Speaking anxiety

An obstacle to second language learning?

Lejla Basic

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Handledare: Dr. Tore Nilsson
Examinator: Dr. Alan Shima
Abstract

Language is a system for communication, for that reason it is evident that communication skills are a big part of learning a language. To practice speaking is therefore a central part of English lessons in schools today. However, to make students speak the target language is not always easy and there can be several different reasons why this is the case. The current study investigates one possible reason, namely speaking anxiety and its influence on second language acquisition. The study's purpose was to examine how a teacher can encourage students to communicate orally but also to learn why the phenomenon is not dealt with more in schools. The study is mainly based on literature but also contains an interview with two upper secondary teachers. It is found that speaking anxiety inhibits students from speaking which has a negative effect on their oral skills. The study also shows that speaking anxiety is not a prioritized problem in schools, a reason can be that speaking anxiety is not seen as a problem concerning language teaching since it can be considered as a social difficulty. Nevertheless, since oral proficiency is a big part of the English course in the Swedish upper secondary school, speaking anxious students have a harder time mastering the goals for education than other students. In order to encourage speaking in a classroom it is important to strive for a pleasant atmosphere where every student can feel relaxed and motivated to communicate orally.
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1. Introduction

*Education shall be adapted to each pupil’s preconditions and needs.*

*Account shall also be taken of the varying circumstances, needs and knowledge of pupils, as well as the fact that there are a variety of ways of attaining these goals.*

*Special attention must be given to those pupils who for different reasons experience difficulties in attaining the goals for education.*

These statements are a part of the Swedish national curriculum for the non-compulsory school system, which can be found under the title “An equivalent education”. English is one of the core subjects in the Swedish upper secondary school which means that it is obligatory for every class. Language is a system for communication and therefore goals for the English courses obviously concern communication skills. Oral communication especially is a big part of our everyday life and nowadays it is not unusual to hear a person speak several different languages. However, in most cases we feel most comfortable with speaking our mother tongue since it is the language we have learned naturally. To speak is therefore natural for most people and not something we bother to think about. When we speak we also at the same ask for attention, and share our thoughts and feelings with other people. In other words, speaking makes us visible and is a big part of our social life. To learn a new language is therefore a great accomplishment which opens up doors to many new opportunities and experiences.

Learning a second language however is a bigger challenge than learning the first one which we barely remember how we learned. Penny Ur argues that the speaking skill is the most important one since foreign language learners are most of all interested in becoming actual speakers of a language. To practice speaking is a central part of English lessons in schools today. It is however also in these situations that our students easily become speechless. It is not a surprising reaction since most of us are used to become less talkative in new situations where we feel insecure. A similar feeling is produced when we are attending a job interview, or give a speech in front of a large group of people. We say that we feel nervous, shy, tense or

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1 Lpf 94 p.4, www.skolverket.se
2 Ur, P. 1996, p.120-121
anxious. These are however feelings that we know vanish with time. If not, it would probably be a huge obstacle for one’s oral communication and one would probably be marked as a shy and withdrawn person.

In a classroom, there are a lot of different individuals. A language teacher surely hopes that the majority of them are outgoing and talkative since those are the characteristics of a good language learner. But what about those quiet students? Do they attain the goals for the English course and should they receive special attention? We are after all striving after an education of equal opportunity.

1.1 Aim

The aim of this study is to investigate in what way speaking anxiety can affect second language acquisition. Secondly, I wish to examine why this phenomenon is not dealt with more in schools and how a teacher can encourage students to communicate orally.

1.2 Method

This study is mainly based on literature. Since the topic of the study, speaking anxiety, is also covered by terms such as speaking apprehension, inhibition of speech, and communication apprehension, I have used different terms when searching for material. I have decided however to use only the term speaking anxiety in the study.

The second part of my study contains an interview with two upper secondary teachers. The purpose of the interview was to attain a sample of teachers’ view on speaking anxiety and how they teach students that have this problem. The teachers were interviewed at the same time. The reason for that was mainly to stimulate a discussion where the teachers could share their opinions and experiences about the matter.

I have also used information from two internet encyclopedias, mainly a study based on Japanese students’ language anxiety. Furthermore, I have referred to my own teaching experiences and thoughts, particularly in the discussion part of the essay.
1.3 Speaking anxiety

When looking up the word anxiety it is described as:

“An abnormal and overwhelming sense of apprehension and fear often marked by physiological signs (as sweating, tension, and increased pulse), by doubt concerning the reality and nature of the threat, and by self-doubt about one's capacity to cope with it.”

