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SPEAKING ANXIETY IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING: CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract: Speaking anxiety is a common challenge in foreign language learning, particularly in university settings where students are expected to participate in discussions, presentations, and other communicative activities. This article examines the nature of English-speaking anxiety, its major causes, and practical strategies that may help university students participate more confidently in oral communication. It uses a narrative review of influential literature on foreign language anxiety and language-learning processes rather than reporting new empirical data. The reviewed literature identifies fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, perfectionism, limited linguistic resources, and classroom conditions as factors that may contribute to anxiety. The article discusses supportive feedback, pair and small-group work, structured speaking tasks, preparation time, and gradual exposure to public

speaking as possible pedagogical responses. It argues that speaking confidence can be developed through repeated, meaningful practice in a respectful classroom environment. The article concludes that teachers and students share responsibility for creating conditions in which mistakes are treated as a normal part of learning.

Keywords: speaking anxiety, English language learning, university students, communication apprehension, classroom strategies, foreign language anxiety

Introduction

English speaking competence is important for university students who need to communicate in academic, professional, and international contexts. Students may study grammar and vocabulary for years but still find it difficult to express their ideas orally. Some hesitate to answer questions, avoid presentations, or worry that classmates will notice their mistakes. These experiences may reflect speaking anxiety: tension or apprehension that arises when learners are expected to use a language in front of others.

Anxiety matters because speaking requires learners to coordinate several processes at once. They must understand the topic, select vocabulary, organize ideas, produce grammatically appropriate sentences, and respond to listeners in real time. When students are overly concerned about making errors or being judged, their attention may shift from communicating meaning to monitoring their own performance. As a result, they may speak less, use simpler language, or avoid opportunities to practise.

Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) conceptualized foreign language classroom anxiety as a situation-specific form of anxiety associated with language learning. Their work highlighted communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety as important dimensions. Although learners experience anxiety differently, the framework helps explain why a student who feels comfortable in other subjects may feel nervous when speaking English.

The purpose of this article is to review key explanations of English-speaking anxiety among university students and discuss practical strategies that teachers and learners can use to reduce its impact. The article is based on published literature and does not present original questionnaire data. It addresses three questions: What factors commonly contribute to speaking anxiety? How can anxiety affect students' participation and oral performance? What classroom practices may support more confident speaking?

Literature Review

Understanding foreign language anxiety

Foreign language anxiety is more than ordinary nervousness before a presentation. It can be connected specifically with learning and using a language that the learner has not yet mastered. Horwitz et al. (1986) argued that language-classroom anxiety has distinctive features and can influence learners' experiences in the classroom. Their conceptualization remains influential in research on language learning.

Communication apprehension refers to discomfort associated with communicating with other people. In an English lesson, it may appear when a student is asked to answer unexpectedly, take part in a debate, or speak in front of the whole class. Fear of negative evaluation involves concern that teachers or peers will judge the learner's language ability unfavourably. Test anxiety, meanwhile, can be particularly relevant when oral performance is graded or when students believe that a single mistake will strongly affect their mark.

MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) examined how language anxiety may influence cognitive processing in second-language learning. Their work supports the view that anxiety can interfere with processes involved in learning and using a language. In speaking situations, anxious learners may find it harder to retrieve words quickly or maintain their train of thought, especially when they feel under pressure. This does not mean that every nervous student has low ability; rather, anxiety and performance can interact in complex ways.

Common causes of speaking anxiety

One frequently discussed source of anxiety is fear of making mistakes. Students may believe that accurate grammar and pronunciation are necessary before they can speak, so they remain silent until they feel fully prepared. However, spontaneous communication rarely allows time for perfect sentence construction. When the expectation of perfection becomes too strong, learners may avoid the practice that would help them improve.

A second factor is fear of criticism or embarrassment. Negative reactions from classmates, impatient correction, or comparisons between students can make oral participation feel risky. Young (1991) emphasized the importance of classroom conditions in understanding language anxiety and discussed ways teachers can create a less threatening learning environment. A classroom in which errors are treated respectfully is more likely to encourage learners to take communicative risks.

Limited vocabulary and uncertainty about grammar may also contribute to anxiety. Students may understand a topic but struggle to find the words they need quickly. Differences in proficiency within the same group can increase this concern, particularly if less confident learners compare themselves with fluent classmates. In addition, unfamiliar topics, insufficient preparation time, large classes, and high-stakes speaking assessments may make participation more stressful.

These factors should not be treated as identical for all students. Some learners are mainly worried about pronunciation, while others are anxious about being evaluated or simply need more time to organize their ideas. Teachers can respond more effectively when they identify the particular difficulty rather than assuming that silence always indicates a lack of knowledge or motivation. Possible effects on learning and participation. Speaking anxiety may reduce students' willingness to volunteer answers, ask questions, or contribute to group discussions. Students who avoid speaking also receive fewer opportunities to practise fluency, notice gaps in their language, and develop strategies for communicating when they do not know a word. This can create a cycle: anxiety leads to avoidance, reduced practice limits confidence, and low confidence makes later speaking tasks feel even more difficult.

