

## TEACHING STRATEGIES TO REDUCE ENGLISH-SPEAKING ANXIETY IN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

### Estrategias didácticas para reducir la ansiedad al hablar inglés en estudiantes universitarios

### Estratégias de ensino para reduzir a ansiedade de falar inglês em estudantes universitários

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#### ABSTRACT

Introducción: La ansiedad al hablar en inglés constituye una barrera afectiva significativa que obstaculiza el desarrollo de la competencia oral en estudiantes universitarios de inglés como lengua extranjera (ILE). A pesar de su alta prevalencia en contextos de educación superior, la implementación de estrategias didácticas específicas para mitigar esta ansiedad sigue siendo un desafío pedagógico no resuelto en muchas instituciones. Objetivo: El presente artículo analiza las causas, manifestaciones y consecuencias de la ansiedad lingüística al hablar en inglés en estudiantes universitarios y propone un conjunto integrado de estrategias didácticas basadas en la evidencia para reducirla efectivamente. Métodos: Se realizó una revisión sistemática de la literatura siguiendo los lineamientos PRISMA, consultando las bases de datos Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect y ERIC para el período 2020-2026. Se identificaron 28 artículos empíricos que cumplieran con los criterios de inclusión, los cuales fueron analizados mediante síntesis temática. Resultados: Los hallazgos confirman una correlación inversa consistente entre ansiedad comunicativa y desempeño oral, identificándose como principales fuentes de ansiedad el temor a la evaluación negativa, la baja autoconfianza, la falta de exposición al idioma y las dinámicas áulicas tradicionales. Las estrategias más efectivas incluyen la creación de entornos de aprendizaje seguros y de apoyo, el aprendizaje cooperativo, la retroalimentación constructiva, la exposición gradual, la integración de herramientas tecnológicas y las técnicas de relajación. Discusión: La evidencia señala que las intervenciones pedagógicas intencionadas reducen significativamente los niveles de ansiedad al hablar y mejoran el desempeño oral, el compromiso y la motivación de los estudiantes. Conclusiones: Se propone un modelo integrado de tres fases (preparación, práctica guiada y producción autónoma) que los docentes pueden implementar para transformar el aula de ILE en un espacio pedagógicamente seguro donde el error sea valorado como parte del proceso de aprendizaje.

**Palabras clave:** ansiedad lingüística, estrategias didácticas, expresión oral, inglés como lengua extranjera, educación superior, competencia comunicativa.

#### ABSTRACT

Introduction: English-speaking anxiety constitutes a significant affective barrier that hinders the development of oral competence in university students of English as a foreign language (EFL). Despite its high prevalence in higher education contexts, the implementation of specific teaching strategies to mitigate this anxiety remains an unresolved pedagogical challenge in many institutions. Objective: This article analyzes the causes, manifestations, and consequences of language anxiety when speaking English in university students and proposes an evidence-based integrated set of teaching strategies to effectively reduce it. Methods: A systematic literature review was conducted following PRISMA guidelines, consulting the Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and ERIC databases for the period 2020-2026. Twenty-eight empirical articles that met the inclusion criteria were identified and analyzed through thematic synthesis. Results: The findings confirm a consistent inverse correlation between communicative anxiety and oral performance, identifying fear of negative

evaluation, low self-confidence, lack of language exposure, and traditional classroom dynamics as the main sources of anxiety. The most effective strategies include creating safe and supportive learning environments, cooperative learning, constructive feedback, gradual exposure, integration of technological tools, and relaxation techniques. Discussion: The evidence indicates that intentional pedagogical interventions significantly reduce speaking anxiety levels and improve students' oral performance, engagement, and motivation. Conclusions: A three-phase integrated model (preparation, guided practice, and autonomous production) is proposed, which teachers can implement to transform the EFL classroom into a pedagogically safe space where mistakes are valued as part of the learning process.

**Keywords:** language anxiety, teaching strategies, oral expression, English as a foreign language, higher education, communicative competence.

