

ADDRESSING PRONUNCIATION ANXIETY: CREATING A PSYCHOLOGICALLY
SAFE SPACE FOR CONFIDENT ENGLISH SPEAKING PRACTICE

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Annotation: It is known that one of the most important parts of learning English, but often unseen, is **pronunciation**. Because of this, when learners speak and mispronounce words, they often develop a fear and anxiety about conveying their message correctly to the listener. This leads to the feelings of "I can't speak" and "language learning is not for me." This psychological barrier—Krashen's "**Affective Filter**"—hinders language acquisition. This article uses research on **feelings in language learning (SLA)** and **learning psychology** to offer a new, complete plan for teachers. This plan includes ways to manage the class, new teaching methods, and different ways to test students. The goal is to always lower **Pronunciation Anxiety (PA)** and build a culture where students are okay with making mistakes (**risk-taking**). This helps students see pronunciation practice as a key part of **being able to communicate**. The comprehensive article explores the theoretical foundations, causes, and widespread impact of PA while meticulously examining a shift in the pedagogical paradigm. The ultimate goal is to transform the speaking class from a source of fear into a **sanctuary** for confident, authentic, and anxiety-free oral production.

Keywords: Pronunciation Anxiety, Foreign Language Anxiety, Affective Filter Hypothesis, Psychological Safety, Communicative Competence, Supportive Classroom Environment, Error Correction, Second Language Acquisition.

1. Introduction: The Silent Stranglehold of Pronunciation Anxiety

The steps that new language learners go through, especially those learning global languages like English, can be a little **exciting and scary**. Researchers say that while people learning a second language should not focus too much on their worries, their biggest problem is **mispronouncing words** during conversation, which often makes them anxious. This is because, before they even speak, they worry about mistakes in **word stress, rhythm, and intonation**. When they try to speak, the learner's mind tries to avoid any possible pronunciation mistake. This causes a panic reaction that shows up as physical signs like **shaking and sweating**, and mental problems like **forgetting things** and having **trouble remembering words** (Akramy, 2020; Horwitz et al., 1986).

The consequences of anxiety are clear: hesitation to speak, a decrease in the desire to communicate (WTC), and ultimately, poor performance despite sufficient linguistic knowledge.

If left untreated, this anxiety (PA) creates a vicious cycle in which avoidance prevents practice and lack of practice exacerbates the perceived lack of competence, leading to even greater anxiety (Baran-Łucarz, 2017). This article argues that the most effective and sustainable strategy for alleviating language anxiety (PA) is not through isolated practice, but rather by comprehensively and consciously constructing a psychologically safe learning environment—a place where mistakes are not signs of failure but important reference points for growth.

2. Theoretical Framework: Anxiety, Affect, and Acquisition

To effectively address PA, educators must first understand its theoretical roots within SLA.

2.1 The Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982)

At the heart of the discussion of language anxiety is **Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis**. This theory posits that affective variables (such as motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety) act as a filter that regulates the amount of intelligible input that a learner can absorb. When anxiety is high, the "**Affective Filter**" is raised, creating a psychological barrier that prevents language input from being fully processed and transformed into acquired language. Pronunciation, the most visible and audible aspect of language production, is particularly susceptible to this filter being raised. The fear of an incomprehensible sound or a foreign accent is often so strong that the learner prefers to remain silent, thereby shutting down the most important channel for language output and feedback.

