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## **REDUCING SPEAKING ANXIETY THROUGH FREQUENT LOW-STAKES INTERACTION.**

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### **Abstract**

Speaking anxiety is a pervasive issue among learners of English as a foreign language, particularly in higher education settings where English is not the primary focus of study. This article investigates the underlying causes of anxiety in speaking, drawing on the concepts of communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Classroom observations indicate that learners often avoid participation due to low confidence, fear of errors, and concerns about assessment. To address these challenges, the study emphasizes the role of frequent low-stakes interactions as a pedagogical strategy to create a supportive and low-pressure environment. Practical techniques include small talk, turn-and-talk exercises, small group discussions, sentence stems, advance preparation, recognition of incremental progress, and optional participation. By incorporating these strategies, educators can foster a safe and motivating classroom atmosphere, gradually enhancing learners' willingness to communicate. The findings suggest that such interventions not only improve speaking competence but also contribute to students' academic success, career prospects, and personal development.

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**Key words:** *Speaking anxiety; English as a Foreign Language (EFL); low-stakes interaction; communication apprehension; test anxiety; fear of negative evaluation; learner confidence; public speaking skills; classroom interaction strategies; language learning motivation.*

## **Introduction**

Learning English as a foreign language can be a very challenging task for many students, particularly in educational environments where it is not considered the learners' main field of study. Consequently, they may encounter different problems while learning this language, for example speaking or expressing their ideas in English. It is one of the greatest issues among language learners, and it leads to different results which may hinder them from achieving their desired goals. It is widely known that the English language has become one of the most important international languages all over the world. Obviously, every person who wants to have a career or personal growth tends to learn this language, though they may have a lot of challenges. Nevertheless, learners try to deal with this matter, which relates to their comprehension skills as well as communication skills, as much as they can. Unfortunately, there can be some crucial issues that are very hard to overcome for students who are trying to learn the English language. One of these matters is the fear of speaking in English and the lack of confidence to communicate in this language. But it is worth noting that this problem arises mostly among those who have low language proficiency, and indeed these students often struggle with insufficient practice and heightened anxiety when speaking. Anxiety causes learners to become discouraged from learning and improving their English skills, especially speaking.

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This anxiety issue correlates with their motivational level in learning EFL. These conditions affect their willingness to improve their speaking skills.

Furthermore, in order to solve each problem and make the situation better, first of all it is necessary to find out the main root of this issue. Many scientists claim that there can be various factors for feeling anxiety while having communication in English. In the opinion of Ariani & Dewi (2020), students feel anxious for three reasons: nervousness, worry, and fear. Because of these conditions, students suffer from a self-confidence crisis that affects their speaking ability. Another study by Horwitz et al. (1986) has identified the components of foreign language anxiety, namely:

### **1. Communication apprehension.**

Communication apprehension is associated with communicating, being in front of others, and talking in groups. Horwitz et al. (1986) explain that People who speak poorly in groups will likely experience even more difficulty speaking in a foreign language class where communication is limited and their performance is constantly monitored.

### **2. Test anxiety.**

Horwitz et al. (1986) defined Test anxiety as a type of performance anxiety stemming from a fear of failure. Test-anxious students often put unrealistic demands on themselves. Mahmoodzadeh (2012) stated that Test anxiety is likewise believed to be one of the essential aspects of negative motivation. Concerning test anxiety, many learners feel more pressure when asked to perform in a foreign/second language because they are challenged by the fact that they must recall and coordinate many grammar points simultaneously during the limited test period.

**3. Fear of negative evaluation.** Fear of negative evaluation is explained as the student's expectation to be evaluated negatively by others in situations such as oral exams

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or in-class presentations. Another study conducted by Mahmoodzadeh (2012) found out that in this sense, it seems that teachers' beliefs about language teaching may act as some obstacles for L2 learners and thus create language anxiety in them because the assumptions of teachers as to their role in the language classroom may not always correspond to the individual needs or expectations that L2 learners would consider for their teachers (Sulistyowati, 2023).

