

Strategies for Reducing Speaking Anxiety in Saudi EFL Classrooms: Teachers' Perspectives

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Abstract

This study explores the strategies that teachers use to reduce students' speaking anxiety in Saudi EFL classrooms from teachers' perspectives. Speaking anxiety remains a persistent challenge among EFL learners, negatively affecting their participation and language development. While previous research has focused mainly on students' perspectives and experiences, limited attention has been given to teachers' strategies in the Saudi context.

A qualitative approach was employed using semi-structured interviews with eight female EFL teachers from a university in Jeddah. The data were analyzed thematically. The findings identified several strategies teachers used to reduce speaking anxiety, such as creating a safe and supportive classroom environment and encouraging classroom participation. In addition, the study found that teachers adapt tasks and strategies to students' needs.

Overall, the study highlights the important role of teachers in reducing speaking anxiety and emphasizes the necessity for flexible, supportive, and interactive teaching practices that encourage student participation in EFL classrooms. The study demonstrates that anxiety reduction depends not on individual strategies, but on how teachers combine and adapt them within classroom contexts.

Keywords: foreign language anxiety, speaking anxiety, EFL classrooms, teacher strategies, Saudi Arabia

1. Introduction

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) is defined as a set of feelings, beliefs, and behaviors that occur during the process of learning a new language (Horwitz et al., 1986). While FLA can affect various language skills, it is most commonly associated with speaking (Luo, 2014). Speaking anxiety refers to feelings of nervousness or discomfort when using a foreign language in a public setting (Horwitz et al., 2010). This form of anxiety remains a persistent challenge among EFL learners, limiting their ability to interact with teachers and peers in the classroom. Fear of making mistakes and negative evaluation often prevents students from participating, which can negatively affect their confidence, engagement, and overall language development (Tercan & Dikilitaş, 2015).

In EFL classrooms, students exhibit speaking anxiety in various ways such as hesitation in speaking and avoidance of participation in speaking tasks. These behaviors not only reduce opportunities for practice but also limit students' exposure to meaningful communication, which is essential for language acquisition (Horwitz et al., 1986). As a result, students who experience high levels of speaking anxiety may struggle to develop their speaking skills. Therefore, reducing speaking anxiety is essential for improving both students' participation and their overall language learning outcomes (Tercan & Dikilitaş, 2015).

In Saudi Arabia, speaking anxiety is a common issue in EFL classrooms (Rafada & Madini, 2017a). Many students experience speaking anxiety in the classroom which leads them to refuse or avoid participating in activities and discussions (Ashraf, 2019). This can hinder both language development and reduce social confidence (Rafada & Madini, 2017b). Several factors influence students' anxiety including limited opportunities for speaking practice, reliance on rote memorization, and social pressure to maintain a positive self-image in front of peers (Asif, 2017; Hakim, 2019). In addition, contextual factors such as exam-oriented curricula and limited exposure to English outside the classroom further hinder students' participation in speaking activities (Al-Sobhi & Preece, 2018). These challenges highlight the importance of addressing speaking anxiety within the specific educational context of Saudi EFL classrooms.

Although a number of studies have explored the causes and effects of speaking anxiety, much of the literature focuses on students' perspectives and coping strategies rather than on teacher-led interventions. Previous research has identified various psychological, linguistic, and contextual factors contributing to language anxiety (Suleimenova, 2013), as well as student-centered approaches for managing it (Widhayanti, 2018). While some studies have proposed strategies such as creating supportive environments, using communicative approaches, and encouraging collaboration (Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2009), these studies are often conducted in different contexts where cultural and educational backgrounds differ. As a result, the role of teachers in reducing speaking anxiety continues to be relatively underexplored in the Saudi educational context.

Since teachers play a key role in influencing classroom environments and learning experiences, understanding how they manage students' speaking anxiety is crucial. Teachers are responsible for designing classroom activities, providing feedback, and creating a classroom environment that may either increase or reduce students' anxiety (Young, 1991; Alrabai, 2015). However,

there is limited research that examines the specific strategies teachers use to reduce speaking anxiety in Saudi EFL classrooms. Therefore, further research is needed to explore teachers' strategies for reducing students' speaking anxiety in this context.

