

# Causes of Beginners' Oral Anxiety and its Mitigation Strategies

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## Abstract

Learners' anxiety has drawn widespread attention in the field of foreign language teaching and learning. Among the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, speaking is considered the most anxiety-inducing skill for learners. This article explores the causes of oral English anxiety: a) learners' fear of negative evaluation; b) poor English efficiency; c) a tense atmosphere for practicing oral English. The article also provides some measures to alleviate students' oral anxiety, including a) providing positive feedback; b) Fully utilizing multimedia to achieve effective multimodal teaching and form effective classroom interaction; c) Adopting group cooperative learning to create a relaxed classroom atmosphere and create more opportunities for students to use language, hoping to provide some inspiration for foreign language teaching.

## Keywords

Oral English Anxiety; Causes; Measures.

## 1. Introduction

The cultivation of communicative competence is increasingly emphasized in China's foreign language education. However, in order to meet parents', teachers', and others' expectations in exam-oriented contexts, many foreign language learners learn English to pass exams but rarely speak it (Kim, 2021). As many of these second language learners do not speak English well, they often do not enjoy learning the language, lack confidence, and feel anxious or reluctant to speak English (Kiaer et al., 2021). In China, oral English anxiety has always been a common problem among English learners. A survey on university students in China shows that among the four dimensions of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, the level of students' speaking anxiety is the highest (Guo & Xu, 2014). Wang (2022) also made a similar discovery that most of the undergraduates experience a high level of oral English anxiety, due to lack of self-confidence, test anxiety, communicative apprehension, and insufficient language competence. So, as an important factor affecting the development of students' communicative competence, oral English anxiety is worth exploring and researching.

## 2. Problem Identification

### 2.1. Foreign Language Anxiety

Foreign language anxiety, a situation-specific construct, is defined as "the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language" (MacIntyre, 1999). For example, competent EFL speakers suddenly asked a question by an English professor may become anxious or even unable to speak in English. Research shows that FLA consists of three parts: communication anxiety, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. FLA can impact any activity in the L2 classroom, but it is especially prevalent during speaking activities (Horwitz et al., 1986).

#### 2.1.1. Communication Anxiety

According to McCroskey (1978), communication anxiety refers to the level of fear or apprehension an individual experiences in real or expected communication with others. He

pointed out that the typical behavior pattern of communication anxiety is communication avoidance and communication withdrawal. Compared to individuals without anxiety, individuals with communication apprehension appear more reluctant to engage in social interactions with others.

Anxiety is closely related to the students' motivational regulations. Students reporting higher ideal second language self or lower ought-to second language self had lower L2 communication anxiety (Papi, 2010; Lee & Chiu, 2023). Hu (2016) conducted a survey on students from a university in China and found that there is a correlation between foreign language anxiety and willingness to communicate. In the process of language learning, learners' poor language abilities, unfamiliarity among classmates, and low adaptation to English classroom can all lead to communication anxiety, thereby lowering their willingness to communicate and opportunities to use a second language.

## **2.2. The Causes of Learners' Oral English Anxiety**

### **2.2.1. Fear of Negative Evaluation**

Fear of negative evaluation refers to the fear of being evaluated by others, the distress caused by negative evaluations, and the expectation that others may give oneself negative evaluations. In foreign language classrooms, students will continuously receive evaluations from teachers and are always worried about negative evaluations. A study on students from a certain university showed a positive correlation between negative evaluations and classroom anxiety. The more intensive the fear of negative evaluations is, the more severe the anxiety. For students with lower English proficiency, the fear of negative evaluation shows a strong correlation with classroom anxiety (Yan, 2010). Anxious students excessively pursue proficiency in foreign language use, thus have little self-awareness in answering questions and participating in classroom activities, tend to avoid complex sentence structures, or avoid speaking English.

### **2.2.2. Poor English Proficiency**

This self-awareness of personal language ability is also one of the reasons for oral English anxiety. Hembree (1988) studied the relationship between English proficiency and anxiety and concluded that the higher a students' language proficiency, the lower their level of anxiety. The more students perceive their language proficiency to be low, the more likely they are to develop language anxiety. A study targeting tertiary-level EFL students has shown that students' levels of EFL spoken proficiency are moderately negatively correlated with their level of anxiety (Tsang, 2022). Thus, there is the potential value of improving spoken proficiency in mitigating learners' oral English anxiety.