2.2 Skill-Specific Anxiety and its Determinants

Research has shown that anxiety is often skill-specific, meaning that a student who is good at reading or writing may experience distressing anxiety when speaking (Baran-Lukarz, 2011). The key determinants of PA that have often been identified in empirical studies include:

- **Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE):** This may be the most important factor in **PA**, meaning they face discussion among their peers or the thought that "they will laugh at me" when they make a mistake, and hearing a reprimand from their teacher. (Akramy, 2020).
- **Beliefs about Pronunciation:** There is a common misconception among many learners that having "good" speaking skills means being like a **native speaker**, and this is exemplified by many media and some sources, which can be a bit intimidating for the learner. (Erdel, 2023; Hendriks et al., 2021).
- **Low Self-Perceived Proficiency:** Students who rate their own English proficiency, particularly their speaking ability, as low often exhibit significantly higher PA (Erdel, 2023).
- **Teacher Interaction:** Sometimes, during the course of the conversation, it may even be tempting to correct a pronunciation error, that is, to publicly point out the mistakes. (Akramy, 2020).

3. The Cornerstone of Mitigation: Psychological Safety

The concept of **Psychological Safety**— The basic solution for **PA** is the idea that a learner must create a **psychological safe zone** for themselves. In this zone, they can **talk and make mistakes** without fear, and know that **mistakes are normal** and okay. (Edmondson, 1999; Sanako, 2023).

3.1 Establishing a Non-Threatening Classroom Climate

The teacher has a major role in creating such an environment. This is achieved through deliberate and consistent actions:

- **Co-Creating Classroom Norms:** Teachers should change students' breaking of mandatory rules into respectful communication with each other, that is, before they start a lesson or course, they should address the student with the question "In what situation or environment do you feel free to speak?" (Udpglobal, 2024). This shared ownership increases investment and adherence.
- **Modeling Inclusive Behavior:** Remembering and pronouncing students' names correctly is a key micro-affirmation that makes people feel recognized and valued. (UCL, 2020). In addition, teachers should normalize and support mistakes, humanize the role of the expert, and recognize their difficulties or uncomfortable situations in language learning. (Udpglobal, 2024).
- **Zero-Tolerance for Ridicule:** Active monitoring and constructive resolution of any peer-related disagreements are essential. Why is that the classroom should be free from teasing or bullying. (WGU, 2022).

3.2 Rethinking the Role of the Teacher

The educator must transition from the role of a corrector to a facilitator and coach.

- **Feedback as Scaffolding, Not Judgment:** Despite the pronunciation errors that students make during the conversation, teachers should not discuss or judge their mistakes, but rather create a constructive and supportive classroom environment. (Sanako, 2023). For example, remembering the mistakes made or taking points and summarizing them at the end of the student's speech and explaining them in an impersonal way would be a much more useful strategy than interrupting them and their opinion. (Akramy, 2020).
- **Focusing on Intelligibility over Accent:** Teachers need to shift the teaching goal from achieving "native" pronunciation to achieving intelligibility. This approach relieves the enormous pressure for phonetic perfection by emphasizing that the primary goal of pronunciation is successful communication. (Erdel, 2023). Openly discussing the concept of **English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)**, i.e., learners interacting with other speakers whose native language is not English, can help to confirm the "non-native" accent.
- **Positive Reinforcement and Micro-affirmations:** Utilizing specific, friendly praise—"I really liked how you managed to use that new vowel sound we practiced"—is more effective than generic "good job" in building self-efficacy (Udpglobal, 2024).

4. Instructional Strategies for Anxiety Reduction

A psychologically safe environment should be supported by **practical, low-stakes teaching strategies** that encourage a gradual impact on speech practice.

4.1 Gradual Exposure and Low-Stakes Practice

Anxiety (or nervousness) is often triggered by sudden, high-pressure public speaking demands. The gradual progression (or Sequencing) of speaking activities is crucial:

- **Start Small:** It is advisable to start training in small groups first, as this allows for better supervision of students and individual attention. (Udpglobal, 2024).
- **Unmonitored Practice:** Incorporating technology into language learning programs, for example, allows students to engage in individual, safe, and independent practice outside of the classroom. This immediately eliminates the fear of peer and teacher participation, allowing them to build foundational confidence before speaking in public. (Sanako, 2023).
- **Preparation as a Strategy:** The most important mechanism is the preparation of the student before his speech, that is, they should pay attention to each word by imitating it out loud, by reading phonetic transcriptions (Szyszka, 2017). This provides a sense of control over the task.