This study aims to explore the strategies teachers use to reduce students' speaking anxiety in EFL classrooms from teachers' perspectives. The study is guided by one primary research question: What are the strategies teachers use to reduce students' speaking anxiety in EFL classrooms?

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Theoretical Framework*

2.1.1 Affective Filter Hypothesis

The Affective Filter Hypothesis was proposed by Stephen Krashen (1982) to explain how affective factors such as motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety influence second language acquisition. The hypothesis suggests that emotional variables act as a filter that affects how much input a learner is able to process and acquire. Language acquisition is most successful when learners have strong motivation, high self-confidence, and low anxiety, while negative emotions such as anxiety can hinder the learning process.

MacIntyre and Gardner (1989) found that students experience lower anxiety and more successful language acquisition when teachers use strategies that enhance confidence and reduce stress. Similarly, Lundberg and Hyseni (2022) suggested that creating a comfortable classroom environment, providing positive feedback, and encouraging peer support can help lower learners' affective filter.

These findings highlight the important role of teachers in shaping learners' emotional experiences. Therefore, the Affective Filter Hypothesis provides a framework for understanding how teachers' strategies can reduce speaking anxiety by creating supportive environments and encouraging participation.

2.1.2 Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emerged in the 1970s, changing the focus from grammatical drills to effective communication (Sutanto & Sjamsir, 2022). This approach highlights the crucial role of interaction and communication in language learning (Teng, 2023).

CLT can lower speaking anxiety by encouraging real-life communication activities such as role plays, interviews, and group discussions (Tabatabaei et al., 2015). Through such activities, students use the language more spontaneously without excessive focus on grammatical accuracy.

Collaborative learning is a key feature in CLT, which requires learners to work in pairs or small groups. Sharing responsibility in speaking tasks reduces pressure and helps create a supportive environment (Mon, 2019). In addition, the teacher's role shifts to a facilitator of communication

where the teacher supports students without excessive correction (Savignon, 1991).

Feedback in CLT is designed to be supportive and constructive (Richards & Rodgers, 2014), focusing on strengths while providing guidance for improvement. This creates a positive learning atmosphere, encourages risk-taking, and reduces fear of negative evaluation (Rohman, 2019). Therefore, CLT provides a useful framework for understanding how interactive strategies can reduce speaking anxiety and promote participation.

2.1.3 Sociocultural Theory

Sociocultural Theory, established by Lev Vygotsky, proposes that social interaction plays a major role in cognitive development (Lantolf, 2000). According to Vygotsky, language acquisition begins in social interactions and is later internalized individually (Pathan et al., 2018). A key concept is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which refers to the range of tasks a learner can perform with support but not yet independently (Shakra, 2008).

In EFL contexts, collaborative interaction and communicative practices provide learners with opportunities to use the language in a supportive environment which helps to reduce pressure and encourage participation (Scott & Palincsar, 2013). The use of sociocultural principles can reduce speaking anxiety and promote effective language learning (Shirvan et al., 2016).

Teachers embracing this approach act as facilitators who organize interaction and provide scaffolding to support learners' development (Lantolf, 2000). This process promotes confidence and contributes to reducing speaking anxiety.

Therefore, Sociocultural Theory provides a framework for understanding how interaction-based and scaffolded strategies can reduce speaking anxiety in EFL classrooms.

2.2 *Speaking Anxiety in EFL Contexts*

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) has been widely examined in language learning research. Elaine Horwitz et al. (1986) defined FLA as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning” and categorized it into communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Speaking anxiety has been identified as the most challenging form in EFL classrooms (Young, 1990). Speaking anxiety refers to the fear associated with verbal communication tasks, specifically in situations that require real-time language production and interaction with others. The public nature of speaking, along with the pressure to produce immediate and accurate responses, can significantly increase learners' anxiety and hinder effective communication (Suleimenova, 2013).

In the Saudi context, speaking anxiety is influenced by specific educational and cultural factors. The educational system has traditionally emphasized rote learning and grammatical accuracy while offering limited opportunities for meaningful language production (Hakim, 2019). This can increase fear of making mistakes and reduce learners' confidence in speaking. In addition, the focus on examinations and written performance may hinder the development of communicative competence which contributes to increasing speaking anxiety (Rafada & Madini, 2017b). Cultural factors such as concern about social evaluation and maintaining a

positive self-image may also cause students to avoid participating in speaking activities (Asif, 2017).

