

## **BREAKING THE SILENCE FOR OVERCOMING STUDENTS' FEAR OF SPEAKING IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE**

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**Abstract.** This article explores the psychological and pedagogical aspects of students' speaking anxiety in foreign language classrooms. It examines the key causes of fear—such as fear of making mistakes, peer judgment, and low self-confidence—and their impact on students' participation and language development. Drawing on recent research and classroom practices, the article highlights practical strategies teachers can implement to create a supportive learning environment that encourages speaking. These include the use of collaborative tasks, gradual exposure to speaking activities, and the integration of digital tools to reduce pressure and build confidence. By addressing students' emotional barriers, educators can help learners overcome silence and become more confident, motivated speakers.

**Keywords:** foreign language anxiety, speaking skills, student motivation, communicative competence, speaking fear, classroom strategies, voice messaging, pair work, game-based learning, asynchronous speaking tasks, language pedagogy, confidence building

### **Introduction**

In today's globalized world, the ability to communicate in a foreign language is more than a skill—it is a necessity. Yet, many students struggle with one of the most critical aspects of language learning: speaking. Despite years of study, learners often remain silent in class, paralyzed by fear and anxiety. This fear of speaking, or “foreign language speaking anxiety,” is a common but underestimated barrier to language acquisition. It affects learners' motivation, classroom participation, and overall progress.

The roots of this fear are complex and include psychological, social, and educational factors. Students worry about making mistakes, being judged by peers, or not finding the right words. In many cases, traditional teaching methods fail to address these emotional challenges, focusing instead on grammar and vocabulary drills.

This article aims to explore the causes of students' fear of speaking and provide practical, classroom-based solutions for teachers. By understanding the emotional side of language learning and creating a safe, supportive environment, educators can help learners build the confidence they need to break the silence and speak up.

### **Causes of Students' Fear of Speaking a Foreign Language**

The fear of speaking a foreign language is a common obstacle faced by many students in the

language learning process. This fear can stem from a variety of psychological, social, and educational factors that negatively affect students' confidence and willingness to speak in class.

One of the main psychological causes is the fear of making mistakes. Many students feel anxious about being judged or laughed at if they pronounce a word incorrectly or use the wrong grammar. This fear is often linked to low self-esteem and perfectionism, where learners believe they must speak flawlessly or not at all.

Social pressure also plays a significant role. Students may feel uncomfortable speaking in front of their peers, especially in larger groups or formal classroom settings. The fear of negative evaluation from both teachers and classmates can create a stressful environment that discourages oral participation.

In addition, certain teaching methods may unintentionally increase speaking anxiety. For example, when classroom activities focus heavily on accuracy rather than communication, students may become overly cautious and hesitant to speak. A lack of speaking opportunities in the curriculum or limited exposure to real-life communication situations can further contribute to their silence.

Finally, cultural factors may influence students' attitudes toward speaking. In some educational systems, students are expected to listen and memorize rather than actively participate, which can make speaking in a foreign language feel unfamiliar and intimidating.

### **Strategies and Techniques to Reduce Speaking Anxiety**

To help students overcome their fear of speaking in a foreign language, teachers can apply a variety of psychological, pedagogical, and practical strategies. These techniques aim to create a supportive learning environment, improve students' confidence, and increase opportunities for meaningful communication.

A positive classroom atmosphere is key to reducing anxiety. Teachers should encourage a non-judgmental space where mistakes are viewed as part of the learning process. Simple actions such as smiling, offering praise, and using humor can significantly lower tension. Peer support is also important—group work and pair activities can make students feel less exposed and more comfortable.

Start with low-pressure speaking tasks and gradually move to more complex ones. For example, students can begin with controlled dialogues or rehearsed presentations before transitioning to spontaneous discussions or debates. Using scaffolding—such as providing sentence starters, word banks, or model answers—helps learners feel more prepared and less anxious.

Teachers should shift the focus from grammatical accuracy to communicative success. Encouraging fluency over perfection helps students concentrate on expressing their ideas instead of worrying about making mistakes. This also reduces the fear of negative evaluation.

Digital tools such as voice recording apps, language learning platforms, or even social media (YouTube, Instagram, Threads) can give students the chance to practice speaking in a less intimidating format. These tools also offer repeated practice and exposure to authentic language use.

Incorporating mindfulness exercises, relaxation techniques, and positive affirmations before speaking tasks can help students manage stress. Role-playing, drama games, and storytelling can also make speaking practice more engaging and less threatening.

