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## PAIR AND GROUP WORK ACTIVITIES FOR REDUCING ENGLISH SPEAKING ANXIETY

**Severina T. M.**

*Candidate of Pedagogical Sciences, Associate Professor,  
Associate Professor at the Department of Foreign Languages  
Khmelnyskyi Humanitarian Pedagogical Academy  
Proskurivskogo Pidpyllyya str. 139, Khmelnytskyi, Ukraine  
[orcid.org/0000-0003-1379-8456](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1379-8456)  
[severina.tetiana@gmail.com](mailto:severina.tetiana@gmail.com)*

**Key words:** *foreign language anxiety, oral performance, pair work activities, group work activities, decreasing anxiety in communication.*

Foreign language anxiety is an urgent problem experienced by the majority of learners, specifically Ukrainian ESL students in their speaking performance. The consideration of foreign language anxiety in the modern English classroom is highly significant to assist learners boost their confidence and develop their communication skills in the target language. The current study includes literature review of the concepts of “foreign language anxiety”, “speaking anxiety”, describes the factors that may cause communication apprehension in ESL classroom and possible ways of overcoming this anxiety. The article presents investigation of the activities for decreasing English language anxiety in speaking. The qualitative study aimed at exploration of the speaking anxiety experiences of the first-year Ukrainian ESL students studying at Primary Education and Philology Department of Khmelnytskyi Humanitarian Pedagogical Academy. For collecting data, observation, interviews and diary are implemented at Practice of Oral and Written English classes. The reasons of speaking anxiety are analyzed: fear to be criticized or judged by their teacher or groupmates due to some mistakes while speaking; irrelevant error correction techniques; fear not be able to express opinion briefly and clearly; teacher-centered modes of interaction; authoritarian teaching style; students’ low self-esteem; intense classroom atmosphere; a fear of public speaking. In order to reduce English speaking anxiety, a multi-faceted approach is implicated: using pair and group work activities, establishing supportive classroom atmosphere, giving constructive feedback with self- and peer- error correction techniques, and employing student-centered methods. The most beneficial for reducing English language anxiety such activities are defined: line up role plays, picture dictation, memory cards, buzz groups, fishbowl, snowball pyramids and circle of voices. The results of the study confirmed the effectiveness of the interventions that led to increasing foreign language performance of the students and their willingness to be engaged in speaking activities.

## ПАРНІ ТА ГРУПОВІ ВИДИ ДІЯЛЬНОСТІ ЯК ЗАСІБ ЗНИЖЕННЯ АНГЛОМОВНОЇ ТРИВОЖНОСТІ У ГОВОРІННІ

**Северіна Т. М.**

*кандидат педагогічних наук, доцент,  
доцент кафедри іноземних мов*

*Хмельницька гуманітарно-педагогічна академія  
вул. Проскурівського підпілля, 139, Хмельницький, Україна  
orcid.org/0000-0003-1379-8456  
severina.tetiana@gmail.com*

**Ключові слова:** *іншомовна тривожність, успішність у говорінні, парні види діяльності, групові види діяльності, зниження тривожності у спілкуванні.*

Іншомовна тривожність у говорінні – актуальна проблема, з якою стикається більшість студентів. Зокрема, це стосується українських студентів, для яких англійська є другою іноземною мовою. Дослідження аспектів іншомовної тривожності у навчанні іноземної мови є надзвичайно важливим, оскільки сприяє визначенню шляхів розвитку впевненості студентів та навичок спілкування іноземною мовою. Автором здійснено аналіз літературних джерел щодо інтерпретації понять «іншомовна тривожність», «тривожність у говорінні», описано чинники, що зумовлюють появу тривожності у говорінні на заняттях з англійської мови, а також визначено шляхи подолання такої тривожності. У статті наведено вивчення способів зниження тривожності студентів у говорінні. Дослідження спрямоване на аналіз іншомовної тривожності студентів-першокурсників факультету початкової освіти та філології Хмельницької гуманітарно-педагогічної академії. Для збору даних застосовувалися такі методи, як спостереження, інтерв'ювання та ведення щоденника, що здійснювалися на заняттях із практики усного та писемного мовлення англійської мови. Проаналізовано можливі причини виникнення іншомовної тривожності: страх критики або осуду учителем чи однокласниками через помилки у говорінні; невідповідні методи виправлення помилок; страх неспроможності висловити свою думку чітко і стисло; вчителюцентровані способи взаємодії; авторитарний стиль навчання; низька самооцінка учнів; напружена атмосфера на заняттях; страх перед публічними виступами. З метою зниження тривожності у говорінні застосовано комплексний підхід: використання парних та групових видів діяльності, створення сприятливої атмосфери на заняттях, надання конструктивного зворотного зв'язку з використанням методів самокорекції та взаємокорекції, застосування студентоцентризованих методів навчання. Найбільш дієвими у подоланні іншомовної тривожності студентів виявилися такі види діяльності: рольова гра, диктант-малюнок, картки пам'яті, перехідні групи, акваріум, сніжний ком та коло ідей. Результати дослідження підтвердили ефективність застосованих методів, які сприяли зацікавленості студентів брати активну участь у мовленнєвій діяльності та підвищенню успішності студентів у говорінні.