Anxiety is explained as a sort of fear that is manifested by visual signs. I have therefore interpreted the word speaking anxiety as a fear of expressing oneself orally which can be recognized by the physiological signs mentioned above. It is most likely that these signs can obstruct and inhibit one’s ability to speak since a person who experiences that kind of anxiety will not be able to focus on the speaking process.

Speech therapist Margaretha Lanerfeldt describes speaking anxiety as something that has a great impact on one’s self-confidence since it often makes one experience failure when not being able to speak out and show what one knows. Irregular heartbeat, perspiration, stumbling and an inability to act are a few symptoms that block ones capacity to act and speak. Lanerfeldt explains that this issue often turns into a vicious circle because one bad experience from speaking often becomes a reminder when the next opportunity arises. If a student with speaking anxiety experience failure he or she will rather remain quiet than take the risk of failing again. This situation drags them into a silence that becomes more and more difficult to break since it contributes to a role as “the quiet one” in class. Speaking anxiety creates a low self-confidence which makes students remain quiet in all situations, even if they have the capacity to express themselves and knowledge that is worth hearing.

Lightbown and Spada also discuss speaking anxiety and how it can affect language learning. They argue that anxiety is something that is more likely to depend on special situations and circumstances that can make one feel uncomfortable as, for example, an oral presentation in front of a larger group of people. Nevertheless, in these situations researchers prefer to use the term tension. Lightbown and Spada claim however that one should distinguish temporary

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4 Lanerfeldt, M., 1992, p.53-54
anxiety or tension from anxiety that interferes with a student’s learning process. Anxiety that interferes with the learning process affects most speaking activities and is not simply related to specific situations such as oral presentations in front of the whole class.⁵

2. Speaking anxiety and SLA

2.1 The importance of oral communication skills

Ulrika Tornberg discusses the perception of knowledge in her book Språkdidaktik. She explains that the ideas regarding “knowledge” and “learning” are always affected by the social groups that have the political authority in society. These groups affect the view on what “important knowledge” is, which in turn affects the school system and what kind of “knowledge” it should convey. Tornberg argues that this is something that changes from time to time since politics also changes. However, society’s view on “important knowledge” is often expressed in curriculums and syllabuses. Since those are the prescriptions that should guide teachers they automatically affect what we teach and how. This means that the language courses in schools also are influenced by how politicians and other authorities view language skills.

As Tornberg points out, we live in a time of internationalization and therefore the ability of communicating in other languages is very central. It is obvious that this situation has also contributed to the development of new language learning theories and language teaching methods. Tornberg, however, argues that many language teaching methods today are influenced by old language learning theories which focus on either formal or active language qualities. The methods we use today are therefore influenced by what kind of language qualities our time demands.⁶

⁵ Lightbown P & Spada N. 2003, p.60-61

⁶ Tornberg, U. 2000, p.25-27
The fact that the time we live in demands comprehensive communicative skills is noticeable and it contributes to a focus on active language qualities such as speaking. Internationalization has put pressure on language skills and therefore also in our communicative capacity. This importance of oral communication is also reflected in the way we teach language. It is nowadays natural for almost every teacher to use the target language in the classroom and there are several language learning theories that support the idea of exposure to the second language.

"If students are not using English everyone is wasting their time."

The above cited quote is from Jeremy Harmer’s book *The practice of English language teaching*. He explains that a situation where students are not speaking English is often seen as a teacher/student failure. When reading about different teaching methods and theories it is evident that using target language in the classroom is very central. Harmer also argues that it is a question of the age of students, how much English they can already speak and what tasks they are doing. He states that code-switching is acceptable if it is done to further students’ understanding of English, or in pedagogical situations such as explaining grammar or giving instructions. If the students are doing oral fluency activities however, the use of English becomes more significant. He also explains that teachers have a lot of responsibility in language acquisition since they are the source of comprehensible input and therefore it is important that the teacher speaks as much English as possible in the classroom.\(^7\)

In agreement with Harmer, Ulrika Tornberg argues that it is crucial to stick to the target language in the classroom in order to be able to use it outside the classroom as well. She states that it is important to integrate language in all possible communicative situations in order to conform to reality and make speaking the target language in the classroom a “natural thing”. If we want to learn a language we have to develop our means of communication. By using the target language we give students opportunities to use the language in different contexts.\(^8\)

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\(^7\) Harmer, J. 2001, p.131-132

\(^8\) Tornberg, U. 2000, p.136-137
2.2 Speaking activities and successful learning