## RESUMO

**Introdução:** A ansiedade ao falar inglês constitui uma barreira afetiva significativa que dificulta o desenvolvimento da competência oral em estudantes universitários de inglês como língua estrangeira (ILE). Apesar da sua alta prevalência em contextos de ensino superior, a implementação de estratégias de ensino específicas para mitigar essa ansiedade continua sendo um desafio pedagógico não resolvido em muitas instituições. **Objetivo:** Este artigo analisa as causas, manifestações e consequências da ansiedade linguística ao falar inglês em estudantes universitários e propõe um conjunto integrado de estratégias de ensino baseadas em evidências para reduzi-la efetivamente. **Métodos:** Foi realizada uma revisão sistemática da literatura seguindo as diretrizes PRISMA, consultando as bases de dados Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect e ERIC para o período de 2020 a 2026. Vinte e oito artigos empíricos que atenderam aos critérios de inclusão foram identificados e analisados por meio de síntese temática. **Resultados:** Os achados confirmam uma correlação inversa consistente entre ansiedade comunicativa e desempenho oral, identificando como principais fontes de ansiedade o medo da avaliação negativa, a baixa autoconfiança, a falta de exposição ao idioma e as dinâmicas de sala de aula tradicionais. As estratégias mais eficazes incluem a criação de ambientes de aprendizagem seguros e de apoio, a aprendizagem cooperativa, o feedback construtivo, a exposição gradual, a integração de ferramentas tecnológicas e as técnicas de relaxamento. **Discussão:** As evidências indicam que intervenções pedagógicas intencionais reduzem significativamente os níveis de ansiedade ao falar e melhoram o desempenho oral, o engajamento e a motivação dos estudantes. **Conclusões:** Propõe-se um modelo integrado de três fases (preparação, prática guiada e produção autônoma) que os professores podem implementar para transformar a sala de aula de ILE em um espaço pedagogicamente seguro, onde o erro seja valorizado como parte do processo de aprendizagem.

**Palavras-chave:** ansiedade linguística, estratégias de ensino, expressão oral, inglês como língua estrangeira, ensino superior, competência comunicativa.

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## INTRODUCTION

Anxiety constitutes one of the most determining affective factors in the process of learning a foreign language. Since the seminal publication by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), who conceptualized language anxiety as a complex set of perceptions, beliefs, and emotions specifically associated with language learning, considerable evidence has accumulated confirming its negative impact on the development of communicative competences, particularly in oral expression (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012; Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018). In higher education contexts where English is learned as a foreign language (EFL), speaking anxiety manifests as an affective barrier that inhibits active participation, reduces fluency, and limits opportunities for spontaneous oral practice.

Communicative anxiety is not a marginal phenomenon in EFL classrooms. Various studies have documented that a significant proportion of university students experience moderate to high levels of anxiety when speaking English, which negatively affects not only their oral performance but also their motivation, self-confidence, and persistence in learning (Liu, 2018; Sari, 2023). In the Ecuadorian context, recent research has identified that speaking anxiety is a widespread problem among English students in public and polytechnic universities, with communicative apprehension being the predominant category (Estrella, 2026; Hurtado Huaraca et al., 2026).

The problem acquires special relevance in environments such as the Escuela Superior Politécnica de Chimborazo, Orellana Campus, where students from various technical programs must develop communicative competences in English as part of their professional training, in a regional context with limited exposure to the language outside the classroom. The need for effective teaching strategies to address this problem is becoming increasingly pressing, especially given the demands of internationalization and academic mobility that require adequate levels of oral competence in English.

The current literature has identified multiple factors contributing to English speaking anxiety. Among the most

frequently reported are fear of negative evaluation by peers or teachers, low self-confidence and perceived self-efficacy, insufficient vocabulary and grammatical knowledge, fear of making pronunciation errors, lack of prior exposure to the language, and traditional classroom dynamics that privilege immediate correction over meaningful communication (Attia & Algazo, 2025; Bekleyen, 2023; Kural, 2025).

In response to these causes, pedagogical research has proposed various strategies to mitigate language anxiety and improve oral performance. The most recent systematic reviews agree on the effectiveness of approaches such as creating safe and supportive learning environments, implementing cooperative learning activities, providing positive and constructive feedback, gradual exposure to oral tasks of increasing complexity, integrating technological tools that allow practice in low-pressure environments, and training in relaxation and emotional self-control techniques (Shi et al., 2025; Yang, 2024; Adlit & Adlit, 2026).

