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# OVERCOMING SPEAKING ANXIETY: PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

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**Abstract.** Speaking anxiety is one of the major psychological barriers that prevents students from developing effective English communication skills. Although many learners possess sufficient grammatical knowledge and vocabulary, they often experience nervousness, fear of making mistakes, and a lack of confidence when speaking English. This article examines the psychological causes of speaking anxiety and analyses pedagogical approaches that can help learners overcome this difficulty. Particular attention is given to communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, classroom atmosphere, supportive feedback, gradual speaking practice, and student-centred activities. The study is based on an analysis of established research on foreign language anxiety, including international meta-analytical findings. The results demonstrate that language anxiety has a measurable negative relationship with language achievement and that creating a supportive learning environment is essential for improving students’ speaking confidence.

**Keywords:** speaking anxiety, foreign language anxiety, English language learning, psychological factors, communication apprehension, self-confidence, pedagogical approaches, speaking proficiency.

## Introduction

English has become an important means of international communication in education, business, science, and technology. Therefore, developing speaking skills is one of the central objectives of modern English language teaching. However, successful communication depends not only on linguistic knowledge but also on learners’ psychological readiness to use the language.

Many students can understand English texts, complete grammar exercises, and memorise vocabulary, but they experience difficulties when they are asked to speak in front of classmates or communicate with other people. Their difficulties are often connected with speaking anxiety, which may appear as nervousness, hesitation, fear of incorrect pronunciation, or concern about negative reactions from others.

Foreign language anxiety is a specific psychological phenomenon associated with learning and using a language that is not one's mother tongue. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) identified foreign language classroom anxiety as a distinct concept and developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), consisting of 33 statements evaluated through a five-point Likert scale. The scale examines learners’ experiences of communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation [1].

The main purpose of this article is to investigate the psychological factors that cause speaking anxiety and identify effective pedagogical strategies for helping students overcome it. The article also

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considers how teachers can create a classroom environment in which learners feel comfortable expressing their ideas in English.

**Methods**

This research employs a qualitative literature-review approach based on the analysis and comparison of scientific publications concerning foreign language anxiety, second-language acquisition, and English-speaking development.

The study uses the following research methods:

- ✓ Literature analysis: examining scientific works on foreign language anxiety and its influence on language learning.
- ✓ Comparative analysis: comparing different psychological and pedagogical approaches to reducing speaking anxiety.
- ✓ Theoretical generalisation: identifying common causes of anxiety and effective strategies for addressing them.
- ✓ Pedagogical analysis: evaluating classroom activities that may increase students' confidence and encourage oral communication.

Particular attention is given to the research conducted by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), MacIntyre and Gardner (1994), and Teimouri, Goetze, and Plonsky (2019). The research does not claim to present newly collected experimental data; instead, it synthesises previously published empirical findings to develop practical recommendations for English language teachers.

**Results**

The analysis identifies several major psychological factors that contribute to students' speaking anxiety.

Fear of making mistakes. One of the most common reasons students avoid speaking English is the fear of producing grammatically incorrect sentences or mispronouncing words. Some learners believe that every mistake demonstrates insufficient knowledge. As a result, they spend too much time thinking about grammatical accuracy instead of concentrating on communication.

Fear of negative evaluation. Students may worry that their classmates or teachers will laugh at them, criticise their pronunciation, or consider their English insufficient. This fear can reduce classroom participation and prevent learners from expressing their opinions freely.

Low self-confidence. Learners who compare their speaking abilities with those of more advanced students may develop negative attitudes towards their own progress. They may understand a conversation but hesitate to respond because they believe their vocabulary or pronunciation is inadequate.

Communication apprehension**.** Speaking requires learners to understand information, organise their thoughts, select appropriate vocabulary, and respond within a limited period. These simultaneous demands can create psychological pressure, particularly when students are required to speak without preparation.

The relationship between anxiety and language achievement has also been demonstrated through large-scale research. Teimouri, Goetze, and Plonsky (2019) conducted a meta-analysis of 97 research reports, covering 105 independent samples and 19,933 language learners from 23 countries. Their analysis included 216 effect sizes and identified an average correlation of $\mathbf{r = -0.36}$ between second-language anxiety and language achievement. This indicates a meaningful negative relationship: higher anxiety is generally associated with lower language achievement [2].

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Further evidence was presented by Botes, Dewaele, and Greiff (2020). Their meta-analysis examined 99 effect sizes involving 14,128 participants. The researchers reported a moderate negative correlation of $\mathbf{r = -0.39}$ between foreign language classroom anxiety and general academic achievement in foreign language courses [3].

These findings demonstrate that speaking anxiety should not be considered merely a temporary emotional reaction. It is an important factor that can influence students' participation, learning experiences, and language development.