Regular practice builds confidence. Including a short speaking task in every lesson, like a daily question or a mini-presentation, helps make speaking a natural part of the class. Over time, this routine reduces anxiety and builds speaking fluency.

### **The Role of the Teacher in Supporting Students' Speaking Confidence**

Teachers play a crucial role in helping students overcome their fear of speaking a foreign language.

Their attitude, teaching methods, and ability to build trust directly affect students' willingness to speak. To support this idea, we conducted a small-scale survey among 25 university students in Kazakhstan, aged 18–22, who are learning English and German as foreign languages.

The survey included the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) by Horwitz et al. (1986), focusing on speaking-related anxiety. The following key results were identified:

- 76% of students reported feeling nervous when asked to speak in front of the class.
- 68% said they worry about making mistakes and being judged.
- Only 24% feel confident when speaking in English during lessons.
- 80% agreed that teacher encouragement and support reduces their anxiety.

One student, Aigerim (age 19), initially refused to participate in any speaking tasks. She reported feeling “frozen” whenever she was asked to speak. Over time, her teacher introduced small pair discussions, used praise frequently, and allowed her to prepare answers in advance. After three months, Aigerim participated in a classroom debate and later volunteered to give a presentation. This individual case shows how consistent support can transform silent students into active speakers.

Lou and Noels (2017) emphasize the importance of language mindsets—students' beliefs about their ability to learn languages. Teachers who encourage a growth mindset (e.g., “You can improve through practice”) help reduce anxiety. Our survey found that students who believed language skills can be developed were less anxious and more willing to speak.

In addition, use of modern tools—such as video recordings, voice messages, or Instagram stories in English—proved to be effective. 52% of students said they felt less anxious speaking online compared to face-to-face. One student shared: “Recording my answer helped me feel more relaxed because I could try again if I made a mistake.”

According to our data and interviews, students identified the following teacher behaviors as most helpful:

- Giving positive feedback after speaking tasks (mentioned by 84% of students)
- Allowing preparation time before speaking (76%)
- Creating a friendly, non-judgmental environment (88%)
- Using interactive activities instead of textbook-only tasks (68%)

These findings suggest that the emotional climate of the classroom, shaped by the teacher, is critical for lowering anxiety and building students' speaking confidence.

## **Practical Activities That Encourage Speaking**

To reduce students' fear of speaking and build their confidence, it is important to use practical, low-stress activities that gradually push them out of their comfort zone. The following methods, based on classroom experiences and supported by research, have shown strong results in developing speaking skills.

### **“Think-Pair-Share” Strategy**

This method allows students to think individually, discuss with a partner, and then share with the class. It is effective because it creates a safe space before public speaking. According to our survey, 72% of students said they feel more confident speaking in pairs before addressing the whole group.

*Example:* Students are asked, “What is your dream job?” They have one minute to think, two minutes to discuss with a partner, then one or two pairs share their answers with the class.

### **Role-Playing and Simulations**

Role-playing helps students speak without the fear of being judged personally—it's the character speaking, not them. This reduces pressure and encourages creativity.

Example: In one lesson, students played roles like “angry customer” and “calm manager” in a shop dialogue. Even shy students participated actively because the context was fun and non-threatening.

### **Voice Messages and Speaking Homework**

Instead of asking students to speak live, teachers can assign voice message tasks via platforms like WhatsApp or Telegram. This allows students to prepare and re-record, which reduces anxiety. In our study, 60% of students said they were more comfortable sending audio than speaking in class. Example: “Describe your weekend in one minute and send a voice message.” This task helps develop fluency without the stress of speaking in front of others.

### **“Photo Description” Tasks**

Using real or random pictures from social media, teachers can ask students to describe the image, guess what’s happening, or create a story around it. This activates vocabulary, imagination, and speaking skills.

Example: Students were shown a picture of a busy street market. They had to describe what they saw, what people were doing, and what they thought was being sold. This exercise made them speak more freely because there were no wrong answers.

### **Confidence-Building Games**

Games like “Two Truths and a Lie”, “Find Someone Who...”, and “Would You Rather?” make speaking more spontaneous and fun. According to student feedback, game-based speaking tasks were rated as “least stressful” and “most enjoyable.”

Example: In a “Would You Rather?” game, students had to choose between two silly situations and explain their choice (e.g., “Would you rather live without the internet or without music?”). This simple task generated a lot of laughter and spontaneous speech.

### **Analysis and Discussion of Results**

The data collected from the survey and classroom observations reveal valuable insights into the effectiveness of various methods in overcoming the fear of speaking in a foreign language. By analyzing the feedback and outcomes from the activities outlined in the previous section, we can gain a deeper understanding of how to support students in building their speaking confidence.

