the privacy of participants in naming, researcher used pseudonym for each participant as in the profile below.

**Table 1. Participants' Profile**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>
Participant 1 (P1)	Daeng	Male
Participant 2 (P2)	Tenri	Female
Participant 3 (P3)	Tetta	Male
Participant 4 (P4)	Becce	Female

As the use of narrative inquiry approach, the selection of participants no needs to use observational activity, because this research focuses on perception and not ethnographic research. As what explained by, "while the literature on qualitative

research refers to 'selecting the participants', in my case it is more apt to say that I 'found' people willing to participate in the study". They explain that the important thing in selecting the participant in narrative inquiry study is about to find the people who have willing to be involved in our study.

A semi-structured interview also conducted in this research. Semi-structured interview begins with structured questions then move to open questions . The interview question was adopted and modified from Tanveer (2007) about investigation of the factors causing speaking anxiety experienced by EFL students and students' strategies to overcome their speaking anxiety. In the interview, the researcher used *bahasa* (Indonesian language) with simply local dialect to make easier for the for the participant to understand and answer the interview question.

Furthermore, the researcher conducted seven steps of narrative inquiry that adapted and merged from Creswell and Poth (2016) and Heigham and Croker (2009) about procedure of conducting narrative research. They are: (1) identifying the explored phenomenon, (2) preparing an interview questions, (3) Selecting one or more participants to be involved in the research, (4) conducting an interview, (5) collecting and transcribing the stories from the participants, (6) restorying, (7) collaborating with the participants (checking).

## Results

### Causal Factors of Students' Speaking Anxiety during Online Learning

#### a) *Internal Factor*

##### 1) Lack of confidence

Although not all participants experienced this factor, lack of confidence is considered as a causal factor of speaking anxiety. This factor was only experienced by Becce and haunted her from the beginning she started learning English. She said:

The most fundamental reason that made me felt very nervous when speaking was more on internal problem, such as lack of self-confidence and my excessive fear of making mistakes. Since then till now, this problem always haunted me in learning English.

(Becce: Restorying, April 30, 2021)

That was not too surprised, because based on experiences and daily observations of the researcher who taught Becce as her English teacher, both in offline and online class, Becce was a very calm student and always avoided the

teacher's attention. In fact, she preferred to be silent, rarely wanted to talk or to be involved to express her opinion in the class and try to avoid eye contact to the teacher in the classroom. Likewise, in online class, Becce always turned off her microphone when in online Zoom meeting.

#### 2) Shyness

At the beginning, the researcher assumed this factor be the most influential factor, but in fact it was not. Only Becce considered this factor as her problem. Talking about Becce as the researcher stated in the previous factor (lack of confidence), she was a very calm student and always feels inferior among her friends. Once upon a time when a researcher asked her to answer a question in an online Zoom meeting class, she stuttered and became speechless. After the class over, the researcher who was also her English teacher contacted her personally and asked what was causing the problem. Then, she shared that she was so shy and ashamed to her abilities comparing to her friends, so that every time she was given opportunity to answer questions, she felt anxious and made her be nervous.

#### 3) Fear of making mistake

Making mistake was one of the factors of students' speaking anxiety. Surprisingly, it was only Becce experienced it again.

The most fundamental cause that made me felt very nervous when speaking was more on internal problem, such as lack of self-confidence and my excessive fear of making mistakes.

(Becce: Restorying, April 30, 2021)

#### 4) Feeling Insecure

Apart from several explained factors above: lack of confidence, shyness, fear of making mistake, the study found additional internal factor namely feeling insecure.

One of the participants, Daeng told that basically the main factors that make him feel anxious when speaking English were limited vocabulary and feeling inferior when meeting his friends. Daeng, was a student who is quite vocal and often brings religious lectures at the mosque, but in English, everything was completely different. He admitted that he could not deal with his feelings of inferiority with his friends who good at English.

Meanwhile, Tenri who was also a calm student in the class, admitted that the factor causing her speaking anxiety in class was feeling insecure with her friends' good ability.

The prominence of their characters when in class made me felt insecure and inferior with my own ability. (Tenri: Restorying, April 23, 2021)

Furthermore, Becce, as stated by the researcher before, was really weak when she met her friends who spoke fluent in English, even she realized that her friends actually threatened her well.

*b) External Factor*

1) Lack of preparation

As states by Liu (2007) about preparation as the major factor makes student anxious, this current study also found the same. Almost all the participant considered this as the factor they experienced, only Tenri excluded this factor.

