WHY ARE STUDENTS AFRAID TO SPEAK, AND HOW CAN THEY OVERCOME IT?

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Abstract. Fear of speaking is one of the most persistent obstacles in learning English as a foreign language. Many students know grammar and vocabulary well, yet remain silent in class or lose fluency under pressure. This article examines why this happens and how the fear can be reduced. Using an analytical review of key research on foreign language anxiety, willingness to communicate and classroom interaction, the study identifies four main sources of the fear: fear of negative evaluation, low self-confidence, insufficient linguistic preparation, and a classroom climate that treats errors as failures. On this basis, the article proposes practical strategies for teachers and learners: building a low-anxiety environment, using pair and small-group work, giving supportive feedback, rehearsal and gradual exposure, and teaching learners to manage anxiety. The findings suggest that speaking fear is largely a product of the learning environment and learners' beliefs rather than a lack of ability, and can therefore be reduced through consistent, deliberate teaching practice.

Keywords: *speaking anxiety; foreign language anxiety; willingness to communicate; English language teaching; learner confidence; classroom climate.*

Introduction

Speaking is often regarded as the most important of the four language skills, because most learners study English in order to communicate with other people. At the same time, it is the skill that causes the greatest emotional tension. Teachers in

every country meet the same situation: a student who completes written exercises accurately, understands a listening text and can explain a grammar rule, but becomes silent or visibly nervous when asked to answer aloud. For such students, the problem is not knowledge of the language but the fear of using it.

The relevance of this topic is clear. Without regular speaking practice, learners cannot develop fluency, and a silent student gives the teacher very little information about what he or she actually needs. Fear of speaking therefore reduces both learning and teaching effectiveness. Moreover, as English is increasingly required for study, work and international communication, the inability to speak confidently has real consequences for students' future opportunities.

The novelty of this article lies in its practical orientation. Rather than describing anxiety only as a psychological variable, it connects each identified source of fear with a concrete classroom response that a teacher can apply immediately. The theoretical significance of the work is that it brings together findings from research on anxiety, motivation and interaction into one coherent explanation. Its practical significance is a set of strategies that language teachers and learners can use without special equipment or additional resources.

The aim of the article is to explain why students are afraid to speak English and to describe how this fear can be overcome. To achieve this aim, the article answers two questions: (1) What are the main causes of speaking fear? (2) Which teaching and learning strategies reduce it most effectively?

Literature Review

Research on fear in language learning began with the distinction between types of anxiety. Scovel (1978) pointed out that anxiety can be facilitating or debilitating, and that earlier studies produced contradictory results because they did not separate the two. A major step forward came when Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) argued that foreign language anxiety is a specific, situation-related phenomenon, distinct

from general anxiety. They described it through three related components: communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation, and they created the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale, which is still widely used.

Later studies clarified how anxiety harms performance. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) showed that anxiety can interfere with the input, processing and output stages of learning, so that an anxious learner may not only speak less but also understand and remember less. This idea is consistent with Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis, according to which emotions such as fear and low self-esteem can block the language input that learners receive from becoming acquired knowledge. At the same time, Swain's (1985) output hypothesis emphasises that producing language is itself necessary for acquisition. Together, these views create a cycle: fear reduces speaking, and reduced speaking limits development, which in turn maintains fear.

A second group of studies focuses on learners' willingness to communicate. MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei and Noels (1998) proposed a layered model in which the decision to speak depends not only on language ability but also on self-confidence, motivation, the communication situation and relationships with the interlocutor. Liu and Jackson (2008), studying Chinese university learners of English, found that unwillingness to communicate was connected with anxiety, fear of negative evaluation and low self-rated proficiency, confirming that silence often has an emotional rather than a linguistic basis.

The classroom context has also received attention. Tsui (1996), working with teachers in Hong Kong, identified reasons for student reticence, including low proficiency, fear of making mistakes, fear of ridicule by classmates and teachers' intolerance of silence. Young (1991) analysed sources of anxiety that include learner beliefs, teacher beliefs, teacher–learner interaction and classroom procedures, and suggested that a low-anxiety classroom can be created through teacher behaviour and task design. More recently, Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) showed that anxiety

and enjoyment are separate emotions that can exist at the same time, which suggests that reducing fear is not enough: teachers should also increase positive experiences in speaking.

Overall, the literature agrees that speaking fear is real, common and learnable in the sense that it responds to the learning environment. What is often missing from the research is a clear link between each cause and a corresponding teaching action; the present article attempts to provide it.

Methodology

This is a review-type article. The method used is an analytical synthesis of the studies discussed above, supplemented by well-established principles of communicative language teaching. The sources were examined to identify causes of speaking fear that were repeatedly reported by different authors in different contexts, and teaching strategies that logically address each cause and are supported by research on anxiety and willingness to communicate. The article does not report new experimental data; its conclusions should therefore be seen as an evidence-based framework that teachers can test and adapt in their own classrooms.

