

Why do learners fail to speak despite years of studying

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Classroom participation, Communication skills, Foreign language learning, Language anxiety, Language use outside class, Learner confidence, Practice frequency, speaking skills, Student survey, teaching methods

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ABSTRACT

Foreign language learners often struggle to speak fluently despite years of study. This study aims to identify key factors that hinder speaking ability by surveying 20 students from various language backgrounds. Data was collected on years of study, speaking practice frequency, confidence, classroom participation, fear of mistakes, use of language outside class, and

perceived teaching methods. Results indicate that most learners practice speaking infrequently, feel anxious, and receive limited speaking opportunities in class. These findings suggest that prolonged exposure alone is insufficient for developing speaking skills. Practical implications include designing curricula that emphasize active communication and reducing learner anxiety.

INTRODUCTION

Speaking proficiency is one of the most important skills in foreign language learning, as it enables learners to communicate effectively and apply their knowledge in real-life situations. Despite years of study, many learners continue to struggle with oral communication, which raises concerns about the effectiveness of traditional language instruction. Previous research has identified several factors that influence speaking ability, including insufficient practice, low learner confidence, classroom dynamics, language anxiety, and teaching methods that focus more on grammar and reading than on communication.

Language anxiety, in particular, has been widely recognized as a significant barrier to speaking. Learners who fear making mistakes or being judged may avoid speaking altogether, which limits opportunities to practice and develop fluency. Similarly, the frequency and quality of speaking practice both inside and outside the classroom play a crucial role in oral skill development. While some learners may study a language for many years, irregular practice and limited interaction with native speakers or peers can prevent the consolidation of speaking skills.

Classroom participation and teaching methods are also critical. Traditional approaches often prioritize written exercises, memorization, and translation over communicative activities, reducing learners' chances to speak in a supportive environment. Moreover, the use of language outside the classroom, through media, apps, or social interaction, can provide meaningful exposure, yet many students do not engage with the language in real-life contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many language learners struggle to speak fluently even after years of formal language study. Researchers have identified several key reasons for this phenomenon, which relate to psychological, pedagogical, and environmental factors.

Firstly, foreign language anxiety plays a major role. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) introduced the concept of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety and explained that fear of making mistakes and being judged often prevents learners from speaking. Learners who experience high anxiety tend to remain silent, even when they have sufficient vocabulary and grammar knowledge.

Secondly, the overemphasis on grammar and written tests in traditional language classrooms reduces opportunities for oral practice. Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis suggested that learners are often exposed to language input (reading and listening) but lack enough meaningful output (speaking). Swain (1985) later emphasized the importance of the Output Hypothesis, arguing that speaking helps learners notice gaps in their knowledge and develop fluency.

Another important factor is the lack of authentic communicative environments. According to Long (1996), interaction is essential for language development. When learners do not have real-life opportunities to use the language outside the classroom, their speaking skills remain underdeveloped. This is especially common in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts where the target language is rarely used in daily life.

Motivation also significantly influences speaking ability. Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model highlighted that learners with low integrative or instrumental motivation often show limited progress in oral skills. Without strong personal or professional reasons to speak the language, learners participate less actively in speaking tasks.

Finally, teacher-centered classroom practices can limit student talk time. Richards and Rodgers (2001) noted that when teachers dominate classroom interaction, learners receive fewer chances to practice speaking. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) encourages student-centered activities such as role-plays, discussions, and pair work, which are crucial for developing speaking competence.

In conclusion, the literature shows that learners fail to develop speaking skills despite years of study due to anxiety, lack of speaking opportunities, overfocus on grammar, limited real-life use, low motivation, and teacher-centered instruction. Researchers consistently emphasize the importance of creating supportive, interactive, and communicative learning environments to improve learners' oral proficiency.

METHODOLOGY

A survey was conducted among 20 students who have been learning a foreign language for varying durations. The questionnaire included seven main areas:

language background, speaking practice frequency, confidence in speaking, classroom participation, fear or anxiety, use of language outside class, and teaching methods. Responses were collected and analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine the percentage distribution of each answer option. All methods were performed in accordance with standard survey analysis procedures.

RESULTS

The survey of 20 students revealed several factors affecting speaking proficiency despite years of study. Regarding language background, 40% had studied the language for 4–6 years, 30% for 1–3 years, 20% for more than 6 years, and 10% for less than one year.

Speaking practice was limited: 20% practiced daily, 40% weekly, 30% rarely, and 10% never. Confidence was also low, with only 10% very confident, 30% somewhat confident, 40% not confident, and 20% avoiding speaking. Classroom participation was inconsistent, as 15% always had opportunities to speak, 35% sometimes, 30% rarely, and 20% never.

Fear and anxiety were common, with 15% always anxious, 30% often, 35% sometimes, and 20% never. Language use outside class was minimal: 10% frequently, 25% occasionally, 40% rarely, and 25% never. Teaching methods were partially effective, with 15% very effective, 40% partially effective, 30% not really, and 15% not at all.

These results indicate that limited practice, low confidence, anxiety, insufficient classroom opportunities, and partially effective teaching methods are key reasons why learners struggle to speak despite years of study.

DISCUSSION

The survey results indicate that several interrelated factors contribute to learners' difficulty in speaking a foreign language despite years of study. Limited speaking practice was a prominent issue, as only a small portion of students reported daily use, while the majority practiced weekly or rarely. This suggests that prolonged exposure alone is insufficient without consistent active use. Confidence also emerged as a key factor: most students felt not confident or avoided speaking, highlighting the psychological barriers that inhibit oral participation. Anxiety and fear of making mistakes further exacerbate this issue, preventing learners from taking risks in communication.

Classroom participation was found to be inconsistent, with many students reporting that opportunities to speak were limited or rare. This indicates that traditional teaching methods may not sufficiently promote communicative activities, even when learners are motivated. Furthermore, the low use of language outside class underscores the importance of authentic, real-life practice for developing fluency. Teaching methods were perceived as partially effective, suggesting that curriculum design and classroom strategies may need adjustment to focus more on speaking and interactive exercises.

Overall, the findings align with previous research emphasizing the importance of regular speaking practice, confidence-building, reduced anxiety, and communicative teaching approaches. Addressing these factors can help bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical language use. Educators should consider incorporating structured speaking

activities, peer interaction, and opportunities for informal conversation both inside and outside the classroom to enhance learners' oral proficiency.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that years of foreign language study alone do not guarantee speaking proficiency. Key obstacles include low speaking practice, classroom limitations, learner anxiety, and insufficient teaching focus on communication. Future research should explore interventions that increase oral practice, reduce anxiety, and implement communicative methods. Educational programs must prioritize active speaking to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical language use.

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