### **2.2.3. A Tense Atmosphere for Oral Practice**

Unlike written language, oral communication occurs instantly and speakers do not have much time to prepare their words. Thus, a relaxed and natural classroom atmosphere is important for students practicing their oral English. However, the environment and atmosphere for oral practice are usually tense in the classroom. When speaking, students need to face dozens of classmates in the entire class, which can easily cause anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and a sense of tension (Zhang, 2007).

## **3. Measures to Overcome Oral English Anxiety**

### **3.1. Providing Positive Feedback**

Teachers' feedback plays a guiding role in promoting the development of students' language abilities. Feedback objectively reflects the true situation of students and should be adjusted according to their constantly changing needs, while providing constructive advice to students (Dong, et al., 2021). Positive and evaluative feedback from teachers can enhance students'

confidence in second language communication, cultivate a positive attitude towards foreign language learning, and enhance their motivation for second language communication (Feng, 2019). In order to reduce students' oral anxiety, teachers should encourage students to express their opinions, and provide positive and constructive feedback in a timely manner. For learning progress, it is necessary to give students clear and specific affirmation, enhance their learning motivation and confidence.

### **3.2. Fully Utilizing Multimedia to Achieve Effective Multimodal Teaching and Form Effective Classroom Interaction**

The multimodal teaching design of listening and speaking classes can to some extent alleviate students' oral anxiety (Rui & Ji, 2017). Teachers can make full use of multimedia to design rich classroom activities, enabling students to fully mobilize various senses such as auditory, visual, and tactile senses for information input, and use oral, written, video and audio modes for information output, thus forming effective classroom interaction.

To achieve effective multimodal classroom teaching, teachers need to pay attention to the following points: (a) assigning tasks before class, allowing students to preview and accumulate background language knowledge, so that they have something to say in the classroom. (b) carefully designing activities for each class, highlighting the coordinated operation of various modalities, and making oral activities compact and coherent. Besides, arranging the time of each activity to avoid problems such as lack of concentration and dull classroom due to unreasonable scheduling of each stage.

### **3.3. Adopting Group Cooperative Learning to Create a Relaxed Classroom Atmosphere and Create more Opportunities for Students to Use Language**

Group cooperative learning enhances communication among students and can effectively create a relaxed atmosphere emotionally to stimulate their learning motivation, thereby alleviating their anxiety (Su, 2012). Liu (2011) pointed out that there are two reasons why group activities can alleviate students' anxiety. Firstly, cooperation and mutual assistance enable group members to share individual pressure; The second is that group activities can provide students with preparation time to complete communicative task drills. In addition, in group cooperative learning students will not be discouraged by the teacher's direct language correction, and the overall classroom atmosphere is relaxed and pleasant, which is greatly beneficial for students' English-speaking practice.

When organizing group cooperative learning, firstly, teachers should group students reasonably based on their personality, attitude, learning ability, and interests, avoiding significant differences within and between groups, which may damage students' self-esteem. Secondly, teachers should also clarify the responsibilities of each group member, enabling every student to receive sufficient exercise during the activity. In addition, teachers are supposed to play a role of guide, teaching students cooperative skills, guiding them to conduct group activities, timely identifying problems in the group, and solving them properly.

## **4. Conclusion**

Anxiety seriously hinders the improvement of students' oral proficiency (Yang, 2005). Fear of negative evaluation, self-awareness of personal language ability, and tense atmosphere are three causes of learners' oral English anxiety. Therefore, special attention should be paid to students' oral anxiety in English teaching. Teachers should provide constructive and positive feedback, as well as make full use of multimedia, to enhance students' confidence and provide them with opportunities to use English. In addition, group cooperative learning should also be utilized reasonably to help students maximize their opportunities for oral expression in English

speaking classes, enhance their learning enthusiasm and initiative, and reduce their foreign language anxiety.

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