To make students communicate and to become aware of their language use can not only be achieved by input from the teacher. Teachers need to create situations where students get the chance to speak and communicate with each other. Speaking activities in the classroom are an important part of teaching English since they help students to develop their language and fluency when talking. Penny Ur argues that the speaking skill is the most important one since foreign language learners are most of all interested in becoming actual speakers of a language. Therefore, activities that develop learners’ speaking skills are an important part of a language course. Penny Ur writes about four characteristics for a successful speaking activity:

1. Learners talk a lot.
2. Participation is even.
3. Motivation is high.
4. Language is of an acceptable level.\(^9\)

Lightbown and Spada also discuss learner characteristics. They argue that teachers nowadays are convinced that outgoing students who find opportunities to practice language skills and interact without inhibition also are the most successful learners.\(^10\) Inhibition is a frequent problem with adolescents because they are more self-conscious than younger learners. This problem discourages their risk-taking in speaking, which they argue, is very important for progress in language learning. Characteristics such as a learner’s willingness to communicate also have a direct connection to self-confidence. Researchers say that people who are willing to communicate are able to do so because of pleasant experiences from prior language learning. Learner characteristics that have to do with one’s personality are also strongly connected to oral communication skills rather than acquisition of literacy or academic skills. This can explain why many researchers argue that personality plays an important role in language learning.\(^11\)

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\(^9\) Ur, P. 1996, p.120-121

\(^10\) Lightbown P. & Spada N. 2003, p.53

\(^11\) Lightbown P. & Spada N. 2003, p.61-63
“In a teacher’s mind, motivated students are usually those who participate actively in class, express interest in the subject matter, and study a great deal.”\footnote{Lightbown P. & Spada N. 2003, p.64}

The above quote expresses Lightbown’s and Spada’s view of motivation in the classroom. They claim that a teacher has a lot influence on students’ motivation since teachers are those who manage the lessons and the atmosphere in the classroom. Research has shown that if a teacher varies activities, tasks and materials and motivates students before starting activities the interest will rise. It has also shown that tasks where students have to work together are more stimulating since they have a positive effect on students’ self-confidence. The teacher should however take cultural and age differences in consideration when choosing activities.\footnote{Lightbown P. & Spada N. 2003, p.64-65}

In a classroom full of different individuals it is not easy to make sure that everyone attains successful learning. Penny Ur mentions not only characteristics for success but also problems with speaking activities. The four most common problems according to her are:

1. Inhibition.
2. Nothing to say.
3. Low or uneven participation.
4. Mother-tongue use.\footnote{Ur, P. 1996, p.120-121}

She is not alone in discussing these problems with speaking and depending on what problem occurs there are also different recommendations and theories about how to deal with it. I believe however that speaking inhibition is a bit harder to overcome and therefore it will be closer examined in this essay.
2.3 What causes fear of speaking?

Speaking anxiety has to do with fear, which in most cases has developed from bad prior experiences. It is frequently suggested that children who have not been encouraged to speak from an early stage also create a weaker communicative behavior pattern. Becoming silent at an early stage also contributes to limited opportunities to practice oral skills. Parents’ behavior and views on outspokenness have therefore a great impact on children’s speaking development. When children that are not used to speaking out are confronted with schools’ challenging requirements in oral proficiency, their inhibition often results in silence and withdrawnness.\textsuperscript{15}

Bo Arne Skiöld is a methodology lector who confirms that speaking-anxious people are often those who are self-conscious and afraid of making fools of them, being laughed at or bullied.\textsuperscript{16} Fear of speaking is very closely connected to fear of exposure since fear of speaking is often triggered by the surroundings. Studies have shown that speaking anxiety is often triggered by other people that the speaking anxious person does not feel comfortable with.\textsuperscript{17}

Skiöld points out that it is important to remember how complicated our speech process really is. Most of us forget how much time and effort it took to master speaking, since it is something that becomes automated and natural as we learn to speak. It takes only a few simple mishaps to remind us about how complex the mechanism of speech really is. An individual’s experience of his own speaking ability and voice is very closely connected to the picture of one’s own personality. Therefore it is quite normal that stress and low self-confidence occur in connection with negative experiences from speaking activities. A few negative experiences can trigger stress on later occasions.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{15} Atterström H. 1983, p.19

\textsuperscript{16} Skiöld B. 1989, p.9

\textsuperscript{17} http://encyclopedia.jrank.org/articles/pages/6420/Apprehension-and-Communication.html

\textsuperscript{18} Skiöld B & Stening B. 1988. P.10-11
2.4 Speaking anxious students

Students who have speech anxiety are often very calm and passive and can therefore also receive less attention from teachers in comparison with noisy, antisocial and aggressive children. Since these students do not cause any discipline problems their “calls for help” are seldom noticed, which contributes to them sinking in to a deeper and deeper silence. These students usually give up very early and continue to be quiet throughout their years in school.

