

OVERCOMING THE FEAR OF SPEAKING: THE SILENT STRUGGLE OF ADULT LEARNERS

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Abstract: Many adult English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners experience significant anxiety when speaking, which prevents them from participating fully in communicative activities. This paper examines the psychological, social, and linguistic causes of speaking anxiety in adult learners and highlights classroom strategies that can reduce fear and build confidence. Drawing on both classical theories and recent studies, the paper argues that affective factors such as low self-esteem, fear of negative evaluation, and limited linguistic competence can hinder oral communication. The paper concludes with practical recommendations to create supportive speaking environments that promote confidence, autonomy, and meaningful interaction.

Keywords: speaking anxiety, adult learners, EFL, communication, confidence, linguistic competence, self-esteem, evaluation, oral communication.

Introduction

Speaking is one of the most challenging skills for adult EFL learners, as it requires real-time processing of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation while engaging with listeners. Unlike children, adult learners often carry psychological barriers that influence their performance. Many fear embarrassment, judgment, or making mistakes in front of others. As the scientists Horwitz and Cope (1986) observed, speaking anxiety is a common and powerful affective barrier in second language learning. Consequently, overcoming speaking fear is essential for communicative competence and successful language development.

Literature Review

The affective domain plays a crucial role in language learning. Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis argues that negative emotions—such as anxiety and fear—can block language intake and limit speaking performance (Krashen, 1982). Horwitz et al. (1986) later defined foreign language anxiety as a distinct and measurable form of situational anxiety. Similarly, Dornyei (2005) emphasized motivation and self-beliefs as central to learners' success.

Recent research continues to support these findings. Studies show that speaking anxiety can reduce fluency, limit participation, and cause avoidance behavior in adult learners (Liu & Jackson, 2020; Zhang, 2022). Additionally, adults tend to compare themselves with more proficient speakers, which intensifies feelings of inadequacy (Mahmood & Iqbal, 2019). Social pressure, insufficient vocabulary, and pronunciation insecurity are among the most cited triggers in modern EFL classrooms.

Discussion and Analysis

Adult learners' fear of speaking stems from both internal and external sources. Internally, perfectionism, self-criticism, and fear of negative evaluation are common psychological barriers. Externally, unsupportive classroom environments or teacher-centered methods can heighten anxiety. Many adults also feel that mistakes are signs of personal failure rather than part of the learning process.

To overcome this fear, teachers must address emotional and cognitive factors simultaneously. Creating a positive classroom atmosphere, offering structured speaking tasks, and providing gradual exposure to communication help reduce anxiety. Research suggests that supportive feedback, peer collaboration, and predictable speaking routines can increase learner confidence and fluency (Mahmood & Iqbal, 2019; Zhang, 2022).

Practical Recommendations

To help adult learners overcome speaking anxiety, teachers can apply the following techniques:

1. **Normalizing mistakes** as part of learning makes the learners feel relieved while learning.
2. **Using pair and group work** to lower the pressure.
3. **Providing speaking frames and vocabulary support** before tasks.
4. **Giving positive and constructive feedback** instead of public criticism that most instructors or teachers prioritize today.
5. **The inclusion of gradual speaking challenges**, moving from low-risk to high-risk tasks.
6. **Teaching relaxation and self-talk strategies** to reduce anxiety (a widely used example is the mirror technique, where learners talk to themselves looking at the mirror).

These practices help the adult learners beat the common challenges mentioned above, including mostly the emotional ones, and simultaneously promote autonomy among them.

Conclusion

Speaking fear is a silent struggle for many adult EFL learners. Anxiety, perfectionism, and fear of judgment prevent learners from expressing themselves freely. However, with supportive teaching approaches and psychologically safe environments, learners can develop confidence and communicative competence. By combining emotional support with structured speaking practice, educators can help adult learners find their voice in a second language.

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