Speaking anxiety is influenced by both internal and external factors. Internal factors include fear of negative evaluation and low self-confidence, while external factors relate to classroom environment, teaching practices, and peer interaction (Horwitz et al., 1986). Classrooms that emphasize accuracy, frequent correction, or high-stakes evaluation may increase anxiety, while supportive environments can encourage participation (Young, 1990; Bozkurt & Aydin, 2023). These factors highlight the importance of implementing effective teacher strategies that reduce pressure, create supportive learning environments, and encourage students to participate in speaking tasks.

2.3 Teacher Strategies to Reduce Speaking Anxiety

Previous research has shown that students use a variety of strategies to reduce speaking anxiety such as preparation, coping techniques, and peer interaction (Young, 1991; Widhayanti, 2018). However, these studies focus primarily on students' coping methods rather than teacher-led strategies.

This section reviews studies that examine teachers' strategies for reducing speaking anxiety in EFL classrooms. Alrabai (2015) conducted a large-scale quasi-experimental study in the Saudi context investigating the impact of anxiety-reducing strategies. The findings showed a significant decrease in students' anxiety and an increase in self-confidence (Alrabai, 2015). Effective strategies included promoting cooperative learning, providing positive feedback, avoiding negative teacher behaviors, and supporting learner autonomy. These findings are consistent with Han et al. (2016), who found that students' speaking anxiety is influenced by teacher behavior, classroom environment, and feedback practices.

A significant number of studies highlight the importance of creating a supportive classroom environment. Young (1991) emphasized that teachers can reduce students' anxiety by employing supportive practices such as using positive feedback, avoiding harsh corrections, and encouraging participation. Similarly, Tsiplakides and Keramida (2009) found that supportive teaching practices, including communicative approaches and encouragement, can increase motivation and reduce anxiety. The findings also highlight the value of collaborative approaches such as group work and interactive activities in promoting a relaxed learning environment.

More recent research supports these findings. Öztürk and Öztürk (2021) found that structured speaking activities and supportive feedback reduced students' anxiety and increased confidence. Toubot et al. (2017) also highlights the role of positive reinforcement and reduced pressure in lowering anxiety. In addition, Ansari (2015) emphasizes that supportive teacher behavior, including encouragement, rapport building, and sensitivity to learners' struggles, plays a central role in reducing speaking anxiety. These studies consistently show that reducing pressure, providing support, and encouraging participation are effective teacher strategies in reducing speaking anxiety.

Collaborative learning is another widely supported strategy. Tabatabaei et al. (2015) found that

learners who engaged in collaborative learning showed improved speaking ability and lower anxiety levels. Similarly, Kamarulzaman et al. (2020) found that collaborative activities increased confidence, provided more opportunities for speaking, and created a supportive environment. Group-based activities such as discussions, role-plays, and games also help reduce anxiety by promoting peer support (Rohman, 2019).

In addition, interaction-based approaches such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) have been shown to reduce speaking anxiety. Sutanto and Sjamsir (2022) found that CLT improved students' speaking skills and reduced their anxiety. Likewise, Teng (2023) emphasized that communicative classroom practices create supportive environments that encourage participation. These findings suggest that collaborative and interactive approaches are effective in reducing speaking anxiety.

However, some studies report conflicting findings. Liao (2014) and Bozkurt and Aydin (2023) found that collaborative learning did not significantly reduce speaking anxiety, although it improved speaking performance and confidence. These findings suggest that the effectiveness of collaborative learning depends on factors such as task design, classroom environment, and implementation.