Other factors that made me felt nervous when speaking was the preparation and learning conditions. The lack of preparation would affect my performance when speaking. Likewise with learning conditions, when I felt depressed and not relaxed situations, it would put me in danger to express my idea or opinion.

(Daeng: Restorying, April 19, 2021)

Daeng admitted that he often felt depressed and anxious when he was in a situation where he did not prepare everything well. He also claimed that it would be very difficult for him and made him be stiff in stating what he was going to say.

Then, Tetta, who liked playing online games, actually had quite many of vocabulary that he got during playing online games. However, he felt his motivation and enthusiasm ruined when he did not prepare everything well. In the other hand, Becce would prefer to be quiet and even say nothing in online classes when she was poorly prepared, she admitted that her bad preparation came from her own laziness.

2) Limited Vocabulary

This factor really affected the participants' speaking anxiety, especially for Daeng. It became the most influencing factor for him, causing his anxiety in speaking English. As the researcher stated before, his case was quite unique, where he was vocal in other subject, but not in English. Coming from one big factor, it was vocabulary that put him in trouble since he started learning English in elementary school.

Since he started learning English, his teachers had given him quite a lot of basic English vocabularies and grammar, and he had memorized it. Unfortunately, because rarely did he apply it in daily conversation, so the vocabulary just like Bruno Mars' song, "easy come, easy go".

Vocabulary was the factor that I thought be the most influential for me since I started learning English till now. Actually, I had memorized a lot of vocabularies, but it just was "easy come, easy go", I memorized it today, and forgot it tomorrow.



(Daeng: Restorying, April 19, 2021)

One day, at English Day in his present school (*madrasah aliyah*), as we know, on English Day, all academics have to speak English, Daeng had a conversation with his teacher (*ustad*), but in the middle of the conversation he became 'blackout' and lost the idea about what to express. The concept was in his head already, but his inability to translate the word made him be speechless, so at that moment, he felt very ashamed and anxious to his teacher.

Besides Daeng, Tenri also experienced this factor. She thought that vocabulary factor made her become really difficult in composing a sentence in English and it also made her didn't know what to say in a conversation. However, she did his best to improve her vocabulary by reading several English novels.

Becce also felt that this factor as the main factor causing her anxiety, where she finds it difficult to compose sentences when speaking which is due to her limited vocabulary.

### 3) Friends or Classmates

This factor almost experienced by all participants, Daeng, Tenri, and Tetta. Daeng thought that his friends who were good at English as an obstacle causing him to feel nervous. Their good ability made him be nervous. He also stated that he had no friend as interlocutor to practice his speaking in English, that was why he considered "friend" as a factor that he experienced in his speaking anxiety.

The same problem with Tetta who felt insecure of being laughed by his friend whenever he made a mistake in speaking.

I also felt very insecure and felt afraid of being laughed at by my friends whenever I made mistakes while speaking.

(Tetta: Restorying, April 26, 2021)

Something unique told by Tenri. In the beginning she studied English in junior high school, she actually felt joyful in learning English because she and her friends were almost the same ability or level. Based on what the researcher observed at the beginning when Tenri enrolled herself at MAN Insan Cendekia Gowa, actually her general score was quite good, even his English grade was fairly high. She was a smart student at her former school (Islamic junior high school/*madrasah tsanawiyah*). In her confession, when she was in Islamic junior high school, her friends overall had equal abilities, and no one seemed to be too dominant. It made her learning environment still feel comfortable and she really enjoyed it, the point was that there was no competition against her at that time.

Then, when she entered MAN Insan Cendekia Gowa, everything turned into 180 degrees. The flagship school which is a school of outstanding students made her felt so anxious dealing with her friends who were good at all subjects. Although several times she tried to suggest herself, trying to keep thinking positive, trying to assume that her friends had equal abilities, but it didn't work. She always felt inferior among

her friends, that's why the researcher chose her as one of the participants, based on the researcher's monitoring during his time as her English teacher.

#### 4) Embarrassment

In general, this factor should get better attention and follow-up by teachers, parents, schools and all parties in education field. The researcher got suggestions for this concern, especially from Tetta. He hopes that the bullying habit should be eliminated and not be exist in the world of education, especially school as a place to educate the younger generation. He sometimes faced this situation whenever he made a mistake in speaking, he would get bad response from his friends. He also felt this situation whenever he made a mistake in speaking, he would get bad response from his friends. In addition, Tenri also told her experienced when she got mocked by her friends when she made a mistake, and it made her experienced a bad moment whenever it happened.

