Strategies to motivate learners to engage in speaking and overcome anxiety: A case study

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Abstract

Anxiety and motivation are pivotal in foreign language learning success. Anxiety can have a negative effect on language learning by causing stress and inhibiting the ability to perform, while motivation plays a positive role by providing the drive and desire to learn and succeed. Research has shown that high levels of motivation can offset adverse effects of anxiety, making it easier for students to learn and perform well in a foreign language. Overall, the balance between anxiety and motivation is an important aspect of foreign language learning, and understanding how these factors interact can help educators and students to create a more effective and successful learning environment.

This study aimed to examine practical and effective methods for motivating tertiary-level English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students to participate in speaking activities, by taking into account the complex relationship between motivation and anxiety in the foreign language learning context. The study used a combination of questionnaires and interviews to identify specific factors that influence students' level of anxiety and motivation in the language classroom, and explored strategies that may positively influence their willingness to engage in speaking activities.

The study reveals that students' motivation to improve their language skills is hindered by a lack of confidence and anxiety about expressing themselves orally. This reluctance, attributed mainly to fear of judgment from peers and teachers, is

often reinforced by a lack of oral practice. However, effective communication skills are vital for language development and cultivated through active engagement. Recognizing the emotional dimension, it was imperative to establish a supportive environment and introduce low-risk opportunities for practice and support. The implementation of these strategies yielded positive results, enhancing participants' experiences, boosting self-esteem, fostering engagement, and improving success in speaking activities.

1 INTRODUCTION

This study stemmed from firsthand observations of students enrolled in extracurricular language courses available to university students, staff, and the wider community. These courses offer two weekly, two-hour lessons per level, scheduled at the end of the workday. While many B2 and C1 students seeking the courses are confident in written communication, they harbour speaking apprehensions, particularly in group settings. The study implemented strategies aimed at boosting students' motivation to engage in speaking activities and address language anxiety. The goal was to promote a more active participation, ultimately enhancing their overall communication skills. In today's globalized world, where English is of paramount importance as the world's lingua franca, nurturing students' speaking skills is imperative to facilitate effective communication– a primary language function, emphasised by McDonough et al. (2013). Yet Horwitz et al. (1986) assert that anxiety is a significant obstacle to overcome, resulting in reduced willingness for oral activities. To address this, it is vital to gradually expose learners to English-speaking situations, building confidence and fostering connections in class that allow learners to feel at ease to engage in oral discourse and venture beyond their comfort zones. Motivation emerges as a pivotal factor of performance, with Dörnyei (2005) highlighting its crucial role in instigating and sustaining foreign language learning. However, it is often observed that students, although eager to improve their speaking abilities, frequently adopt passive roles during speaking activities. The reasons behind this lack of motivation or willingness to engage in speaking may be diverse. Dörnyei & Ushioda (2011) identify several demotivating factors, including teacher influence, reduced self-confidence, and the attitude of peers. Additionally, motivation may be influenced by task or topic, a lack of reward, anxiety, a lack of self-drive, or even the teacher's choice of teaching methods. Hence, understanding and addressing these motivational challenges is essential to encourage students to embrace a more active and engaging role. Therefore, this case study aimed to understand:

I.   What factors contribute to students' unwillingness to participate in speaking activities?

II.   How do the adopted teaching strategies impact anxiety and the motivation to speak?

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Competence in communicating in a foreign language involves not only exposure and comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982), but also active interaction —both the means and the goal of foreign language learning. To promote proficiency, students must engage in oral interactions and communicate in the target language. Yet, teachers struggle with students' reluctance to participate orally in the target language.

Foreign language learning encompasses cognitive and affective components (Arnold & Brown, 1999). Affective factors —motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety— significantly impact language learning success. Motivation drives students' behaviour and dedication, while self-confidence empowers students to take risks. Conversely, anxiety can hinder effective language learning, especially in spoken communication. Rubio (2007) notes students' willingness to communicate in a foreign language is influenced by their level of self-confidence, tied to their assessment of competence and self-worth.