Overall, the reviewed studies highlight the crucial role of teachers in reducing students' speaking anxiety by creating supportive environments, encouraging interaction, and providing constructive feedback. These findings emphasize that effective anxiety reduction depends on how teachers implement strategies and structure classroom activities. Despite the extensive research on speaking anxiety and the various strategies to reduce it, studies examining teachers' strategies in Saudi EFL classrooms focusing on teachers' perspectives remain limited. Therefore, further research is needed to explore how teachers implement anxiety-reduction strategies in Saudi EFL classrooms.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study utilized a qualitative research design to explore the strategies teachers use to reduce students' speaking anxiety in EFL classrooms. This design is appropriate because it provides an in-depth exploration of teachers' perceptions and experiences on students' speaking anxiety, while providing a greater understanding of the strategies and how they are implemented (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Accordingly, this study is situated within an Interpretivist paradigm, adopting an exploratory qualitative design to gain in-depth insight into teachers' perspectives and practices.

3.2 Participants

The participants were eight experienced female EFL teachers from a university in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, with teaching experience ranging from 5 to 20 years. The sample size was considered sufficient once data saturation was reached, as similar ideas and themes began to recur across participants' responses. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based

on their experience in EFL teaching (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Recruitment was conducted via email through the university administration, and participants were provided with information about the study and gave informed consent.

3.3 Data Collection

This study used semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives and experiences (Mackey & Gass, 2015). The semi-structured design allowed for follow-up questions and gave participants the freedom to share their thoughts openly. Interviews were conducted individually either online or in person depending on participants' preferences and availability.

The interview questions were designed to guide the semi-structured interviews while allowing flexibility in the conversation. They were developed based on the research questions and theoretical framework of the study. The questions explored teachers' observations of students' speaking anxiety and the strategies they used to reduce it. The open-ended questions encouraged participants to share their perspectives in detail while using prompts to further discussion when needed. The questions were shared with participants in advance to support recall during the interviews.

A pilot study was conducted to refine the interview questions and ensure their effectiveness. Two practice interviews were carried out with teachers from similar educational settings who were not part of the final participants. The pilot study helped identify unclear questions and led to minor revisions. It also resulted in the decision to share the interview questions in advance, as teachers found it challenging to recall strategies on the spot since the questions required teachers to reflect on their classroom practices.

Participants were provided with an information sheet and gave informed consent. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was ensured.

3.4 Data Analysis

To ensure accuracy in reporting participants' responses, interviews were audio-recorded, then transcribed using transcription tools and manually verified to avoid errors in transcription. The transcription process maintained participants' exact wording and provided a reliable basis for analysis, allowing early exploration of potential themes.

After transcription, the data were coded using a hybrid approach combining deductive and inductive coding. Deductive codes were based on the research questions and theoretical framework, while inductive codes were generated from the data (Mackey & Gass, 2015). Coding was conducted manually using Microsoft Word due to the small sample size and manageable data. Codes were refined until broader patterns emerged and themes were formed.

A thematic analysis was conducted to identify patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved organizing codes into themes reflecting key topics discussed by participants. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Familiarization and initial coding were completed during the transcription and coding process. Codes were organized into categories, then grouped into themes, which were reviewed and refined to ensure they reflected

the data and addressed the research questions. Finally, the themes were defined and presented with supporting quotes.

3.5 Limitations of the Study

This study encountered several limitations that should be acknowledged. The study involved a relatively small sample (8 participants) and included female teachers from a single university, which may limit the diversity and generalizability of the findings. Data was collected through interviews, relying on self-reported information, which may affect accuracy and could be influenced by social desirability bias. Finally, as the data were collected and analyzed by the researcher, there is a possibility of subjective bias, although efforts were made to ensure thorough analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Theme: Creating a Supportive Low-Anxiety Environment

The findings suggest that creating a supportive and low-anxiety environment is not simply one strategy among others, but a key condition that influences students' willingness to participate in speaking tasks. Teachers emphasized that the classroom environment plays a central role in affecting students' speaking anxiety, as learners are more likely to participate when they feel safe from negative evaluation. This is particularly important in EFL contexts where speaking is often associated with fear of making mistakes in front of others.

While this finding aligns with the Affective Filter Hypothesis, it also shows how teachers actively lower students' affective filter through classroom practices. At the same time, the findings indicate that creating a supportive environment is not only about reducing pressure, but about balancing emotional support with appropriate guidance, which allows students to participate while still developing their language skills. This suggests that the effectiveness of anxiety-reduction strategies depends largely on the classroom environment in which they are implemented, rather than on the strategies themselves.