#### 5) Teacher Characteristic

As stated by Cheng (2009), teacher characteristic also affected students anxiety. Both Daeng, Tenri, and Tetta considered the role of teacher was important in motivating and increasing student's self-confidence, especially in speaking.

Daeng thought the teacher should be able to create a comfort learning environment and use an appropriate learning method that covered and facilitated all students' diversity to avoid feeling stressed by the students. Tetta also considered the important role for the teacher in encouraging the students to deal with their public speaking anxiety.

Tenri stated that the teacher should be more wisely and friendly as a language agent.

Furthermore, I thought teachers should be able to become language agents who were always be wise and friendly to students. I feel it was quite positive in improving my language skills, sometimes when I made a speaking mistake, the teachers would be wisely to correct it.

(Tenri: Restorying, April 23, 2021)

## 2. Strategies Used by Students to Overcome their Speaking Anxiety during Online Learning

### 1) Preparation (Lecture note)

One of the strategies used by the students to overcome their speaking anxiety through good preparation. Tetta shared that he overcame his speaking anxiety by

preparing everything well. Reflecting on his mistakes that sometimes underestimated and not too interested in English subjects. In online learning, he chose to prepare a small note to write down the important points of what his teacher explained. When he was suddenly asked to answer a question from his teacher, he had a help by looking at his small note.

When the teacher was explaining the learning material, I wrote down the important topics he said in my small note, so that, when suddenly I got question, I already had an answer to that question.  
(Tetta: Restorying, April 26, 2021)

#### 2) Peer seeking

Finding a friend to practice speaking ability only used by Tenri, from the story we could see many times she stated this strategy.

She tried many ways to find friends to practice speaking. This can be seen from the several ways she did. She sometimes talked to her close friends. She didn't feel ashamed to make mistakes with them because they would correct her mistake. Then she also tried to talk to some of her close relatives who she felt had the same speaking skill level with her. A unique thing she did, she even talked to her little cousin, who couldn't speak English yet, she just tried to encourage herself that at least she knew English better than her cousin.

I also talked to my little nephew, well, even though he didn't know what I was saying, at least I felt that I could speak English better than him.  
(Tenri: Restorying, April 23, 2021)

#### 3) Keeping silent or calm

This strategy also experienced by 2 participants: Daeng and Becce. Daeng did it reasonably in order to be easier for him to understand what the teacher said, so that when he was suddenly invited to speak, he had an answer that can be put forward. He also realized that sometimes when his teacher was speaking too fast, it would quite mess up his mind, because he found it difficult to understand rapid conversations with various vocabulary.

In the other hand, Becce did it for more conservative purpose. Even she also admitted her weakness, she did it in purpose for looking for safety and avoid herself to be the centre attention in the online class.

#### 4) Speaking themselves at home

Talking to your own-self is a good strategy to do. This was done by Tenri, where she tried to talk to herself because she felt that her own-self was the best interlocutor who would not mock he whenever she made mistake.

But the thing I did most of the time was talking to my own-self, I did this a lot because it was impossible for myself to laugh at me, myself was the best person I could talk to.

(Tenri: Restorying, April 23, 2021)

5) Turning off the camera (avoiding eye contact)

This study also finds three new strategies used by the participants in online learning to overcome their speaking anxiety. These strategies are turning off the camera, using google translator, and limiting speaking duration.

Turning the camera off was used Tetta and Becce in online learning, especially via online Zoom meeting applications who utilize camera as its virtual communication.

Tetta employed this strategy to avoid being monitored or seen by his classmates. It was useful for him to reduce his speaking anxiety, so that he could be more relax in expressing his thought.

Another unique thing I did was turn off my camera when in online classes by using Zoom. Seemed strange enough, but it really helped me to reduce my anxiety when speaking in online classes. By turning off the camera, I felt that I would not be monitored or seen by all my classmates, so I could express myself more freely.

(Tetta: Restorying, April 26, 2021)

The researcher, as his English teacher, several times found Tetta turning off his camera in the online learning process. He used this strategy quite often. When his teacher opened question and answer session, he sometimes pretended that he had problem with his internet connection, so that he turned his camera off.

As well as Becce who also did this strategy to help her became more relax. Even the learning process conducted in online, she still thought that she had direct eye contact with her friends, so by turning her camera off, it could reduce her nervousness.