Anxiety significantly hinders the learning process (Brown, 2014; Dörnyei, 2005; Horwitz et al., 1986). Anxiety can be debilitative or facilitative, with high levels negatively affecting performance, particularly in speaking. Horwitz et al. (1986) introduced foreign language anxiety (FLA) as a complex concept encompassing more than just communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. It involves self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours linked to classroom language learning and arises from the unique nature of the language learning process. Initially, anxiety is a generalized negative emotional response in

language class, but it becomes specifically associated with the language class context if left unaddressed.

Motivation, according to Gardner (1985), can be instrumental (driven by social or economic goals) and integrative (connecting with the language community). While many students initially enroll in language courses due to instrumental motivation, long-term success hinges on integrative motivation. Self-determination theory (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011) distinguishes intrinsic motivation, derived from inner satisfaction through enjoying the activity itself, fostering autonomy and competence, from extrinsic motivation, driven by external rewards and describes how it is often less effective in encouraging language learning.

The significance of interpersonal dynamics in the classroom was underscored by Stevick as early as 1980, highlighting that success in language learning depends more on human interactions than on teaching materials or linguistic analysis. Emotional states and connections formed in the learning environment, including interactions between students and between students and teachers, are crucial for promoting speaking ability. Dörnyei (2005) delves deeper into motivation through his theory of the L2 Motivational Self-system, emphasizing the role of the L2 learning experience, including the school context, study programme, chosen tasks, peer relationships, and teacher-student interactions. Harmer (2001) reinforces the importance of interpersonal dynamics, particularly the attitudes of peers and teachers in shaping students' motivation and fostering a positive learning environment. Harmer (2001) also emphasizes the importance of confidence in the teaching method to motivate both students and teachers, contributing to the overall success of the teaching and learning process.

Fostering a motivating learning atmosphere goes beyond creating a pleasant environment; it also involves providing opportunities for meaningful real-life activities that inspire students to actively participate (Thornbury, 2005). Additionally, offering opportunities for students to gradually overcome their fears and providing adequate feedback to improve their speaking skills are essential (Ölmezer-Öztürk & Öztürk, 2021). Sparking students' interest through topics that

resonate with them and facilitate exploration can further boost motivation (Harmer, 2001). In higher education, students seek an enriching experience that not only captivates them but also fosters interdependence and equips them with skills for the future.

In conclusion, the development of competence in communicating in a foreign language is intricate and multifaceted. Overcoming challenges such as students' reluctance to engage orally requires addressing affective factors, including motivation and anxiety. By understanding the complex interplay of these elements and fostering a positive learning environment through effective interpersonal dynamics, educators can create a motivating atmosphere that enhances students' language experience and help promote proficiency.

In practical application, various strategies, specifically speaking activities, were employed in the control group to help students overcome their reluctance to engage in speaking. These strategies were tailored taking into account affective factors as a driving force, reflecting the principles discussed above.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Implementation of strategies

This case study, inspired by Yin's (2009) approach to real-life situations, explores the use of various teaching strategies to help a small group of students overcome their fear of speaking in English and enhance their self-confidence. Specifically, it focused on 30 students aged 17 to 30, enrolled in two B2-level English classes in university extra-curricular language courses. The aim was to contribute to the broader understanding of this phenomena and encourage further exploration. Following Bergs' (2000), a mixed-methods approach was employed to investigate strategies designed to increase students' confidence in speaking a foreign language, including prepared and unprepared speaking moments.

3.1.1 Prepared speaking moments – Podcasts

Podcasts can be a valuable platform for less confident students, allowing them to express their ideas without the pressure of a vis-à-vis interaction while enhancing pronunciation skills (Sze, 2006) and were used in this research. The podcast challenge began at the semester's start. A class Padlet facilitated the recording and peer feedback. The initial task, which followed an early discussion aimed at getting to know the students and encouraging them to share their passions with the group, involved learners preparing a two-minute podcast discussing topics students were passionate about to increase motivation. Although peer feedback was requested, it was hoped that the absence of vis-à-vis interaction would reduce anxiety. The subsidiary goal was for students to understand, through self-listening, the significance of speed, intonation, and word stress in conveying messages. The second task involved creating vodcasts individually, in pairs, or groups, with video prompting a focus on paralinguistic features, eye contact, and body language.

