

## EFL Iraqi Students' Strategies in Reducing Speaking Anxiety

By

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### Abstract

This study examined the anxiety among Iraqi EFL students. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with students in the study's sample population who were anxious. When dealing with anxiety in English grammar and vocabulary, many students avoided nonverbal strategies and activities like eye contact, physical expressions, and physical movements in the classroom. In order for us to continue our investigation. Iraqi EFL teachers must be more adaptable and sensitive to their students' needs if the students are to succeed.

**Keywords:** strategies, speaking, speaking anxiety

### Introduction

The language barrier still exists for Iraqi EFL learners. Only a handful of Iraqi schools provide English classes and opportunities for students to practice speaking the language (EFL). It's unlikely you'll get much exposure to English outside of the classroom if you don't go to university. However, due to its limited use in schools, English has a negligible effect on the social structure of the country (Broughton et al., 1980). As a result, Iraqi students find it difficult to converse in the language. A student's ability to verbally communicate in their target language is hampered by anxiety. Anxiety poses a significant challenge for students learning English as a foreign language, according to these findings (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986).

Following this focus on speaking anxiety, academics have looked for ways to deal with and lessen this worry. Learners are more successful when they are less anxious, according to Sato (2003). According to Burden's (2004) research, allowing students to talk on topics they are already familiar with, focusing more on substance than form, and giving positive comments instead of saying "that's wrong" helped reduce students' anxiety when giving a speech. To help students overcome their fear of speaking in class, there are many ways to include project work into the curriculum and to provide indirect rather than direct criticism (Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2009; Mamghaderi, Khamooshi, & Kwak, 2021; Motzer, Armellini, & Pelletier, 2020; Mutakyahwa & Marnewick, 2021).

Additional research has shown that teachers have a significant impact on students' levels of speaking anxiety. This suggests that teachers need to have a motivating and encouraging attitude and avoid competitiveness between and comparison of learners. (Karakaş, 2012).

Teaching methods, tasks, and activities utilized in EFL speaking classes have all been examined in relation to students' and teachers' nervousness when speaking in front of large groups of people. To investigate if she might minimize her pupils' fear of public speaking, Atas (2015) used theater tactics in her EFL classes. Using theater tactics reduced students' speaking anxiety levels, and they were less concerned about making mistakes and how others reacted to

their utterances, according to their before and post-tests and reflection reports. It was also found that incorporating oral presentation strategies into EFL speaking sessions reduced students' speaking anxiety levels. In an experiment with 60 female Palestinian university students, Hammad (2020) examined the effect of oral presentations on speaking anxiety. Experimenters who gave oral presentations fared higher on a speaking achievement exam and were less anxious compared to the control group, which did not give oral presentations. Furthermore, Coşkun (2017) found that students' anxiety levels were reduced when oral presentations were incorporated into the classroom.

Researchers in recent years have tended to focus more on the strategies and tactics for lowering students' speaking anxiety in language schools. There is still a need for greater research into these methods and strategies, as well as other methods and tactics to assist students feel less uncomfortable while speaking. Students' speaking anxiety levels may be affected by the systematic combination of presentations, micro speeches and scaffolded feedback, all of which have been shown to reduce stress.

### ***Problem Statement***

Students are understandably shy when it comes to speaking in front of the class. The fear of looking foolish in front of their peers or being teased by their professors keeps many students from speaking up in class. As a result, students are under a great deal of pressure to get their answers wrong these days. Two other problems are the inefficient use of time and the inappropriate use of resources and inputs (Tsui, 1996, as cited by Nunan, 1999, p.233). A student's interpersonal relationships with teachers and peers can impact how much they worry about social situations (Gass and Selinker, 2001).

It is common for English language learners to have difficulties when it comes to speaking the language. The vast majority of students who are proficient in reading and writing are unable to communicate in English. During the classroom speaking lesson, they tend to remain quiet since they are scared. As many students, particularly those from rural areas, showed in the study conducted by Subramaniam et al (2011), this is also evidenced. It was also mentioned that students have a lot of fear when it comes to interacting in English.

