

When Words Fail: The Causes and Intervention Models for Student Public Speaking Fear

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Abstract

Public speaking fear, or glossophobia, constitutes a significant and widespread barrier to communication competence and socioeconomic integration for adult English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners, intensified by the effects of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA). This Systematic Literature Review (SLR) employed the PRISMA framework to synthesize empirical evidence published between 2015 and the present (36 studies) regarding the causes and interventions for this phenomenon. Findings confirm that anxiety is driven by the dynamic interaction of psychological factors (fear of negative evaluation, low self-efficacy) and linguistic factors (L2 proficiency deficits, accent anxiety). Intervention models based on Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT), particularly when combined with Virtual Reality (VR) exposure, demonstrated the highest efficacy in producing large and sustained reductions in anxiety. The results advocate for adopting multi-modal, integrated curricula that systematically address both psychological resilience and linguistic insecurity within a supportive, low-stakes learning environment.

Keywords: Public Speaking Fear, Glossophobia, Foreign Language Anxiety, Adult EAL Learners, Systematic Literature Review, CBT, Virtual Reality.

INTRODUCTION

Public speaking anxiety, known clinically as glossophobia, constitutes a significant and widespread barrier to academic success, professional advancement, and social inclusion for adult learners of English as an Additional Language (EAL). The systematic investigation of this phenomenon is crucial because it fundamentally impacts language acquisition trajectories and socioeconomic mobility in a globalized context where English communication competence is essential for career development and cross-cultural participation (Khan, 2015; Tseng, 2012).

Adult EAL learners face a uniquely compounded challenge that distinguishes

them from native speakers experiencing public speaking anxiety. These individuals must simultaneously contend with Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), which stems from fears of linguistic errors, limited vocabulary, and pronunciation concerns, and Communication Apprehension (CA), which is the psychological distress associated with performing before an audience (Horwitz et al., 1986). This dual burden creates an amplified fear response that significantly exceeds the anxiety experienced by native speakers in comparable situations. Research suggests that approximately 75% of language learners experience moderate to high levels of anxiety during oral presentations (Zhang & Ardasheva, 2019). The underlying psychological mechanism is often explained

by attentional control theory, where anxiety impairs the working memory and cognitive resources necessary for effective L2 language processing, thereby initiating a detrimental, self-reinforcing cycle of avoidance behavior (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014).

Despite widespread acknowledgment that effective speaking skills are the most critical competency for successful integration in English-dominant professional and social settings, current instructional approaches often fail to adequately address the psychological barriers preventing learners from developing these skills (Abrar et al., 2018). Adult EAL students frequently report that public speaking requirements in academic and professional contexts trigger intense fear of negative evaluation, test anxiety, and concerns about linguistic competence, resulting in reluctance to participate, class avoidance, and poor academic outcomes (Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2014). This pattern is especially problematic given that many adult learners pursue English proficiency to advance their careers or complete higher education, instrumental goals that are fundamentally dependent on effective oral communication (Bensalem, 2018).

The research landscape concerning interventions for public speaking anxiety in adult EAL learners is fragmented across various disciplines, including applied linguistics, psychology, communication studies, and educational technology. While many studies have investigated isolated aspects of language anxiety or specific interventions, such as adaptations of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), technology-enhanced exposure using Virtual Reality (VR), and communication skills training, a comprehensive systematic review focused explicitly on the adult EAL demographic remains absent (Russell, 2020). This evidence synthesis is methodologically vital because adult learners possess distinct characteristics, including self-directed

learning preferences, established cognitive patterns, and motivation profiles tied to specific instrumental life goals. Therefore, an SLR is essential to identify common causal factors, critically evaluate intervention efficacy using rigorous criteria, and translate fragmented findings into evidence-based support programs for practitioners (Li, 2020).

The implications of addressing public speaking fear extend beyond individual academic progress, touching upon significant societal concerns related to workforce productivity, economic participation, and social cohesion. Adult EAL populations, including immigrants, refugees, international students, and professionals, rely heavily on effective English communication for employment and civic engagement. Speaking anxiety not only impedes language development but can also lead to social isolation, decreased self-efficacy, and identity conflict as learners negotiate their multilingual identities (Al-Saraj, 2014; Spielmann & Radnofsky, 2001). Consequently, systematic investigation into the causes and appropriate interventions serves the dual purpose of achieving pedagogical excellence and advancing broader societal goals of equity, inclusion, and human capital development.