3.1.2 Prepared speaking moments – Oral presentations in group

Oral presentations are effective tools for developing language skills in the EFL classroom (Thornbury, 2005). When performed in groups, students enhance communication skills, promoting meaningful interaction during the preparation stage, leading to content emergence (Nunan, 2004). Group work contributes to a friendlier classroom atmosphere, promoting positive relationships (Douglas, 2000), aligning with the Common European Framework's emphasis on productive activities such as oral presentations in academic and professional contexts (2020, p.60). Furthermore, oral presentations encompass not only spoken language but also body language, essential for conveying meaning and enhanced through practice (Burns & Claire, 2003).

In the current study program, students must give a group oral presentation at the end of the semester. To this end, in-class sessions focused on planning the oral presentation, including brainstorming topics, researching information, negotiating the topic and task, and making decisions on visual presentation.

To enhance their presentation skills, mini presentations on other group projects were held throughout the semester. These served as practice sessions, encouraging critical reflection, and helping students gradually overcome inhibitions (Thornbury, 2005). Standing in front of peers and delivering sustained speeches prepared students for real-life speaking situations in the workplace and academia.

3.2.2 – Unprepared speaking moments – Impromptu speeches

Burns (2016) emphasizes competent English speakers have to deal with complex processes and skills in real time, often without prior planning. Impromptu speeches, described by Lucas (2001), are spontaneous, requiring minimal formal preparation. Despite potential anxiety, Girardelli's (2017) study suggests engaging in improvised speech activities increases confidence, enhances speech organization skills, and increases awareness of non-verbal communication in delivering short speeches without extensive preparation.

> The first impromptu speech activity required no prior preparation or structure. Students were tasked with delivering a one-minute speech on a randomly chosen topic card. The aim was for students to recognise that discomfort is a natural part of the process and that it diminishes through practice. They then analysed example impromptu speeches to understand structure and the importance of a strong opening. To foster empathy, a vital skill for intercultural speakers, students were also assigned the responsibility of selecting topics for their peers that would offer support rather than hinder their speeches. In the third activity, students delivered speeches on a common quote, and in the next challenge, they were requested to give a piece of advice to colleagues. This topic not only allowed for greater personalization, but also it was anticipated that speaking from a personal standpoint would help manage anxiety. For the final impromptu challenge, students gave a two-minute speech on teacher-selected topics that aligned with their interests. By this point, students had gained confidence through

repeated practice and developed stronger connections with peers.3.3 Group discussions

Nunan (2003) defines oral expression as conveying thoughts and emotions through language, especially when discussing controversial topics. This elicits emotional responses from participants with diverse perspectives, fostering active engagement and providing a platform for language practice, cultivating the ability to establish objective and respectful dialogue, both inside and outside the classroom. While teachers avoid discussing controversial topics due to their sensitive nature (Haynes, 2009), the Council of Europe (2016) stresses the importance of addressing these issues, particularly in higher education contexts that encourage mature and respectful debates, aligning with Burron's (2006) emphasis on their role in reinforcing critical thinking and cultivating more effective citizens. Byram (2008) advocates integrating real-world issues into English classes to promote intercultural communication skills and global citizenship. Students' interest in global issues and a desire to address them in the classroom (Oxfam, 2006) further supports this approach.

The initial group discussion, a class-wide discussion on crime and punishment in Portugal, followed a topic lesson on Crime and Punishment. It offered students an opportunity to present arguments publicly, however without a set structure. To enhance understanding of debate mechanics, a video introduced concepts such as motion, proposition, opposition, and debate structure. Students were then divided into two groups (for/against) and provided with a language handout to facilitate the discussion. The motion presented was: "The death penalty should be an option in more serious crimes." Students were asked to brainstorm arguments and examples while considering potential counterarguments from the opposing group.

