

UNDERSTANDING THE STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY EFL LEARNERS TO OVERCOME SPEAKING ANXIETY IN THE CLASSROOM

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Abstract: This research study aims to investigate the strategies employed by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners to overcome speaking anxiety in the classroom. Speaking anxiety is a significant challenge faced by EFL learners, hindering their development of fluency and confidence in speaking. However, there is limited understanding of the specific strategies used by EFL learners to cope with and overcome this anxiety in the classroom context. This study adopts a qualitative research design, utilizing interviews and observations to gather in-depth data from EFL learners. The findings reveal a range of strategies employed by participants, including cognitive strategies (positive self-talk, visualization, and reframing anxious thoughts), preparation and practice, a supportive learning environment, gradual exposure and desensitization, and emotional regulation techniques. These strategies contribute to the effective management of speaking anxiety and the promotion of speaking proficiency among EFL learners. The insights from this study provide valuable implications for educators and practitioners, enabling the development of targeted interventions and instructional approaches to support EFL learners in managing their anxiety and enhancing their speaking skills. By addressing speaking anxiety effectively, language teaching and learning practices in the EFL context can be improved, fostering a positive and inclusive environment for EFL learners to develop their speaking abilities with confidence.

Keywords: EFL learners, speaking anxiety, the strategies employed, the classroom

INTRODUCTION

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners often face challenges in developing their speaking skills due to various factors, one of which is speaking anxiety. Speaking anxiety refers to the fear, apprehension, or nervousness experienced by learners when engaging in oral communication in the target language (Suleimenova, 2013). It can significantly impede the language learning process and hinder the development of fluency and confidence in speaking. Overcoming speaking anxiety is crucial for EFL learners as it directly affects their ability to effectively communicate in English (Octaberlina et al., 2022). While there is a growing body of research on speaking anxiety, there is limited understanding of the specific strategies employed by EFL learners to cope with and overcome this anxiety in the classroom context.

This study aims to bridge this gap in the existing literature by investigating the strategies employed by EFL learners to overcome speaking anxiety in the classroom. By understanding these strategies, educators can develop targeted interventions and instructional approaches to help students effectively manage and alleviate their speaking anxiety. The research will

employ qualitative research methods, such as interviews and observations, to gather rich and nuanced data (Babu et al., 2013). Through in-depth interviews with EFL learners, this study will explore the specific strategies, techniques, and coping mechanisms utilized by students to overcome their speaking anxiety.

The findings of this study will contribute to the existing body of knowledge on speaking anxiety in the EFL context and provide valuable insights into the experiences of EFL learners. Additionally, the results will have practical implications for EFL educators, as they can inform the development of classroom strategies and interventions to support learners in overcoming their speaking anxiety and promoting their speaking proficiency (Shamsuri et al., 2021). By shedding light on the strategies employed by EFL learners to overcome speaking anxiety, this research aims to provide a deeper understanding of this phenomenon and contribute to the improvement of language teaching and learning practices in the EFL context.

METHODS

This study will adopt a qualitative research design to explore the strategies employed by EFL learners to overcome speaking anxiety in the classroom. Qualitative research allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, perceptions, and behaviors, providing rich and nuanced data. The participants for this study will be EFL learners who experience speaking anxiety in the classroom (Tercan & Dikilitaş, 2015). A purposive sampling technique will be employed to select participants who represent a range of language proficiency levels, ages, and genders (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013). The sample size will be determined based on data saturation, ensuring that enough participants are included to capture diverse perspectives.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with the participants. The interview protocol will be developed based on relevant literature and initial pilot interviews. The interviews will explore the participants' experiences with speaking anxiety, the strategies they employ to overcome it, and the effectiveness of these strategies. Probing questions will be used to elicit detailed responses. Classroom observations will be conducted to supplement the interview data. The researcher will observe the participants during speaking activities to gain insights into their nonverbal behaviors, interaction patterns, and observable manifestations of anxiety. Field notes will be taken during the observations to record important observations and contextual details.