Margaretha Lanerfeldt argues that speaking anxiety is a speaking disorder such as stuttering. However, in contrast to stuttering, speaking anxious people’s handicap is not acceptable. The difference is that other speech impediments have an advantage, because teachers and students can be aware of them and therefore not demand the same type of oral presentation. In contrast, students with speaking anxiety are seen as weaker as and less motivated than others, which also have an effect on their grades.\(^\text{19}\)

Landerfeldt states that today’s school is a place where the voluble children are the ones that achieve most attention. They do not have the patience to listen to others since they are often worried not to be heard themselves. The quiet children are therefore put in a position where they have to speak out loud, fast and clear if they are going to be heard and that makes it even harder for them to speak out. Therefore it is very important to establish a good climate in the classroom where everyone’s voice is equally heard and respected.\(^\text{20}\)

This situation also contributes to the quiet students being seen as less intelligent since they rarely demonstrate their knowledge. They also receive less attention from teachers and ask for help much less than other students. Grades also depend a lot on participation and since the quiet students participate less in classroom activities it often leads to a lower grade. The lack of opportunity to participate in classroom activities also contributes to less learning even if they are no less intelligent than other students in class.\(^\text{21}\)

\(^{19}\) Lanerfeldt, M. 1992, p.53-54

\(^{20}\) Lanerfeldt, M. 1992, p.55

Intelligence as a learner characteristic is also discussed by Lightbown and Spada who say that a link between intelligence and second language learning has been reported. Nevertheless a higher intelligence quotient is more connected to metalinguistic knowledge whereas oral production skills are related to communication ability.  

A study made by Margaretha Lanerfeldt, where 295 students in the 7-9\textsuperscript{th} grade were tested shows that a large group of them felt discomfort when speaking in class and 30 \% of them believed that their speaking difficulties started at the intermediate level. Another study shows that the grades of the quiet students were lower than the grades of the talkative students. Students that are quiet in different discussions and do not make their voices heard are very likely to be quiet in other situations as well.

A different study made with Japanese foreign students at a graduate school in America showed that many of them were anxious when speaking English with their peers and native speakers. The fear of speaking English made many of them remain silent and they avoided speaking English even if the primary reason of coming to the U.S was to acquire English as a second language. Out of the 32 participants in the study, 24 confirmed that they were anxious when speaking with native English speakers in informal settings. The main reason for this was that they worried about being misunderstood and got stressed about making mistakes.

The students’ anxiety levels seemed to increase in classroom settings where many believed correct English must be spoken. 27 of the students said that they became anxious when speaking English in the classroom, and this included students who indicated that they did not become apprehensive in informal settings. They felt pressure about making language mistakes as well as presenting their opinions in front of their peers and teachers. Many of them felt uncomfortable about speaking in class and receiving questions they could not answer or not being able to explain themselves in English. The study also shows that speaking anxiety is

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Lightbown P. & Spada N. 2003, p.57
\item Lanerfeldt, M. 1992, p.56,59
\item http://ci.nii.ac.jp/naid/110001137951 (p. 229-234)
\item http://ci.nii.ac.jp/naid/110001137951 (p. 229-234)
\end{enumerate}
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experienced more intensely in more formal situations that include a greater amount of participants such as a classroom. Nevertheless, several students revealed that regardless of the place, they were unwilling to speak English unless the listeners showed understanding and patience to them. The author of the study claims that anxiety associated with English use can hinder Japanese foreign students from learning English because it holds them back to associate with native speakers.  

Professor of psychology Peter D. MacIntyre explains that language learning is a cognitive activity which depends on several psychological processes which anxiety can interfere with by creating a divided attention scenario. If a student who experiences anxiety is asked a question, he/she will be focused on responding to the question and dealing with social effects at the same time. This kind of situation does affect one’s performance and can result in slower learning. McIntyre explains that task-related cognition is limited when self-related cognition increases, and anxious students therefore differ from more relaxed students when learning language. He also mentions that anxiety can interfere with students’ capability of demonstrating knowledge and consequently also experience more failure which can contribute to the anxiety level increasing.

Skiöld points out how important it is to speak in a group since our speaking capacity also signals our existence. This means if a person stays quiet for a longer time that person’s existence within the group also vanishes. In view of the fact that people’s feeling of existence comes through reflection from others consciousness it means that a feeling of non-existence is very likely to be created. An experience like that can be very destructive for one’s self-confidence. This situation also has an impact on the learning environment in class because silent and insecure students can be seen upon as distant and uninterested. Silence as a defense mechanism can be mistaken by others for resistance to learning which prevents a warm and pleasant classroom climate, which is a necessary precondition for a group to socially function and learn together.