The activity was based on Harvard Project Zero's Circle of Viewpoints (2015), which encourages students to consider a topic from various angles, brainstorming what different stakeholders might say about the issue in question, considering factors such as education, location, age, religion, and the political/social landscape. This

aimed to help students appreciate the multiple perspectives that any topic can generate and promote empathy for different opinions.

3.4 Research Tools

To assess attitudes towards speaking in English before and after the course, three methods of data collection were employed: an initial online questionnaire (Appendix A) to assess motivation and feelings towards speaking in English, student journals to record reflections after the oral activities, and semi-structured group interviews (Appendix B) conducted after the course had finished to provide further input. This approach allowed for a thorough examination of the strategies' effectiveness and a deeper understanding of students' motivation and attitudes.

The questionnaire, conducted through Google Forms, aimed to assess whether students in B2-level English classes experienced anxiety when speaking the target language, along with identifying potential influencing factors. All 30 students across two B2-level classes completed the questionnaire. However, due to time constraints, the implementation of strategies to address the identified issues was limited to one of the B2 classes, compromising 14 students. The online questionnaire had six sections with mostly closed-ended questions, following Dörnyei's (2010) approach of dividing questionnaires into sections for efficient data collection. The first section encouraged students to read the questions carefully and emphasised the importance of truthful answers. The second collected personal information to determine affiliation to the institution and ascertain the study cycle. The next explored students' exposure to English and their history of learning the language and the fourth section focused on self-perception of language skills and identification of weaknesses. The fifth section looked at motivation to study English and the choice of institution. The final section, inspired by the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (Horwitz et al., 1986), aimed not to measure anxiety levels but rather to explore underlying causes of speech-related anxiety, as well as to understand students' motivations for engagement. Therefore,

the statements were divided into five categories: anxiety, social, confidence in abilities, motivation, and classroom environment issues for a comprehensive analysis (Appendix C). To avoid bias, statements were presented in a random order, and respondents rated them using a five-point Likert scale from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5).

Students were encouraged to journal their thoughts and feelings after oral activities to facilitate group discussions during the interview phase and promote self-awareness of anxiety and motivation changes throughout the course. The first occurred after an impromptu speech challenge in class to ensure learners understood the journaling task. While students had the freedom to reflect as they wished, they were asked some questions to prompt this first activity. Students were asked to reflect on their feelings when the activity was presented, when they had to stand in front of the class for a speech with limited preparation time, and their feelings at the conclusion of the task, considering how the activity could improve their speaking skills.

Group interviews, conducted at the end of the course, were divided into two one-hour sessions and aimed at gaining valuable insights into students' perspectives on speaking struggles, motivation for speaking, and the impact of the strategies implemented. Despite the B2 class compromising 14 students, only 12 out of participated, as two were unable to attend on any available date. The interview began with an introductory phase to welcome participants and clarify the purpose and procedure of the interview. The semi-structured interview used predetermined questions to guide the discussion towards the topic but allowed new questions to emerge as the participants shared their ideas. The set questions were open-ended, with the aim of encouraging reflection without restricting the participants' answers and were divided into three phases: engagement, exploration and exit questions. The engagement question established the topic, exploration questions collected data for investigation, and exit questions allowed an opportunity for participants to share pertinent information.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis involved two distinct phases. Firstly, quantitative data from the questionnaire was transformed into graphs and tables, providing information on the participants' motivations for studying English with Dörnyei's (2007) data reduction approach used to condense the Likert scale responses into three variables (Disagree, Neutral, Agree). The exclusion of neutral responses facilitated clearer comparisons between participants who disagreed and agreed with the statements, aiding interpretation, and statistical analysis. Secondly, qualitative data from the recorded interviews was transcribed and categorised, as shown in Figure 1, along with the data from the journals. This coding process helped identify and label relevant information, enhancing data comprehension.,
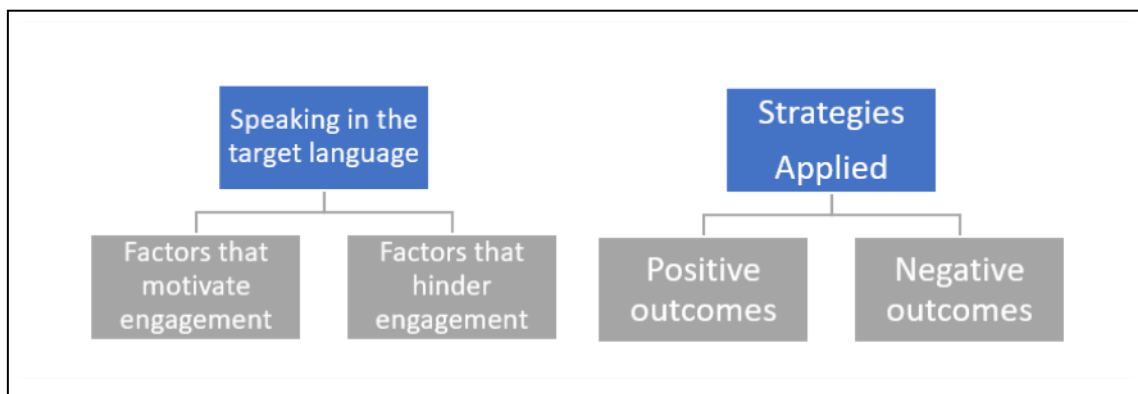
Figure 1: Group interview categories

