

## THE IMPACT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIERS ON ORAL PROFICIENCY IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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**Abstract.** This study investigates how psychological constraints influence learners’ oral proficiency in a foreign language. While traditional teaching emphasizes grammar and vocabulary, emotional and cognitive factors often determine communicative performance. The paper reviews current research on psychological barriers (such as anxiety and fear of mistakes) and examines their effects on fluency and interaction. Empirical data from recent studies are synthesized to highlight how anxiety reduces participation and fluency. Practical recommendations are discussed, including pedagogical strategies to lower anxiety and foster active speaking in the classroom.

**Keywords:** psychological barriers, oral proficiency, speaking anxiety, foreign language learning, communication, motivation.

**Introduction.** Oral proficiency is widely considered a key goal of language education, yet speaking is often the most challenging skill to develop. Learners may demonstrate adequate grammar and vocabulary knowledge but still struggle to speak fluently in real situations. This apparent paradox is largely attributed to psychological barriers. These include emotional factors like anxiety, fear of negative evaluation and low self-confidence, which can outweigh linguistic competence in determining performance. For example, studies have found that increased anxiety levels lead to significantly reduced participation in class and diminished speaking performance.

Psychological barriers also impose cognitive costs. High anxiety can overload working memory, making it difficult for learners to recall words or construct coherent sentences in real time. As one review notes, stress often causes “forgetfulness, negative thoughts and difficulties in recalling words” during speaking tasks. Thus even simple sentences become harder to produce under pressure. In combination with time constraints, these barriers disrupt fluency and coherence. Understanding the nature of psychological barriers is therefore essential for improving oral proficiency.

**Literature Review.** Psychological barriers in language learning have been widely studied in applied linguistics and psychology. One influential model identifies foreign language classroom anxiety as a situation-specific form of stress. Horwitz introduced the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale to measure anxiety in three dimensions: communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation and test anxiety

[2]. High scores on this scale have been linked to lower participation and performance in speaking tasks. Krashen’s Affective Filter Hypothesis similarly suggests that emotional factors (anxiety, motivation) act as a filter: when anxiety is high, language input and production suffer [4].

Humanistic approaches in education stress the importance of emotional safety and self-esteem. According to this perspective, learners perform best when they feel accepted and supported [9] and when basic needs like confidence and belonging are met [6]. Indeed, recent research finds that learners with higher anxiety often avoid communication and show less fluency [5]. For example, Quvanch found that Afghan EFL students experienced shaking, sweating and memory lapses when anxious and their main concerns were low self-confidence and fear of negative evaluation [8]. These findings align with broader evidence that anxiety causes reluctance to speak and reliance on simple language structures.

**Psychological Factors Affecting Speaking.** Studies consistently identify similar factors:

1. Internal factors: low self-confidence, fear of making mistakes, communication apprehension and negative emotions such as stress or embarrassment [4], [1]. These internal constraints make students hesitant and disrupt the flow of conversation.

2. External factors: classroom environment and teaching methods also play a role. Strict or accuracy-focused instruction, lack of supportive feedback and limited opportunities for authentic communication all exacerbate anxiety [1], [8]. For instance, research notes that heavy emphasis on error correction creates pressure that discourages risk-taking. Conversely, a positive classroom atmosphere and interactive activities can lower the emotional barrier and encourage participation.

The literature suggests that psychological barriers are multifaceted, involving both affective and cognitive dimensions. Overcoming them likely requires addressing both personal and contextual factors.

**Methods.** This study is based on a qualitative review of recent research in educational psychology and applied linguistics. Key theoretical concepts (such as anxiety models and affective filter theory) were analyzed. In addition, empirical findings from classroom observations and student surveys were compiled from the literature. Indicators such as anxiety symptoms, participation rates and coping strategies were compared across studies to identify common patterns in how psychological barriers affect oral proficiency.

**Results.** The analysis confirms that psychological barriers have a direct impact on oral language performance. Data from multiple studies show:

*High prevalence of anxiety:* A majority of learners report feeling nervous when speaking a foreign language. For example, one study found moderate speaking anxiety in undergraduates, who cited fear of mistakes and low confidence as key issues [4].