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26 http://ci.nii.ac.jp/naid/110001137951 (p.235-239)


28 Skiöld B. 1989, p.10-11
2.5 Interview

Since one of my intentions with this study was to examine how speaking anxiety can affect second language acquisition and also how teachers can deal with speaking anxious students I found it relevant to speak with teachers about the phenomenon. The following interview was made with two Swedish English teachers at an upper secondary school. I asked six questions and the interview was made with both teachers at the same time. Many questions led to follow up questions and discussions. The teachers are named Corinne and Mary in the interview.

1. Why do you find it important for students to speak the target language in the classroom?

Corinne and Mary agreed a lot with each other on this question. “Practice makes perfect”, Mary said. It is very important to speak the target language in order to create situations where the students feel natural about speaking the language and get as much input as possible. Both teachers were very positive about speaking as much English as possible in the classroom. Corinne said that she once has been criticized by a few students about her speaking English all the time. The students were upset because they did not understand what she said and it was particularly frustrating for them when she spoke about important things such as instructions for assignments. She said that nowadays she therefore gives instructions in Swedish. Mary explained that she often speaks Swedish in grammar lessons since the subject is hard as it is and a lot of students have difficulties with grammar. It was easier for her to explain in Swedish as well since she often compared English grammar to the Swedish. Even though both teachers agreed upon the fact that it was best to keep speaking the target language in the classroom they also admitted that it did not mean it was easy. It takes a lot of valuable time to explain and make sure that everybody understands what is being said. They also said that it was a hard challenge to make sure that everybody is using English in the classroom and not switching to L1. Therefore it is important to create a good climate in the classroom where students can feel relaxed and secure.
2. Why do you think that some students have a hard time speaking?

Both teachers answered the same way. “They are afraid of being laughed at.” Mary explained that adolescents at upper secondary schools are in various emotional stages in their lives. There is a lot going on when you are a teenager and others opinions are very important. It is significant to have that in mind when working with teenagers. A teacher should not put them in positions where they could risk making fools of themselves in front of their classmates. Mary told about a girl in one of her classes who refused to speak in front of the class and when Mary confronted her about it she explained that she felt embarrassed about her braces. It was so important to her to make sure that nobody teased her and therefore she also avoided smiling. Even if a reason like that can seem unimportant for a teacher one must not forget that it can be very sensitive for the student.

Corinne said that students that were shy had particular trouble with speaking and she argued that it had to do with personalities. She also mentioned that most of the speaking apprehensive students were girls, probably because they tend to be more emotional than boys. Mary however argued that she thought it was a question of self-confidence and background. She also said that it is hard for students who have difficulties with speaking to be seen in classes with many loud and talkative students. It is up to the teacher to create a climate in the classroom where everybody could be seen and heard.

3. What effect does speaking anxiety have on students learning of English?

Mary and Corrine say that not communicating orally has a huge effect on learning since it is a big part of language learning. If a student does not speak, he/she does not get the chance to practice oral skills and get feedback from the teacher. Mary said that most quiet students are also very withdrawn which makes it harder to connect and create a dialog. This contributes to less motivation and engagement from both student and teacher. It is crucial to mark the importance of speaking in a language classroom from start so that the students are aware of what is expected and necessary for their learning.
Corrine said that teachers can often talk too fast which can be frightening for the students, especially if they do not understand. She continued that it is important to not forget the process of speaking. To produce a sentence takes time and a lot of thinking if one is not used to speaking the language. It is important to remember this and give the student the time and support that is needed.

4. How can speaking anxiety affect one’s grades?

Unfortunately it can have bad consequences, Corinne said and Mary nodded. Grades are not just about performing well but also showing interest and will. Being quiet does not help. It is important to try at least, but sometimes we have to chase students and nag about the oral proficiency test he or she did not attend. We do our best though to make them pass but to achieve a higher grade is more difficult.

Mary said that students who perform less well on tests also are the one who are speaking anxious. Her thought was that one reason for their speaking anxiety was lack of knowledge in the subject. Corinne said that the case doesn’t have to be so. She said that one of her former students always got an MVG on tests and writing assignments but never wanted to perform orally or participate in speaking activities and unfortunately Corinne could not give her the MVG she knew she was capable of.

5. What can you do to make a student more comfortable with speaking? What do you do yourself if somebody refuses to attend on speaking activities?

