

SPEAKING ANXIETY IN EFL LEARNERS AND CLASSROOM STRATEGIES TO REDUCE IT

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Abstract. *Speaking anxiety is a major factor hindering the development of oral communication skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Fear of mistakes, negative evaluation, and low self-confidence often reduce participation in speaking activities. This article examines the causes of speaking anxiety and explores effective classroom strategies to address it, including supportive environments, pair and group work, constructive feedback, communicative activities, and gradual task difficulty. The findings suggest that learner-centered approaches improve students' confidence, participation, and oral performance. Reducing speaking anxiety is crucial for fostering effective communication in EFL classrooms.*

Key words: *speaking anxiety, oral communication, foreign language learning, classroom strategies, learner confidence, communicative competence.*

Annotatsiya. *Og'zaki nutqdagi xavotir ingliz tilini xorijiy til sifatida o'rganayotgan (EFL) talabalarda og'zaki muloqot ko'nikmalarining rivojlanishiga to'sqinlik qiluvchi muhim omildir. Ko'plab talabalar xato qilishdan qo'rqish, salbiy baholanishdan xavotirlanish va past o'ziga ishonch tufayli nutqda faol ishtirok eta olmaydilar. Ushbu maqolada nutqiy xavotirning sabablari va uni kamaytirish uchun sinfda qo'llaniladigan samarali strategiyalar, jumladan, qo'llab-quvvatlovchi muhit yaratish, juftlik va guruh ishlari, konstruktiv fikr-mulohaza, kommunikativ mashg'ulotlar va topshiriqlarni bosqichma-bosqich murakkablashtirish, tahlil qilinadi. Natijalar shuni ko'rsatadiki, talaba uchun yo'naltirilgan yondashuvlar xavotirni kamaytirib, ishonch va faollikni oshiradi.*

Kalit so'zlar: *nutqiy xavotir, og'zaki muloqot, chet tilini o'rganish, sinf strategiyalari, o'quvchi ishonchi, kommunikativ kompetensiya.*

Аннотация. *Речевая тревожность является одним из ключевых факторов, препятствующих развитию устной речи у изучающих английский язык как иностранный. Страх ошибок, негативной оценки и низкая уверенность снижают активность обучающихся на занятиях. В статье рассматриваются причины тревожности и анализируются эффективные стратегии её снижения, включая поддерживающую образовательную среду, парную и групповую работу, конструктивную обратную связь, коммуникативные задания и постепенное усложнение упражнений. Результаты показывают, что лично-ориентированные подходы повышают уверенность, активность и эффективность устной речи. Снижение речевой тревожности важно для успешного формирования коммуникативной компетенции.*

Ключевые слова: *речевая тревожность, устная коммуникация, изучение иностранного языка, учебные стратегии, уверенность обучающихся, коммуникативная компетенция.*

Introduction. Oral communication is a core component of language learning, enabling learners to express ideas, interact socially, and participate effectively in academic and professional contexts. However, many learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) face significant challenges when it comes to speaking, with anxiety being one of the most critical barriers. Speaking anxiety, often referred to as “oral or communicative apprehension,” can manifest as fear of making mistakes, worry about negative evaluation,

and a lack of confidence in one's language abilities. These factors can significantly reduce students' participation in classroom activities, hinder fluency development, and limit opportunities for meaningful communication.

Research has shown that speaking anxiety is influenced by a variety of factors, including individual psychological traits, linguistic limitations, classroom dynamics, and cultural expectations. Students experiencing high levels of anxiety often remain silent during lessons, avoid participating in discussions, and may develop negative attitudes toward language learning. Consequently, addressing speaking anxiety has become a crucial concern for language educators aiming to foster effective oral communication skills. This article explores the causes of speaking anxiety in EFL learners and examines practical classroom strategies that teachers can employ to reduce it. By integrating insights from research and classroom practice, the study emphasizes learner-centered approaches, communicative activities, supportive feedback, and incremental task design as effective means to enhance students' confidence and participation. Understanding and mitigating speaking anxiety not only improves learners' oral proficiency but also contributes to a more engaging and productive language learning environment.

