

Overcoming Speaking Anxiety in the EFL Classroom

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“Never make fun of someone who speaks broken English. It means they know another language.”

H. Jackson Brown, Jr.

Abstract

The article **Overcoming Speaking Anxiety in the EFL Classroom** is a brief overview of scientific articles and literature that explore speaking and performance anxiety that adults as well as children frequently experience. It explores the incidence of anxiety in adults and children, defines what it is and how to cope with it. The article states that both performance anxiety is common in adults and children, as well as foreign language anxiety. The author has also found that performance anxiety can have a negative and both positive effect on performance, that anxiety can lead to low self-esteem in children, which can in turn lead to even greater anxiety. The article also presents ways on dealing with speaking anxiety, managing it in EFL and the primary role of the teacher in speaking anxiety management. The article is in terms of methodology theoretical in nature and uses the descriptive research method as it describes previous findings on the topic and comparative research method when comparing professional and scientific findings of different authors. The article also describes personal experience of the author in dealing with speaking anxiety in the classroom in over 20 years of teaching English.

Keywords: performance anxiety, speaking, children, EFL

1. Introduction

The author has chosen speaking anxiety as her research topic as she has been personally and professionally interested in it. She has spent many years researching the issue of stress management both professionally and personally and has held different seminars and workshops on the topic. In her twenty years of teaching English, she has also often witnessed speaking anxiety in students in the classroom. She was interested in seeing how other people experience speaking or performance anxiety, how to manage it and to determine how common speaking and performance anxiety and foreign language anxiety are in children. The purpose of the article was to examine literature dealing with speaking anxiety and stress in adults and children. At first, the article defines performance anxiety, how common is performance anxiety in performers, for example musicians. The central part of the article offers a definition of anxiety, presents the reasons for it and briefly summarises certain article

defines anxiety, performance anxiety, foreign language anxiety, as well as explains whether anxiety is good or bad. Subsequently, the article answers the question whether also children experience anxiety, both performance and foreign language, how often and whether this is an issue. In conclusion, the paper offers certain techniques, which effectively reduce speaking anxiety and classroom tips for teachers.

2. Purpose

The purpose of the article is to research literature on performance, speaking and foreign language anxiety in adults in children and ways to overcome it. In the beginning, the paper defines performance anxiety, how it manifests and how common it is. The central part of the paper describes the reasons behind performance anxiety and answers the question whether performance anxiety is an issue. Then, it researches whether children experience performance and speaking anxiety and how often it occurs. In conclusion the article offers several techniques on how to reduce speaking anxiety and certain tips for foreign language teachers on how to help their students overcome foreign language anxiety and facilitate English language learning.

3. Methodology

The article *Overcoming Speaking Anxiety in the EFL Classroom* is of theoretical nature, it uses the descriptive method in describing findings on the issue, as well as personal experience of the author in her 20 years of teaching English and comparative method in comparing scientific findings of different authors.

4. What is anxiety?

Anxiety or stress manifests itself on four levels:

- **physical level:** change in the nervous and hormonal system, adrenaline begins to enter the blood stream, which leads to increased heartbeat, dry mouth, sweating palms, trembling, shallow and irregular breathing, nausea, dizziness, and blurred vision,
- **cognitive level:** concentration difficulties, increased awareness, our senses sharpen, negative evaluation of one's abilities and performance,
- **emotional level:** worry, fear, panic, insecurity, and a feeling of inferiority,
- **behavioural level:** we make more mistakes, irritation.¹

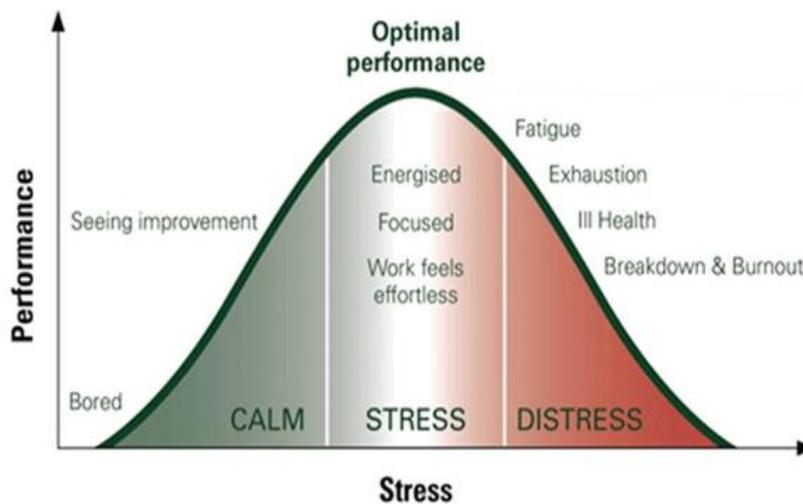
Up to a certain extent anxiety before a performance is positive. Psychologists Yerkes and Dillingham Dodson have proven that there is a relationship between the level of stress or arousal and level of performance. They suggest that you reach peak level of performance