It is about creating situations as a teacher. Mary explained that it is not so important what students talk about but that they talk about something. It can be easier to talk about something silly and unimportant because the student then doesn’t have to think about what to say as well. Discussions in smaller groups use to be more effective for speaking activities because students then feel less indicated.
Corinne said that she used to start up lessons by letting the students solve easy crosswords and making each student say the right answer to a question in the crossword out loud. This way everybody got to say something and since the questions were very easy to answer no one could say that they did not know. Corinne thought that this exercise also was good for students’ self-esteem and a way of getting speaking started. It is about taking very small steps every lesson just to make students used to speaking and making their voices heard.

Neither Corinne nor Mary said that they had big issues with students refusing to perform on oral performance since they always gave the students who felt discomfort the chance to perform in smaller groups or sometimes with only the teacher. It did occur that students did not show up on days when oral performing would take place and in this situation they used to talk individually with the student and come up with a resolution.

Mary explained that she is very strict with introducing the syllabuses for language courses and reminded students a lot about the goals and grading criteria. This is a way of making them aware of the importance of speaking when learning a language. It is necessary to explain for the class what is expected from them and that they have responsibility for their education.

The most important part for both Corinne and Mary, however, was to create a good classroom environment. Everybody should feel welcome and equal in a class. That is the basics of making a nice and warm climate within the group. To feel that you “belong” is important for a person’s self-esteem which increases the motivation to learn.

6. Do teachers get enough information about speaking difficulties in school?

Probably not, Corinne said. Since there are so many students that have this problem I believe that many of them are not even seen or given the right help. There is not much information or research available either. It is quite obvious that it is not seen as serious enough when looking at the fact that many students go through school without making their voice heard. It is not about the information being given but about teachers not seeing these students who are in need for help. Other speaking difficulties that are easier to spot and put a name on are more discussed. Speaking anxiety is perhaps not seen as a problem serious enough to highlight.
2.6 Encouraging speaking

Bo Arne Sköld holds classes about speaking anxiety and has also created courses for people with speaking anxiety. The courses are available for persons in different age groups and the aim is to overcome the fear of speaking. One exercise that has received the best response is a “three step model exercise” where people get to practice their speech. The teacher leads the activity, distributes the tasks and comments on the work. It starts with pair presentations where the students are supposed to introduce each other in front of the group. In this sequence it is important that the teacher chooses pairs so that nobody feels alone. The second consists of group discussions where the members talk about how they feel about talking in front of others. The aim of it is to de-dramatize experiences and to be able to identify with others. The third part is about practicing oral performance where the students get to describe objects, events and emotions in front of the group. Every description has to be done in a neutrally, negatively and positively loaded way in order to go through different emotions. By practicing oral performance in this order, one can be confronted with his fears and realize to what great extent a person can affect a performance. Sköld points out that it is very important to deal with the fear of speaking in group since the fear most times has developed in a group.29

Penny Ur gives five recommendations for successful speaking activities.

1. To lower inhabitation it can be good to use group work so that the inhibited person doesn’t have to face the whole class when speaking. It is more likely that useful oral practice will take place in this situation than in full class. It doesn’t allow the teacher to supervise all learner speech though and switching into L1 is a risk.

2. It is important to base an activity on easy language so that the participants can speak fluently and feel secure. A good way to make this work is to review vocabulary before starting.

29 Sköld B &Stening B. 1988
3. To make participants motivated it is crucial that the discussion has a clear purpose. The topic should be something that the students can easily relate to and use their own experiences.

4. Give instructions about participation before starting a speaking discussion. To make sure that everyone’s voice is heard the teacher can choose one student to lead the discussion.

5. A teacher should never stop encouraging students to speak the target language. A teacher can also appoint a group or person in class as monitors who will remind others in class to stick to the target language.30

Jeremy Harmer argues that succeeding with speaking in class mostly depends on a good atmosphere where students get along with each other. Harmer states that the teacher’s role is very important in those situations. It is essential that the teacher is gentle when giving feedback or correcting students while they are speaking. Sometimes students may get stuck in a speaking activity and it is important that the teacher helps out in a discrete way without exposing the student. Feedback should always be given at the end of the activity. Harmer argues that it can be effective if the teacher is a participant in the discussion as long as he/she doesn’t take over the discussion which means less time for students to speak. He believes that preparation can help out a lot when it comes to speaking activities since it contributes to a more fluent language and relaxed feeling when making presentations. If a discussion is to be held it can be helpful to put students in buzz groups where they can brainstorm ideas and prepare themselves for a discussion. Preparation can also be done through rehearsal. By letting students repeat speaking tasks they get the chance to the same activity twice which will make them more confident and also give them an opportunity to improve a presentation.31

30 Ur, P. 1991. P. 122-123

The list below was made in the 1980’s and is a result from a study made by Freidman and Sober. The research was based on the participation of 200 students in upper and upper secondary level and their task was to write down what they thought would contribute to a more speaking friendly classroom. These guidelines where compiled from their answers.