Literature review and methods. Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) Classroom anxiety was first investigated in-depth by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986). The term Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) or Language Anxiety (LA) was first introduced by Horwitz and Cope (1986) [7]. They have created the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) to measure anxiety among language learning students. Horwitz et al. (1986) divided anxiety into test anxiety, communication apprehension, and fear of negative evaluation. The correlation between anxiety and classroom performance and grades has been previously researched. However, the majority of them show a negative correlation (Horwitz, Horwitz&Cope, 1986; Young 1986). One research found the correlation in a French class at a University showing that anxiety is a significant factor that determines classroom success (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994) [5]. Gardner and MacIntyre (1994) described anxiety as tension associated with speaking, listening, and learning. They noted that anxiety is the negative emotions and worry that arise while interacting in a foreign language. Tobias (1986) noted that anxiety affects both input and output stages of the language learning process.

In the language processing stage, anxious students get easily distracted and lose attention, especially in speaking. They read the exact text several times, but they cannot ask for clarification or repetition because of their emotional state. In the performance stage, being distracted, they fail to process new material, so errors may occur, and the learning speed may be slower. Anxiety level and oral performance are closely linked (Woodrow, 2006). Anxious learners freeze up and cannot speak a word. Therefore it is essential to investigate the internal and external factors that cause anxiety to control and lessen it. [5] It also may have physical and cognitive effects on language learners, making

them unable to replicate the inflection or rhythm, mispronouncing sounds, forgetting phrases and words that have been just learned (Hameed & Anwar, 2018). Anxious learners usually sweat, feel nausea, dryness in the mouth, and weak knees (Lian & Mardziah, 2014). According to Ismael et al. (2021), the common symptoms of anxious learners are a red or pale face, trembling voice, being annoyed, faster heartbeats, and forgetting the words.[7] found a correlation between anxiety and perfectionism. Some anxious learners have been found to have better performance of the target language, concern seriously about the errors, worry about others' opinions, and are prone to procrastinating.

Materials and methods. The study involved twenty-five EFL learners from the Faculty of Mathematics and Economics at Renaissance Education University in Tashkent. Participants varied in age, socio-economic background, language proficiency, and previous English learning experience. Both male and female learners were included to ensure a balanced representation.

If a person is shy and introverted in their first language, their second language personality could be outgoing and extroverted. The second language provides a feeling of a “protective barrier” and perhaps offers a release for the person to express themselves without feeling any negative emotions because of the aforementioned emotional connection that they have with their first language. [8]

Research Design. The research was conducted in **three stages** to investigate speaking anxiety and the effectiveness of classroom strategies for reducing it.

Stage 1 was involved using concept-checking questions with the participants. During the interviews, I asked simple, everyday questions regarding their name, family, language background, socio-economic status, the age at which they began learning the second language (L2), whether they practiced the language outside the classroom, and whether they made up for any lessons they had missed. The question about the age of L2 onset was designed to examine Dewale's (2013) hypothesis, which suggests that early starters tend to experience lower levels of language anxiety, and to explore the impact of additional practice on reducing anxiety. The question about compensating for missed lessons aimed to test the hypothesis proposed by Gardner and Macintyre (1994), which states that learners who review or make up for complex topics exhibit lower anxiety levels. Additionally, inquiries about family, language, and socio-economic background were intended to investigate how these factors influence a foreign language development.

Stage 2. Following the interviews, I conducted six lessons in which I taught the participants the language. I used the Business vocabulary in use Bill Mascull.[2] In this period, I taught them grammar (making comparisons, order of adjectives, past simple, past continuous, adjectives, adverbs), vocabulary (works ad job, ways of working, skills and qualifications), reading (texts about nature of work, applying for a job, economy in Uzbekistan and the world industry) listening and speaking (talking about working hours, nice work if you can get it, the right person, telling a story), pronunciation (pronunciation

of "h", sentence stress), communication (describing lost property, asking about prices, polite request, offers, economy specialists' reports), and writing (CV, resume, complain letters, formal and informal letters).