METHOD

The present systematic literature review (SLR) will employ the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework to ensure methodological rigor and transparency throughout the review process (Moher et al., 2009). The review's eligibility criteria mandate the inclusion of empirical studies employing quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods designs, drawn from peer-reviewed journals, focusing on public speaking fear among adult English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners aged 18 or older, and published in English between 2015 and the present. Studies will be excluded if they are not empirical (reviews, editorials), are not peer-reviewed,

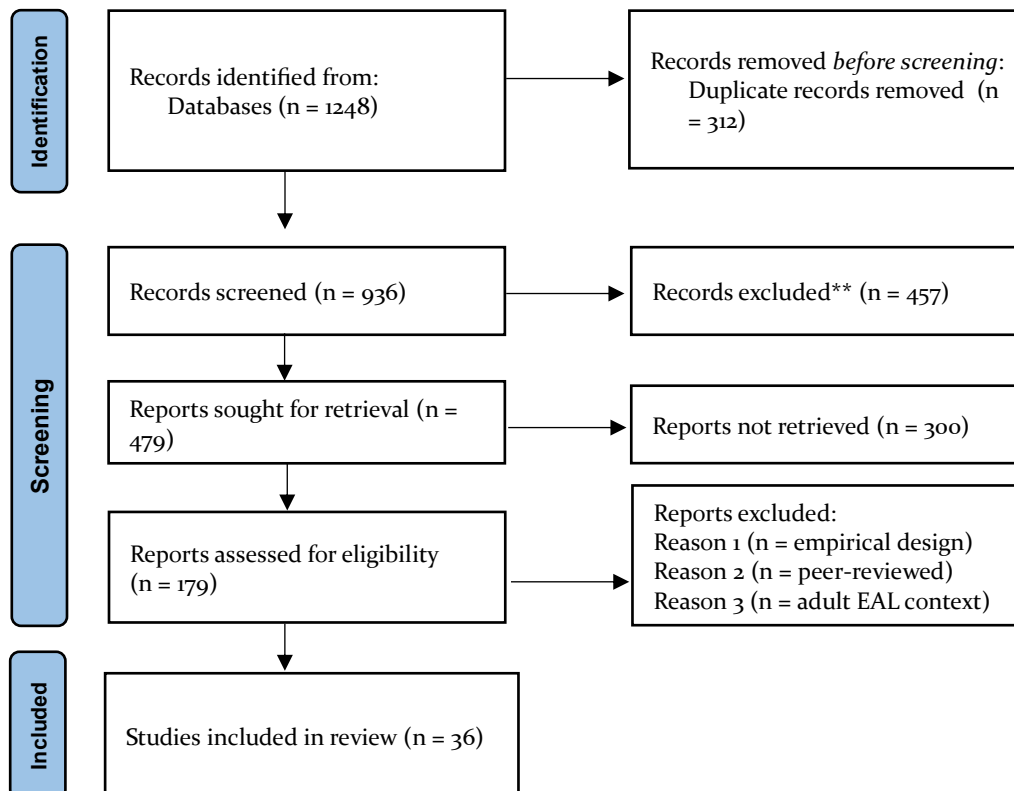
address populations outside the EAL context, focus on general communication apprehension unrelated to public performance, or appear as conference proceedings or dissertations (Papaioannou et al., 2016).

The literature search will encompass core scholarly databases relevant to education, psychology, and applied linguistics, including Google Scholar, ERIC, PsycINFO, and Scopus, using carefully constructed Boolean search strings that combine terms related to population, phenomenon, and setting. Search String: (“public speaking fear” OR glossophobia OR “oral presentation anxiety”) AND (“adult learner” OR “ESL” OR “EFL” OR “L2”) AND (cause OR factor OR intervention OR model OR treatment) (Siddaway et al., 2019). The study selection process will involve two independent reviewers conducting a two-phase screening: first assessing titles and abstracts, and then full texts, with disagreements resolved either by consensus or third-party adjudication. A standardized data

extraction form will be designed to capture key study information, including author, year, country, study design, participant characteristics (age, first language, proficiency level), research focus (causes or interventions), and specific findings relevant to the research questions.

For quality appraisal, the review will use established instruments such as the equivalent standardized checklists depending on the study’s methodological orientation (Hong et al., 2018). Only studies meeting pre-defined quality thresholds will be included in the final synthesis. Data analysis strategies will be tailored to the nature of the evidence: where quantitative intervention outcomes permit, meta-analysis or effect size synthesis will be undertaken. Otherwise, thematic synthesis will be used, enabling systematic grouping of causes and intervention types as well as an integrated analysis of intervention efficacy and limitations (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

Figure 1. Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses framework



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Results

The systematic review identified an initial pool of 1,248 studies from databases including Google Scholar, ERIC, PsycINFO, and Scopus, using search strings targeting public speaking fear and anxiety in adult EAL learners. After removal of 312 duplicates, 936 articles underwent title and abstract screening. Of those, 179 were retained for full-text review. Applying inclusion and exclusion criteria (empirical design, peer-reviewed, adult EAL context, 2015–present), 36 studies were included in the final synthesis. Most studies were published after 2018, indicating a growing recent interest in the subject. Methodologically, 17 utilized quantitative approaches, 12 employed qualitative methods, and 7 adopted a mixed-methods design. Geographically, research was dominated by studies from Asia (12), North America (10), and Europe (8), with additional contributions from the Middle East and Africa. Table 1 below summarizes these descriptive findings.