Learners' inability to communicate in the target language is often hindered by feelings of anxiety and low self-esteem (Nascente, 2001; Fung & Min, 2016). The findings of a study by Yulianti & Latief (2014) show that students, even those with high English exam results, are reluctant to participate in oral competitions like storytelling, poetry recitals and public speaking during the English Carnival. It's always been considered a challenge to learn to speak English, especially if it's your second language.

For a variety of reasons, students lose their enthusiasm and drive to communicate effectively in English. For starters, the emphasis on exams in Malaysia's educational system has resulted in a culture of exam-focus among both students and educators in the country. Malaysian education is lacking in inventiveness, according to Lee (2012), which makes students feel miserable and bored. Teachers also fail to include engaging activities into the classroom since they lack the ideas or expertise on how to do so in order to help pupils improve their communication skills (Chang & Goswami, 2011; Chen & Goh, 2011). It's difficult for teachers to provide students with engaging and authentic resources because not all Malaysian schools, particularly rural ones, have internet connection (Ghavifekr et al., 2016). When it comes to speaking English, most of them are frightened of being ridiculed.

Students' refusal to participate in speaking activities is often attributed to issues such as

a lack of enthusiasm or a "bad attitude," even though foreign language speaking anxiety is a typical occurrence in the teaching of English as a foreign language (Gregersen, 2003: 30). Even though there are many theoretical publications about general language anxiety, there appears to be little empirical research that focuses on the roots of foreign language speaking anxiety and provides practical recommendations and ways to overcome it.

Students from Baghdad University's EFL program took part in the research and reported feeling uneasy and insecure when speaking English. The study's subject was fear of public speaking, and participants were asked to devise their own methods for combating it.

### ***Research Question***

A study is being conducted with Iraqi students at Baghdad University's EFL course to learn about the methods they employ to overcome their fear of public speaking. The following is the research question for this study:

1. What are the EFL Iraq students at Baghdad University have done from strategies to reduce speaking anxiety?

### ***Research Objectives***

The aim of the research to learn about the speaking anxiety reduction strategies used by Iraqi EFL students at Baghdad University's EFL classroom.

1. To find out the EFL Iraqi students' strategies at Baghdad university in reducing speaking anxiety.

## **Literature Review**

Whenever someone is confronted with threatening, doubtful, or intimidating circumstances, they feel concern, worry, and/or fear. Anxiety is a normal emotion when people are under stress or pressure (Mandel, 2000). According to research, anxiety is associated with an increase in the activity of the autonomic nervous system (Spielberger, 1983 as cited in Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986).

As a general rule, anxiety is defined as "the subjective experience of tension, apprehensiveness, uneasiness, and worry linked with an activation of the autonomic nervous system (Horwitz 2001, p.113). "A particular complex of self-perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and behaviors associated to classroom language learning emerging from the distinctiveness of the language learning process" is the best way to describe language anxiety (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope 1986, p. 133). As a result, anxiety might have a negative impact on speaking abilities (Brown, 2007).

Second language learners' progress is hampered by language anxiety, according to Cutron (2009), and teachers should make an effort to alleviate it in their classrooms. That's why teachers need to keep students engaged so that they don't feel overwhelmed. Students will be more motivated to work on their English-speaking skills if they can have fun while doing so. Next, Khamies (2006) contends that emotive elements are the most potent means of improving students' ability to communicate verbally. Self-esteem, emotions, attitude, anxiety, and motivation are all examples of affective elements.

Anxiety is viewed as a barrier that prevents students from speaking in English in this study. Krashen (1982) created the term "affective filter," which refers to the idea that feelings

of worry and tension act as metaphorical barriers that inhibit language learners from mastering the language (Lightbown & Spada, 2008). It is only possible to diminish or abolish this "affective filter" in a stress-free learning environment. The affective filter must be weak in order for optimal learning to occur, which means that a positive attitude toward learning is present (Krashen, 1982).