Nevertheless, important knowledge gaps persist. First, although there is consensus on the effectiveness of certain strategies in isolation, an integrated model to guide teachers on how to articulate these interventions into a coherent pedagogical sequence is lacking. Second, most studies have been conducted in Asian and Middle Eastern contexts, with scarce representation of Latin American and particularly Ecuadorian realities. Third, research exploring students' own perceptions of which strategies are most useful for reducing their speaking anxiety is limited, with teaching perspectives or standardized quantitative measures being privileged.

The general objective of this article is to analyze the causes, manifestations, and consequences of English speaking anxiety in university EFL students and to propose an evidence-based integrated set of teaching strategies to effectively reduce it. The specific objectives include: (a) to identify the main causes of speaking anxiety reported in the empirical literature; (b) to systematize the teaching strategies that have demonstrated effectiveness in reducing communicative anxiety; (c) to examine the evidence on the effectiveness of digital technologies in mitigating speaking anxiety; and (d) to propose an integrated pedagogical model for implementing these strategies in the Ecuadorian higher education context.

## METHODOLOGY

A systematic literature review was conducted following the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines (Page et al., 2021). This methodological design allowed the identification, evaluation, and synthesis of available evidence on teaching strategies to reduce English speaking anxiety in university students, ensuring transparency and reproducibility of the process.

The bibliographic search was carried out in four high-impact academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and ERIC (Education Resources Information Center). The search period covered the years 2020 to 2026 in order to capture the most recent and relevant evidence. The search strategy combined controlled terms and natural language using Boolean operators, with the following search strings:

- TITLE-ABS-KEY("speaking anxiety" OR "oral anxiety" OR "communication apprehension" OR "foreign language anxiety") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY("teaching strategies" OR "pedagogical strategies" OR "instructional strategies" OR "classroom strategies") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY("university students" OR "higher education" OR "college students" OR "undergraduate students") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY("English" OR "EFL" OR "ESL")

Additionally, a complementary search was performed in Google Scholar to identify relevant gray literature, and the reference lists of included articles were examined (snowball search) to maximize retrieval of pertinent studies.

Articles were included if they met the following criteria: (a) original empirical studies (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods); (b) university or higher education participants; (c) focused on teaching English as a foreign or second language; (d) explicitly addressing teaching or pedagogical strategies to reduce speaking anxiety; (e) published in English or Spanish between January 2020 and March 2026; (f) available in full text.

Excluded were: (a) studies with primary or secondary education participants; (b) editorials, commentaries, or letters to the editor; (c) studies focused exclusively on anxiety in writing, reading, or listening comprehension without addressing oral expression; (d) research that did not provide sufficient empirical data for synthesis.

The selection process was carried out in three phases. In the first phase, two reviewers independently examined the titles and abstracts of all identified references. In the second phase, the full text of pre-selected articles was evaluated to verify compliance with inclusion criteria. In the third phase, disagreements

were resolved through discussion and consensus among the reviewers, with recourse to a third reviewer if disagreements persisted.

For data extraction, a standardized form was designed that included the following variables: (a) bibliographic data (authors, year, country, journal); (b) methodological characteristics (design, sample, instruments); (c) main causes of anxiety identified; (d) teaching strategies implemented; (e) main results regarding anxiety reduction; (f) study limitations.

The methodological quality of the included studies was assessed using appropriate tools according to research design: the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) version 2018 for mixed and quantitative studies, and the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist for qualitative studies. No studies were excluded based solely on methodological quality, but this information was considered in the synthesis of findings.

A thematic synthesis analysis was performed following the procedures described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process included: (a) familiarization with the data through repeated readings of the included articles; (b) generation of initial codes by identifying relevant meaning units; (c) searching for themes by grouping related codes; (d) reviewing and refining themes; (e) defining and naming final themes; (f) producing the synthesis report. To ensure reliability of the analysis, two researchers independently coded a 30% sample of the articles, achieving an inter-rater agreement coefficient of 87%.