Table 1 Year of Publication

Year of Publication	Number of Studies
2015-2017	6
2018-2020	13
2021-2025	17

Table 2 Methodologically

Methodology	Number of Studies
Quantitative	17
Qualitative	12
Mixed-Methods	7

Table 3 Geographically

Geographic Region	Number of Studies
Asia	12
North America	10
Europe	8
Middle East	4
Africa	2

2. Synthesis of Causes (RQ1)

Psychological Factors

Psychological causes were identified as salient contributors to public speaking fear. Self-efficacy consistently predicted anxiety outcomes, with learners perceiving low communicative competence exhibiting higher glossophobia (Bandura & Walters, 1977; Li, 2020). Negative self-talk and perfectionist tendencies exacerbated anticipatory anxiety and reduced willingness to speak (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). The fear of negative evaluation (FNE), worrying about judgment from peers and instructors, emerged as a central anxiety driver, often triggering avoidance behaviors (Horwitz et al., 1986; Zhang & Ardasheva, 2019). Meta-analytic evidence also revealed that these psychological characteristics interact dynamically, increasing the likelihood and persistence of speaking-related anxiety (Khan, 2015; Spielmann & Radnofsky, 2001).

Table 4 Psychological Factor

Psychological Factor	Salient Findings / Evidence
Self-Efficacy	Lower self-perceived ability linked to higher anxiety levels
Negative Self-Talk	Ruminative anticipation increases avoidance
Perfectionism	Sets unattainable standards, increases fear of mistakes
Fear of Negative Evaluation	Main predictor of participation/engagement

Linguistic Factors

Insufficient L2 proficiency, heavy accent, and limited vocabulary were frequently cited as direct triggers for speaking anxiety. Learners with greater proficiency experienced reduced fear, suggesting linguistic competence mitigates psychological stressors (Bensalem, 2018; Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2014). Accent anxiety and perceived

grammatical insecurity induced self-consciousness, diminishing fluency and spontaneity. These concerns were particularly pronounced in high-stakes presentations, where errors could have public consequences. The dynamic relationship between proficiency and anxiety suggests that linguistic insecurity amplifies other psychological causes, creating a compounded effect (Abrar et al., 2018; Russell, 2020; Tseng, 2012).

Table 5 Linguistic Factor

Linguistic Factor	Salient Findings / Evidence
Proficiency Level	Higher proficiency = reduced anxiety
Accent Anxiety	Self-consciousness about accent increases with high audience stakes
Vocabulary Limitations	Fears of 'getting stuck' due to word gaps
Grammatical Insecurity	Concern about tenses/accuracy discourages participation

Environmental/Contextual Factors

Larger class sizes and less supportive classroom climates were found to exacerbate public speaking anxiety. Negative or non-constructive instructor feedback heightened fear of failure and reduced willingness to participate. Cultural background also played a significant role, learners from high power-

distance societies or those where public performance is discouraged reported elevated anxiety in Western classrooms (Al-Saraj, 2014; Spielmann & Radnofsky, 2001). This cross-cultural dimension implies the importance of considering classroom ecology and sociocultural norms when designing interventions.

Table 6 Contextual Factor

Contextual Factor	Salient Findings / Evidence
Class Size	Large groups increase speaking apprehension
Classroom Climate	Supportive/inclusive settings lower anxiety
Instructor Feedback	Constructive feedback reduces FNE, punitive increases it
Cultural Norms	Learners from reserved cultures experience heightened fear

3. Synthesis of Intervention Models (RQ2)

Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT)-Based Interventions

Several studies reviewed integrated CBT-based strategies, such as cognitive restructuring and graduated exposure, to challenge irrational beliefs, build self-efficacy, and reduce anxiety (Hong et al., 2018). Results showed that CBT, especially when tailored for language learners, significantly reduced anxiety scores and promoted positive behavior change, with some meta-analyses reporting large effect sizes.

Communication Skills Training (CST) and Structured Practice

CST programs provided structured rehearsal in public speaking, feedback, and gradual performance increases. These programs improved learners' confidence and participation by targeting both linguistic and psychological factors in tandem (Khan, 2015; Russell, 2020). Role-plays, group presentations, and peer review mechanisms were often used. CST's focus on skills plus mindset, with repeated practice in low-stakes

contexts, yielded moderate reduction in anxiety and improvement in self-reported ability.