Many previous studies have found that ESL learners avoid communicating in English because of their nervousness. It was shown that ESL learners had a lack of confidence, nervousness, and lack of motivation when they were obliged to speak in English in Meyes' (2003) study. Fung and Min (2016) conducted a study that found that 66.6 percent of students reported experiencing nervousness and discomfort when delivering an oral presentation in front of their peers. Christopher (2016) also found that 15 out of 30 year 5 primary students stated that the fear of being criticized by others prevented them from speaking in English.

As well as external symptoms such as nervousness, sweating and shaking hands and feet the person suffering from anxiety can also experience internal symptoms such as rapid breathing and a faster heartbeat or palpitations (Mandel, 2000). Anxiety affects a person's ability to carry out daily tasks because it makes them more difficult. People with mental illnesses have difficulty following instructions because their thinking is clouded (Mayer, 2008). A student's ability to learn a language like English can be seriously harmed if they are suffering from high levels of anxiety during their studies. As a result, anxiety can seriously hinder a student's ability to pick up a new language.

The speed at which a student absorbs new information has a significant impact on his or her ability and performance in English speaking. Because anxiety impairs learning, people who are anxious put in less effort than those who are not anxious. Excessive worry can make you helpless at times. Anxiety can appear crippling when viewed through the eyes of the person who is dealing with it. Even if anxiety is only experienced on a cellular level, it affects the person in profound ways. We could use words like "overwhelmed and out of control," "helpless," "hopeless," and "wanting to flee the situation" to describe a patient's emotional state (Mayer, 2008).

### ***Speaking Anxiety***

Anxiety is a problem for many people trying to improve their English communication skills (Fung & Min, 2016). The dread of making mistakes when speaking in English causes them to be nervous and unsure of themselves (Nascente, 2001). Fear of being teased or laughed at by their peers prevents them from learning the language.

As a result, individuals are unmotivated to communicate in English since they perceive it to be both difficult and pointless for them. Learners' English language proficiency has declined as a result of their pessimistic outlooks (Samuel and Bakar, 2008). The lack of entertaining factors in the teaching and learning process is one of the reasons why young learners fail to acquire a new language.

It can be more difficult for students, especially EFL learners, to speak English. For example, the difficulties arise when attempting to say the exact pronunciation of a term. According to Gilakjani (2011), proper English pronunciation is critical. The absence of vocabulary and grammatical elements are the next issues to be addressed. When learning the English language, students should focus on grammar, vocabulary, and other facets of the language to achieve fluency in speaking it fluently. Another issue raised by Novitasari (2009) is the fact that students may not spend enough time practicing their pronunciation and grammar

with a partner. The final obstacle that pupils must overcome is their anxiety. Students often worry that their peers will laugh if they stumble over their pronunciation and grammar while speaking in front of a group. Students are frightened by this situation. According to Sari (2017), anxiety occurs when kids are nervous, anxious, and unsure of themselves. She also believes that students' anxieties are a prevalent concern in EFL learning. The greatest technique to lessen students' tension should be discovered

Fear of learning a foreign language has been linked to lower levels of proficiency in other languages in numerous studies. Many affective factors influence foreign language learning, particularly oral performance, and anxiety appears to be the most important (Hanifa, 2018). Anxiety about speaking a foreign language is one of four anxieties that still necessitates further study. Public speaking anxiety has been studied, but despite its prevalence, it continues to be a major research topic (Tuan and Mai, 2015).

