



**TEACHER EVALUATIVE DISCOURSE AND SPEAKING
ANXIETY IN ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES (ESP): A CRITICAL
PERSPECTIVE ON PROFESSIONAL FACE-THREAT AMONG
PHILOLOGY UNDERGRADUATES**

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Abstract: *The role of teacher evaluative discourse in shaping students' emotional and academic experiences has received increasing attention in language education research. In English for Specific Purposes (ESP) contexts, where communicative competence is closely linked to professional identity, evaluative practices carry heightened significance. This paper offers a critical examination of how traditional feedback practices in ESP classrooms may contribute to speaking anxiety by reinforcing professional face-threat among philology undergraduates. Drawing on critical pedagogy, sociolinguistic theory, and affective approaches to language learning, the study interrogates the power dynamics embedded in teacher-student interactions. It argues that conventional evaluative discourse often privileges authority, correctness, and performance, thereby marginalizing student voice and increasing anxiety. The paper advocates for a shift toward dialogic, student-*



centered, and reflective evaluative practices that acknowledge learners as active participants in meaning-making.

Keywords: *evaluative discourse, speaking anxiety, ESP, professional face-threat, philology undergraduates, critical pedagogy, feedback practices*

1. Introduction

Language classrooms are not neutral spaces; they are socially constructed environments shaped by institutional expectations, cultural values, and interpersonal power relations. In English for Specific Purposes (ESP) education, these dynamics become especially significant because language learning is directly connected to students' future professional roles. For philology undergraduates, classroom interaction is not only a process of linguistic development but also a process of identity formation in which students negotiate their future professional selves through language use.

Within this context, teacher evaluative discourse occupies a central pedagogical role. Through evaluative practices, teachers establish standards of correctness, determine acceptable forms of communication, and regulate classroom participation. Evaluation therefore extends beyond the correction of linguistic errors; it becomes a socially meaningful act that influences learners' confidence, self-perception, and willingness to communicate.

Traditional approaches to classroom evaluation often emphasize grammatical accuracy, fluency, and adherence to standardized norms. While these practices are generally intended to improve learners' competence, they may also produce unintended emotional consequences. In many ESP classrooms, corrective feedback is delivered through authoritative and performance-oriented discourse that positions students as deficient language users rather than developing professionals. Such interactions may intensify speaking anxiety, particularly when students perceive evaluation as a threat to their academic and professional identity.

Research on foreign language anxiety has consistently demonstrated that fear of negative evaluation is one of the most influential factors affecting oral participation and communicative performance. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986)



identified communication apprehension and evaluation anxiety as central dimensions of foreign language classroom anxiety. Subsequent studies have further emphasized the relationship between evaluative classroom practices and learners' emotional well-being (Horwitz, 2010; Liu, 2011; Gao, 2022). In ESP settings, this relationship becomes more complex because students associate language competence with employability, expertise, and professional legitimacy.

This paper critically examines the relationship between teacher evaluative discourse and speaking anxiety among philology undergraduates in ESP classrooms. Specifically, it explores how traditional feedback practices may reinforce professional face-threat and contribute to silence, self-monitoring, and reduced participation. Drawing on critical pedagogy, face theory, and affective language learning, the study seeks to challenge dominant assumptions about evaluation and propose more dialogic and student-centered alternatives.

The paper argues that evaluation should not function merely as a mechanism of control and correction. Instead, it should be reconceptualized as a collaborative, reflective, and empowering process that supports learner agency and emotional security. By transforming evaluative discourse, ESP educators can create learning environments that foster both communicative competence and psychological well-being.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Speaking Anxiety in Language Learning

Speaking anxiety has long been recognized as one of the most significant affective barriers in second and foreign language acquisition. It refers to feelings of tension, nervousness, apprehension, and fear associated with oral communication in a target language. According to Horwitz et al. (1986), foreign language anxiety is a situation-specific form of anxiety rooted in self-perceptions, beliefs, and emotional reactions connected to classroom language learning.

Among the different language skills, speaking is frequently identified as the most anxiety-provoking because it requires immediate performance and public exposure. Learners often fear making mistakes, being negatively evaluated, or



appearing incompetent in front of teachers and peers. Liu (2011) found that students experiencing high levels of speaking anxiety tend to avoid participation, remain silent during discussions, and engage in excessive self-monitoring during speech production.