Once the main reasons and results of learners' anxiety while speaking in English have been identified, it becomes easier to find solutions for how to overcome or prevent them from experiencing this psychological condition. Certainly, there are many ways to assist students in applying these theoretical and practical approaches effectively. Some principal methods include mastering grammar, finding a native speaker to practice conversations with, or joining speaking clubs where using English is mandatory. However, these well-known strategies are not always as effective as expected. In reality, learners may still face various obstacles when delivering a speech in public. From my own experience in the English lesson I observed, many resources and techniques were recommended to help students improve their speaking abilities and overcome their fear of public communication, yet the results were not as significant as anticipated.

Moreover, after thorough analysis and research, I drew a conclusion and came to the decision that students must be taught in a way that prevents feelings of fear, embarrassment, or lack of confidence while speaking. Specifically, I found that because learners are afraid of making mistakes and being judged for them, they prefer to remain silent, avoid speaking, or even skip the lesson to escape conversations in the classroom. In addition, students are often worried about receiving low scores when their speaking performance is weak in exams or classroom activities.

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As a result, I realized that the most effective way to motivate and encourage students to communicate is to introduce activities that involve low-stakes interactions. These tasks do not put learners under pressure, allowing them to express their thoughts and opinions freely in front of their peers. However, it should be kept in mind that such activities must be selected carefully and explained clearly to students so they understand that these tasks will not affect their overall grades. As mentioned above, low-stakes interaction can gradually boost learners' confidence in speaking. This is because high-stakes interactions are not a convenient way for every student to practice speaking in public. Some learners may be very introverted by personality or may have social phobia. In turn, low-stakes interactions can provide support. These include the following activities:

### **1. Small talk.**

It is far more powerful than its name suggests. What appears to be superficial chitchat about weather and weekends is actually the foundation upon which professional networks, friendships, and social belonging are built. For English learners, mastering small talk is transformative—it's the gateway from feeling isolated in English-speaking environments to feeling genuinely connected. Yet small talk doesn't come naturally to everyone. The good news is that small talk is a learnable skill. With strategic practice and specific techniques, you can transform it from anxiety-inducing to genuinely enjoyable.

#### **1. Turn-and-Talks to Build Confidence and Clarity**

Before whole-class discussions, have students practice their ideas with a partner. Prompt them with questions like:

“What’s one thing you noticed?”

“How would you explain this in your own words?”

“What questions do you still have?”

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This simple structure helps students clarify their thinking and prepare to share with the group, especially for students who need extra processing time.

## **2. Small group discussions before moving to whole-class sharing**

Instead of asking students to speak in front of the whole class immediately, they first talk in a small group of 3–4 classmates. Small groups feel safer and less intimidating. Students can practice their ideas privately before sharing with everyone. By the time they speak in front of the class, they already feel more confident because they have rehearsed in a comfortable setting.

## **3. Provide sentence stems**

Sentence stems are the beginnings of sentences that help students start speaking. For example: “I think that...”, “In my opinion...”, “I agree with this because...”

These help because students often know what they want to say but don’t know how to start their sentence in English. Sentence stems reduce anxiety and give them a structure to follow.

## **4. Allow students to prepare their thoughts in advance**

Instead of asking students to answer immediately, give them a few minutes to think or write their ideas first. This helps because they feel more prepared, they can organize their thoughts, it reduces the fear of making mistakes or forgetting what to say.

## **5. Celebrate small steps**

This means praising even very small progress, such as trying to say one sentence, volunteering once, using a new word, speaking with more confidence. Celebrating small improvements motivates students and shows them that progress takes time.

## **6. Invite students to contribute without forcing participation.**

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In this activity students should be encouraged to speak, but not forced. For example: You can say, “Would you like to share your idea?” instead of “You must answer now.” Students feel safe because they have a choice. When pressure is removed, many students eventually choose to participate on their own.

To conclude, while language learners—particularly those studying in higher education—may struggle to speak in English because of the reasons mentioned above, appropriate solutions must be applied to address these issues. Communication in a foreign language is very beneficial for many aspects of students’ lives, especially when learning English. It can contribute to their career growth, provide valuable opportunities to gain experience abroad, and support their personal development.

However, there are certain problems that may arise when speaking in the target language, and this article has suggested several important ways to overcome these difficulties if they are implemented effectively. The following recommendation can be made: anxiety while speaking should not hinder learners from achieving the higher goals associated with their chosen career paths. Certainly, teachers should apply the techniques mentioned in this article and try to minimize any challenges their students may face in developing their speaking skills.

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