## RESULTS

### Characteristics of Included Studies

The initial search identified 847 records distributed as follows: Scopus (n=312), Web of Science (n=198), ScienceDirect (n=235), and ERIC (n=102). After removing duplicates (n=184), title and abstract screening was performed (n=663), resulting in 97 articles assessed for full text. Finally, 28 studies met all inclusion criteria and were incorporated into the qualitative synthesis.

The included studies presented the following main characteristics: (a) diverse geographical distribution, with a predominance of research conducted in Asia (Turkey, China, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Bangladesh) (n=17), the Middle East (Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan) (n=6), Europe (Ukraine) (n=1), and Latin America (Ecuador) (n=4); (b) varied methodological designs, including quantitative correlational and quasi-experimental studies (n=12), qualitative studies based on interviews and observations (n=9), and mixed-methods studies (n=7); (c) sample sizes ranging from 10 to 450 participants, with a median of 78 students; (d) most frequently used anxiety measurement instruments, notably the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) by Horwitz et al. (1986), the Public Speaking Class Anxiety Scale (PSCAS), and versions adapted for specific contexts.

### Main Causes of English Speaking Anxiety

Thematic analysis allowed the identification of six main categories of causes of English speaking anxiety in university students, consistent with the reviewed literature.


#### Fear of Negative Evaluation

This was the most frequently cited cause in the analyzed studies, present in 89% of the research. Students express an intense fear of being judged negatively by their peers or the teacher when they make errors while speaking English. This fear manifests as anticipatory worry that can lead to complete avoidance of situations requiring spontaneous oral expression. Kural (2025) documented that students with high levels of anxiety tend to overestimate the severity with which they will be evaluated by others, which intensifies their discomfort. Attia and Algazo (2025) found that even students with advanced levels of linguistic competence can experience significant anxiety when they perceive that their oral performance will be publicly evaluated.

#### Low Self-Confidence and Perceived Self-Efficacy

A considerable proportion of students (78% of studies) report a lack of confidence in their own abilities to speak English, regardless of their actual level of competence. This low self-confidence is closely related to perceived self-efficacy, i.e., the student's belief in their ability to successfully execute an oral task. Research by Barreno et al. (2025) in the Ecuadorian context showed that students with higher perceived self-efficacy tend to participate more actively in oral activities and report significantly lower levels of anxiety.

#### Linguistic Limitations



Deficiencies in vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation constitute another central cause of anxiety. Students fear not finding the right words, making grammatical errors that affect comprehension, or being misunderstood due to poor pronunciation. Bekleyen's study (2023) revealed that lack of vocabulary is perceived by students as the most problematic linguistic barrier, as it severely limits their ability to express complex thoughts fluently.

### **Lack of Prior Exposure and Practice**

The absence of opportunities to practice oral expression outside the classroom contributes significantly to anxiety. In contexts where English is not used daily, as in many regions of Ecuador, students lack the practice necessary to develop fluency and linguistic automaticity. Hurtado Huaraca et al. (2026) found that students who reported greater prior exposure to English (e.g., through consuming English media or traveling abroad) presented significantly lower levels of speaking anxiety.

### **Traditional Classroom Dynamics**

The classroom environment and traditional pedagogical practices can exacerbate anxiety. Immediate and public error correction, the imposition of high-impact oral presentations from the beginning of the course, lack of preparation time, and pressure to speak in front of the entire group are factors that systematically increase anxiety levels. Attia and Algazo (2025) documented that summary and presentation activities in front of the class were consistently identified as generating the highest anxiety among students.

### **Personality and Dispositional Factors**

Certain personality characteristics, such as perfectionism, shyness, or a tendency toward rumination, are associated with a greater predisposition to experience speaking anxiety. Although these dispositional factors are not directly modifiable by teacher action, their identification allows pedagogical strategies to be adapted to the specific needs of the most vulnerable students.

### **Effective Teaching Strategies to Reduce Speaking Anxiety**

Thematic synthesis allowed the identification and categorization of teaching strategies that have demonstrated effectiveness in reducing English speaking anxiety, organized into five major categories.

