

DO YOU SPEAK ENGLISH? LANGUAGE ANXIETY IN THE SPEAKING SKILL

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Abstract: *The literature suggests that the speaking skill is extremely anxiety-provoking in many languages, therefore students are hindered from speaking so very often. There are no doubt psychological factors that hinder students from speaking any foreign language, and these apply to the English language as well. That is why teachers' efforts should be focused on developing students' ability to speak, giving them more opportunities to express themselves by providing speaking activities as many as possible. The speaking skill, one of the four skills when learning a language, is considered a great challenge for all language learners, and arouses much more anxiety than the other skills. The aim of this paper is to bring into discussion the factors that lead to anxiety, and some possible solutions to overcome them.*

Key words: *psychological factors, speaking skill, language anxiety, fears, motivation.*

The process of learning a foreign language is long and complex and significantly differs from any other educational subject. Its specificity is determined by the fact that it is characterized by the features inherent to the language as a sign system. Language learning is not at all a set of easy steps that you follow and at the end of the road you simply say “*that's it!*”. Many variables are involved in the acquisition process. In order to send and receive messages in a second language, you, as a person, must involve physically, intellectually and emotionally. There is a continuous struggle to reach beyond the boundaries of your first language and into a new one, a new way of thinking and feeling, a totally new culture. A foreign language is a social-historical product in which are reflected the respective nation's history, culture and traditions. We live in an era of globalization, therefore the acquisition of a foreign language serves students well in the today's world and opens the door to different job opportunities within the global economy. Kachru and Smith [1] stated that “*in the era of globalization and rapid diffusion of knowledge, all the nations are aware of the need to prepare their citizens to perform in ways that would ensure their prosperity and eminence in the world. In order to be competitive, they have to be able to function well in multinational industrial enterprises, international trade, diplomacy, and scientific technological areas of expertise. They have to be innovative and contribute to the knowledge-based of the world. In order to achieve these goals, they need to be able to utilize the most widely used medium, English.*”

Many students all over the world and, in Romania as well, learn English for various purposes, therefore English has become an important part of their day- to- day activities. When acquiring any new language, English included, one has to face

the four important skills: listening, reading, speaking and writing. One of the productive skills is speaking, which has been defined in various ways by experts all over the world. According to McKay [2] “*in language use situations, when people speak, it is not the case that they simply open their mouths and speak the words and sentences; when people speak, they are doing so in a cultural context, they are speaking to another person or persons (perhaps friends, a teacher or a tester) who bring with them a relative degree of status and power and they are doing so in order to meet the purpose required of the interaction, which may be a conversation, or a task that needs completing.*”

Regrettably, most of those students always show increased levels of anxieties when it comes to use the target language for the oral communicative purposes. Those levels can appear due to the factors as being called by the teacher to present something in front of the class, to respond orally to some questions or to practice role plays. These lead us to an issue that one should be aware of, when acquiring a foreign language.

MacIntyre and Gardener [3] define foreign language anxiety (or xenoglossophobia) as “*the feeling of unease, worry, nervousness and apprehension experienced when learning or using a second or foreign language. These feelings may stem from any second language context whether associated with the productive skills of speaking and writing, or the receptive skills of reading and listening.*” Foreign language anxiety is a form of what psychologists describe as *specific anxiety reaction*. Some individuals are more predisposed to anxiety than others, and may feel anxious in a wide variety of situations. Foreign language anxiety, however, is situation specific and so can also affect individuals who are not characteristically anxious in other situations.

Among the four skills involved in learning a language, listening and speaking are generally described as the most anxiety provoking of foreign language activities. MacIntyre and Gardner [4] separate the main causes of foreign language anxiety into three distinct components: *communicative apprehension*, *test anxiety* and *fear of negative evaluation*. Communication apprehension is the anxiety experienced when speaking to or listening to other individuals. Test-anxiety is a form of performance anxiety associated with the fear of doing badly, or indeed failing altogether. Fear of negative evaluation is the anxiety associated with the learner's perception of how other onlookers (instructors, classmates or others) may negatively view their language ability.

Sparks and Ganschow [5] drew attention to the fact that anxiety could either be a cause of poor language learning or a result of poor language learning. Their explanation is that a student can experience test anxiety if he is unable to study as required before a language examination. In this case anxiety could be perceived as a result. In contrast, anxiety becomes a cause of poor language learning if the student is unable to competently learn the target language.

