

FACTORS AFFECTING YOUNG LEARNERS’ SPEAKING ANXIETY IN ENGLISH CLASSROOMS

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Abstract: Speaking anxiety is one of the main barriers preventing young learners from participating actively in English lessons. The purpose of this paper is to identify the major factors affecting young learners’ speaking anxiety and suggest effective ways of reducing it. The study is based on a review of recent research published between 2018 and 2025. The findings indicate that speaking anxiety is caused by psychological, linguistic, classroom-related, teacher-related, and social factors. Low self-confidence, fear of mistakes, limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, public speaking, teacher correction, and peer judgment are among the most common causes. Preparation time, pair and group work, visual support, communicative activities, positive feedback, and gradual speaking practice can help reduce anxiety. The study concludes that creating a supportive classroom environment is essential for developing young learners’ speaking confidence.

Keywords: speaking anxiety, young learners, English classroom, self-confidence, speaking skills, classroom environment.

Introduction

Speaking is one of the most important skills in foreign language learning. It enables learners to express ideas, exchange information, ask and answer questions, and participate in communication. However, many learners experience anxiety when they are required to speak English in front of teachers and classmates.

Speaking anxiety may appear in the form of hesitation, silence, nervousness, forgetting familiar words, speaking too quietly, or avoiding classroom participation. An anxious learner may possess sufficient vocabulary and grammatical knowledge but still be unable to demonstrate these abilities during oral activities. This problem requires particular attention in young learner classrooms. Children’s willingness to speak is closely connected with their self-confidence, emotional security, teacher support, and relationships with classmates. A negative experience, such as being criticized or laughed at, may reduce a learner’s willingness to participate in future speaking activities.

Research shows that speaking anxiety is rarely caused by one factor. It usually results from the interaction of psychological, linguistic, instructional, and social influences (Hanifa, 2018; Fındıklı, 2023; Paraguas, 2025). Therefore, identifying these factors is important for organizing effective speaking instruction. The purpose of this paper is to identify the main factors affecting young learners’ speaking anxiety in English classrooms and discuss teaching strategies that can reduce it.

Research Methodology

The study employed a narrative literature review method. Academic studies published between 2018 and 2025 were analyzed. The selected sources discussed the causes, forms, levels, and reduction of speaking anxiety in English as a Foreign Language classrooms.

The findings were classified into four main groups:

1. psychological and linguistic factors;
2. classroom and task-related factors;
3. teacher-related factors;
4. peer and social factors.

Psychological and linguistic factors

Low self-confidence is one of the most common causes of speaking anxiety. Learners who do not believe in their own abilities often avoid answering questions or participating in discussions. They may compare themselves with stronger classmates and consider their English insufficient for communication.

Shyness and nervousness also reduce young learners’ participation. Some children can speak successfully with a partner but become silent when they are asked to speak in front of the whole class. This shows that speaking performance depends not only on language knowledge but also on the learner’s emotional condition.

Fear of making mistakes is another major factor. Learners may worry that grammatical or pronunciation errors will lead to criticism or embarrassment. Consequently, they monitor every word, pause frequently, and lose fluency. When mistakes are treated as failures, learners become more concerned with accuracy than communication.

Limited vocabulary also causes speaking anxiety. Learners may understand the topic but fail to find suitable words quickly. This problem is especially noticeable in spontaneous speaking because learners have little time to organize their responses.

Weak grammatical control creates similar difficulties. Learners may hesitate because they are unsure about word order, verb forms, or sentence structure. Pronunciation problems may also cause embarrassment and fear of being misunderstood.

Psychological and linguistic factors are closely related. Limited language knowledge can reduce confidence, while anxiety can make it more difficult to remember familiar words. Therefore, learners need both language support and emotional encouragement.

Classroom and task-related factors

The classroom environment strongly influences speaking anxiety. Formal and highly competitive classrooms may make learners feel that every response is being evaluated. A supportive environment, in contrast, allows learners to use English without excessive fear of mistakes. Public speaking, individual presentations, oral tests, and unexpected questions are especially anxiety-provoking. These tasks require learners to produce language immediately while being observed by others.

Young learners may experience mental blocking when they are given no preparation time. They must generate ideas, choose words, construct sentences, and pronounce them correctly at the same time. This cognitive pressure often results in hesitation or silence. Speaking tasks should therefore progress gradually. Learners may first listen to a model, practise key expressions, work with a partner, participate in a small group, and only later speak in front of the whole class.