4. RESULTS

In addressing Research Question 1 on factors contributing to students' unwillingness to participate in speaking activities, the analysis of various factors yielded crucial insights.

4.1 Exposure to the target language

Regarding exposure to the target language, the results from the questionnaire (Appendix B) revealed 90 percent of the respondents were Portuguese individuals who had undergone a minimum of five years of English education in school. Twenty

percent had experienced English-taught curricular units at university, reflecting a growing trend. A noteworthy finding was the significant number of respondents (36.7%) who identified English as the primary language in their workplace, underscoring its pivotal role in the globalized professional landscape. Additionally, more than 30 percent reported using English in social contexts, potentially influenced by a more diverse social environment. Notably, 50 percent had previously enrolled in private English lessons, possibly driven by concerns about their proficiency level or the perceived value of English for personal and professional growth. Among this group, half initially selected the Open Language Courses as their first option, while the remaining participants joined at a later stage, a choice attributed by over 35 percent to the institute's credibility.

4.2 Participants perception of their proficiency

It was clear that students feel more confident in their receptive skills than their productive skills. Despite Portugal ranking ninth in the EF English Proficiency Index (2022), indicating a high level of proficiency, the participants exhibit a significant lack of confidence in their oral skills. Among 30 respondents, 70 percent stated they were not confident, 26,6 percent were not very confident and only one expressed confidence in speaking abilities.

4.3 Motivation for English language learning

Concerning their motivation for furthering their studies of English, learners expressed a desire to enhance language competence for various reasons, including career advancement, effective communication, academic pursuits, and interest in the language. Findings indicated that motivation is predominantly instrumental and extrinsic, as participants desire to learn the language mainly for future employment goals. The absence of intrinsic motivation could explain hesitation in engaging in speaking activities, hindering active participation. When asked to state what their

top priority in language development was, seventy percent of the participants emphasised the importance of effective communication in real life situations, emphasizing the need for a syllabus that reflects this priority.

4.4 Attitudes towards speaking in English

Despite having substantial language exposure and proficiency, students often experience anxiety when communicating in English in the presence of others. The data from the questionnaire, complemented by insights from group interviews, suggest that this anxiety primarily arises from the fear of exposing their proficiency level rather than concerns about validation of opinions from both peers and teachers. Over 70 percent of the participants admitted to being reluctant to speak, citing fear of judgment from peers and of making mistakes as the main causes. Interestingly, some of the group interview participants expressed a similar apprehension when communicating in their mother tongue. It's worth noting that over time, with practice and growing familiarity with their peers, students found that this anxiety became more manageable. Several of the group interview participants specifically credited the improvements to the course, highlighting its positive impact on their willingness to participate in speaking activities.