**Problem statement.** English language speaking anxiety is considered one of the most challenging issues in teaching and learning process. Methodologists agree that speaking anxiety influences students' performance, adaptation to the target environment and the achievement of their educational goals [12, p. 8]. Communication problems such as being nervous, anxious, worried about making mistakes,

and feeling shy in performing English may hinder foreign language learning.

Several studies have been conducted to investigate the problem of speaking anxiety experienced by students (Horwitz, Saltan, Subasi, Mak, MacIntyre & Gardner). The importance of anxiety as one of the factors influencing oral communication performance, was examined by numerous scientists (Woodrow,

Liu, Inthakanok, Subaşı, Mak, Heng, Abdullah, & Yusof, Agudo). An exploration of speaking anxiety justifies a correlation between a) anxiety and fear of negative evaluation, and b) anxiety and perception of low ability in relation to peers and native speakers [1]. However, the problem of reducing speaking anxiety of Ukrainian students needs more research and exploration.

**The Research Aim.** This current paper presents the results of the study aimed at using group/pair work to reduce speaking anxiety in ESL classroom.

**Results.** There are several definitions of foreign language anxiety. Horwitz defines language anxiety as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” [5, p. 128]. Language anxiety is described as “the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language texts, including speaking, listening, and learning” [7, p. 290].

Speaking Anxiety, a specific type of communication apprehension, is interpreted as “an individual’s level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or

anticipated communication in front of a group of persons” [8, p. 158]. Speaking anxiety, as one of the affective factors that influences foreign language learning, often has a detrimental effect on the students’ oral performance of English [9]. It negatively influences the adaptation to the learning atmosphere of students and their achievement [10].

Methodologists suggest plenty of methods and techniques to reduce or even overcome speaking anxiety: increasing confidence of students by giving them the opportunity to choose for themselves reading assignments [1]; motivating students to more often compose written tasks based on their personal experience, using of clearly structured tasks and sensitivity to the fears of students [4]; not insulting students [5]; creating a calm, relaxed atmosphere in the learning environment [6]; using of topics and materials that are in some way related to the students’ own lives and interests [7]; encouraging the application of sketches, plays, games in class [3; 11; 14]; implementing pair and group work activities [13].

Analysis of literature revealed that methodologists offer communicative and cooperative methods to deal with learners’ language anxiety [10; 11]. It gave grounds for assumption that use of pair and group work may help teachers to reduce learners’ language anxiety in speaking.

The study was conducted in the Khmelnytskyi Humanitarian Pedagogical Academy for the first-year students majored in English. The total number of the focus group was 24 pre-intermediate students (2 male and 22 female). Their ages ranged between aged 17 and 19. The students have 9 hours of practice of oral and written English classes every week.

A study consisted of two phases: exploratory research phase and implementation phase. Qualitative research techniques were employed in the study. The first step included observation of the teacher work, students’ behavior and learning perspectives.

Having observed the teacher’s methods and techniques, learning approaches, teaching style, sequence of activities, students’ engagement, their behavior and attitude to different tasks and activities, modes of interaction, and the classroom atmosphere, there were made some conclusions. It was noticed that at English sessions a teacher-centered approach prevailed: students were not involved in the learning process, the teacher mostly used teacher-student, teacher-the whole class mode of interactions, students worked individually or in pairs as well; teacher role was rather a controller than a facilitator. Students were bored doing monotonous tasks from their textbooks. The teacher used grammar-translation method. The atmosphere in the class was not stressful, but intense and unfriendly. Most students were highly anxious in speaking activities. The learners reported that speaking was the most anxiety producing experience.

After data was gathered, it was found that 20 of the students were experiencing English language speaking anxiety as a result of: a fear of making mistakes; a fear of speaking alone in front of the classroom; a fear of getting bad marks.

To understand the reasons of the students’ speaking anxiety an interview was conducted. As a result, probable causes of the problem were identified: fear to be judged by their teacher or groupmates due to some mistakes while speaking; irrelevant error correction techniques; fear not be able to express opinion briefly and clearly; teacher-centered modes of interaction; authoritarian teaching method; students’ low self-esteem; intense classroom atmosphere; a fear of public speaking.