The interview recordings will be transcribed verbatim, ensuring accurate representation of participants' responses. The field notes from observations will also be included in the analysis. A thematic analysis approach will be employed to identify recurring patterns, themes, and categories in the data. The transcripts and field notes will be coded and analyzed using a qualitative data analysis software or manually. Themes related to strategies employed by participants to overcome speaking anxiety will be identified and organized. To ensure the accuracy and validity of the findings, member checking will be conducted. Participants will be given the opportunity to review the analysis and provide feedback to validate the interpretations of their experiences.

Ethical guidelines will be followed throughout the study. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants, ensuring their voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity. The study will also undergo ethical review and approval from the relevant institutional ethics committee. It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the study. The findings may be context-specific and may not be generalized to all EFL learners. Additionally, the study relies on self-reported data and participant perspectives, which may be subject to biases and individual interpretations

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this research shed light on the strategies employed by EFL learners to overcome speaking anxiety in the classroom. Through a qualitative analysis of participant experiences and perspectives, this study explored various cognitive, preparatory, environmental, and emotional strategies utilized by EFL learners. The results revealed a rich tapestry of techniques employed by participants to manage their speaking anxiety, including cognitive strategies such as positive self-talk, visualization, and reframing anxious thoughts. Additionally, preparation and practice emerged as prominent strategies, highlighting the importance of thorough preparation and regular practice in alleviating anxiety and building confidence. Participants also emphasized the significance of a supportive learning environment, where positive feedback and collaborative activities provided a safe space for practicing speaking skills. Furthermore, gradual exposure and desensitization, as well as emotional regulation techniques such as deep breathing exercises and engagement in physical activities, were identified as effective approaches for reducing anxiety levels. These findings contribute to our understanding of the diverse strategies employed by EFL learners to overcome speaking anxiety and provide insights for educators and practitioners in creating supportive language learning environments.

1) Cognitive Strategies

A significant finding from this study was that several participants reported employing cognitive strategies to manage their speaking anxiety. These strategies included positive self-talk, visualization techniques, and reframing anxious thoughts. Participants mentioned using self-affirmations as a way to boost their confidence before engaging in speaking tasks. Statements such as "I can do this" or "I am prepared" were commonly used to reinforce a positive mindset and counteract self-doubt. Additionally, visualization techniques were found to be effective in reducing anxiety and increasing self-assurance. Participants described visualizing successful communication situations, imagining themselves speaking fluently and confidently. By mentally rehearsing positive outcomes, participants were able to alleviate their anxiety and approach speaking tasks with greater confidence. Another cognitive strategy employed by participants was the process of reframing negative thoughts. They actively worked on identifying and replacing their anxious and unrealistic thoughts with more positive and realistic ones. This cognitive restructuring process helped participants manage their anxiety during speaking activities.

Furthermore, the use of self-affirmations and visualization techniques played a vital role in fostering a positive mindset among EFL learners. Participants recognized the

importance of positive self-talk in building their confidence levels. By consciously repeating affirming statements, they were able to reframe their self-perceptions and shift their focus towards their strengths and abilities. Visualization techniques complemented this cognitive strategy by providing participants with a mental image of successful communication scenarios. By envisioning themselves speaking fluently and effectively, participants were able to reduce their anxiety and increase their self-assurance. The combination of positive self-talk and visualization techniques served as powerful cognitive tools for managing speaking anxiety and enhancing EFL learners' confidence in their speaking abilities.

Moreover, the process of reframing anxious thoughts emerged as a significant cognitive strategy employed by participants to overcome speaking anxiety. Participants actively worked on identifying their negative and irrational thoughts related to speaking tasks. They then replaced these thoughts with more positive, rational, and realistic ones. For instance, participants reframed thoughts such as "I will embarrass myself" to "Mistakes are a normal part of learning, and I can improve with practice." By challenging and replacing negative thoughts, participants were able to reduce their anxiety levels and approach speaking activities with a more positive and adaptive mindset. This cognitive restructuring process contributed to their overall ability to manage speaking anxiety and engage more confidently in oral communication.