In ESP classrooms, speaking anxiety is particularly pronounced because communication is linked to specialized and professional contexts. Students are expected not only to demonstrate linguistic competence but also to perform professionally appropriate identities. Čepon (2016) argues that ESP learners frequently experience pressure to appear knowledgeable and competent within discipline-specific communicative situations. Consequently, classroom speaking becomes associated with professional self-worth rather than merely language practice.

2.2 Teacher Evaluative Discourse

Teacher evaluative discourse refers to the language teachers use to assess, comment on, and respond to student performance. This includes explicit correction, praise, criticism, questioning patterns, and non-verbal evaluative signals. Evaluation is an unavoidable component of educational practice; however, its form and delivery significantly shape classroom relationships and emotional climates.

Traditional evaluative discourse is often grounded in transmission-oriented models of education in which teachers function as authorities responsible for identifying errors and enforcing standards. Such discourse typically emphasizes correctness, efficiency, and compliance. Common evaluative expressions include direct correction, interruption, and judgment-oriented comments such as “incorrect,” “not acceptable,” or “you should know this already.”

2.3 Face Theory and Professional Face-Threat

Face theory provides an important framework for understanding the interpersonal dimensions of classroom evaluation. Originally developed by Brown and Levinson (1987), the concept of “face” refers to an individual’s public self-image and desire for social approval. Face-threatening acts occur when interactions challenge or undermine a person’s sense of competence, dignity, or social value.



In language classrooms, corrective feedback may function as a face-threatening act when students perceive evaluation as criticism of their abilities or identity. Łuszczynska (2019) notes that language learning involves continuous exposure to potential embarrassment because learners must publicly perform incomplete linguistic competence.

In ESP contexts, face-threat acquires a professional dimension. Philology undergraduates often view themselves as future teachers, translators, linguists, or communication specialists. Consequently, criticism of their speaking ability may be interpreted not only as evidence of linguistic deficiency but also as a sign of professional inadequacy. This creates a conflict between the learner identity (“I am still developing”) and the professional identity (“I should already be competent”).

2.4 Critical Pedagogy and Evaluation

Critical pedagogy challenges traditional authoritarian models of education by emphasizing dialogue, empowerment, and learner agency. Scholars such as Paulo Freire argue that education should not reproduce hierarchical power relations but instead promote critical reflection and collaborative knowledge construction.

From a critical pedagogical perspective, evaluative discourse should not position students as passive recipients of judgment. Rather, learners should participate actively in the assessment process through reflection, dialogue, and co-construction of meaning. This approach recognizes that language learning is not simply the acquisition of correct forms but also the development of voice, identity, and social participation.

Critical pedagogy also draws attention to the emotional dimensions of classroom interaction. Anxiety, silence, and withdrawal are not viewed merely as individual psychological problems but as socially produced responses to unequal communicative conditions. Therefore, transforming evaluative discourse requires educators to reconsider not only feedback techniques but also broader assumptions about authority, participation, and success in language education.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Approach



This study adopts a critical qualitative research approach informed by critical pedagogy and discourse analysis. Rather than measuring anxiety quantitatively, the study seeks to examine how evaluative discourse constructs power relations and influences students' emotional experiences in ESP classrooms.

The qualitative orientation allows for an in-depth exploration of subjective perceptions, interactional patterns, and identity-related tensions. The study focuses on understanding how students interpret teacher feedback and how these interpretations shape speaking behavior and professional self-perception.

3.2 Data Sources

The analysis draws on multiple qualitative data sources:

- * Classroom discourse samples from ESP speaking activities
- * Student reflective narratives
- * Teacher self-reflection journals
- * Focus group discussions with philology undergraduates

These data sources provide insights into both observable classroom practices and participants' emotional interpretations of evaluative interactions.

3.3 Analytical Framework

The study integrates three interconnected theoretical perspectives:

1. Critical Pedagogy

Used to examine authority relations and classroom power structures.

2. Face Theory

Applied to analyze how evaluation affects students' self-image and professional identity.