4.1.1 Sub-theme: Normalizing Mistakes

Normalizing mistakes is a key strategy teachers use to make their students feel comfortable and less anxious in the classroom. The participants explained that reassuring students that mistakes are a necessary part of the learning process significantly reduces their speaking anxiety in the classroom. As Participant 4 stated, *"I always assure them that this is a safe learning environment and it's okay to make mistakes. We are learners and language learning is all about practice, making mistakes, and knowing how to correct them"*. Also, she highlighted that students need to *"feel safe to speak without being judged"*. In addition, teachers avoided constant correction of students' mistakes, as Participant 3 expressed, *"I try not to correct every single word so that it doesn't demotivate them and prevent them from participating further"*. These responses suggest that normalizing mistakes reduces students' fear of negative evaluation, which is a key factor influencing their willingness to participate in speaking tasks.

This finding supports previous research (e.g., Du, 2009; Lundberg & Hyseni, 2022) and is consistent with Horwitz et al., who highlight fear of negative evaluation as a major source of language anxiety. However, the findings also suggest that the effectiveness of this strategy depends on how it is applied, as completely avoiding correction may limit students' language development. This indicates that normalizing mistakes requires a balance between reducing anxiety and maintaining learning opportunities.

4.1.2 Sub-theme: Positive and Constructive Feedback

Teachers emphasized providing positive and constructive feedback to students to avoid increasing their speaking anxiety. Most participants described combining positive feedback with constructive feedback in the classroom. As Participant 2 explained, *"I try to encourage them always and say that they are doing well, but here is your feedback. Here are the areas that you need to focus on"*. Another teacher described providing individual constructive feedback as a strategy to reduce students' anxiety, stating that *"the strategy itself is like speaking with the students one-on-one and telling her what her errors are and how she can correct them and what her fears are so we can overcome them"* (Participant 1). This suggests that supportive feedback reduces anxiety not only by encouraging students, but by guiding them in a way that maintains their confidence while addressing their errors.

This finding is supported by previous studies (e.g., Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2009; Alrabai, 2015), but it also highlights that feedback is most effective when it balances emotional support with corrective guidance. From a theoretical perspective, this reflects the principles of Communicative Language Teaching, which emphasize meaningful communication alongside supportive feedback practices (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). At the same time, the findings suggest that overly direct or frequent correction may increase anxiety, indicating that the timing and type of feedback are critical factors in its effectiveness.

4.1.3 Sub-theme: Interactive Classroom Activities

This subtheme demonstrates how participants use interactive activities in the classroom to create a comfortable environment where students feel less anxious about speaking or participating. One teacher explained that using classroom activities such as group worksheets can help students interact with their classmates, stating that *"Having extra activities, this is always helpful because they get to know each other.... They are more relaxed. They do activities together"* (Participant 7). Another teacher used games such as Kahoot to encourage students to speak, noting that *"The games would really help make the class interactive"* (Participant 8). This suggests that interactive activities reduce speaking anxiety by shifting the focus from individual performance to shared participation, which lowers the pressure on students and makes speaking less intimidating.

This finding is supported by previous research (e.g., Chen, 2022; Rohman, 2019), which highlights the role of interactive and engaging activities in reducing anxiety. However, the findings of this study suggest that the effectiveness of such activities may depend on the classroom environment in which they are implemented, as interaction alone may not reduce anxiety unless students feel comfortable and supported.

4.2 Theme: Encouraging Classroom Participation

This theme focuses on the strategies teachers use to encourage students' participation in speaking tasks. Teachers viewed increased participation as an indication of reduced speaking anxiety, which explains their emphasis on encouraging students to speak in the classroom. However, participation should not be understood only as an outcome of lower anxiety, but also as a process to reduce anxiety, since engaging in speaking tasks may gradually build students' confidence.