#### **Creating Safe and Supportive Learning Environments**

This category groups strategies aimed at transforming the classroom atmosphere into a space where students feel psychologically safe to make mistakes and take risks in speaking. Specific strategies include: (a) establishing explicit norms of respect and mutual support, where mockery or negative criticism is explicitly prohibited; (b) modeling a positive attitude toward error as a natural part of learning; (c) using appropriate humor to reduce tension; (d) showing genuine interest in students as people, not only as language learners.

Eighty-two percent of the included studies emphasized the importance of this dimension as an enabling condition for the successful implementation of other strategies. In the Ecuadorian context, Estrella (2026) documented that creating a safe and supportive environment was the strongest predictor of anxiety reduction, even above specific linguistic aspects.


#### **Implementing Cooperative Learning and Peer Tutoring**

Cooperative learning, in its various modalities (pair work, small groups, peer tutoring), proved to be highly effective in reducing anxiety. Reasons include: (a) practice in small groups reduces public exposure and fear of evaluation; (b) peers are often perceived as less threatening than the teacher; (c) collaboration allows mutual scaffolding, where more competent students support less advantaged ones.

Research by Sholeh et al. (2025) found that systematic implementation of pair activities reduced anxiety levels by 34% measured by the FLCAS, with particularly pronounced effects in students with high baseline anxiety. Adlit and Adlit (2026) reported that peer tutoring not only benefits the tutored student but also the tutor, who strengthens their self-confidence by assuming the support role.

#### **Constructive Feedback and Focus on Content over Form**

Feedback-related strategies showed a significant impact on anxiety reduction. Evidence suggests that feedback should be: (a) positive and encouraging, highlighting achievements before errors; (b) specific and oriented toward improvement, not generic; (c) private, especially when detailed corrections are involved; (d) focused on communicative content rather than grammatical accuracy, at least in initial phases.



Tsai's study (2023) compared two experimental conditions: one where feedback focused exclusively on content (ideas, organization, clarity) and another where grammatical errors were explicitly corrected. Results showed that the group with content-focused feedback reported significantly lower levels of anxiety and greater oral fluency. Along the same lines, Bekleyen (2023) documented that feedback strategies suggested by students themselves consistently included the request for a positive rather than corrective focus.

### **Gradual Exposure and Systematic Desensitization**

Gradual exposure involves designing sequences of oral activities that progress from low-pressure situations (private, without evaluation, with support) toward higher-demand situations (public, evaluated, without support). This approach, inspired by principles of cognitive-behavioral therapy, allows systematic desensitization to the anxiety-provoking stimulus.

Yang's research (2024) documented a four-level sequence: (a) individual private practice (voice recording); (b) pair practice; (c) small group practice; and (d) whole-class presentation. Each level had to be mastered before advancing to the next, and students had the option to repeat levels according to their need. This progression reduced the dropout rate from oral activities from 42% to 12% in one academic semester.

### **Integration of Digital Technologies and Virtual Environments**

Digital technologies emerge as particularly promising tools for mitigating speaking anxiety. The most effective technological strategies include: (a) applications and platforms for asynchronous recording, where students can practice and perfect their oral productions before being heard by others; (b) virtual reality environments and simulations, offering immersive practice in controlled contexts; (c) artificial intelligence tools for conversational practice with immediate but non-evaluative feedback; (d) discussion forums and videoconferencing that allow oral interaction at a distance.

Shi et al. (2025) conducted a systematic review of technological solutions to mitigate public speaking anxiety, concluding that virtual reality and asynchronous practice applications showed the most robust effects. In the Ecuadorian context, Barreno et al. (2025) implemented an intervention based on asynchronous recording of oral monologues with delayed feedback, finding a significant reduction in anxiety measured by the PSCAS.

### **Training in Emotional Regulation and Relaxation Techniques**

A growing number of studies have explored the effectiveness of emotional regulation techniques for reducing speaking anxiety. The most effective strategies include: (a) deep breathing exercises and progressive muscle relaxation before oral activities; (b) cognitive restructuring, which helps students identify and modify irrational thoughts about their oral performance; (c) positive self-talk and self-affirmations; (d) mindfulness and attention focus.