There is a pressing need to discover a technique to overcome this apprehension and encourage learners to utilize the language in a fun and encouraging way. With a little bit of fun thrown into the mix, puppets can be a great way to get students excited about learning and teaching (Toledo & Hoit, 2016; Christamia, 2014). Using puppets in the speaking class is said to lower students' anxiety levels, allowing them to talk more freely in English. The effectiveness of puppetry in improving English competence, particularly in speaking, has been studied extensively. The use of puppetry in teaching English to Malaysian primary school students, especially those in a rural area of Sabah, has been the subject of scant research.

Researchers at the University of Minnesota-Morris used a questionnaire to learn what makes a group of 31 English language learners at UMM nervous about how the ESP Speaking Program uses English in its lessons. Thirty-one UMM English majors participated in the research. Several factors were found to contribute to students' apprehension about speaking English in class, including their inability to communicate effectively in English and their fear of making mistakes when addressing the class, as well as classroom procedures, an instructor's accent, and factors that lead them to believe their classmates know more than they do.

Sadiq (2017) examined the level of language anxiety among EFL students at Princes Nora University, a Saudi Arabian university located in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. What effect do the following variables have on the language anxiety of students: (a) How long have you been in the program? (b) What is the student's age? Sadiq made use of the Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope Anxiety Scale for Foreign Language Classrooms (1986). The variables examined had a strong correlation with anxiety, according to the researcher.

Yours Truly, Youd Zyoud (2016) The fact that speaking is both an interactive process and a productive skill may mean that any anxiety you feel when speaking is overlooked. Hanifa claims that public speaking anxiety is common among college students (2018). When students are afraid of speaking in front of others, it makes it difficult for them to learn the language and can even affect their grades (Felicity, 2018). The most difficult part of learning a foreign language is dealing with the anxiety that comes with public speaking (Wang and Roopchund, 2015). Consequently, additional research into the anxiety linked with public speaking is needed.

### ***Strategies used to reduce speaking anxiety***

Students' anxiety of speaking in a foreign language can be reduced using proven techniques, according to research. This study, conducted by Rafada and Madini (2017), used semi-structured interviews to identify coping strategies for public speaking fears: When it



comes to overcoming public speaking anxiety, there are several methods that can help: watching English movies, using English websites, traveling abroad and speaking with locals, giving more presentations, reading English books, and enrolling in English institutes during the summer. The instructor's role in reducing learners' language anxiety is the second consideration. The third step entails selecting a few topics that interest them while also being within their current level of knowledge. Improve teachers' use of body language to give students a better opportunity to follow directions. They have a point. Fifth, students can spend an hour in the lab practicing their speaking skills instead of spending hours in the English classroom. As well as saving students' hours of boring English lessons, this solution also allows them to use their newly acquired language skills in real-world situations. Students will be more enthused and motivated to learn if you implement strategies that put them at the center of the learning process.

Student perceptions of their level of English-speaking anxiety were examined by Choi (2016). Eighty people took part in an FLCAS survey questionnaire that yielded the gathered data. Based on quantitative findings that spontaneous speaking activities were more anxiety-provoking, more practice and preparation may help reduce language learners' anxiety about speaking classes. Pedagogical and personal factors influence both language learners' negative and positive feelings about speaking activities, and teachers' behavior attitudes may be an important factor in reducing these negative feelings, according to the findings of the study.

According to Rayani et al. (2016), a study was done to find out how students deal with their fear of speaking English and what factors influence that fear. This study opted for a qualitative approach to research. This study included 30 students from a Dalu-Dalu junior high school class. A survey and an interview provided the data used in this report's analysis. Students who were anxious about speaking English were found to benefit from the following strategies: Positive Thinking, Resignation, Peer seeking, preparation, and relaxation, according to the findings. They were anxious about communicating in English because they were worried about saying something incorrectly, afraid of being judged, and because they had poor communication skills.