This finding is consistent with Horwitz et al.'s (1986) argument that anxious learners tend to avoid oral participation, suggesting that willingness to participate and anxiety are closely linked. At the same time, the findings indicate that encouraging participation alone may not be sufficient unless it is supported by a classroom environment that reduces fear of negative evaluation. This suggests that participation functions not only as evidence of reduced anxiety, but also as an important process through which anxiety may gradually decrease, as increased participation provides opportunities for confidence building and positive speaking experiences

4.2.1 Sub-theme: Collaborative Learning Strategies

Collaborative learning emerged as one of the most common strategies teachers used to manage students' speaking anxiety. The participants observed that students exhibited less speaking anxiety and participated more after using collaborative strategies in the classroom. As Participant 7 stated, "*Students are more active when I divide them into groups*". Teachers often encouraged learners to work together in groups or pairs on speaking tasks in the classroom, as noted by Participant 5, "*I would group them into a group of three or four and give each one a little part to speak about to encourage them to speak*". Another teacher explained the value in pair work, "*Whenever there's a speaking exercise, I start out by letting them talk to the person they're sitting next to. That kind of reduces their anxiety because they're just speaking to a friend or a classmate*" (Participant 3). In addition, teachers explained that students learn more from each other by having peer feedback and getting more practice opportunities without worrying about being corrected by teachers (Participant 5). These responses suggest that collaborative learning reduces speaking anxiety by shifting interaction from teacher-centered evaluation to peer interaction, which lowers pressure and allows students to practice more freely.

Participants' perspectives on using collaborative learning as a strategy reflect the importance of social interaction in mitigating learners' anxiety. This finding reflects the principles of sociocultural theory, which emphasize learning through social interaction. However, the findings also suggest that it is not interaction alone that reduces anxiety, but the type of interaction, particularly when it feels less evaluative and more supportive (Lantolf, 2000). This result aligns with previous studies. For instance, in their studies, Tabatabaei et al. (2015) and Mon (2019) found that collaborative learning significantly reduced learners' anxiety and supported speaking development.

However, previous studies (e.g., Liao, 2014; Bozkurt & Aydin, 2023) have shown that collaborative learning does not always lead to a significant reduction in speaking anxiety. This

suggests that collaboration alone may not be sufficient, and its effectiveness may depend on how it is implemented. In the current study, participants did not use collaborative learning in isolation, but alongside other strategies such as creating a supportive classroom environment and reducing correction pressure. This may explain why it appeared more effective in this context, indicating that collaborative learning works best when combined with supportive classroom practices.

4.2.2 Sub-theme: Frequent Practice and Preparation

The participants explained that frequent speaking practice in the classroom and sufficient preparation before the speaking tasks can help students overcome their speaking anxiety. Many teachers emphasized that students struggling with speaking anxiety require sufficient practice and preparation for them to be able to speak in the classroom confidently. As noted by Participant 5, *“Some students feel that they're not ready to be asked to answer straight away, they need time to prepare and to practice. So, this is a good strategy to have them ready and confident”*.

Another teacher described how prior practice and preparation helped lower students' speaking anxiety in formal assessments, stating that *“I actually let the students come up in front of the whole classroom and present their work. This will let the level of anxiety lower when it comes to the actual day of the presentation where they have the exam”* (Participant 6). In addition, teachers stressed the importance of giving students more opportunities to speak in the classroom which reduces their anxiety and raises their confidence. Participant 2 explained that *“I try to give them a lot of practice and to do it a lot in the classroom. At the beginning, I might go gradually, I encourage them to speak while they are sitting in their place, then I encourage them to just stand up and stay in the same place and try to speak”*. These responses suggest that practice and preparation reduce anxiety by increasing students' sense of readiness, which makes speaking tasks feel more manageable rather than overwhelming.

This finding is supported by previous research (e.g., Young, 1991; Alrabai, 2015; Faqihi, 2023), but it also highlights that practice is most effective when it is gradual and structured. The findings suggest that simply increasing speaking opportunities may not reduce anxiety unless students are given sufficient preparation time and support, indicating that the way practice is implemented is as important as the amount of practice itself.

Overall, these findings indicate that regular practice and preparation play a crucial role in lowering speaking anxiety by building learners' confidence and increasing their engagement in speaking activities.