Results: causes of speaking fear

The analysis identified four main sources of fear.

1. Fear of negative evaluation. This is the most frequently reported cause. Students worry that the teacher will judge their mistakes, or that classmates will laugh at their accent or grammar. Because speaking happens in real time and in public, errors are immediately visible, unlike in writing. When a student has once been corrected harshly or laughed at, one such experience can influence participation for a long time.

2. Low self-confidence. Many learners compare themselves with more fluent classmates and conclude that they are "bad at English". This belief affects motivation

and reduces willingness to take risks. Perfectionism strengthens the problem: students who expect to speak without any errors prefer silence to imperfect speech.

3. Insufficient linguistic preparation. Students are sometimes asked to speak spontaneously about topics for which they lack vocabulary or ideas. They also have limited time to plan, while they must think of content, choose words and control grammar at once. In such conditions even a capable learner may stop, and the experience of failure increases fear for the next occasion.

4. A threatening classroom climate. Teaching methods that emphasise accuracy and testing, immediate correction of every mistake, or calling on students unexpectedly make the classroom feel like an examination. Where silence is not tolerated and mistakes are punished, students learn that the safest strategy is not to speak.

Results: strategies for overcoming the fear

Each cause can be addressed by specific teaching and learning actions, summarised in Table 1 and explained below.

Table 1. Sources of speaking fear and pedagogical responses

Source of fear	Main pedagogical response
Fear of negative evaluation	Treat errors as normal; delay and select corrections; praise effort and communication
Low self-confidence	Scaffolded tasks that guarantee small successes; self-reflection on progress
Insufficient linguistic preparation	Planning time, rehearsal, useful phrases and sentence frames

Threatening classroom climate	Pair and small-group work; supportive teacher role; avoiding forced public performance

Create a low-anxiety environment. The teacher's attitude is the most powerful factor. Presenting mistakes as a natural and necessary part of learning, using a calm and friendly tone and sharing personal stories of difficulty with language learning all lower the emotional cost of speaking. Establishing simple class rules, such as no laughing at errors, protects students and builds trust.

Use pair and small-group work first. Speaking to one partner is much less threatening than speaking to the whole class. Pair work and small-group discussion increase each student's talking time and allow learners to rehearse ideas before sharing them publicly. A useful sequence is think individually, discuss with a partner, then report to the group, which moves students gradually from private to public speaking.

Give planning time and language support. Allowing even one or two minutes to prepare, providing key vocabulary and offering sentence frames (for example, "In my opinion…", "I agree because…") reduce the mental load of speaking. Repeating the same task a second time, for example with a new partner, also improves fluency and builds confidence because students notice their own progress.

Provide supportive, selective feedback. Interrupting a student to correct every error breaks fluency and increases anxiety. It is more effective to focus first on meaning, to note frequent or serious errors for later discussion with the whole class without naming individuals, and to recognise what the student did well. Praise should refer to specific achievements, such as a clear idea or a successful new word, rather than being general.

Increase exposure step by step. Gradual progression helps learners to build confidence: from repeating and answering short questions, to describing pictures, to short dialogues, to presentations and discussions. Each step should be challenging but achievable. Regular, short speaking activities in every lesson are more effective than occasional long ones, because familiarity reduces fear.

Teach learners to manage anxiety. Students can also take active responsibility. Useful techniques include slow breathing before speaking, positive self-talk, preparing key points in advance, practising aloud alone or recording themselves, and speaking with friends or online partners in informal settings. Setting small personal goals, for example, to ask one question in each class, helps learners see progress and develop a realistic view of their abilities.

Make speaking enjoyable. Following Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014), the aim should be not only to reduce anxiety but also to increase enjoyment. Games, role-plays, interesting topics linked to students' own lives, and collaborative tasks with a clear communicative purpose make speaking meaningful and motivating, so that students focus on the message rather than on themselves.

Conclusions

This article examined why students are afraid to speak English and how this fear can be overcome. The review of research showed that speaking fear is not a sign of low ability. It arises mainly from fear of negative evaluation, low self-confidence, insufficient preparation and a classroom climate that makes mistakes costly. Because these causes are largely connected with the learning environment and learners' beliefs, they can be changed.

Teachers can reduce fear by treating mistakes as normal, using pair and group work, providing planning time and language support, giving selective and encouraging feedback, and increasing speaking demands gradually. Learners can contribute by using anxiety-management techniques, setting small goals and seeking

regular practice outside the classroom. The most effective approach combines reducing anxiety with increasing enjoyment, so that speaking becomes a positive experience.

The main limitation of this article is that it is based on a review of existing literature rather than on new empirical data. Future research could test the proposed strategies through classroom experiments or surveys, comparing speaking confidence and participation before and after their introduction, and could study differences between age groups and learning contexts.

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