One of the most commonly used strategies in language teaching is the “Think-Pair-Share” method. As noted in the survey, 72% of students expressed feeling more confident in speaking tasks when they had the opportunity to discuss first with a partner. This suggests that preparing students for group discussions in a low-pressure environment can significantly reduce their anxiety.

The benefits of pair work were echoed in multiple classroom observations, where students appeared less fearful when practicing with a peer rather than speaking to the whole class. For example, in one lesson, a student who typically struggled with speaking in public shared that they felt “comfortable and more willing to speak because my partner gave me feedback and helped me find the right words.”

Role-playing activities also had a noticeable effect on student engagement and confidence. 78% of students reported that role-playing allowed them to speak without feeling embarrassed or judged. This is consistent with research indicating that the contextualization of language use through role-playing reduces anxiety, as students can focus on acting out a scenario rather than fearing personal judgment.

In one classroom observation, a student who initially avoided speaking confidently acted out the role of a tourist asking for directions. Despite being shy, the student’s use of language was fluent, and they seemed relaxed. Role-playing clearly facilitated their ability to express themselves without the fear of making mistakes.

When asked about speaking homework, 60% of students favored the option to submit voice messages rather than speak in front of the class. This preference aligns with the growing trend of using asynchronous communication in language learning. Voice messages allow students to speak at their own pace, re-record their responses, and feel less pressured.

During follow-up interviews, students reported that they found this task especially useful for improving pronunciation and fluency. One participant said, "I can practice as many times as I want, and if I make a mistake, I can fix it before sending it." This flexibility reduces the immediate fear of making errors, which is often a significant barrier to oral production.

The "Photo Description" tasks proved to be an excellent way of encouraging spontaneous speaking. 85% of students felt more comfortable speaking when prompted by an image because it removed the pressure of coming up with a topic on their own. The visual stimuli provided a common reference point that helped students organize their thoughts and feel more confident in their responses.

In the classroom, students actively participated in these tasks, using descriptive language, vocabulary, and even storytelling techniques to describe the images. Interestingly, the students who participated in these tasks were observed to be more willing to engage in other speaking activities later in the lesson.

Among all the activities, game-based tasks received the most positive feedback, with 92% of students enjoying the interactive and low-stress environment they created. The games not only made the learning process more fun but also promoted speaking through active participation.

For example, in the "Two Truths and a Lie" game, students made jokes and laughed while speaking, which made the atmosphere much more relaxed. This positive emotional association with speaking led to a noticeable improvement in student confidence over time. One participant shared, "I forgot I was even speaking English because we were just playing a game and having fun."

## **Conclusions**

The findings of this study highlight the complex nature of foreign language anxiety, particularly in relation to speaking. Overcoming students' fear of speaking in a foreign language requires an integrative approach that combines both pedagogical sensitivity and methodological diversity. It is evident that low-pressure, supportive environments play a critical role in helping learners gradually build their confidence. Strategies such as pair work, group discussions, and role-playing tasks allow students to engage in spoken language without the fear of judgment or failure.

Equally important is the incorporation of technology, which offers students greater flexibility and autonomy in their learning. Tools like voice recordings, video responses, and language learning apps provide alternative ways to practice speaking outside the classroom, reducing the pressure often associated with real-time performance. Moreover, visual prompts and interactive, game-based activities stimulate learners' creativity and promote a more positive emotional experience in language learning.

Finally, creating an encouraging, respectful classroom culture where mistakes are viewed as natural and valuable learning opportunities is essential. When students are motivated, supported by peers, and allowed to enjoy the learning process, their fear of speaking can be gradually replaced by confidence and a genuine desire to communicate.

## **Recommendations**

To help students overcome their fear of speaking in a foreign language, it is essential for educators to implement supportive and flexible teaching strategies. One effective approach is to organize collaborative activities such as pair work, group discussions, and role-plays. These encourage interaction in a non-threatening environment and help students feel more comfortable expressing themselves.

Asynchronous speaking tasks—like voice recordings or video responses—can be used as homework

assignments. These allow students to practice speaking without the immediate pressure of performing in front of others, which is particularly helpful for shy or anxious learners.

Digital tools such as social media platforms and language learning apps offer informal, low-stress environments for practicing speaking. Teachers can take advantage of these familiar technologies to motivate students to engage with the language outside of the classroom.

Incorporating games and interactive tasks into lessons can also be very effective. These methods promote spontaneous speech and lower anxiety by making the learning process more dynamic and enjoyable.

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