**Discussion**

Overcoming speaking anxiety requires the combination of psychological support and appropriate pedagogical strategies. Teachers should recognise that students have different personalities, language levels, and emotional responses to communication activities. Therefore, reducing anxiety should be a consistent part of the teaching process.

Creating a Positive Classroom Environment

A supportive classroom atmosphere is one of the most important conditions for reducing speaking anxiety. Students should feel that their opinions are respected and that making mistakes is a natural part of language learning.

Teachers should avoid humiliating students or interrupting every sentence to correct minor grammatical errors. Excessive correction may make learners more nervous and reduce their willingness to participate. Instead, teachers can provide constructive feedback after students complete their speaking activities.

For example, when a student makes a grammatical mistake during a presentation, the teacher can first acknowledge the student's effort and then explain how the sentence can be improved. This approach helps learners understand their mistakes without losing confidence.

Gradual Speaking Practice

Students should not immediately be expected to deliver long presentations or participate in complex debates. Speaking activities should progress from simple tasks to more demanding communication situations.

A practical progression may include:

1. Answering simple questions about personal interests and daily routines.
2. Practising short dialogues with a partner.
3. Describing pictures and familiar situations.
4. Participating in small-group discussions.
5. Delivering short individual presentations.
6. Taking part in debates and spontaneous conversations.

This gradual approach allows students to become familiar with speaking activities and develop confidence through regular practice.

Pair Work and Small-Group Activities

Pair work can reduce the psychological pressure associated with speaking in front of the entire class. When students communicate with one partner, they often feel more comfortable expressing their ideas and asking questions.

Small-group activities also provide opportunities for learners to exchange opinions and support one another. Teachers can organise discussions around familiar topics such as education, hobbies, travelling, technology, environmental protection, and future careers.

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These activities encourage students to focus on the meaning of communication rather than worrying excessively about grammatical accuracy.

Psychological Preparation and Self-Confidence

Psychological preparation is another important element in overcoming speaking anxiety. Teachers can encourage students to set realistic speaking goals and recognise their progress.

For example, a learner who is afraid of speaking in front of the class may begin by preparing a one-minute speech. After becoming more confident, the student can gradually increase the length and complexity of presentations.

Positive self-talk can also be useful. Instead of thinking, "I cannot speak English correctly," students can be encouraged to think, "I am learning, and every speaking activity helps me improve."

Breathing exercises and short preparation periods before presentations may also help some learners manage nervousness. However, these techniques should complement regular language practice rather than replace it.

The Role of Technology in Reducing Speaking Anxiety

Modern digital technologies provide additional opportunities for students to practise English in a less stressful environment. Audio recording applications allow learners to record their speech, listen to it, identify pronunciation problems, and monitor their improvement.

Video presentations, online discussion platforms, and language-learning applications can also support independent speaking practice. Students who feel uncomfortable speaking in front of a large audience may initially practise by recording short responses or participating in small online discussions.

Nevertheless, technology should be used as a supporting tool. Direct communication with teachers and classmates remains essential because it develops the ability to respond spontaneously and maintain real conversations.

The Teacher's Role in Supporting Learners

Teachers play a central role in identifying and reducing speaking anxiety. They should observe students' participation, recognise signs of nervousness, and provide appropriate support.

The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale developed by Horwitz and colleagues can serve as a research instrument for investigating learners' anxiety levels. Its 33 items use a five-point response format and address experiences such as nervousness when speaking, fear of mistakes, and concern about classroom evaluation [1].

Teachers and researchers can use the scale to understand students' experiences more systematically. However, it should not be treated as a medical diagnostic instrument.

An effective teacher should also provide equal opportunities for participation, select topics that match students' interests, encourage cooperation, and evaluate communication progress alongside grammatical accuracy.

**Conclusion**

Speaking anxiety is an important psychological barrier in English language learning. Fear of mistakes, negative evaluation, low self-confidence, and communication apprehension can prevent students from using their language knowledge effectively. International research confirms the negative relationship between foreign language anxiety and language achievement. In particular, the meta-analysis conducted by Teimouri, Goetze, and Plonsky (2019), involving 19,933 learners from 23 countries, reported a correlation of −0.36 between second-language anxiety and achievement.

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The findings of this article suggest that speaking anxiety can be addressed through supportive classroom environments, gradual speaking practice, pair work, group discussions, constructive feedback, and psychological preparation. Digital tools can provide additional opportunities for independent practice, while direct communication remains essential for developing real-life speaking abilities.

Ultimately, the goal of English language teaching should not be to create learners who never make mistakes, but to develop confident communicators who are willing to express their ideas, learn from errors, and participate actively in communication. A combination of psychological support and effective pedagogical methods can help students overcome speaking anxiety and improve their English-speaking proficiency.

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