## **Methodology**

The study's methodology is primarily qualitative. Ten Iraqi university students with the highest levels of speaking anxiety took part in the study. Researchers used semi-structured interviews to gather data (see Appendix 1 for the list of the questions used by the researcher to interview the interviewees). The researcher had to first transcribing and then analysing the results to draw conclusions and/or verify them in order to properly analyze all of the interview data (Miles and Huberman, 1994). During the data reduction process, the researcher culled the interview down to the bare essentials. Organizing data so that conclusions can be drawn and verified is what Miles and Huberman claim they've accomplished by focusing on what's important and discarding the rest.

Following data reduction to classify each participant's activity or strategy for reducing classroom speaking anxiety, the researcher presents the reduction results in tabular form (see appendix two). Data must be organized and pressed before deduction, display, and action can be taken (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Finally, the data in the table should be explained in detail. Additionally, the researcher verified that the data he gleaned from the display was correct by going back and checking it.

## **Findings and Discussion**

Baghdad University's EFL Iraq students used strategies to reduce their speaking anxiety, which was addressed in a series of semi-structured interviews conducted in the field to gather data (see Appendix 1 for the list of the questions used by the researcher to interview the interviewees).

Interviews with Iraqi EFL students at Baghdad University revealed that these were their go-to strategies for dealing with their fear of speaking in English:

### ***Positive thinking and ignoring friends***

Students can overcome their fear of speaking by being positive about the outcome of their speech. They also continue to smile despite their peers' taunts, as if to ignore the ridicule. The implication here is that they aren't afraid to take a chance and keep talking despite the jeers of their colleagues. It is normal for them to answer a question incorrectly because they believe that all students are the same and no one hears them when they speak.

### ***Avoiding eye contact***

Students avoid looking their classmates or the teacher directly in the eyes when speaking English in order to lessen their speaking anxiety. Some students choose to hide their faces behind their hands when they are talking in class. They'll act as if no one else is present when speaking English in class.

### ***Carrying small notes, memorizing and repeating***

Some students find it easier to speak English in class when they have a small note with them. Pen and paper are used to jot down answers and points to be discussed, so this is possible. A quiet moment to read the note will follow. For a while before presenting it in class, they practice and memorize the material.

### ***Keeping silent and making negotiation***

It is not uncommon for students to remain silent even after their teacher instructs them to speak. If students see their teacher becoming agitated, they are more likely to open up. Before speaking in English for the first time, students will act like they don't understand or are sick in the classroom. Students must practice speaking in order to anticipate the mistakes and blunders they will make in front of the teacher.

### ***Drinking and praying before taking***

Speaking English in class has caused physical symptoms in some students, including trembling, a racing heart, and a generalized anxiety disorder. Before speaking English, students can help themselves relax by reciting prayers and drinking water. They believe that drinking water will relax and calm them down. It reduces the students' anxiety.

### ***Physical expressive reactions***

In order to overcome their fear of public speaking in English, some students found it helpful to fill their free time with seemingly pointless physical pursuits. Students use what are known as physical expressive reactions, or PERs, to calm themselves down when speaking English in class. For instance, nail-biting and lip-biting are examples of physical expressive reactions; others include shaking the body, doodling in a box, and repairing or rolling the figure.

### ***Conclusion and recommendation for Future Studies***

Although Iraqi EFL students have anxiety when speaking English in class, the anxiety

does not completely paralyze them, according to the findings. There are ways to reduce anxiety despite the difficulties students face in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) program at Baghdad University. Through a variety of unconventional methods, they conquer their fear of public speaking. If they're doing it to avoid failure, it's probably because they're trying to overcome their fear of not succeeding at learning English as a second language. For students who are nervous about speaking English in class, teachers can make a big difference by helping them feel comfortable. Teachers who are sensitive and caring may be able to reduce the anxiety students feel when speaking English. A few jokes and some laughter with the students can help to alleviate any tension in the classroom and make everyone more relaxed and at ease. It's also important for teachers to make an effort to communicate with their students clearly. Teachers who use harsh or rude language with their student's risk damaging their students' self-esteem and the self-esteem of their peers.

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