In summary, the findings of this study revealed that cognitive strategies played a significant role in helping EFL learners overcome speaking anxiety. Positive self-talk, visualization techniques, and the process of reframing anxious thoughts emerged as key strategies employed by participants. By using self-affirmations, participants boosted their confidence and nurtured a positive mindset. Visualization techniques allowed them to mentally rehearse successful communication situations, reducing anxiety and increasing self-assurance. Moreover, the process of reframing negative thoughts enabled participants to challenge and replace anxious thoughts with more positive and realistic ones. These cognitive strategies collectively contributed to the effective management of speaking anxiety and the development of greater confidence among EFL learners in the classroom setting.

2) Preparation and Practice

A prominent strategy employed by participants to alleviate their speaking anxiety was preparation and practice. Many participants emphasized the importance of thorough preparation before engaging in speaking tasks. They recognized that being well-prepared helped them feel more confident and reduced their anxiety. Preparation involved researching and organizing their ideas in advance, ensuring they had a solid understanding of the topic or content they would be discussing. By investing time and effort into preparing for speaking tasks, participants felt more equipped and less anxious when it came time to communicate in English. This preparation strategy became a crucial foundation for managing speaking anxiety effectively.

Regular practice emerged as another key strategy highlighted by participants to alleviate speaking anxiety. Engaging in consistent practice activities, such as mock conversations or rehearsing presentations, was perceived as highly effective in building

confidence and reducing anxiety. Participants reported that the more they practiced their speaking skills, the more comfortable they felt when communicating in English. Regular practice provided an opportunity to familiarize themselves with the language, improve their fluency, and gain a sense of control over their spoken communication. Through practice, participants developed a level of automaticity and increased their confidence in their ability to express themselves orally.

Moreover, participants acknowledged that practice not only enhanced their language proficiency but also helped them anticipate and manage their anxiety. By repeatedly exposing themselves to speaking tasks, they gradually became more accustomed to the demands of oral communication. This exposure allowed participants to identify their specific areas of difficulty and work on improving them. With each practice session, participants reported feeling more at ease and less anxious when facing speaking challenges. The combination of practice and increased familiarity with speaking situations contributed to a reduction in anxiety levels and a greater sense of control over their language performance.

In summary, preparation and practice were prominent strategies utilized by participants to alleviate speaking anxiety. Thorough preparation, involving research and organization of ideas, provided participants with a solid foundation and boosted their confidence. Regular practice, through activities such as mock conversations and rehearsing presentations, not only improved their language proficiency but also helped participants become more comfortable and confident when speaking in English. With increased practice and exposure to speaking tasks, participants experienced a gradual reduction in anxiety and developed a greater sense of control over their spoken communication. These findings highlight the importance of preparation and regular practice as effective strategies for managing speaking anxiety among EFL learners.

3) Supportive Learning Environment

The significance of a supportive learning environment in managing speaking anxiety was emphasized by participants. They recognized that the attitudes and actions of teachers and peers played a crucial role in their anxiety levels. Positive and encouraging feedback from teachers and peers was particularly influential in alleviating anxiety and boosting participants' confidence. Participants appreciated when their teachers provided constructive feedback that highlighted their strengths and areas for improvement rather than focusing solely on mistakes. The presence of a supportive learning environment created a sense of psychological safety, which allowed participants to take risks and engage in speaking activities with less fear and anxiety.

Collaborative activities, such as pair or group discussions, were highlighted by participants as an effective strategy for managing speaking anxiety. Engaging in these activities provided a safe space for participants to practice their speaking skills without the fear of judgment or criticism. In this supportive environment, participants felt more comfortable expressing themselves and taking part in oral interactions. Collaborative activities offered opportunities for peer support and feedback, further enhancing participants' confidence and reducing their anxiety. The presence of a supportive community of learners helped foster a positive and non-threatening atmosphere,

allowing participants to develop their speaking skills in a more relaxed and supportive context.