1. All students should be given opportunities for oral participation, for instance by letting them participate with a short comment in a, for the students, interesting discussion subject. One can also give them the opportunity to be team leader for smaller group discussion where the group leader is the one who is responsible for everybody’s speaking participation.

2. The teacher shows that every student’s comment is worthy and appreciated. It can be done by giving opportunities for discussions about controversial topics, emotions, opinions and roll plays about up-to-date events.

3. Teachers, just like students, show an accepting attitude against wrong answers, for example by resisting negative reactions to negative answers. Every student should tell the class about one mistake they have done.

4. Students are encouraged to connect to what others in the class have been speaking about. To link comments with former comments, allowing students to repeat other students’ dictum or letting them to do successive additions to short stories are ways of encouraging them.

5. To see all students and the teacher as resources in classroom discussions by adding more questions like “What do you think the others say about that?” or “Does anybody have an answer to this question?” for example. Students or smaller groups of students should also be given opportunity to lead classroom work like homework tests or skilled reviews.32

32 Atterström, H. 1983. p. 27-28
3. Discussion and conclusion

When working as a teacher one meets a wide range of students with different qualities, strengths and weaknesses. Some students are very loud and outgoing and some are shy and quiet. When a student is shy and quiet as a person it is often seen as a positive characteristic. Nevertheless when a student is quiet all the time including during discussions, seminars and speaking activities it becomes a question of something more than just shyness. This is a problem many students have but also something that is very hard for a teacher to identify and understand. Speaking anxiety makes school and especially language courses very hard to master since communication is an important part of them. In both the English A and English B syllabuses one can read about goals that show what students are supposed to manage at the end of the course and a lot of these goals include oral proficiency:

The pupil shall:

-dare, be willing and able to participate in conversations about familiar topics without preparation and exchange information about personal opinions and experiences

- after preparation be able to orally describe or inform about a subject area or area of interest and show ability of adaption to the language depending on what the situation demands

To achieve a grade it is a fact that one must be able to express oneself orally in the target language:

The pupil exchanges information and opinions in conversations and succeeds to solve linguistic problems with different strategies.

The pupil can expresses himself orally with an understandable and clear pronunciation and accommodates his spoken language to both informal and a bit more formal contexts to some degree.

33 www.skolverket.se, Syllabus for English A (my translation)
The school’s quest for developing students’ communicative skills in the upper secondary school is obvious. When students do not manage to use communicative tools such as speaking it can be devastating for their self-confidence and also future studies or work. School is responsible to create an education environment that can suit every student’s condition and needs. The curriculum also expresses that special attention should be devoted to those who have difficulties in achieving these goals.

Under the headline “The teacher shall” in Lpf 94 it says:

• take as the starting point each individual pupil’s needs, preconditions, experience and thinking,
• reinforce the pupils’ self-confidence as well as their willingness and ability to learn
• organize and carry out the work so that the pupils:
  – receive support in their language and communicative development
• stimulate, guide and support pupils and provide special support to pupils with difficulties

These guidelines are a few mentioned in the curriculum and should be followed by every teacher. I believe that students that fear speaking should be included in the group of “pupils with difficulties” but my experience from my teacher practice and this study has showed me that the case is not so. Just because it is hard to identify speaking anxiety does not mean that it is not something to see seriously upon.

Lanerfeldt compares speaking anxiety with other speech impediment like stuttering and argues that speaking anxiety is not acceptable enough since teachers are not aware of it and therefore treat anxious students differently. I found her comparison with stuttering interesting since both anxiety and stuttering are two speech impediments that are totally different but cause the same problem to language learning by inhibiting students to speak out. The speaking anxious students’ difficulty however can easily be mistaken for disinterest or unwillingness and therefore have a huge negative influence on their learning in school. Speaking anxiety can also contribute to slower learning since language learning is a cognitive process which anxiety can interfere by disconcerting task-related cognition. It can also affect

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34 Lpf 94, www.skolverket.se, (my translation)
students’ ability of presenting knowledge which is important for a teacher to observe in order to give feedback and assistance.

Speaking anxiety affects second language learning since it impedes students in improving their oral skills which is crucial when learning a new language. It automatically affects students’ grades since syllabuses demand oral proficiency and activities in classrooms often require oral communication. I believe that it is important to understand that it is inhibition that is a major obstacle to second language acquisition since it makes students not practice their oral proficiency. Inhibition can nevertheless have many different reasons. This study has shown that speaking anxiety can partly explain problems in language learning. I have noticed that most books about language learning explain inhibition as one problem in second language acquisition which mostly also has one way to be solved, for example by creating a more pleasant classroom atmosphere. It is believable however that inhibition can be solved differently depending on what makes a student inhibited. A student that stutters may have the same problem as the speaking anxious one but they have completely different grounds and therefore also different solutions.