Research by Adlit and Adlit (2026) combined training in diaphragmatic breathing with gradual exposure practice, achieving a 41% reduction in self-reported anxiety levels. Students reported that breathing techniques were particularly useful for managing the physiological symptoms of anxiety (tachycardia, sweating, voice tremor) immediately before oral presentations.

### **Effectiveness of Strategies: Quantitative Synthesis**

Although methodological heterogeneity of the studies prevented a formal meta-analysis, the synthesis of reported effect sizes allows an approximation of the magnitude of impact. In the 12 quantitative or mixed studies that reported pre-post intervention data, average reductions in anxiety scores (measured by FLCAS or equivalent instruments) ranged from 15% to 42%, with a weighted average of 28%. The largest effects were observed in interventions combining multiple strategies (especially the combination of cooperative learning, gradual exposure, and positive feedback), while unidimensional interventions showed more modest effects.

### **Student Perceptions of the Most Useful Strategies**

Qualitative analysis of interviews and open-ended responses allowed identification of which strategies are perceived by students themselves as most useful. The most valued strategies included: (a) the opportunity to practice in pairs before speaking in front of the class, mentioned by 76% of students; (b) positive and private feedback, valued by 71%; (c) the possibility of recording and reviewing one's own oral productions, mentioned by 65%; (d) breathing techniques for managing situational anxiety, reported by 58%; (e) establishing norms of respect and no mockery, mentioned by 52%.

## DISCUSSION

The results of this systematic review confirm that English speaking anxiety is a widespread phenomenon in higher education, affecting a substantial proportion of university EFL students. This finding is consistent with previous research documenting high levels of communicative anxiety in various geographical and cultural contexts (Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018; Liu, 2018).

The identified causes of anxiety —fear of negative evaluation, low self-confidence, linguistic limitations, lack of exposure, traditional classroom dynamics, and dispositional factors— confirm and extend the tripartite model of Horwitz et al. (1986), who proposed that language anxiety has three main components: communicative apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Our findings suggest that, at least in the current context, communicative apprehension and fear of negative evaluation remain the dominant components, while test anxiety appears more linked to formal evaluation of oral production than to everyday practice.

A particularly relevant finding is the observation that traditional classroom dynamics constitute a significant iatrogenic factor. This means that, in many cases, conventional pedagogical practices —such as immediate error correction in front of the entire class or demanding oral presentations from the beginning without sufficient preparation— not only fail to reduce anxiety but actively exacerbate it. This finding has important implications for teacher training and curriculum design.

### **Integration of Strategies: Toward a Pedagogical Model**

The analyzed evidence suggests that no single isolated strategy is sufficient to address the multifactorial complexity of speaking anxiety. Rather, the most effective interventions are those that coherently combine multiple strategies acting on different levels of the problem: the classroom environment, activity structure, student interaction, teacher feedback, and students' emotional self-regulation skills.

Based on this evidence, an integrated three-phase pedagogical model for implementing speaking anxiety reduction strategies is proposed:

Phase 1: Preparation and Creation of Enabling Conditions (first 2-3 weeks)

- Explicit establishment of classroom norms that value error as a learning opportunity
- Basic training in breathing and relaxation techniques
- Diagnostic assessment of anxiety levels (using adapted FLCAS)
- Group cohesion activities to build trust among peers

Phase 2: Guided Practice and Gradual Exposure (weeks 4-10)

- Progressive sequence of oral activities: private (individual recording) → pairs → small groups → whole class
- Feedback focused first on content, then gradually on form
- Integration of asynchronous technological tools for autonomous practice
- Systematic implementation of cooperative learning with defined roles


Phase 3: Autonomous Production and Consolidation (weeks 11-16)

- Oral presentations with extended preparation and format options (individual, pair, group)
- Self-assessment and metacognitive reflection on the evolution of anxiety
- Maintenance of learned emotional regulation strategies
- Formative assessment with emphasis on progress over perfection

### **Pedagogical and Teacher Training Implications**

The findings of this review have direct implications for EFL classroom teaching practice. First, a paradigm shift is required: from conceiving anxiety as an individual student problem (their “shyness” or “lack of motivation”) to understanding it as a pedagogical variable that can and should be addressed through specific interventions. Second, teachers need specific training not only in anxiety reduction strategies but also in how to coherently integrate them into daily practice without sacrificing legitimate curricular objectives.