Stage 3 The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986) was used to measure the participants' language anxiety levels. [7] Originally, the scale included 24 items; the items were designed to measure learners' language anxiety and identify potential contributing factors, such as instructional methods, teacher influence, a competitive classroom environment, peer pressure, fear of embarrassment, limited English proficiency, dissatisfaction with communication, misconceptions about language learning, and learners' self-perceived low ability.

In our teaching process, we try to use pair and group work to reduce speaking anxiety. One effective strategy to help learners overcome speaking anxiety is the use of pair and group work. Peer collaboration allows students to work together in pairs or small groups, which reduces the pressure often experienced in whole-class speaking activities. When learners interact with a limited number of peers, they feel more comfortable taking risks and expressing themselves in English. Incorporating structured speaking tasks, such as role-plays, dialogues, or guided discussions, further facilitates participation by providing clear instructions and expectations. These structured activities give students a framework that supports their speaking practice and builds confidence. Additionally, peer support plays a crucial role, as learners often feel more at ease practicing with classmates who are at a similar language proficiency level. This collaborative environment encourages active engagement, reduces anxiety, and helps learners gradually develop stronger oral communication skills.

Another effective approach to reducing speaking anxiety in language learners is teaching specific anxiety management techniques. One practical method involves deep breathing and relaxation exercises before speaking activities, which help students calm their nerves and focus on the task at hand. In addition, visualization techniques can be used by encouraging learners to imagine themselves successfully communicating in English, which builds confidence and reduces fear of mistakes. Incorporating short mindfulness or focus exercises into the classroom routine can also lower stress levels, helping students stay present and attentive during speaking tasks. By integrating these techniques into lessons, teachers provide learners with practical tools to manage their anxiety, leading to more active participation and improved oral performance.

Incorporating communicative and fun activities. Incorporating communicative and enjoyable activities into language lessons is an effective way to reduce speaking anxiety and enhance learner engagement. Using games and simulations makes speaking practice interactive and entertaining, which helps students feel more relaxed and willing to participate. Task-based learning, involving real-life tasks such as problem-solving or collaborative projects, further motivates learners and reduces the fear of making mistakes

by connecting language use to meaningful contexts. Additionally, activities such as storytelling, debates, and presentations allow students to practice speaking in various formats, gradually building confidence and improving fluency. By integrating these communicative and enjoyable approaches, teachers create a supportive environment where learners can practice speaking in a natural, low-pressure setting.

Encouraging learner autonomy. Promoting learner autonomy is a crucial strategy for helping students overcome speaking anxiety and take ownership of their language learning. One way to foster autonomy is by encouraging practice outside the classroom, such as using language exchange apps, recording themselves speaking, or conversing with peers in informal settings. Setting personal goals, such as small and achievable speaking targets, helps reduce feelings of overwhelm and allows learners to experience steady progress. Additionally, reflecting on progress through journals or self-monitoring enables students to recognize improvements, identify areas for growth, and build confidence in their speaking abilities. By empowering learners to take responsibility for their practice, teachers can support the development of independent, motivated, and resilient language users.

Results and findings. The key to addressing speaking anxiety is to reduce fear of mistakes, build learner confidence, and create meaningful, supportive opportunities for practice. Strategies such as pair and group work, anxiety management techniques, communicative and enjoyable activities, and fostering learner autonomy work together to create a positive learning environment. When these approaches are combined, students are more likely to actively participate, gradually overcome speaking anxiety, and develop stronger oral communication skills over time.

For each measure, the score range was calculated to determine to what extent the students felt anxious in the EFL classroom and which factors are causing the anxiety among L2 learners. The results were interpreted separately first and compared later to see the correlation between anxiety and language progress.

Questionnaire on speaking anxiety in English as a foreign language (EFL)

Instructions for a foreign language learners. This questionnaire aims to investigate learners' anxiety and fear related to speaking English as a foreign language. Please read each statement carefully and indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree. There are no right or wrong answers. All responses will be kept confidential and used for research purposes only. An experiment was carried out to investigate anxiety and fear associated with communication among first-year students at the Faculty of Mathematics and Economics, Group 36–25. Number of students: 25.