Since fear of speaking has a direct connection with fear of exposure and not feeling confident in a group it is probably also there the solution lies. The teachers in the interview also point out the importance of a pleasant classroom atmosphere. It is also underlined in the study made by Freidman and Sober and also by Penny Ur and Jeremy Harmer. Another frequently mentioned solution is working in smaller groups. The main part of making students willing to speak is to make sure that they get along with their classmates and feel supported. It is therefore very important to work with speaking activities as fast as possible after a class is put together. It also prevents the vicious circle to be formed if one is trained to speak right from the beginning. To make a class participate in easier short speaking activities every day could probably be useful for a class’s speaking development.

A problem many teachers seem to have is the lack of time. One often hears that teachers are stressed about finding time to help everyone. To work in smaller groups takes up a lot of time from the teacher. A pleasant classroom atmosphere can also be time-consuming to achieve since one has to deal with a classroom full of different individuals. There is a lot to catch up with during a lesson and it is hard to organize teaching so that it fits everyone and covers everybody’s needs. That could be a possible explanation for teachers not paying attention to
the problem and anxious students letting out on oral performances. Although I believe that even those very small actions in the classroom can be of great importance. Just by making every student say one sentence every lesson will hopefully make everyone’s presence be seen. Since the hardest part for speaking anxious students is probably breaking the silence it is crucial for teachers to create comfortable learning situations.

As a future language teacher, I believe it very important to find out what the reason for a student’s constant silence is. It is pointless to spend a long time in a language classroom if one is never going to use the language orally. If a student has the ability to speak but does not, something obviously must be wrong. What surprises me though is the fact that a large amount of these students never get the help they need during their years in school. They are there, in a classroom with the capacity to speak and probably many interesting things to say that are never said. These students’ knowledge is being wasted, not to mention their self-esteem is being undermined, and nothing is done about it. The teachers interviewed in this study use to handle the problem with anxious students by allowing them to perform orally individually or in smaller groups. Perhaps that can be a problem in itself since these students then are excluded from speaking activities that are important for their language learning. I believe that teachers instead should work towards making the speaking anxious students feel comfortable about communicating orally with their classmates.

This study confirms the fact that inhibition, caused by speaking anxiety, can have an effect on students’ English learning. It also shows that teachers may not always know how to help speaking anxious students to overcome their anxiety. A next step could be to investigate speaking anxious students in order to find out how one can help them to overcome their fear of speaking. If teachers received more information about this problem it would become more visible and explicit which hopefully could lead to students receiving more help and understanding. I believe it would be a good start to educate teachers about the issue during teacher training.

It does not surprise me though that speaking anxiety is not highlighted in schools since I found little information about it in books and other literature. The books I did find were very dated and the chapters about speaking anxiety or inhibition in books about language learning were very short. A reason for this could be that speaking anxiety is not seen as a problem concerning language teaching since it can be considered as a social difficulty. That kind of
difficulty can affect activity in other subjects as well and is therefore not specific to second language learning. The characteristics of a speaking anxious person can also very easily be mistaken for shyness. This situation contributes to different theories about overcoming ones anxiety that causes confusion and unknowing about how to deal with speaking anxiety in schools. Despite the possibility that speaking anxiety does not always have to be specifically related to second language learning I believe that it is important to deal with it in school since it obviously does affect students learning. The research made with Japanese students furthermore show that speaking anxiety can be specific to second language learning since several students did not feel anxious when communicating in informal settings. That can also confirm that Tornberg’s theory about keeping the target language in classrooms and making it as “natural” as possible does have an effect on students’ language learning. It is therefore also important to make students feel comfortable with speaking the target language from an early stage.

Speaking anxiety can be hard to recognize since everyone can feel anxious sometimes, in contrast with other learning difficulties. I can however agree with Lightbown and Spada who argue that one should distinguish temporary anxiety from anxiety that interferes with a student’s learning process since that form of anxiety hinders all oral communication in the classroom. Speaking anxiety seems to be an obstacle for language learning which in my opinion therefore makes it worth highlighting in those areas as well. Research about speaking anxiety from a pedagogical perspective might be a way to raise awareness about this topic. This study has convinced me that speaking anxiety is not a prioritized problem in schools today. It is paradoxical though when looking over the Swedish national curriculum and reading about the importance of communication skills and the schools responsibility of improving them.
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