4.2.3 Sub-theme: Giving Incentives

Two participants highlighted that giving incentives is an effective strategy for reducing anxiety in the classroom. They described using rewards to motivate and encourage anxious students to participate in speaking tasks, thereby reducing their speaking anxiety. As stated by Participant 8, *“I give the rewards for participation, who keep trying especially for shy students...So in order to help them, sometimes I tend to use rewards but not grades actually.”* Another teacher explained how she encouraged anxious students to participate, noting that *“What I usually do*

is bring some stickers with me, with stars and happy faces. Only the ones who come to the front of the class can pick a sticker, and they do. They take stickers” (Participant 7).

These findings suggest that incentives can reduce speaking anxiety by increasing students’ motivation to participate, particularly for those who are reluctant to speak. This indicates that while incentives can encourage participation, their effect may be limited if not combined with strategies that address the underlying causes of anxiety. Prior studies support this finding, for example, Chen (2022) highlighted the importance of motivation and supportive classroom practices in helping anxious students participate more confidently. In addition, the findings of Alrabai (2015) revealed that teachers’ use of anxiety reduction strategies such as positive feedback, praise, and rewards led to a noticeable drop in learners’ speaking anxiety.

4.3 Theme: Adapting Strategies to Learner Needs

This theme highlights the importance of adapting anxiety-reduction strategies to learners’ needs, abilities, and preferences. Teachers consistently emphasized that no single strategy is effective for all students because individual differences influence how learners respond to these strategies and perform in speaking tasks. However, this finding suggests that effectiveness does not lie in the strategy itself, but in how it is adjusted to suit different learners and classroom contexts. From this perspective, reducing speaking anxiety appears to be a flexible and ongoing process rather than the result of applying fixed practices. This indicates that managing speaking anxiety is not based on selecting the “right” strategy, but on teachers’ ability to make ongoing adjustments based on learners’ responses.

4.3.1 Sub-theme: No One-Size-Fits-All Strategy

Teachers acknowledged that there was no one-size-fits-all strategy for helping students overcome their speaking anxiety. They explained that the strategies that are effective with one student or a group of students might not have the same effect on other students. As Participant 2 mentioned, *“Some of the strategies that I’m using right now don’t work for all the students. Even encouraging, using praising words, and not saying that this is a mistake”*. She further explained that generally the strategies are effective in reducing students’ speaking anxiety, however, some students do not benefit from them. Another teacher explained the reasons for the change in strategy effectiveness, stating that *“Sometimes what you do in class doesn’t work every time because every class has its own environment and students are different” (Participant 4).*

These responses suggest that the variability in strategy effectiveness is not a limitation, but an expected outcome of individual differences among learners. This finding is supported by previous research on individual differences (e.g., Kubat, 2018; Alrabai, 2015). However, the findings also suggest that the absence of a single effective strategy should not be viewed as a weakness, but as an indication that anxiety reduction requires flexible and responsive teaching practices rather than fixed methods.

4.3.2 Sub-theme: Adapting to Proficiency Levels

Participants highlighted the value of adjusting speaking tasks and anxiety-reduction strategies

used in the classroom to match students' proficiency level. Teachers described how adapting speaking tasks to students' level can help students speak in the classroom while gradually relieving their anxiety. As Participant 6 stated, *"If they're not very proficient in English, I try to find the easy questions that will allow them to speak without being afraid. So, for instance, short answers...and then I ease her into other questions.... When it comes to the mid and higher levels,... we start with a small subject and give them some words. And then, "Okay, let's put these words in sentences".... "Let's talk about this subject"."*

Another participant described her process for choosing which strategy to use based on students' level, stating that *"With lower-level students, I will need to incorporate more pair and group work and more preparation time. But with high-level students, it's fine to come up with a task that they can prepare during class, they wouldn't need time to prepare in advance"* (Participant 5). These responses suggest that adjusting task difficulty helps reduce anxiety by ensuring that speaking tasks remain within students' capabilities, which allows them to participate without feeling overwhelmed.

This finding reflects the concept of the zone of proximal development, which emphasizes that learning occurs when tasks are appropriately challenging (Pathan et al., 2018). However, the findings also suggest that when tasks exceed students' proficiency levels, they may increase anxiety rather than promote learning (Du, 2009), highlighting the importance of carefully adjusting task difficulty.