Especially during online class, I did reduce my nervousness by turning off my camera when learning through Zoom. It was enough successful to help me be more relax. Even it was learning through the zoom application, when my camera

was on, I still felt like I was in direct eye contact with other friends.  
(Becce: Restorying, April 30, 2021)

6) Using "google" translator

Beside turning the camera off, the students also applied online translator, like "google translate" to overcome their speaking anxiety. This was done by both Daeng and Becce in order to help them translate what were on their mind.

Daeng honestly stated that he became a soulmate of "google translate". It help him to immediately translate what would he said.

I had always been a friend with "google translator", so when I was suddenly asked by my teacher or my friend, I immediately used this application to help me find and translate what words to say. After class, I also usually tried to practice my own speaking skills with "google translator".

(Daeng: Restorying, April 19, 2021)

Tenri also admitted that she used "google translate". Although sometimes she felt it would take time to translate what was in her mind before she said it, but she felt enjoy and helped by the existence of this application.

7) Limiting speaking duration

Another strategy was limiting speaking duration. It used by Tenri where she would speak only for the important thing, she avoided to expand his conversation more to avoid her anxiety. Tenri chose to only speak sparingly when asked to speak, she did it because of her limited ability to master some English vocabularies.

I would speak only what was necessary I thought or limit my speaking duration.  
(Tenri: Restorying, April 23, 2021)

The findings of this present study have several similarities with the study conducted by about Cognitive Behavioural Approach in Public Speaking Anxiety Skills Training. They classify the factors that cause students' speaking anxiety into two main factors, namely internal and external factors. They find that lack of preparation, limited vocabulary, classmate, and embarrassment as the external factors causing students' anxiety, and lack of confidence, shyness, motivation, and fear of making mistakes, as internal factors causing students' anxiety.

In particular, the result of the findings of this current study have some dominant similarities from the results of research conducted by Fatma and Ernawati (2012), namely internal factors: (1) lack of confidence, (2) shyness, (3) fear of making mistakes. While external factors: were (1) lack of preparation, (2) limited vocabulary, (3) friends or classmates, (4) embarrassment, (5) teacher characteristic. In addition,

the external factors show more dominant causes for students' speaking anxiety that was experienced by the participants.

The new factors that distinguish the findings of this present study from the previous study mentions above are the feeling insecure in internal factors, and teacher characteristics in external factors.

On the other hand, for the strategies, the findings in this present research have similarities with some previous study. Kondo and Ying-Ling (2004) who studied about strategies for coping with language anxiety: the case of students of English in Japan, also find preparation and peer seeking as the strategy to overcome students' speaking anxiety namely. In addition, Mohammad (2014) who studied about students' strategies to reduce anxiety in speaking class on second semester students of English Education Program at IAIN Tulungagung Academic Year 2013/2014 also find students' strategy namely speaking themselves at home, trying to be more calm.

The results of the present study also reveal new findings and perspectives on strategies that the students used to overcome their speaking anxiety. The findings reveal three new strategies used by the students, they were (1) turning off the camera, (2) using "google translator", and (3) limiting speaking duration. These are due to the advances in science and technology as well as the breakout of Covid-19 pandemic, which required the government to take safety program and solution for students and teachers so that the learning process could be still conducted through online learning.

### **Conclusion**

The causal factors of students' speaking anxiety are divided into two main factors, namely internal and external factors. Internal factors are caused by lack of confidence, shyness, fear of making mistake, feeling insecure. And the external factors are caused lack of preparation, limited vocabulary, friends or classmates, embarrassment, and teacher characteristic. The external factors seem to be the most dominant factor experienced factor by participants. Afterwards, the strategies used by the students to overcome their speaking anxiety are preparation (lecture note), peer seeking, keeping silent or calm, speaking themselves at home, turning the camera off, using google translator, limiting speaking duration.

It suggested the further researcher to explore deeper at the same concern by applying observation besides interview to get more in-depth data. The advanced researchers also needed for the characteristics and the types of students' anxiety generally for other English skills specifically in online learning.

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Andi Hidayatul Mi'raj Mursyid & Sultan Baa  
*Students' Speaking Anxiety during Online Learning: Causal Factors and Strategies to Overcome Them*

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PAGE 1

PAGE 2

PAGE 3

PAGE 4

PAGE 5

PAGE 6

PAGE 7

PAGE 8

PAGE 9

PAGE 10

PAGE 11

PAGE 12

PAGE 13

PAGE 14

PAGE 15

PAGE 16