Technology-Assisted Interventions

Recent innovations include Virtual Reality (VR) exposure and mobile app-based programs, which provide controlled, repeatable speaking scenarios (Spyridonis et al., 2024). Studies demonstrated that VR, in particular, is highly engaging and allows for stepwise exposure to anxiety triggers, resulting in anxiety reduction comparable to, and sometimes exceeding, in-person CBT. Mobile applications offering real-time feedback and self-guided exercises also contributed positively, especially during remote learning periods.

Pharmacological and Relaxation-Based Approaches

Few studies investigated pharmacological options. Relaxation, mindfulness, and breathing interventions, often embedded as adjuncts to CBT or CST, were found to reduce physiological symptoms of anxiety but showed less consistent impact on core psychological dimensions of fear.

Table 7 Intervention Type

Intervention Type	Efficacy / Evidence
CBT-Based Strategies	High, large effect sizes for targeted anxiety reduction
CST/Structured Practice	Moderate, improved skill and reduced avoidance
VR/Mobile Apps (Tech Models)	Emerging, rapid gains and high user engagement
Relaxation/Mindfulness	Modest adjunct effect, more on physiological symptoms

4. Discussion and Critical Evaluation (RQ3)

Comparison of Efficacy

The comparison of intervention efficacy revealed that CBT-based interventions generally yielded the largest and most sustained reductions in anxiety, especially when tailored to the adult EAL context (Hong et al., 2018). Technology-assisted models, including VR and mobile apps, are promising due to scalability and engagement, sometimes outperforming traditional CST, particularly for highly anxious individuals (Spyridonis et al., 2024). CST maintains strength as an accessible and practical option with solid evidence for moderate improvements, especially when combined with supportive classroom climates. Relaxation-based techniques are best regarded as complements rather than stand-alone treatments.

Limitations in Existing Research

Critical gaps persist in the field. Many studies lack long-term follow-up, making it difficult to ascertain the persistence of improvement. Measurement heterogeneity is a barrier, with varying fear scales and anxiety assessment windows (Russell, 2020; Siddaway et al., 2019). Limited research focuses specifically on lower-proficiency learners, and intervention fidelity varies widely across

studies. Few interventions are explicitly adapted for culturally diverse EAL backgrounds, limiting external validity.

Theoretical Implications

Findings align with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, highlighting the impeding effect of anxiety on language acquisition, and Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, underlining the central role of self-efficacy (Krashen, 1982; Russell, 2020). Successful interventions systematically lower the affective filter by addressing both internal (psychological/linguistic) and external (contextual) causes. The efficacy of VR and CBT further supports contemporary perspectives on the role of emotional regulation within SLA, suggesting that multi-modal, individualized strategies best foster resilience and language growth.

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review successfully synthesized 36 empirical studies, confirming that public speaking fear in adult EAL learners is a compounded challenge stemming from an interplay between psychological vulnerability (specifically Fear of Negative Evaluation and low self-efficacy) and linguistic insecurity (low L2 proficiency and accent anxiety). The review established a clear hierarchy of intervention efficacy: CBT-based strategies and Virtual Reality exposure

offer the most robust and sustained anxiety reduction outcomes, whereas traditional Communication Skills Training (CST) provides a necessary foundation for linguistic skill development.

To effectively address glossophobia, educational institutions must move beyond purely linguistic instruction toward an integrated, multi-modal curriculum.

1. **Integrate Psychological Training:** Language courses must incorporate CBT-informed elements, such as cognitive restructuring exercises, to challenge negative self-talk and unrealistic perfectionist expectations.
2. **Utilize Technology for Exposure:** Leverage VR technology or high-fidelity simulation tools to provide controlled, repeatable, and low-stakes exposure practice, particularly for highly anxious students.
3. **Optimize Classroom Climate:** Instructors should prioritize creating an explicitly supportive and inclusive environment, utilizing non-punitive, growth-oriented constructive feedback to actively reduce the Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE) that drives avoidance behavior.
4. **Target Proficiency and Confidence:** Ensure CST is embedded within proficiency improvement, recognizing that linguistic competence directly mitigates psychological stress.

The review's conclusions are constrained by two primary limitations in the synthesized literature. First, measurement heterogeneity across studies complicates the direct comparison of anxiety reduction outcomes. Second, a persistent lack of longitudinal follow-up data prevents definitive conclusions regarding the long-term durability and persistence of the benefits derived from the current intervention models, especially those relying on technology.

Future research should focus on developing and validating standardized, culturally adaptive instruments for measuring speaking anxiety in diverse EAL populations. There is a critical need for longitudinal, comparative trials to establish the sustained efficacy of VR-based exposure relative to traditional in-person psychological interventions. Finally, research should explore the development of intervention models explicitly tailored to the unique instrumental motivations and time constraints of adult, working EAL learners.

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