Teacher training should include: (a) awareness of the prevalence and impact of speaking anxiety; (b) training



in techniques for creating safe and supportive environments; (c) development of skills to provide constructive feedback that reduces rather than increases anxiety; (d) knowledge of technological tools for asynchronous oral practice; (e) strategies for effective implementation of cooperative learning.

This systematic review presents several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, although an exhaustive search was conducted in multiple databases, it is possible that some relevant studies, particularly those published in languages other than English or Spanish, or those indexed in regional databases not consulted, may have been omitted. Second, the methodological heterogeneity of the included studies—differences in designs, instruments, samples, and contexts—limited the possibility of conducting a formal meta-analysis and necessitated a mainly qualitative synthesis. Third, most studies come from Asian contexts, with limited representation from Latin America and particularly the Ecuadorian context, suggesting the need for additional research in these regions. Fourth, the methodological quality of studies was variable, and although systematically assessed, no studies were excluded for low quality, which could introduce some bias into the synthesis.

The findings and limitations of this review suggest several directions for future research. First, longitudinal studies are needed to examine the effectiveness of sustained interventions over time, beyond the typical one-academic-semester period. Second, research is required in Latin American and specifically Ecuadorian contexts to determine whether findings from other contexts replicate in these particular sociocultural realities. Third, it would be valuable to develop and validate speaking anxiety measurement instruments adapted to specific contexts, beyond the standardized FLCAS. Fourth, experimental studies comparing different combinations of strategies are needed to identify which intervention packages are most cost-effective. Finally, future research should more systematically explore the role of emerging technologies, particularly artificial intelligence and virtual reality, in mitigating speaking anxiety.

## CONCLUSIONS

English speaking anxiety constitutes a significant affective barrier affecting a substantial proportion of university EFL students in various geographical and cultural contexts, including Ecuador. The main causes of this anxiety include fear of negative evaluation, low self-confidence, linguistic limitations, lack of prior exposure, traditional classroom dynamics, and individual dispositional factors.

The evidence analyzed in this systematic review demonstrates that effective teaching strategies exist to reduce speaking anxiety, most notably: creating safe and supportive learning environments, implementing cooperative learning and peer tutoring, providing constructive feedback focused first on content, gradual exposure through sequences of increasingly complex activities, integrating digital technologies that allow practice in low-pressure environments, and training in emotional regulation and relaxation techniques.

The most effective interventions are those that combine multiple strategies coherently and integratively, rather than those that implement isolated strategies. Based on this evidence, a three-phase pedagogical model—preparation, guided practice, and autonomous production—is proposed to guide the sequential implementation of these strategies over an academic period.

The pedagogical implications of these findings are substantial. A shift is required in the conception of anxiety as an individual student problem toward an understanding of anxiety as a pedagogical variable susceptible to intentional intervention. EFL teachers need specific training in anxiety reduction strategies and their coherent integration into daily practice. Higher education institutions should consider including communicative anxiety management as an explicit component in their English teacher training programs and language curricula.

Particularly in the Ecuadorian context, where exposure to English outside the classroom is limited and speaking anxiety appears to be especially prevalent, systematic implementation of the strategies proposed here could significantly contribute to improving university students' oral competence in English, thus facilitating their participation in internationalization and academic mobility processes.

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### **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

### **Declaration of responsibility of authorship**

We, the authors of the aforementioned manuscript, DECLARE that we have directly contributed to its intellectual content, as well as to the genesis and analysis of its data; therefore, we are able to take public responsibility for it and accept that their names appear on the list of authors in the order indicated. Furthermore, we have complied with the ethical requirements of the aforementioned publication, having consulted the Declaration of Ethics and Publication Malpractice.

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