¹ Steptoe, 1989

under an intermediate level of stress or arousal. Too little or too much stress causes poorer performance. This is called **Yerkes-Dodson law**.²

² Yerkes and Dodson, 1908

Figure 1: Yerkes-Dodson law³



A certain amount of anxiety or arousal is therefore positive and can be labelled as positive creative energy. This is also known as the inverted U model of arousal. The left side of the curve represents low arousal or stress, the central part medium level of arousal and on the right high arousal. The vertical lines suggest the level of performance, from poor performance on the left and right (at the bottom) to peak performance in the middle (at the top). A high level of arousal leads to the manifestation of stress symptoms.⁴ An individual is most successful when he or she experiences the right amount of arousal, i.e. intermediate level of stress. Katarina Habe describes anxiety or arousal as electricity, that is the voltage required for a machine to work. If the voltage is too low, the machine will not work. If the voltage is too high, the device will fry. The voltage must be intermediate for the machine to work properly. The same can be applied to performance, if an individual lacks focus, there will be mistakes and if an individual is too stressed, mistakes will also occur. Under stress and anxiety adrenaline is released into our blood stream, our heartbeat increases, and our breathing becomes faster and shallower. In this emotional state our senses sharpen, and it is easier for us to prepare or avoid potential danger. In its 'natural' occurrence stress helps an individual face danger by either escaping or fighting. This is our **fight or flight** response.⁵ Therefore, intermediate arousal or anxiety is positive, because our senses are sharpened, and we are motivated and focused on the task at hand.

³ Yerkes and Dodson, 1908

⁴ Habe, 1999

⁵ Habe, 1999

4.1 Performance anxiety

Almost everyone has at some point in their life experienced some sort of performance anxiety or as it is more commonly known, stage fright. As the name suggests stage fright occurs on stage and we immediately think of musicians, actors, speakers, etc. But stage fright is not reserved only for those on stage. It is actually very common in everyday life and surely many people have experienced it at various events, whether in their childhood at school speaking before the class, at a recital, at a dance performance, or in their adult life speaking in front of a group of people.

Stage fright is very well researched. Stage fright is a noun defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as:

“feeling nervous because you are about to perform or talk to a large group of people.”⁶

Among performers stage fright is most common among musicians, although it affects all performers:

- **musicians (47%),**
- **singers (38%),**
- **dancers (35%),**
- **actors (33%).⁷**

Stage fright in some form affects as many as 70% of musicians, who insist that it does not disappear over time, but that they simply get used to it. Stage fright is more common in solo acts than in group performances and worse in auditions than at premieres. Stage fright occurs both in beginners, music students as well as top level musicians and does not correlate with talent or aptitude, as even the most talented musicians and speakers experience stage fright.

Stage fright or performance anxiety is therefore not related to talent, gift or competence. We could say that performance anxiety is to a certain extent related to our self-image, in the sense how we feel or estimate our performance against our performance standards. Haba in her research on performance anxiety and stage fright among music school pupils determined that the most common performance anxiety factors are:

- lack of self-confidence,
- fear of making mistakes,
- fear of failure,
- fear of critique,
- poor preparation,
- fear of poor performance.⁸

⁶ Cambridge Dictionary, n. d.

⁷ Merchant-Haycox and Wilson, 1992

4.2 Foreign language anxiety

When learning a foreign language, we are learning the four communicative skills:

- **listening**
- **speaking**
- **reading**
- **writing.**

Speaking is among them the one that commonly causes the most anxiety, as speaking is the skill that people will most frequently use in real-life situations and also experience first-hand feedback in the real world. It is the skill that is mostly used in communication. In learning this communicative skill, students will learn vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar, but will also experience public speaking and face speaking anxiety, which is why they need to learn how to build their confidence. While learning and acquiring foreign language and developing speaking skills, it is very common for students to feel nervous, not confident and experience anxiety. This is called foreign language anxiety. Almost everyone has at some point in their life experienced some form of anxiety when speaking in front of a group of people, when performing or in a similar situation. That is in their mother tongue. Speaking in a foreign language can be even more stressful. Speaking in a foreign language that you are only learning even more so. When language learners exhibit high foreign language anxiety, it inhibits their acquisition of a foreign language. Maulidiyah suggests that anxiety impacts the learners' achievement indirectly through worry and directly because of less participation or even rejection of the language.⁹ Based on their research and questionnaire Asysyfa showed that most students experience some level of foreign language anxiety. In their questionnaire students could choose among three levels of speaking anxiety:

- relaxed,
- mildly anxious
- and anxious.