In accordance with the results of the interview it was decided to explore the effect of group/pair work to reduce speaking anxiety of the students. Thus, the implementation phase of the study presumed interventions to decrease foreign language speaking anxiety. It was decided to use pair and group work activities along with traditional accuracy-based tasks. The interventions also included establishing a supportive classroom atmosphere, giving verbal and nonverbal constructive feedback, using self- and peer- error correction techniques, shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered methods.

*Pair work activities.* The students were engaged in pair work during each session: they compared answers for their homework assignments, they activated vocabulary asking each other, they discussed controversial questions and presented their partner idea, they did information gap activities etc. However, the most attention was paid to *Role plays* as it gave the

students opportunity not only to practice vocabulary and grammar but interact in real-life situations. There were different topics offered: “At the restaurant”, “Checking in at the airport”, “Looking for lost property”, “Trapped in the Elevator”, “Blind Date” etc.

In *Line up role plays* the students got to pair off several times with different groupmates and had a similar conversation with each new partner. They got to practice improvising a little bit instead of just repeating the same things over and over. The students were divided into two groups and each group is assigned one of two roles, such as: buyers and sellers; complainers and listeners; policemen and offenders; doctors and patients. The participants of the role play were assigned definite roles. The teacher roles were: a language expert and a facilitator – the teacher activated vocabulary and fed in the students with a new language when it was necessary; a spectator - the teacher watched the role play and offered comments and advice at the end; a participant – the teacher got involved and took part in some role plays herself. This helped to set the contact with each other and the teacher. It created conditions of equality in speech partnership, ruined traditional barrier between the teacher and the student.

As most students were afraid of making mistakes, the teacher corrected them not on the spot but straight after a role play activity. Sentences with errors were written on the board for the group to be corrected together. Self-correction and peer-correction were suggested as well.

The students afterwards showed a general approval of role play activities. The learners considered it to be helpful as it was the development of their oral skills. They also recognized that in role plays they had to produce language according to the context, which involved understanding their partners and elaborating appropriate answers.

*Picture dictation.* After pairing up for this activity, partners sat facing each other, one with a blank sheet of paper and the other with a simple picture held so that their partner couldn't see it. The student with the picture dictated to their partner what to draw. To make it interesting, the students had the same background picture in front of them to start. One student in the pair had simple stick figures in the foreground that the other student didn't have. The student with the more elaborate illustration attempted to describe how to complete the drawing. The participants were eager to do such a task, they were very active and seemed not being afraid of making mistakes when speaking.

*Memory cards.* The learners in pairs practiced topical vocabulary and some grammar rules or concepts by playing the well-known game of “Memory” using cards with relevant words and/or pictures. The matching pairs were identical a picture and a word. The cards were spread face-down in a

grid. Each student took a turn and turned over two cards. They said the word out loud and made sure their partner saw and heard it. If the cards didn't match, they turned them back over in the same positions and the partner took their turn. If the cards matched, then the student picked them up, kept them, gained a point and had another turn.

The students pointed out that they practiced language patterns and acquired vocabulary and grammar during this activity. The participants reported that it was beneficial for them as it was very similar to real life and it was a good preparation for interacting in the real world. The teacher's feedback and the ways of error correction were perceived positively as well.

*Group work activities.* Before implementing group work activities, we took into consideration several issues: how students would be physically arranged in groups, who would be the leader of each group, what should be a group size, how to monitor group work, how to create an inclusive environment, what behavioral rules should be set, how to provide closure to the group activities.

There are some group work activities that were offered to the students. For conducting short, informal discussions we used *Buzz groups*. At a transitional moment in the class, some students turned to 1–3 neighbours to discuss difficulties in understanding, answered a prepared question, defined or gave examples of key concepts, or speculated on what would happen next in the class. Then we had a general discussion in which the students shared their ideas or questions that arose within their subgroups. It was noticed that most students didn't feel anxious during this activity. They were concentrated on expressing their thoughts rather than on necessary grammar or vocabulary.

Another group work activity was *Circle of Voices*. This method involved students taking turns to speak. The participants formed circles of four or five. The students had a few minutes to organize their thoughts about a given topic. Then the discussion began, with each student having up to three minutes of uninterrupted time to speak. During this time, no one else was allowed to say anything. After everyone had spoken once, it was opened the floor within the subgroup for general discussion. Our observation showed that 2 shy students felt uncomfortable to speak. Their fear was lessened by giving each person a relevant quote to speak about. Despite considering the activity helpful, there were 2 students who felt concerned due to lack of ideas and vocabulary. One student felt uncomfortable as he was not sure about using relevant grammar.