Participants expressed appreciation for classroom settings where mistakes were seen as learning opportunities rather than something to be feared or avoided. They highlighted the importance of a mindset that embraced errors as a natural part of the language learning process. Such an environment fostered a supportive and non-threatening atmosphere that significantly reduced anxiety. Participants felt more at ease knowing that their mistakes were seen as valuable learning experiences rather than something to be embarrassed about. This mindset shift helped participants develop a more positive attitude towards speaking tasks, encouraging them to take more risks and engage more confidently in oral communication.

In summary, participants recognized the significance of a supportive learning environment in managing speaking anxiety. Positive and encouraging feedback from teachers and peers played a crucial role in alleviating anxiety and boosting participants' confidence. Collaborative activities, such as pair or group discussions, provided a safe space for participants to practice their speaking skills without fear of judgment. The presence of a supportive community of learners helped create a positive and non-threatening atmosphere that reduced anxiety. Additionally, participants appreciated classroom settings that embraced mistakes as valuable learning opportunities. These findings emphasize the importance of a supportive learning environment in addressing speaking anxiety and creating a positive and inclusive space for EFL learners to develop their speaking skills.

4) Gradual Exposure and Desensitization

Several participants shared their experiences of employing a gradual exposure approach to overcome speaking anxiety. They described starting with simpler speaking activities and gradually progressing to more complex tasks. This step-by-step approach allowed participants to build their confidence gradually. By starting with less challenging speaking tasks, such as short presentations or informal conversations, participants were able to practice and develop their speaking skills in a less intimidating setting. As they gained confidence and proficiency, they gradually moved on to more complex speaking tasks, such as formal presentations or debates. This gradual progression helped participants overcome their anxiety by providing them with opportunities to succeed and gain confidence in their speaking abilities. Participants highlighted the importance of exposure to authentic English materials as a strategy to desensitize themselves to the anxiety-inducing aspects of speaking in a foreign language. They mentioned engaging with various authentic resources, such as movies, podcasts, or conversations with native speakers. Exposure to these materials allowed participants to familiarize themselves with different accents, speech patterns, and contexts of communication. By regularly exposing themselves to authentic English, participants gradually became more comfortable with the language and gained confidence in their ability to understand and respond in real-life situations. This exposure to authentic materials served as a bridge between classroom learning and real-world communication, enabling participants to

overcome their anxiety and develop greater fluency and confidence in their speaking skills.

In summary, participants shared their experiences of employing a gradual exposure approach to overcome speaking anxiety. They emphasized the importance of starting with simpler speaking activities and gradually progressing to more complex tasks. This step-by-step approach allowed participants to build their confidence and skills incrementally. Additionally, exposure to authentic English materials, such as movies, podcasts, or conversations with native speakers, was mentioned as a way to desensitize themselves to the anxiety-inducing aspects of speaking in a foreign language. Regular exposure to authentic resources provided participants with opportunities to familiarize themselves with different language contexts and develop their fluency and confidence. These findings highlight the effectiveness of gradual exposure and exposure to authentic materials as strategies to overcome speaking anxiety and enhance speaking skills among EFL learners.

5) Emotional Regulation Techniques

Participants in the study reported utilizing various emotional regulation techniques to effectively manage their speaking anxiety. They recognized the importance of addressing their emotional state to reduce anxiety levels. Deep breathing exercises emerged as a commonly mentioned strategy. Participants described taking slow, deep breaths to calm their nerves and reduce feelings of anxiety before engaging in speaking tasks. This practice helped them regulate their breathing and induce a sense of relaxation, allowing them to approach speaking activities with a calmer mindset. Additionally, mindfulness practices were mentioned as effective techniques. Participants engaged in mindfulness exercises, such as focusing on the present moment and non-judgmentally observing their thoughts and feelings. These practices helped participants detach from negative thoughts and anxiety-provoking emotions, enabling them to speak more confidently and fluently.