N	Please read each statement carefully	Tick your own opinion and calculate all your scores Each score is mentioned below	Students' gained results (100 %)
1	Personal Experience 1. Do you feel nervous when you speak	· I feel nervous when I have to speak English in class. (33)	Approximately 85 %

	<p>English? Why or why not?</p> <p>2. In what situations do you feel most anxious speaking English?</p> <p>3. What is your biggest fear when you speak English (making mistakes, pronunciation, grammar, etc.)?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I experience anxiety when I speak English without prior preparation. (33) • Speaking English in front of others makes me feel tense and uncomfortable. (34) 	
2	<p>Causes of Anxiety</p> <p>1. Why do you think many students are afraid of speaking English?</p> <p>2. Does fear of making mistakes stop you from speaking English? How?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I worry about my pronunciation when I speak English. (25) • I am afraid that other students will laugh at my mistakes. (25) • I feel stressed when the teacher asks me questions in English. (25) • I am afraid of using incorrect grammar when I speak English. (25) 	Approximately 90 %
3	<p>Coping Strategies</p> <p>1. What can students do to feel more confident when speaking English?</p> <p>2. How can practicing with friends help reduce anxiety?</p> <p>3. Do you think making mistakes is a good way to learn English? Why or why not?</p> <p>4. How can positive thinking help you speak English better?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practicing English with friends helps me feel less anxious. (25) • Making mistakes helps me improve my English speaking skills. (25) • Positive feedback from the teacher helps me feel more confident. (25) • I feel more comfortable speaking English in small groups. (25) 	Approximately 90 %
4	<p>Classroom Environment</p> <p>1. How can teachers help students feel more comfortable speaking English?</p> <p>2. What kind of classroom makes you feel less afraid to speak?</p> <p>3. Do you prefer speaking in pairs, small groups, or in front of the class? Why?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My classroom environment makes me feel safe to speak English. (33) • The teacher encourages students to speak without fear of mistakes. (33) • Pair or group work reduces my speaking anxiety. (34) 	Approximately 65 %
5	<p>Optional Open-Ended Questions</p> <p>1. What advice would you give to a student who is afraid of speaking English?</p> <p>2. What is one thing you can do this week to improve your confidence in speaking English?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I want to improve my English-speaking confidence. (33) • I try to speak English even when I feel nervous. (33) • I believe I can overcome my fear of speaking English. (34) 	Approximately 85%
	<p>The study aims to identify and clarify students' interest in overcoming fear and anxiety related to communication.</p> <p>Total scores of students</p>	Evaluating students' knowledge in relation to the given questions.	Approximately 83%

Teachers' attitudes and opinions play a crucial role in reducing students' fear and anxiety, particularly in foreign language learning contexts. Supportive and positive teacher attitudes help create a safe and encouraging classroom environment where students feel comfortable expressing themselves without fear of negative evaluation. Teachers who demonstrate patience, empathy, and understanding toward learners' difficulties can significantly lower anxiety levels. Additionally, the use of constructive feedback, error-

tolerant practices, and communicative activities such as pair and group work contributes to building students' confidence and willingness to participate. Therefore, teachers' awareness of students' emotional needs is essential for minimizing fear and anxiety and promoting effective learning.

Conclusion. Speaking anxiety is a significant factor that can hinder learners' oral communication skills and overall language development in EFL contexts. This study demonstrated that multiple factors, including age of L2 onset, practice outside the classroom, classroom environment, peer influence, and individual confidence levels, contribute to the intensity of speaking anxiety. By implementing targeted classroom strategies—such as pair and group work, anxiety management techniques, communicative and enjoyable activities, and fostering learner autonomy—teachers can effectively reduce anxiety and create a supportive environment that encourages active participation.

The findings suggest that reducing speaking anxiety not only improves learners' confidence and willingness to communicate but also enhances their fluency and overall oral performance. Encouraging regular practice, providing constructive feedback, and gradually increasing the complexity of speaking tasks are essential components of a comprehensive approach. Ultimately, addressing speaking anxiety is crucial for fostering meaningful, learner-centered, and effective language instruction, enabling students to achieve greater proficiency and success in English communication.

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