3. Affective Language Learning

Used to interpret emotional responses such as anxiety, fear, and self-monitoring.

Discourse analysis focused on:

- * Authority positioning
- * Feedback framing
- * Participation patterns



- * Emotional responses
- * Student agency in evaluative interactions

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Evaluative Discourse as a Mechanism of Power

The findings indicate that traditional evaluative discourse frequently reinforces hierarchical teacher-student relationships. Teachers are positioned as authoritative experts who possess legitimate knowledge, while students occupy subordinate roles characterized by compliance and dependence.

Common evaluative patterns included:

- * Directive language (“This is wrong”)
- * Immediate interruption and correction
- * Limited negotiation of meaning
- * Teacher-dominated interaction

These practices produced a largely unidirectional communicative environment in which students had minimal opportunity to explain their linguistic choices or participate in evaluative dialogue.

From a critical perspective, such interactions function as mechanisms of institutional control. Evaluation becomes a tool for regulating acceptable language behavior rather than facilitating collaborative learning. Students consequently perceive speaking tasks as tests of competence rather than opportunities for experimentation and development.

4.2 Marginalization of Student Voice

A major theme emerging from the analysis was the marginalization of student voice during evaluative interactions. Students reported that feedback often focused exclusively on errors without acknowledging communicative intention, creativity, or effort.

Many participants expressed the feeling that their perspectives were secondary to teacher judgment. They rarely had opportunities to reflect on their learning processes or explain difficulties encountered during speaking tasks.



4.3 Professional Face-Threat and Identity Conflict

The concept of professional face-threat emerged as one of the central findings of the study. Participants frequently interpreted corrective feedback as a judgment of their future professional competence rather than merely their current linguistic performance.

This perception was particularly strong among students preparing for careers in teaching, translation, and academic communication. Comments such as “You should already know this” or “A philology student must speak accurately” were experienced as attacks on professional identity.

Students described an ongoing tension between two identities:

- * “I am still learning”
- * “I am expected to be professionally competent”

This identity conflict generated emotional responses including:

- * Shame
- * Self-consciousness
- * Fear of embarrassment
- * Impostor feelings
- * Reduced confidence

Professional face-threat therefore extends beyond temporary discomfort. It affects how students perceive themselves as future professionals and shapes their willingness to engage in communicative activities.

4.4 Emotional Consequences of Traditional Feedback

[07.05.2026 11:04] my scientific research: The findings demonstrate that evaluative discourse has significant emotional consequences for learners. Repeated exposure to correction-focused feedback contributed to several anxiety-related behaviors:

Anxiety and Fear of Mistakes

Students became highly sensitive to potential errors and anticipated criticism before speaking.

Silence and Withdrawal



Many participants avoided volunteering answers or participating in discussions to minimize evaluative exposure.

Over-Monitoring

Students reported excessive focus on grammatical correctness during speech production, which disrupted fluency and spontaneity.

Loss of Motivation

Some participants gradually disengaged from classroom interaction because speaking became associated with stress and inadequacy.

Importantly, these emotional effects were cumulative. Isolated corrective comments were not necessarily harmful; however, repeated exposure to face-threatening evaluative discourse contributed to long-term communicative insecurity.

5. Conclusion

This study has critically examined the relationship between teacher evaluative discourse and speaking anxiety in ESP classrooms among philology undergraduates. The findings suggest that traditional correction-oriented feedback practices often reinforce hierarchical power relations and contribute to professional face-threat.

In ESP contexts, language performance is closely connected to professional identity. As a result, negative evaluation may be interpreted not simply as linguistic correction but as evidence of personal and professional inadequacy. Such experiences contribute to anxiety, silence, self-monitoring, and reduced participation.

The study argues for a reconceptualization of evaluation as a dialogic, reflective, and collaborative process. By incorporating principles of critical pedagogy, educators can create learning environments that support both communicative competence and emotional well-being.

Reducing speaking anxiety is therefore not only a psychological issue but also a pedagogical and social one. Transforming evaluative discourse requires educators to move beyond authority-centered models toward more inclusive and participatory approaches that recognize students as active contributors to learning.



Ultimately, when evaluation becomes a tool for growth rather than control, ESP classrooms can foster confidence, agency, and authentic professional development.

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