4.5 Confidence in abilities

When assessing their confidence in their speaking abilities (see Table 1), over seventy percent revealed pronunciation insecurities, with an equal number expressing vocabulary and grammar concerns. These linguistic anxieties may discourage oral interaction. Furthermore, eighty percent noted that their lack of confidence results from insufficient speaking practice, underlining that students' anxiety about interacting with people in a foreign language partly stems from their prior learning experiences. Despite the crucial importance of speaking skills in learning a foreign language, learners often face limited opportunities to improve

them in the classroom due to a greater focus on teaching vocabulary and grammar, possibly influenced by coursebook constraints. Table 1: Attitude towards speaking in English |Confidence in abilities

Category	Questions	Disagree		Neutral	Agree	
		N	%	N	N	%
Confidence in Abilities (lack of self-confidence)	I feel insecure about my pronunciation.	5	16.6	2	23	76.6
	My confidence in speaking is low due to lack of previous practice.	4	13.3	2	24	80
	I feel insecure about my vocabulary and/or grammar knowledge.	1	3.3	6	23	76.6

4.6 Motivation to speak and factors influencing it

As can be seen in Table 2, although 83,3 percent expressed a desire to improve speaking skills, only 63,3 percent asserted actively engaging in English during activities. This implies learners may not fully grasp that interacting during activities presents a valuable opportunity to refine this skill. Additionally, 40 percent recognised that the topic choice influences their motivation for oral engagement. Although less than half considered this crucial, the result remains noteworthy. Stimulating students' motivation through topics aligned with their interests is crucial, as interest plays a key role in driving learning. Allowing students to choose topics can increase their responsibility to participate.

Table 2: Attitude towards speaking in English |Motivation

Category	Questions	Disagree		Neutral	Agree	
		N	%	N	N	%
Motivation	I make an effort to always speak in English during pair/group work.	3	10	8	19	63.3
	I am reluctant to orally engage if the topic is not interesting.	7	23.3	11	12	40
	I welcome all opportunities to develop my speaking skills.	1	3.3	4	25	83.3

The findings highlight the classroom environment as a pivotal factor in fostering oral participation (see Table 3). Over 86 percent considered class size crucial for oral engagement, inferring that larger class numbers hinder students from building strong peer connections, thereby making it challenging for them to feel at ease when speaking in class. As noted by 83,3 percent of the participants, a relaxed learning environment is paramount for increased participation. This is important, particularly considering that these classes are scheduled at the end of the workday, potentially when students experience fatigue and diminished motivation. Moreover, the questionnaire underscores the teacher-student relationship importance, with over 70 percent noting its significance. Thus, cultivating a strong rapport with students is imperative to elevate their motivation and stimulate greater oral engagement.

Table 3: Attitude towards speaking in English |Classroom environment issues

Category	Questions	Disagree		Neutral	Agree	
		N	%	N	N	%
Classroom environment issues	I orally participate more in classes where there is a more relaxed learning environment.	1	3.3	4	25	83.3
	My oral interaction is influenced by my relationship with my teacher.	3	10	5	22	73.3
	I feel more at ease to speak in smaller classes.	1	3.3	3	26	86.6

Analysing overall responses across the various parameters reveals the critical role of the classroom environment in motivating oral engagement. Additionally, it is evident that anxiety related to speaking the target language primarily arises from a lack of confidence in one's abilities. Fostering a positive environment with strong interrelationships emerges as a potential key to helping learners overcome anxiety and be more active participants.

4.7 Students 'views on strategies

In addressing Research Question 2 on the impact of the adopted teaching strategies on students' anxiety and motivation to speak, valuable insights were derived both from the journal entries and group interviews.