Only 26.7% of students chose that they were relaxed in learning English. 40% said they were mildly anxious in learning English, whereas 33.3% identified themselves as anxious in learning English. Just this demonstrates that most of the students experienced foreign language anxiety to some degree when speaking English and learning the language.¹⁰ This result is supported by other research, as studies of foreign language anxiety date back to over four decades ago.¹¹ Therefore, foreign language anxiety is something quite common and should be well addressed and managed in class.

⁸ Habe, 1999

⁹ Oxford, 1999 and Maulidiyah, 2014

¹⁰ Asysyfa et al., 2019

¹¹ Sarason, 1959

4.3 Children and anxiety

What about children? Anxiety manifests itself in preschool children, who can have serious issues with anxiety and stress already as soon as in kindergarten. It is crucial that children are not ridiculed because of anxiety.¹² Uranjek has researched anxiety and performance stress in school children and determined that children who have a lower self-esteem experience greater anxiety.¹³ In children anxiety is therefore closely related to (low) self-image, which is in school only developing. Self-image and anxiety are correlated as positive self-image contributes to less anxiety and low or even negative self-image leads to greater anxiety. This then becomes a downward spiral as children who experience more anxiety develop lower self-image leading to even more anxiety. In the EFL classroom this manifests itself so that students whose self-image is that they are not good in English, do not want to learn, experience even more anxiety in speaking and so on. Scientists claim that the period of middle childhood between the ages of six and ten is crucial in developing self-image, on the one hand because of the **cognitive development** in that period and on the other because of the **social environment**, which has a powerful impact on children at that time.¹⁴ The foundation of the child's self-image forms in this period in particular in terms of the academic self-image, because children learn what they are good at and what they are not so good at in school.

It is estimated that over 1.5 billion people are learning English at the moment and children all over the world are learning English as a foreign language in schools. In Slovenia, children start learning English in first grade and learn it throughout primary school (nine years), secondary school (four years) and also at university. Therefore, they learn English for a number of years, a minimum of 9, but even over 17 years. This is a very long time and as the author has stated in a previous chapter, most children experience performance anxiety and most children experience some level of foreign language anxiety when learning a foreign language. This can lead to children not wanting to learn, not wanting to participate in activities, even greater anxiety, which in turn leads to even less interest in learning the language and also in determining their self-image on how well they speak English for life.

5. Overcoming speaking anxiety in (EFL) class

Similarly, as with stress management, it is important to face our emotions and to develop and learn, as well as for teachers to teach, strategies for anxiety management before it occurs. We need to be aware that our fear and anxiety can reach a level where we simply cannot do anything about it. Therefore, it is especially important to address and manage anxiety as soon as the first physical signs appear (sweating, accelerated heartbeat, etc.).¹⁵ There are many ways on how to manage stress or anxiety. Below are some examples.

¹² Milivojević, 1993

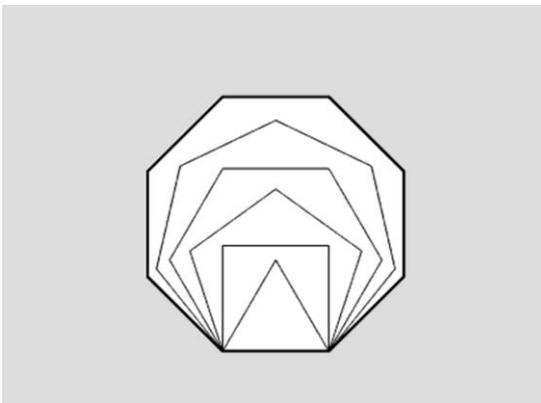
¹³ Uranjek, 1992

¹⁴ Hazel and Nurius, 1984

¹⁵ Habe, 1999

Breathing techniques play an important role in dealing with stress and anxiety. If we can calm down our breathing, we can lower our heartbeat and reduce stress in the body. We can perform simple breathing exercises on our own, but we can also teach breathing techniques in class as part of our daily routine or before tests, examinations, etc. Here is one very simple breathing exercise, where we inhale and slowly count to 5, 6, 7 and then slowly exhale and again count to 5, 6, 7. This exercise is very simple to do, the children like it and it is important for them to become more conscious of their breathing and how it impacts their body. They can do this exercise lying down, sitting, or standing, they can place their hand on their tummy and observe how their tummy moves up and down while breathing deeply.

