

Overcoming Apprehension: How to Become a More Confident English Speaker



By Michael Madill

Professor, Committee on Practical
Foreign Language Courses

mtmadill@hufs.ac.kr

Making mistakes means you are progressing

When you make mistakes in the language classroom, they are not necessarily negative things in your development. It is well known that mistakes are essential in the learning process because you will hopefully learn from them and not repeat them in the future. Many students develop crippling speaking anxiety in the classroom because they dread making mistakes in front of their classmates and professors. You must understand that most educators do not see mistakes as negatives things in their language classrooms. Rather, they see them as learning and teaching

opportunities. They see them as students trying in the classroom. They see them as language learning growth. Thus, as a learner, you need to understand that mistakes are not bad things and you should not be afraid of them. We all make the mistake of falling off our bicycles when we are learning to ride them as a child. Therefore, do not be afraid to make mistakes when speaking English. Just make sure you learn from them and avoid them in the future as best you can.

Introduction

When learning English in South Korea, the most challenging language components to acquire are typically the productive aspects of speaking and writing. This has a lot to do with the Korean Scholastic Ability Test that is heavily focused on listening and reading components. It also has to do with the fact that you are learning English as a foreign language (EFL). Essentially, you are learning in an environment where you do not have daily practice and much needed exposure to the language. These two factors combine to create a situation where English speaking has become a marginalized language component compared to reading and listening capabilities. Thus, upon entering university and taking freshman English classes, it is common to exhibit high levels of speaking anxiety when using the language in class. Therefore, I would like to present five tips that will help alleviate some speaking anxiety in your conversational English classes. It is hoped that this advice will help you succeed, increase your proficiency, make you more confident, and lower your overall speaking apprehension.

The more you practice, the more you will improve

Learning a new language is a lot like playing guitar or piano where the only way you will improve is by practicing. As far as I know, no human in the history of mankind has ever successfully learned a new language without practicing what they have learned. Therefore, if you want to become a better English speaker and lower your speaking anxiety in the classroom, you must practice, practice, and practice some more. Some ways to do this would be to volunteer as an English tour guide or translator for foreigners traveling in Korea. Or maybe join an English social group on Facebook or Meetup.com that gets together on a regular basis and just talks. You could even try to make as many English speaking friends as possible and meet with them on a regular basis to practice your English. Essentially, the more you practice, the better your English speaking will develop and the lower your speaking anxiety will be in your conversational English classes.

Live in an English speaking country

Many of my students ask what the best way is to develop their English skills. I commonly tell them that the best way is to live in an English speaking country for one year or more. Some of my best English speakers over the years have lived abroad and I can usually tell because they have low levels of speaking anxiety and are very comfortable speaking in class. I realize that this can be a difficult endeavour but I urge you to actively seek out any opportunities you can to live in an English speaking country. Such things as exchanges, work abroad programs, or even just traveling are great ways to accomplish this. You will find that even one year living abroad being exposed to English twenty-four hours a day will greatly increase your English speaking ability and lower your apprehension in the classroom.

Watch and listen to English media

Thanks to technology, the availability and variety of English media has drastically increased. Our exposure to online radio broadcasts, YouTube, streaming TV, language learning apps, movie torrents, in addition to various podcasts has become readily available. It is easier to access these media sources nowadays compared to 20 years ago. Therefore there is no excuse for not being able to read, listen to, or watch English based media. You may be asking how these will decrease your speaking anxiety in the classroom. Well, it has to do with

exposure to the natural use of English in real-life settings. The more you listen to and watch English being used in real-life, the more comfortable you will be reproducing this language in the classroom. You must understand that you cannot learn everything there is to know about English in a textbook. The natural use varies greatly and seeing it being used in real-life is a great way for you to become more confident using the language in the future. This will transfer over to your English speaking classes when you will better understand contextual expressions or vocabulary and will ultimately feel more confident using the language you have learned.

Forget about other students in the classroom

In a recent study conducted in my classrooms, it was found that a major cause of speaking anxiety was due to the perception that other students in the class were better at speaking English than they were. Students exhibited high levels of speaking anxiety in class or even did not speak at all because of this. Essentially, they thought their English was not good enough compared to their peers. I understand that there are social and cultural reasons behind this but I urge you to let them go if you really want to be a more confident English speaker. Do not worry about other students in the classroom as you should only be worrying about yourself. When you come to this realization, you will feel more confident in the classroom and will be willing to participate every chance you get. This will lead to greater speaking confidence and an overall increase in your ability to speak English. Always be thinking that your English is better than theirs. This mentality will make you more confident in the classroom.

Conclusion

Learning any language can be a very daunting and challenging task. Some students excel while others exhibit crippling speaking anxiety in the classroom. In the Korean context, what differentiates a confident English speaker from a student with high levels of speaking apprehension is commonly based on some of the five ideas presented in this article. If learning to speak English is a priority in your life, then I strongly recommend you understand and incorporate these five tips into your studies. Make the language a part of your life as this is an influential approach that will help you truly improve and it starts with being confident in your English speaking classrooms. ☐