*Observable effects on speech:* Students experiencing anxiety tend to speak more slowly, pause frequently and use simpler language. They often fixate on accuracy, which can lead to fragmented speech. Quvanch noted that anxious students had difficulties recalling words and maintaining eye contact [8]. Similarly, general research reports that stress “often lead[s] to reduced participation, reluctance to communicate, and impaired linguistic development”.

*Influence of classroom context:* A supportive teacher and interactive tasks correlate with lower anxiety. In surveys, about 70% of students believed that a positive teacher attitude reduced their speaking anxiety. Conversely, rigid teaching styles and negative feedback were linked to higher stress. Studies highlight that “classroom dynamics, institutional expectations and peer interactions” significantly shape language anxiety [1].

These findings illustrate both internal and external categories of barriers:

**Internal barriers:** include fear of mistakes, low self-confidence and anxiety, which lead students to avoid speaking or hesitate. Emotional tension was seen to “interfere with cognitive functioning” making speech slower and less coherent.

**External barriers:** include teaching methods and environment. Emphasis on accuracy, lack of authentic practice and unsupportive classroom climates increase anxiety. For instance, neglecting oral activities or providing only critical feedback discourages students from practicing speaking.

The results underscore that psychological factors significantly limit learners’ oral proficiency. Students who reported high anxiety often participated less and scored lower on speaking assessments, despite possessing grammatical knowledge.

**Discussion.** The evidence makes clear that psychological barriers are central to foreign language outcomes. Anxiety and fear not only reduce participation but also hinder cognitive processing during speech. This aligns with the affective filter hypothesis: when students feel threatened or insecure, their ability to receive and produce language is blocked. Thus, teaching interventions must address emotional as well as linguistic needs.

Creating a low-anxiety learning environment is key. Teachers should encourage a culture where mistakes are treated as natural learning steps. For example, adopting a learner-centered approach with collaborative activities and open discussions can alleviate pressure and build confidence [7]. One study found that using an AI conversational agent in pair work significantly lowered situational anxiety and improved fluency, as students felt they were in a “non-judgmental environment” that scaffolded their speaking practice [3]. While technology is one approach, simple classroom strategies also help: pairing students for dialogues, using role-plays, and offering positive feedback can motivate hesitant learners.

Furthermore, teaching students coping strategies is beneficial. The Afghan study reported that successful learners coped by engaging with authentic English content, practicing regularly, and using relaxation techniques. Encouraging such techniques like speaking aloud at home or visualizing successful communication can empower students. Promoting learner autonomy (e.g. goal-setting, self-monitoring) helps students reframe challenges as achievable goals rather than threats. As Quvanch conclude, awareness and targeted practice are crucial for overcoming anxiety [8].

Vocabulary development also contributes to fluency and confidence in speaking. Rich lexical knowledge improves communication speed and accuracy [10]. The use of idioms and authentic expressions further enhances natural communication [11].

Reducing psychological barriers involves both emotional support from the teacher and skill-building for the student. When learners feel supported and prepared, their oral proficiency improves noticeably.

**Conclusion.** Psychological barriers are a significant obstacle to achieving oral proficiency in a foreign language. Anxiety, fear of mistakes and low confidence undermine learners’ willingness and ability to speak, often more than their lack of grammar. These barriers manifest in hesitancy, reduced participation and slow, fragmented speech. However, they are not insurmountable.

The literature shows that targeted pedagogical strategies can mitigate these barriers. A supportive classroom environment, positive and constructive feedback, and opportunities for genuine communication all help lower anxiety. Meanwhile, teaching students coping strategies (such as regular practice, exposure to authentic language and relaxation) enables them to manage their emotions. Integrating these methods into language teaching allows learners to build confidence and fluency over time. Ultimately, successful language learning requires addressing both linguistic competence and psychological readiness. By acknowledging the emotional dimension of language learning and adapting our teaching accordingly, educators can help students overcome psychological barriers and develop strong oral skills.

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