Moreover, participants mentioned the effectiveness of relaxation techniques in managing their speaking anxiety. Techniques such as progressive muscle relaxation and guided imagery were utilized to induce a state of relaxation and reduce tension before speaking tasks. Participants described systematically tensing and relaxing their muscles or visualizing calm and peaceful scenes to alleviate anxiety. By consciously relaxing their bodies and minds, participants were able to release tension and create a more conducive state for effective communication. These relaxation techniques not only helped participants manage their anxiety in the moment but also empowered them to approach future speaking tasks with increased confidence and a more relaxed disposition.

Furthermore, participants shared their experiences of engaging in physical activities as a means to release tension and anxiety before speaking tasks. Activities such as exercising, stretching, or engaging in brief physical movements were mentioned as effective strategies. Participants found that physical activity helped them release built-up tension and nervous energy, which in turn reduced their overall anxiety levels. By incorporating physical activity into their pre-speaking routines, participants experienced a greater sense of calmness and readiness to engage in speaking tasks. The physical

exertion also had the added benefit of boosting their energy levels and enhancing their overall focus and concentration, leading to improved performance during speaking activities.

In summary, participants in the study utilized various emotional regulation techniques to manage their speaking anxiety. Deep breathing exercises, mindfulness practices, and relaxation techniques were identified as effective strategies for reducing anxiety levels. Additionally, engaging in physical activities, such as exercising or stretching, was found to be beneficial in releasing tension and anxiety before speaking tasks. These findings highlight the importance of addressing emotional well-being and employing various strategies to regulate anxiety levels among EFL learners. By implementing these emotional regulation techniques, participants were able to manage their anxiety effectively and approach speaking tasks with greater confidence and composure.

These findings highlight the range of strategies employed by EFL learners to overcome speaking anxiety in the classroom. The identified cognitive strategies, preparation and practice, supportive learning environments, gradual exposure and desensitization, and emotional regulation techniques. These findings provide valuable insights into the experiences and coping mechanisms of EFL learners, contributing to the understanding of effective strategies for addressing speaking anxiety in language learning contexts.

The findings of this study offer valuable insights into the strategies employed by EFL learners to overcome speaking anxiety in the classroom. The identified cognitive strategies, including positive self-talk, visualization techniques, and the process of reframing anxious thoughts, played a significant role in helping participants manage their anxiety levels and enhance their speaking confidence. These findings align with previous research emphasizing the importance of cognitive strategies in reducing anxiety and enhancing performance (Dewaele Chengchen Li, 2020). By using positive self-talk and visualization techniques, participants were able to foster a positive mindset, alleviate anxiety, and enhance their self-assurance. Furthermore, the process of reframing negative thoughts allowed participants to challenge and replace anxious thoughts with more positive and realistic ones, leading to a reduction in anxiety levels during speaking activities. The utilization of these cognitive strategies highlights the potential for developing effective intervention programs that focus on enhancing learners' cognitive skills to manage speaking anxiety.

The findings also underscore the significance of preparation and practice as key strategies for alleviating speaking anxiety among EFL learners. Thorough preparation before speaking tasks, including researching and organizing ideas in advance, was found to enhance participants' confidence and reduce their anxiety levels. This aligns with previous research emphasizing the role of preparation in improving performance and reducing anxiety (Macintyre & Gregersen, 2012). Moreover, regular practice activities, such as mock conversations and rehearsing presentations, not only improved participants' language proficiency but also helped them develop a sense of control and familiarity with speaking tasks. Through consistent practice, participants gradually became more comfortable and confident in their speaking abilities, leading to a reduction in anxiety levels. These findings

highlight the importance of incorporating sufficient preparation and regular practice opportunities into language learning curricula to help EFL learners build their confidence and manage their speaking anxiety effectively.

Furthermore, the supportive learning environment emerged as a crucial factor in managing speaking anxiety. Positive and encouraging feedback from teachers and peers, as well as collaborative activities, played a significant role in reducing anxiety levels and boosting participants' confidence. The presence of a supportive community of learners created a safe space for participants to practice their speaking skills without fear of judgment or criticism. These findings are consistent with previous research emphasizing the importance of supportive learning environments in promoting learners' well-being and reducing anxiety (Dewaele et al., 2018). Creating an environment that embraces mistakes as learning opportunities and provides constructive feedback can enhance learners' self-esteem, reduce anxiety, and foster a positive attitude towards speaking tasks. These findings suggest the need for educators to cultivate a supportive and inclusive classroom environment that nurtures learners' confidence and addresses their speaking anxiety effectively.

