

WHY SOME STUDENTS UNDERSTAND ENGLISH BUT CANNOT SPEAK:A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Many students demonstrate a strong ability to understand English through listening and reading, yet struggle to express themselves orally. This phenomenon can be explained from a psychological perspective. Factors such as speaking anxiety, fear of making mistakes, low self-confidence, perfectionism, and limited opportunities for active communication play a significant role. Psychological barriers often prevent learners from transferring passive knowledge into active language use. Additionally, classroom environments that prioritize accuracy over fluency may increase stress and inhibit spontaneous speech. Understanding these psychological factors is essential for developing effective teaching strategies that encourage confidence, reduce anxiety, and promote communicative competence among English language learners

Introduction. In recent years, English has become a global language of communication, education, and professional development. As a result, a growing number of students around

the world invest significant time and effort in learning English. Many of these learners develop strong receptive skills, enabling them to understand written texts, lectures, and spoken conversations with relative ease. However, despite this level of comprehension, a considerable number of students struggle to express their thoughts orally in English.

This gap between understanding and speaking represents one of the most common and persistent challenges in second language learning. While students may possess sufficient vocabulary and grammatical knowledge, they often hesitate to speak due to internal psychological barriers rather than linguistic limitations. Feelings of anxiety, fear of making mistakes, low self-confidence, and social pressure frequently prevent learners from transforming passive knowledge into active language use.

From a psychological perspective, speaking in a foreign language is a complex cognitive and emotional process. It requires not only linguistic competence but also emotional readiness, confidence, and a supportive learning environment. When learners experience stress or fear, their cognitive resources become limited, which negatively affects their ability to produce speech in real time. Consequently, even well-prepared students may remain silent in communicative situations.

Understanding the psychological factors that influence speaking ability is essential for both educators and learners. By examining why students can understand English but cannot speak it fluently, this study aims to highlight the role of affective variables in language learning and emphasize the importance of creating low-anxiety, learner-centered environments. Addressing these issues can lead to more effective teaching strategies that encourage active participation, build confidence, and ultimately enhance students communicative competence.

1. The Difference Between Understanding and Speaking (The Core Problem)

In learning English, there are two main types of skills:

Passive (receptive) skills

→ listening comprehension

→ reading comprehension

Active (productive) skills

→ speaking

→ writing

Many students find passive skills easier to acquire because:

there is no immediate risk of making mistakes

the brain only needs to recognize existing information

However, speaking requires:forming ideas quickly applying grammar in real time thinking about pronunciation speaking in front of others.At this stage, psychological barriers begin to appear.

2. Main Psychological Reasons

2.1. Speaking Anxiety

This is the most common reason.

Example:A student knows the answer in class but thinks:What if I make a mistake?What if my classmates laugh at me? As a result, the student remains silent despite understanding.When the brain senses danger:thinking slows down words become blocked

2.2. Fear of Making Mistakes

For many students, making mistakes equals embarrassment.

Example:A student says He go to school yesterday, and the teacher corrects them immediately.After that, the student:stops speakingprefers only listening

Psychologically, this becomes a negative experience stored in memory.

2.3. Low Self-Confidence

Some students constantly compare themselves with others.

Example:They speak better than me.My pronunciation is bad.As a result:low self-esteem social comparison avoidance of speaking

2.4. Perfectionism

Some students want to speak perfectly.

Example:Before speaking, a student:checks grammar chooses words carefully mentally repeats the sentence.But real communication does not allow such time.

As a result, the student does not speak at all.

3. Comparison of Past and Present Education

In the Past (Traditional Approach)

Strong focus on grammar

Memorization-based learning

Teacher-centered classrooms

Mistakes = low grades

Result:Students know the rules.But are afraid to speak. In the Present (Modern Communicative Approach).Communication-oriented lessons.Pair and group work.Mistakes seen as part of learning

Student-centered learning

Result: Students express ideas more freely

Anxiety gradually decreases

4. Comparison Between Native Language and English Learning

Native Language

English Language

No fear of mistakes

Strong fear of mistakes

Natural environment

Artificial environment

No evaluation

Constant evaluation

Free speech

Restricted speech

Therefore, the problem lies not in knowledge, but in the psychological environment.

5. Why Is Understanding Easier?

In psychology, this is called passive competence.

In understanding: the brain recognizes information

In speaking: the brain produces language

Language production requires: more mental energy more courage more self-confidence

6. Ways to Reduce the Problem (Briefly)

Develop a positive attitude toward mistakes

Create a pressure-free environment

Start with simple sentences

Encourage pair speaking

Use motivation instead of criticism.

In conclusion, the phenomenon of students understanding English but struggling to speak it highlights the critical role of psychological factors in second language acquisition. While learners may possess adequate vocabulary, grammar knowledge, and listening skills, speaking requires additional cognitive and emotional readiness. Anxiety, fear of making mistakes, low self-confidence, perfectionism, and social pressure can significantly inhibit oral expression.

Comparing traditional and modern teaching approaches further emphasizes that supportive, communicative, and learner-centered environments encourage active participation and reduce speaking anxiety. By addressing these psychological barriers, educators can help students transform their passive knowledge into active language use, fostering greater communicative competence and overall confidence in English. Ultimately, understanding and mitigating the psychological obstacles to speaking is essential for effective English language education and for enabling students to fully realize their linguistic potential.

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