4.3.3 Sub-theme: Adapting Feedback and Support

The interviews revealed that not all teachers follow the same method in giving feedback and error correction. Some teachers preferred to provide students with indirect feedback, as Participant 6 described, *"I repeat the word after the student to make them notice that there is a mistake, but I do not like to point each and every single word the student has a mistake with because that will actually make the level of anxiety for the student higher, and she will feel uncomfortable to complete speaking"*. Other teachers preferred to give delayed feedback and keep it general to avoid highlighting each student's mistake and increasing her anxiety, stating that *"I give them delayed feedback, but general feedback from what I have noticed at the end of the speaking task"* (Participant 1).

However, some teachers prefer to be flexible and use different strategies with different students which demonstrates teachers' ability to adapt their teaching to students' needs and preferences, as explained by Participant 2, *"I'm trying to use different kinds of feedback to approach different types of students. So, I give them individual feedback. I give them group feedback. I think giving them different types of feedback is very good for them."*

These findings suggest that the effectiveness of feedback depends on how it is adapted to learners' needs, as different types of feedback may influence students' anxiety in different ways. Du (2009) and Khan (2023) explain that language anxiety is influenced by affective factors and individual differences among learners, emphasizing the importance of modifying teaching practices to learners' needs. This perspective aligns with sociocultural theory, which supports cognitive development through adapting instruction to learners' individual characteristics

(Shakra, 2008). This indicates that while feedback is necessary for learning, inappropriate timing or overly direct correction may increase students' anxiety and reduce their willingness to participate.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the strategies teachers use to reduce students' speaking anxiety in EFL classrooms. The findings indicate that speaking anxiety significantly affects students' participation and language development, as learners often avoid engaging in speaking tasks due to fear and discomfort. To address this issue, teachers employ a range of strategies and adapt them to students' needs and proficiency levels.

The findings identified several strategies used by teachers to reduce speaking anxiety. These include encouraging student collaboration, normalizing mistakes to create a safe environment, providing positive and constructive feedback, and promoting frequent practice and preparation. In addition, teachers demonstrated understanding of students' needs by adjusting tasks according to students' proficiency levels and using motivational techniques to encourage participation. These findings highlight that effective anxiety reduction requires a combination of pedagogical strategies and constant teacher awareness of students' emotional needs.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings support the Affective Filter Hypothesis by demonstrating that reducing anxiety facilitates language learning. They also align with the principles of Communicative Language Teaching and Sociocultural Theory, emphasizing the role of interaction, collaboration, and supportive feedback in promoting participation and reducing speaking anxiety.

The findings also provide practical implications for EFL teachers. Creating a supportive classroom environment, encouraging collaboration, and providing constructive feedback can help reduce students' anxiety and increase their willingness to participate. In addition, integrating regular speaking activities and allowing time for preparation can improve students' confidence and performance. Importantly, the findings indicate that no single strategy is effective for all learners, highlighting the need for flexible teaching approaches that are adapted to students' individual differences.

This study contributes to the literature by providing context-specific insight into how speaking anxiety is managed in Saudi EFL classrooms. It shows that anxiety reduction is not achieved through isolated strategies, but through the deliberate combination of supportive classroom practices, interaction-based activities, and adaptive instruction. In doing so, the study extends existing perspectives by demonstrating how these strategies operate together in practice rather than as separate techniques.

This is important because it moves beyond identifying strategies to explaining how they can be effectively implemented in context. The findings suggest that reducing speaking anxiety depends on teachers' ability to balance emotional support with instructional demands, offering a practical framework that can inform teaching in similar EFL settings. In addition, the study

provides a more applied interpretation of existing theories by showing how concepts such as the affective filter and interaction-based learning are realized in actual classroom practices.

This study has several limitations. The relatively small sample size and the focus on a single educational context may limit the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the reliance on interview data may not fully reflect actual classroom practices. Future research could include larger and more diverse samples, incorporate students' perspectives, and examine the long-term impact of anxiety-reduction strategies.

Overall, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how teachers address speaking anxiety in EFL classrooms. It highlights that reducing speaking anxiety is not the result of isolated techniques, but a continuous, adaptive process constructed by teachers' awareness, classroom dynamics, and learners' individual differences.

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