SPEAKING ANXIETY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract

Speaking anxiety remains one of the most significant psychological barriers in foreign language learning, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. Despite possessing adequate grammatical knowledge, many learners struggle to express themselves orally due to fear of negative evaluation, low self-confidence, and classroom-related stress. This article examines the psychological factors underlying speaking anxiety and their impact on communicative competence. Drawing on sociocultural theory, affective filter hypothesis, and contemporary research on foreign language anxiety, the study analyzes how emotional, cognitive, and social variables influence oral performance. The paper further explores pedagogical strategies for reducing anxiety through scaffolding, supportive classroom environments, task-based interaction, and formative assessment. The findings suggest that addressing psychological dimensions is essential for developing fluency, learner autonomy, and communicative effectiveness in EFL classrooms.

Key words: speaking anxiety, foreign language anxiety, affective factors, communicative competence, self-confidence, scaffolding, classroom environment, EFL learners, psychological barriers, motivation.

Introduction. Oral communication is widely recognized as a central goal of foreign language education. However, for many learners, speaking in a second or foreign language is the most anxiety-provoking activity in the classroom. While students may demonstrate competence in grammar, reading, and writing, they frequently hesitate when required to speak spontaneously. This discrepancy highlights the importance of examining psychological dimensions of language acquisition.

Foreign language anxiety has been conceptualized as a situation-specific form of anxiety related to language learning contexts. According to Horwitz, Elaine K. and colleagues, foreign language anxiety includes communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Their foundational work, *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety*, remains central to understanding affective barriers in language education.

In addition, Stephen Krashen introduced the Affective Filter Hypothesis, suggesting that emotional variables such as anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence can either facilitate or block language acquisition. When anxiety levels are high, learners' "affective filter" prevents input from being effectively processed.

From a sociocultural perspective, Lev Vygotsky emphasized the role of social interaction and supportive scaffolding in cognitive development. His work, presented in Mind in Society, suggests that learners perform better within collaborative and psychologically safe environments.

This article explores the psychological factors contributing to speaking anxiety and proposes pedagogical strategies to mitigate its negative effects in EFL contexts.

Conceptualizing Speaking Anxiety

Speaking anxiety refers to feelings of tension, nervousness, and fear that arise during oral communication in a foreign language. It is not merely general nervousness but a specific reaction linked to linguistic performance.

Three core components are commonly identified:

Communication Apprehension – fear of speaking in front of others.

Fear of Negative Evaluation – concern about being judged by teachers or peers.

Test Anxiety – stress related to performance evaluation.

These components often interact, creating a cycle where anxiety reduces performance quality, which in turn increases anxiety.

Psychological Factors Influencing Speaking Anxiety

Self-Confidence and Self-Efficacy. Learners with low self-confidence are more likely to avoid participation. Perceived linguistic inadequacy leads to hesitation and reduced

fluency. When students believe they cannot express ideas accurately, they may prefer silence to potential embarrassment.

Perfectionism. Some learners fear making grammatical or pronunciation errors. In highly accuracy-focused educational systems, this fear intensifies. Excessive correction may unintentionally reinforce anxiety.

Classroom Climate. Teacher behavior, peer attitudes, and classroom atmosphere significantly influence anxiety levels. Supportive and non-judgmental environments reduce emotional tension, whereas competitive or overly critical settings heighten stress.

Cultural Factors. In some educational contexts, students are accustomed to teacher-centered instruction and limited oral participation. Speaking publicly may be culturally associated with risk-taking or potential loss of face, which increases anxiety.

Cognitive and Emotional Impact on Performance

High anxiety affects cognitive processing in several ways:

— Reduced working memory capacity

— Difficulty retrieving vocabulary

— Increased hesitation and pauses

— Over-monitoring of grammatical accuracy

As a result, learners may appear less proficient than they actually are. Emotional stress interferes with automatic language processing, limiting fluency development.

Pedagogical Strategies to Reduce Speaking Anxiety

Scaffolding and Gradual Exposure.

Drawing from sociocultural theory, teachers can implement structured support. Activities may begin with pair work, move to small groups, and gradually progress to whole-class presentations. Sentence starters and guided prompts provide linguistic security.

Task-Based Interaction

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) encourages meaningful communication rather than error-free production. Authentic tasks shift focus from linguistic form to message content, reducing performance pressure.

Positive Error Treatment

Errors should be viewed as natural steps in language development. Delayed correction and constructive feedback prevent learners from associating speaking with humiliation.

Building Self-Efficacy

Encouraging reflection on progress and celebrating small achievements enhances learner confidence. Peer support and collaborative learning further strengthen psychological safety.

Formative Assessment

Low-stakes assessment reduces test-related anxiety. Continuous feedback fosters improvement without excessive evaluative pressure.

The Role of the Teacher

Teachers play a central role in managing classroom emotions. Their attitudes toward mistakes, encouragement style, and interaction patterns influence students' psychological well-being.

An effective language teacher:

— Creates a safe communicative environment

— Encourages risk-taking

— Balances accuracy and fluency

— Demonstrates empathy and patience

Human support remains indispensable in addressing emotional dimensions of learning.

Conclusion.

Speaking anxiety constitutes a significant psychological barrier in foreign language education. Emotional, cognitive, social, and cultural factors interact to influence learners' oral performance. High anxiety restricts fluency, reduces participation, and impedes communicative competence.

However, through supportive classroom environments, scaffolding techniques, task-based interaction, and positive feedback strategies, educators can substantially reduce

anxiety levels. Addressing affective factors is not secondary to linguistic instruction—it is fundamental to successful language acquisition.

Future research should further investigate long-term effects of anxiety-reduction strategies and explore culturally responsive pedagogical approaches. Ultimately, fostering emotional safety in the classroom enables learners to transform passive linguistic knowledge into confident communicative ability.

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