4.2 Integrating Pronunciation into Communicative Tasks

Although pronunciation is considered an academic aspect, learners should study it as a vital connection in real life for utilizing.

- **Task-Based Learning (TBL):** Design tasks that prioritize the successful transmission of a message. When the focus is on achieving a real-world outcome (e.g., planning a trip, solving a puzzle), the focus shifts away from the self-conscious monitoring of one's own pronunciation (Sanako, 2023).
- **Game-Based Learning (GBL):** Incorporating games, music, and cooperative learning activities has been shown to reduce anxiety and increase motivation by introducing an element of fun and reducing the amount of interaction (Ciencia Latina, 2023).
- **Focus on Suprasegmentals:** Learners may do **stress, rhythm and intonation** before sounds for more rapid indelibility and less intimidation. Activities can target word stress and new vocabulary, or sentence rhythm in short dialogues

4.3 Learner-Centered Coping Mechanisms

In addition to teacher-led measures, learners should also be provided with self-management coping strategies:

- **Affective Strategies:** Teaching students **relaxation techniques**, such as deep breathing and mindfulness, is a key psychological intervention. These strategies help reduce the affective filter during times of stress (Ciencia Latina, 2023; ResearchGate, 2016).
- **Authentic Exposure and Practice:** Encouraging students to **engage with authentic English**—watching videos, listening to podcasts, and trying to mimic phrases—can improve their intuitive grasp of pronunciation and build a stronger foundation for speaking (Akramy, 2020; Khreisat, 2022).
- **Self-Affirmation and Reappraisal:** Learners can be taught to re-frame anxious thoughts. Instead of thinking, "I'm going to sound stupid," they can use self-affirmations like, "Making mistakes means I'm trying and learning." This cognitive behavioral approach helps to manage the emotional response to fear (ResearchGate, 2024).

5. The Role of Technology and the Digital Learning Space

Technology offers a uniquely non-threatening space for pronunciation practice, effectively creating a private, digital safe space.

5.1 Asynchronous Speaking Practice

Language software and applications allow for **asynchronous speaking exercises**. Learners can record themselves speaking a set task—repeatedly, if necessary—without the real-time presence of an audience.

- **Self-Correction Tools:** One powerful strategy for self-study is to use visual feedback (e.g., comparing voice recordings, identifying pitch) or tools that allow students to hear their own voices.
- **Phonetic Aids:** Technology provides immediate access to phonetic transcriptions or audio playback, which helps students proactively address pronunciation issues before speaking (Cambridge Core, 2025).

5.2 Online Environments and Anxiety

The transition to an **online learning** environment has shown mixed results regarding anxiety. While some students report that their anxiety about studying has decreased in an online environment due to the **lack of direct observation** (PMC, 2025), speaking anxiety may persist. However, using small online chat rooms or private chat features for pair work can mimic the low-level environment of pair discussion, reducing the intimidation of a full-screen virtual classroom (Sanako, 2022).

6. Conclusion: A Call for Affective Pedagogy

Not getting better at pronunciation while studying a language is a big deal, not just a small discomfort. It seriously impacts how well the student can communicate. The solution needs to happen in two ways: the student must feel **psychologically secure** through mutual respect and a basic change in the teaching style. But, students also have to recognize how bad **FNE** can be and control their sensitivity to things.

By implementing strategies such as creating supportive norms, understanding each other, delaying error correction, and using less demanding and technological practices, teachers can notice new changes in students, that is, weak areas of the student, such as incorrect vowel sounds or inappropriate use of stresses, can gradually change for the better. Ultimately, addressing PA requires a change in the mindset of both the teacher and the student, and should be viewed not as a fear of mistakes, but as an aspect that leads to success and as a key evidence of learning.

Resources:

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