Horwitz & Horwitz [6] show that the effects of this type of anxiety are obviously evident in the foreign language classroom, being a strong indicator of the academic performance. Anxiety is found to have a detrimental effect on students' confidence, self-esteem and level of participation. Horwitz [7] also asserts that one third of all foreign language learners experience some level of language anxiety. Taking into account all the above statements, we dare say that one of the big issues that affect students' English speaking practices is the psychological barrier. A lot of studies revealed that psychological factors, such as: fear of making mistakes, shyness, lack of confidence and motivation prevent students from speaking during the English classes. To all these we add the anxiety we already mentioned in the paragraphs above. Many researchers, such as Brown [8] or Gebhard [9] consider that anxiety and shyness are the main causes of the students' reluctance to speak.

Along the years, I have observed my students in class and realized that, even if they have good level in grammar and vocabulary, they have difficulties in using the language to speak. Therefore, we come to the conclusion that there is a question of psychology, meaning their beliefs, their confidence, and their self-esteem. Most of them have lack of motivation or weak motivation and never develop confidence in themselves. They are afraid of making mistakes which is often caused by their fear of being laughed at by their

peers. Some are shy; some hesitate just because they do not feel secure while using the target language in order to communicate.

Anxious learners think that their language skills, especially the speaking skill, are weaker than their peers. [10] Additionally, Kitano [11] states that *“speaking skill is the first thing that learners compare with that of peers, teachers and native speakers”*. Furthermore, the evaluation or criticisms from peers is also a major cause of anxiety, Conway [12] added.

Since some of the learners do not feel able to speak English in a natural way and they are always thinking about how to pronounce words correctly or how to use correct grammar structures, it is very difficult to feel confident. Some other learners consider that language is complicated and difficult, and they already put this psychological barrier and do not make any effort to improve themselves and deny their abilities to learn that language. To sum up, for most of the English learners the problems they complain about are almost the same: being worried of making mistakes, being nervous or anxious, feeling shy, uncomfortable and frustrated while speaking and interacting with each other, in one word, while performing the speaking skill.

All these problems mentioned above indicate nothing but the psychological factors that hinder students from practicing their speaking in the English class and in other English –speaking environments as well.

How to overcome these fears? It is not a simple question, therefore the answer is not simple either. Richard [13] asserts that, in the teaching of English, speaking activity should focus on how to assist students to use and to communicate in English. He further asserts that most students often evaluate their success in language learning as well as the effectiveness of their English course on the basis on how much they feel they have improved in their speaking proficiency.

As Pinter [14] argues, that is why teachers' efforts must be focused on developing students' ability to speak since learning to speak is considered as the greatest challenge for all language learners. In this sense, Brown [15] adds that teachers should give more opportunities to their students to express themselves by providing them with speaking activities that enable them to speak English in real-life situations.

All these indicate the importance of the fact that teachers should help students reduce those feelings in order to maximize their learning to speak in English. Therefore, teachers should be more aware of their students' barrier to speak during the English class and find the possible solutions to overcome those psychological factors. Possible solutions come, on one hand, from the

students themselves: they need to stop thinking a lot about mistakes, about how difficult the language is, or about what others think about their performance in English speaking. They should practice the language as much as they can, without giving too much importance to mistakes. People learn from mistakes, no one is perfect, perfection is impossible, and they should think that mistakes are not a bad or a negative thing. As Sousa [16] cited “*people learn from their mistakes, so they should think of them as useful and positive*”.

Furthermore, students should stop underestimating themselves and another possible solution that students believe in, and is worth considering, is trying to motivate them to be more confident when speaking English. They should start speaking and not stop, as the psychological danger of not doing it is that the longer they wait to start speaking the harder it will get to really start, and in the end it becomes a psychological issue more than a linguistic one. And the cause is clear: *paralysis by analysis*. Learning it, but not using it; having too many words and grammar rules in their head, but not having that rapid ability to pull out appropriate language on demand.

On the other hand, teachers should come with solutions in order to make students to overcome these psychological barriers. Classroom activities have always caused anxiety. As we already

presume, many anxious students fear making mistakes in pronunciation in front of their peers. Furthermore, being in the position of delivering oral presentations is the most anxiety provoking classroom activity which makes the classroom environment more formal and stressful for the learners, Koch and Terrell [17] state.

According to Hashemi and Abbasi [18], the more friendly and informal the language classroom environment, the less it is likely to be anxiety provoking. They state that “*formal language classroom setting is a major source of stress and anxiety because of its demand to be more correct and clearer in using the target language.*” However, the same researches reported language learners to be less anxious and stressful in environments which emphasize collaborative activities among the teachers and the students. We come to the conclusion that motivating students to speak in English, to some extent encourages them to actively participate in the process of speaking within the class environment. All of these lay forward the importance of generating a supporting learning atmosphere in the classroom.

To sum up, we dare launch a piece of advice: if you deny yourself to speak, think of all mistakes you will never make!

“*By seeking and blundering we learn*”
(Johann Wolfgang von Goethe)

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