Regarding impromptu speeches, many students found the activity challenging due to limited preparation time and lack of prior reflection or interest in specific topics. Despite this, most embraced the challenge, recognizing benefits such as mirroring real-life conversations, organizing thoughts, and expanding vocabulary. Even a shy learner appreciated the opportunity and the safe environment to develop her

fluency. As communication is the goal of language learning, it was recognised that this exercise was important for language development. The activity in itself only reinforced the idea that other speaking moments, such as group oral presentations, are less stressful as there is time for preparation. Learners did, however, recognise that the anxiety associated with impromptu speeches diminished over time, leading to significant improvements in confidence and attitudes towards mistakes. In her journal entry, one learner described how her confidence "normalised", no longer perceiving a mistake "a crime". Another learner attributed her increased confidence to practice, reducing her fear of speaking in public. Additionally, speaking without prior preparations was noted as a method to manage emotions and improve delivery. Furthermore, the impact of weekly impromptu speeches and teacher's encouragement and reactions to mistakes, contributed to changing students' feelings about speaking in front of others. This supports the hypothesis that a supportive environment encourages students to step outside their comfort zones and engage more readily in speaking a foreign language. Creating a positive learning environment is crucial for maximizing engagement and willingness to tackle the challenge of speaking a foreign language while being mindful of individual limits to tailor the approach accordingly.

Podcast assignments proved valuable for students. Students recorded themselves multiple times, addressing organization, pronunciation, speed of delivery and vocabulary. Students acknowledged that this trial-and-error process led to improved speaking skills and enhanced their confidence. The first voice-only podcast was considered less challenging, allowing students to shield their nervousness, and read from a script. Although two learners opted for an unscripted speech, they still resorted to multiple recordings. These learners later shared their vodcast experience, recorded spontaneously to replicate a natural conversation between two individuals. They highlighted the importance of conducting the planning stage in English to practice more and avoid the cognitive burden of translating L1 thoughts into the target language. Essentially, podcast the activities empowered students by allowing them to choose topics, make decisions, and

develop language awareness, fostering an active and engaging learning experience.

Students valued participating in group discussions, citing educational values. They acknowledged that addressing controversial topics, where a single correct viewpoint is lacking, offers diverse perspectives on the same topic. This, in turn, helps cultivate respect for differing opinions, a crucial life skill. Furthermore, exposure to new perspectives prompted a reassessment of opinions. In terms of language development, students believed discussing unfamiliar topics enhanced vocabulary. The process of pinpointing precise words for effective arguments was challenging yet advantageous. Students also acknowledged the need for increased focus when dealing with new and more serious topics, indicating awareness of the complexities involved. Students highlighted the role of controversial discussions not only in fostering critical thinking but also in developing vocabulary. One learner advocated for this approach to be adopted more widely, emphasizing its ability to develop valuable critical thinking skills applicable in academic and professional contexts. An interesting point emerged during the group interview, where learners noted the emotional aspect in discussing controversial issues, suggesting that the desire to express one's opinion, fuelled by adrenaline, often overcomes concerns about language barriers or anxiety, leading to increased motivation to speak. One learner added that, despite vocabulary issues and fear of being misunderstood, he felt compelled to speak, recognizing it as a valuable push to overcome his challenges. Another highlighted the effectiveness of controversial discussions in promoting oral interaction without the anxiety associated with formal assessment. The informal setting of group discussions allowed participants to focus on language improvement through practice rather than worrying about grades. Additionally, a participant with speaking insecurities, found comfort in the group discussion format.

The majority preferred group oral presentations for reasons like shared pressure, time for reorganising thoughts during others' presentations, peer support, additional oral practice during preparation and negotiating presentation. A learner,