Figure 2: Breathing exercise



The right focus. Before a performance or speaking in front of people we can focus on three things.

1. We can focus on ourselves. How we look, how we speak, how we sound?
2. We can focus on the audience or the listeners. Do they like it? Are they interested? Are they bored?
3. We can focus on the task or performance at hand. What do we need to present, what do we need to communicate?

Research suggests that we experience less anxiety if we simply focus on the task at hand. We need to help students who experience speaking anxiety in redirecting their attention to the task at hand.

Visualisation and preparation. It is important to prepare and visualise each performance or 'public' speaking exercise, grading, assessment, etc. To not merely explain the children what they will need to say, present, etc., but to show them. Go through it in as much detail as possible, show the children, where they will speak in front of a class, what they need to say, present, etc.

Grounding technique. If you or your students are experiencing severe anxiety or even a panic attack, try this grounding technique. Look around and find:

1. Five things you can **SEE**.
2. Four things you can **FEEL** or **TOUCH**.
3. Three things you can **HEAR**.
4. Two things you can **SMELL**.
5. One thing you can **TASTE**.

Teacher's role. In the (EFL) classroom the teacher has the number one role in reducing speaking anxiety, yet it is usually the teacher who is the main cause of speaking anxiety. As a teacher there is so much you can do to reduce speaking anxiety in the EFL classroom and in turn improve and help shape a positive self-image of your students and teach them important life skills on how to manage stress and anxiety. You can teach the students all of the above techniques on how to manage anxiety and stress. Below are some more ways on how to contribute to less speaking anxiety in class.

1. **Remember.** Remember what it is like to learn a new language. As an English teacher, you are fluent in English, listen to another foreign language, try to understand what they are talking about, try to speak it. How do you feel? How would you feel speaking in this foreign language in front of a group of people?
2. **Lead by example.** Every so often, recite an English poem off the top of your head in front of the students. Show and demonstrate to the children how you cope with speaking anxiety, do not just tell them.
3. **Keep in mind.** Keep in mind that speaking anxiety is common for most students. Remember that performance anxiety or stage fright is common for most people, including children. Keep in mind that you are contributing to defining them as a person, that you have a big impact on their self-image, as well as their attitude towards learning English and also other foreign languages.
4. **Classroom environment.** Establish a relaxed and supportive learning environment. Teach students that it's OK to make mistakes. Encourage students to talk, to speak up. Teach them that the only wrong answer is silence. Do not overcorrect them and do not allow negative comments from other students when a student makes a mistake. Give them plenty of room to practice, encourage pair work and group work, where they do not need to speak in front of the whole class.
5. **Grading.** Students should have a clear idea on what they will be graded on. Always make the learning objectives clear, before you even start to teach them, but definitely before you grade them. They need to be very clear on what they need to learn, know, present, etc. Use formative assessment and allow the students to grade themselves. This is a grading handout for 4th grade English, a type of formative assessment. It has different statements for example I know how to say what I am wearing today, etc. With it the students can grade their own knowledge.

Figure 3: 4th grade English formative assessment

OPISNA OCENA	Moja ocena:   	Učenec standarde znanja dosega:			
		samostojno	ob manjši pomoči	ob pomoči	ne dosega
Znam se predstaviti					
Znam povedati nekaj mojih najljubših stvari (barva, žival, hrana, letni čas)					
Poznam barve					
Poznam oblačila					
Znam povedati, kaj imam oblečeno					
Znam zapeti pesmico If you're wearing					
OCENA:	Podpis staršev:				

6. Conclusion

The article *Overcoming Speaking Anxiety in the EFL Classroom* examines the topic of performance anxiety, speaking and foreign language anxiety, stress management and ways of dealing with it in the classroom. Based on her personal experience in class and by reviewing literature on the topic, the author has discovered that both performance anxiety and foreign language anxiety are very common, that performance anxiety is not necessarily correlated with talent or knowledge and not something that simply goes away in time. The author has also found that anxiety can also be beneficial to a certain degree, that it can be an excellent source of creative energy, but also debilitating when it is too high. The article furthermore shows that anxiety is associated with self-image, that children frequently experience anxiety in class and that anxiety can lead to lower self-image, which in turn leads to even more anxiety. Finally, the article presents practical tips and examples on how to reduce speaking anxiety in the classroom, tips for teachers on how to manage anxiety in class and how to facilitate (foreign language) learning and promote positive self-image.

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