*Snowball pyramids* involved progressive doubling: the participants first worked alone, then in pairs, then in fours, and so on. After working in fours,

the students came together for a plenary session in which their conclusions or solutions were pooled. For example, the learners listened to a few questions that related to the class topic. In pairs, they tried to answer one another's questions. The pairs joined together to make fours and identified, depending on the topic, either unanswered questions or areas of controversy or relevant principles based on their previous discussions. Back in the large class group, one representative from each group reported the group's conclusions. During this activity there was one student who refused to be a representative of the group to report conclusions. The rest of the students were engaged in the discussions, they felt free to develop their ideas.

*Fishbowl.* This method involved one group observing another group. The first group formed a circle and either discussed an issue or topic, did a role play, or performed a brief drama. The second group formed a circle around the inner group. The outer group looked for themes, patterns, soundness of argument, in the inner group's discussion, watched and commented on the role play. This activity was the most successful among the participants as they were interested in performing drama and role play. The learners considered such activity beneficial for practicing vocabulary, communication skills development, a rehearsal for real life situations, a model for social interaction, and having fun in class.

*Constructive feedback.* The teacher wasn't concentrated on learners' errors, there was no on-the-spot correction. Giving feedback to the students the teacher had a spreadsheet with her own record of which student was meeting expectations and self and peer evaluations were used to shed light on how each student was contributing to group work. Both verbal (use of humor, use of students' first names, advice on useful vocabulary or grammar patterns) and nonverbal (eye contact, positive gestures) types of feedback were employed.

*Establishing a supportive classroom atmosphere.* The teacher tried to create the environment with a collaborative atmosphere that helped to reduce students' fear of errors. The following interventions were made: a set of classroom rules and norms was negotiated with the students: making fun of a wrong answer was not accepted, and a norm of "mistake tolerance" was ratified. Errors were considered a natural part of learning a foreign language, and students were encouraged to ask for help without running the risk of embarrassment [2]. In addition, situations of success for all students were created. There was no differential treatment with respect to the learners' language performance.

**Conclusions.** The effectiveness of the interventions was assessed on the basis of 1) students' willingness to participate in pair and group work speaking activities;

2) language performance in speaking activities at the end of the semester.

To measure willingness, a diary was kept in which the students' desire to participate in speaking tasks was recorded. Research findings provided strong evidence that at the end of the semester these anxious students were significantly more willing to participate in pair and group work speaking activities. Those students did not avoid eye contact with the teacher, as they did at the beginning of the semester. They also felt more relaxed, and interested in taking part in speaking tasks.

With respect to English language speaking performance, even 4 shy students showed improvement. We recorded the progress of those learners and their performance in speaking tasks. Performance was measured in terms of both accuracy and fluency in a speaking test conducted at the end of the semester. Improvement was evident for the students as their ability to produce grammatically correct utterances increased. Some slight mistakes did not stop them from trying to speak. Fluency is also increased and the students felt more confident when communicating in front of the class.

It was noticed that most students were concentrated on content rather than form, their conversational speed increased. They also showed more appropriate use of stress and intonation, ability to produce continuous speech without breakdown of communication, which are important parameters of language fluency. Finally, their tendency to switch to their mother tongue disappeared almost completely. Instead, the students tried to express themselves in English, using gestures, paraphrasing or asking their teacher for help.

The results of the study showed that such pair work activities as line up role plays, picture dictation and memory cards provided the students with opportunities to practice language in a "natural" setting, negotiate for meaning, and facilitate to develop communicative strategies despite language difficulties.

As for group work activities, the most successful were buzz groups, fishbowl, snowball pyramids and circle of voices. They were beneficial for the students in reducing a foreign language anxiety, as they helped them to feel more confident in speaking tasks, concentrate on their speech rather than on grammar mistakes. In addition, these activities provided the learners with opportunity to plan and manage time, refine understanding through discussions, develop their communication skills, solve more complex problems than they could on their own, delegate roles and responsibilities, receive social support and encouragement to take risks, reveal their acting abilities.

Summing up, it must be emphasized that multi-faceted approach should be implemented to solve the problem of reducing English speaking anxiety. Creating

positive and supportive classroom atmosphere, giving constructive feedback, employing pair and group work activities, using student-centered methods may help students overcome foreign language speaking anxiety, increase foreign language performance and

their willingness to be engaged in speaking activities. Communicative and collaborative approach can have positive effects both on the students' anxiety levels, motivation and language acquisition, which no doubt lead to progress in oral performance.

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