Test pressure is another important factor. When every speaking activity is graded, learners may focus more on possible failure than on communication. Speaking practice should not always be treated as formal assessment.

Teacher-related factors

The teacher plays an important role in increasing or reducing speaking anxiety. Immediate correction can interrupt learners and make them afraid of continuing. Although correction is necessary, its timing should depend on the purpose of the activity. During fluency activities, teachers should allow learners to complete their ideas before correcting errors. Common mistakes can be discussed after the activity without identifying individual learners. This approach protects learners from embarrassment.

Harsh criticism, sarcasm, and comparison with stronger classmates may seriously damage young learners' confidence. Children often depend strongly on teacher approval, so negative comments can influence their future participation. Unclear instructions can also create anxiety. Learners need to understand what they should say, how long they should speak, and which expressions they can use. Teachers should demonstrate the task and provide an example before asking learners to perform.

Positive feedback has the opposite effect. Teachers should acknowledge the learner's effort and successful communication before correcting language errors. For example, instead of saying, “Your answer is wrong,” the teacher can say, “Your idea is clear; let us improve this sentence.”

Young learners are often afraid of being laughed at or judged by classmates. Fear of peer reaction may prevent them from speaking even when they know the answer. Negative comparison with more fluent learners can also reduce self-confidence. Nevertheless, classmates can become an important source of support. Pair and group activities reduce public pressure and give learners more opportunities to practise speaking. In cooperative tasks, attention is focused on completing a shared activity rather than evaluating one learner. Teachers should establish rules of respectful communication. Learners should not laugh at mistakes or interrupt one another. They can be taught supportive expressions such as “Good idea,” “Please continue,” and “Take your time.”

The main factors affecting young learners' speaking anxiety can be summarized as follows:

Figure1.

Recurring factors affecting speaking anxiety in EFL classrooms.

Factor	How It Raises Anxiety	Example Evidence
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Low self-confidence	Reduces willingness to speak and increases self-doubt	Rajendran, 2025
Fear of mistakes	Makes learners avoid speaking or over-monitor speech	Suparlan, 2021
Limited vocabulary and grammar	Creates difficulty forming sentences in real time	Alazeer, 2023
Pronunciation problems	Increases embarrassment and fear of misunderstanding	Suparlan, 2021
Peer judgment	Produces fear of ridicule or negative comparison	Agustin, 2025
Teacher correction and evaluation	Heightens fear of negative evaluation	Paraguas, 2025
Test and performance pressure	Intensifies anxiety during speaking tasks	Rasyida, 2023

These factors are interconnected. For example, pronunciation difficulties may lead to negative peer reactions, which then reduce self-confidence. Therefore, speaking anxiety requires a comprehensive pedagogical approach.

Pedagogical Implications

Speaking anxiety can be reduced through appropriate task design and classroom management. Learners should be given sufficient preparation time before speaking. Teachers can provide pictures, vocabulary lists, sentence starters, dialogue models, and question cards. Pair work and small-group activities are particularly effective because they reduce public pressure and increase speaking time. Role plays, information-gap activities, interviews, picture descriptions, guessing games, and storytelling are suitable for young learners. Visual support is also important. Pictures, flashcards, toys, and real objects help learners generate ideas and remember vocabulary.

Teachers should create a classroom environment in which mistakes are considered a natural part of language learning. Learners should not be interrupted constantly during communicative tasks. Feedback should be encouraging and limited to the most important errors. Technology-supported practice can also be useful. Learners may record short audio or video responses and repeat them before presenting their work. Such activities allow children to practise at their own pace.

Speaking assessment should include task completion, fluency, comprehensibility, interaction, vocabulary, and accuracy. Assessment based only on grammatical correctness may increase anxiety and discourage communication.

Conclusion

Young learners' speaking anxiety is caused by a combination of psychological, linguistic, instructional, and social factors. Low self-confidence, fear of mistakes, limited vocabulary, grammatical and pronunciation difficulties, public performance, teacher correction, test pressure, and peer judgment are the most common causes.

Speaking anxiety should not be considered only an individual learner problem. Classroom activities, correction techniques, teacher behavior, and peer relationships may also influence learners' willingness to communicate.

Teachers can reduce speaking anxiety by providing preparation time, visual and linguistic support, pair and group work, communicative activities, positive feedback, and gradual speaking practice. Learners should understand that mistakes are a normal part of language learning.

A supportive and respectful classroom environment enables young learners to feel safe, participate actively, and develop confidence in English communication.

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