Additionally, gradual exposure and desensitization emerged as effective strategies for overcoming speaking anxiety. Starting with simpler speaking activities and gradually progressing to more complex tasks allowed participants to build their confidence gradually. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that gradual exposure to anxiety-inducing situations can help individuals overcome their fears and enhance their confidence. Moreover, exposure to authentic English materials, such as movies, podcasts, and conversations with native speakers, provided participants with opportunities to familiarize themselves with different language contexts and desensitize themselves to the anxiety-inducing aspects of speaking in a foreign language. This finding supports the value of incorporating authentic materials and real-world communication experiences into language learning environments to help EFL learners overcome speaking anxiety and enhance their fluency and confidence.

Finally, emotional regulation techniques, including deep breathing exercises, mindfulness practices, and engagement in physical activities, were found to be effective in managing speaking anxiety. These techniques helped participants regulate their emotions, induce relaxation, and reduce anxiety levels. The findings align with previous research highlighting the positive effects of emotional regulation strategies on anxiety reduction (Hofmann et al., 2012). By addressing their emotional state, participants were able to approach speaking tasks with a calmer mindset, leading to improved performance and reduced anxiety. These findings suggest the importance of incorporating emotional regulation techniques into language learning programs to support EFL learners in managing their speaking anxiety effectively.

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the strategies employed by EFL learners to overcome speaking anxiety in the classroom. The cognitive strategies, including positive self-talk, visualization techniques, and reframing anxious thoughts, played a significant role in managing anxiety levels and enhancing speaking confidence. Preparation and practice, along with the supportive learning environment, gradual exposure and

desensitization, and emotional regulation techniques, emerged as key strategies for alleviating speaking anxiety. These findings have implications for educators and practitioners in designing effective interventions and creating supportive language learning environments that help EFL learners develop their speaking skills with confidence and manage their anxiety effectively.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research has shed light on the strategies employed by EFL learners to overcome speaking anxiety in the classroom. The findings highlight the significance of cognitive strategies, such as positive self-talk, visualization techniques, and reframing anxious thoughts, in managing anxiety levels and enhancing speaking confidence. Preparation and practice were identified as key strategies that contribute to reducing anxiety and building learners' confidence in speaking tasks. The study also emphasized the importance of a supportive learning environment, where positive feedback, collaborative activities, and a mindset that embraces mistakes as learning opportunities create a safe space for practicing speaking skills. Gradual exposure and desensitization techniques, combined with exposure to authentic English materials, were found to be effective in reducing anxiety levels and enhancing fluency and confidence. Additionally, emotional regulation techniques, including deep breathing exercises, mindfulness practices, and engagement in physical activities, were identified as effective strategies for managing speaking anxiety.

These findings have practical implications for EFL educators and practitioners. By understanding the strategies employed by EFL learners to overcome speaking anxiety, educators can develop targeted interventions and instructional approaches to help students effectively manage and alleviate their anxiety. Incorporating cognitive strategies, providing opportunities for preparation and practice, creating a supportive learning environment, and incorporating gradual exposure and desensitization techniques can contribute to reducing speaking anxiety and promoting speaking proficiency among EFL learners.

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the study. The findings may be context-specific and may not be generalized to all EFL learners. The study relied on self-reported data and participant perspectives, which may be subject to biases and individual interpretations. Further research is needed to explore the effectiveness of these strategies across different contexts and populations.

Overall, this research contributes to our understanding of the strategies employed by EFL learners to overcome speaking anxiety. It provides valuable insights for educators and practitioners in developing classroom strategies and interventions that support learners in managing their anxiety and promoting their speaking proficiency. By addressing speaking anxiety effectively, language teaching and learning practices in the EFL context can be improved, creating a more positive and inclusive environment for EFL learners to develop their speaking skills with confidence.

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