Anxiety can also affect the quality of performance in the moment. A student may know the relevant vocabulary but struggle to retrieve it under pressure, lose track of an idea, or speak more briefly than intended. Nevertheless, anxiety should not be viewed as the only explanation for weak performance. Language proficiency, task difficulty, motivation, previous learning experiences, and classroom relationships may all play a role. The aim should therefore be to reduce unnecessary pressure while continuing to provide meaningful opportunities to learn.

Methodological Approach

This article uses a narrative literature-review approach. It draws on established publications concerning foreign language classroom anxiety, cognitive processing, and classroom practices, with particular attention to Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), MacIntyre and Gardner (1994), and Young (1991). These works were selected because they address foundational concepts relevant to anxiety in language learning and the role of the learning environment.

The article synthesizes ideas from these publications to identify recurring challenges and discuss practical teaching implications. It does not include a survey, interviews, an experimental intervention, or statistical analysis. Therefore, the strategies discussed below should be understood as literature-informed recommendations rather than as outcomes tested by the author in a new study. A future empirical study could investigate students' experiences through questionnaires or interviews and evaluate whether particular classroom interventions reduce reported anxiety.

Discussion: Strategies for Overcoming Speaking Anxiety

Begin with pair work and small groups

For learners who feel uncomfortable speaking before the whole class, pair work can provide a less intimidating starting point. Students can first discuss a question with one partner, compare ideas in a small group, and only then share selected points with the class. This sequence allows them to rehearse their ideas and experience speaking success before facing a larger audience. Pair work should still have a clear purpose, such as solving a problem, exchanging opinions, or reaching a decision, so that students focus on communication rather than simply taking turns.

Create a supportive response to mistakes

Teachers can reduce fear of negative evaluation by responding to errors constructively. Instead of interrupting every sentence, a teacher may allow a student to finish and then address a small number of important errors. Recasts, prompts, and brief feedback can help learners notice improvements without making them feel publicly embarrassed. Teachers can also establish clear

classroom expectations: classmates should listen respectfully, avoid ridicule, and recognize that errors are a normal part of language development.

Provide preparation time and language support

Students often speak more confidently when they have a short period to prepare. Before a discussion, teachers can provide guiding questions, a few useful expressions, or a simple planning framework. For example, learners may prepare three key points and one example before giving a one-minute response. Sentence starters such as “In my opinion…,” “One reason is…,” and “For example…” can help learners begin speaking while gradually developing independence.

Use gradual, achievable speaking tasks

Speaking tasks can progress from less demanding to more challenging activities. Learners might begin by reading a prepared response, move to a short pair discussion, then give an unprepared answer in a small group, and eventually deliver a short presentation. The purpose is not to remove all challenge but to make the challenge manageable. Regular short speaking

activities may be more useful for confidence-building than occasional high-pressure performances.Focus on communication, not perfection. Teachers can explain that successful communication does not require every sentence to be grammatically perfect. Students should be encouraged to clarify meaning, paraphrase

unfamiliar words, ask for repetition, and continue after a mistake. Activities with an information gap, role-play, or problem-solving goal can shift attention towards conveying meaning. Accuracy remains important, but it can be developed alongside fluency rather than treated as a condition that must be achieved before speaking.

Help students reflect on progress Brief self-reflection can help learners notice progress that they might otherwise overlook. After a speaking task, students can record what they communicated successfully, which expression they used, and one goal for the next activity. The focus should be on personal development rather than comparison with classmates. Students can also practise outside class by recording short voice notes, rehearsing answers aloud, or speaking English with a trusted partner. Such practice should be manageable and regular rather than burdensome.

Pedagogical Implications. The literature suggests that speaking anxiety should be addressed through both teaching methods and classroom relationships. Teachers can vary interaction patterns, provide preparation time, give constructive feedback, and make assessment criteria transparent. They should also avoid assuming that all students respond to the same activity in the same way. Offering several participation formats—individual preparation, pair discussion, small-group work, and whole-class speaking—can give learners different routes into oral communication. Assessment practices deserve particular attention. If every speaking activity is graded heavily, students may focus on avoiding errors instead of developing fluency. Low-stakes practice, clear rubrics, and feedback that identifies both strengths and next steps may help students understand that speaking is a skill developed over time. At the same time, students need opportunities to become comfortable with formal presentations and assessed tasks; these can be introduced progressively with explicit guidance. Students also have an active role. They can set realistic speaking goals, prepare key vocabulary, practise useful phrases, and treat mistakes as information about what to learn next. They may benefit from reminding themselves that classmates are often focused on their

own performance rather than judging every error. Teachers and students together can help create a classroom culture where participation is valued and improvement is expected.

Conclusion

Speaking anxiety can make English language learning more difficult by discouraging participation and placing additional pressure on learners during oral communication. The literature reviewed in this article highlights fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, perfectionism, limited linguistic resources, and classroom conditions as relevant factors. Anxiety does not affect every learner in the same way, and it should not be confused with a lack of ability or effort.A supportive classroom can help students approach speaking tasks with greater confidence. Pair work, small-group discussion, constructive feedback, preparation time, gradual progression towards public speaking, and a focus on meaningful communication are practical strategies that teachers can adapt to their learners' needs. Students can support this process through regular practice and realistic self-reflection. Because this article is based on published literature rather than original data, further research with university students would be useful to explore which strategies are most effective in particular educational contexts. Overall, reducing unnecessary fear while maintaining meaningful speaking practice can contribute to a more inclusive and communicative English-learning environment.

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