working alone, missed the collaborative aspect of group work, emphasizing its importance in language courses for learning negotiation, debate, and effective communication. Collaborative efforts, as noted by a different learner, lead to richer perspectives and better results. The relevance of group work for real-life scenarios where teamwork is essential was highlighted by another participant. However, having to align topics with others was considered a drawback. If the majority selects an unfamiliar topic, extensive preparation becomes necessary. Discussing unfamiliar topics in real-time might be challenging, potentially causing stress, especially for those already struggling with foreign language speaking. Challenges in agreeing with all group members' input, potentially leading to disagreements, and negatively impacting presentations and group dynamics, were also mentioned. To address these issues, establishing clear communication and decision-making processes from the start is crucial. Despite challenges, group oral presentations significantly contribute to building language learners' confidence and reducing anxiety. Collaboration allows students to learn from each other, practice language skills, and receive valuable feedback. The group dynamic fosters a collaborative learning environment, enhancing teamwork and communication skills beyond the classroom.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study navigates the intricate landscape of language acquisition. Anxiety, identified by Brown (2014), Dörnyei (2005) and Horwitz et al. (1986), emerges as a formidable barrier, particularly in spoken communication. Rubio (2007) presents the vital link between students' willingness to communicate, self-confidence and perceived competence - a key facet. Harmer (2001) emphasizes the role of interpersonal dynamics, highlighting the impact of peers and teachers on motivation and a positive learning environment, echoed in Dörnyei's (2005) L2 Motivational Self-system theory.

The strategies implemented, inspired by Thornbury (2005) and Ölmezer-Öztürk & Öztürk (2021), align with Harmer's (2001) emphasis on the importance of confidence in teaching methods for overall success. The study, which incorporates low-risk

opportunities and real-life discussions, reflects Thornbury's (2005) call for meaningful activities. It underlines the need to address anxiety, cultivate motivation and provide opportunities for the gradual improvement of skills - a multi-faceted approach advocated in the literature.

Ultimately, the impact of this study on participants' self-esteem and active participation emphasizes the importance of holistic approaches to creating confident communicators.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix A | Online Questionnaire

Section 1 | Explanation

This questionnaire aims to understand the anxiety and motivation of the B2 English language learners at the Open Language Course in relation to speaking in English. **All your answers are very important**, therefore, **please read each part carefully and answer honestly**. Your input is much appreciated! Thank you for participating in this study.

Section 2 | Personal Information

2.1 Please provide full name.

2.2 E-mail

2.3 Nationality

   a) Portuguese

   b) Other

2.4 Please choose an option.

   o   A resident in Portugal

   o   On a student visa

   o   On a work visa

   o   Other

2.5 Age

   o   17-20

   o   21-25

   o   26-30

   o   Over 30

2.6 Affiliation to the institution

- o Student at the University

- o Former student at the university

- o Employee at the University

- o Erasmus student

- o Research fellow

- o Other

2.7 If a student at the university, what is your cycle of study?

- o 1st-Undergraduate

- o 2nd -Masters level

- o 3rd-Doctoral level

- o Post-Doctoral

- o Other

- o Not applicable

Section 3 | Contact with language

3.1 How many years did you study English during your compulsory studies as a part of the curriculum (from 1st to 12th grade)?

3.2 Have you ever attended private English lessons/courses?

- o Yes

- o No

3.3 If yes, how many years?

- o   1-4

- o   5-10

- o   Over 10

3.4 Were any of these at the Open Language Courses at the university?

- o   Yes

- o   No

3.5 Are any of your curriculum units taught in English or have been in the past?

- o   Yes

- o   No

3.6 If yes, please name curriculum units.

3.7 If you are already working, is English the language of communication?

- o   Yes

- o   No

3.8 How much do you contact with and/or use the English language in your social life (media, family, friends, peers, etc.)?

- o   Less than 10%

- o   10% to 30%

- o   31% to 40%

- o   41% to 50%

- o   Over 50%

Section 4 | Assessment of your English

4.1 How do you feel about your writing skills in English?

- o   Not confident (needs improvement)

- o   Somewhat confident (minor issues)

- o   Confident (at ease)

4.2 How do you feel about your speaking skills in English?

- o   Not confident (needs improvement)

- o   Somewhat confident (minor issues)

- o   Confident (at ease)

4.3 How do you feel about your reading skills in English?

- o   Not confident (needs improvement)

- o   Somewhat confident (minor issues)

- o   Confident (at ease)

4.4 How do you feel about your listening skills in English?

- o   Not confident (needs improvement)

- o   Somewhat confident (minor issues)

- o   Confident (at ease)

Section 5 | Interest in this course

5.1 Why did you choose to attend English lessons at the Open Language Courses?

- o   Credibility of the Institution

o   By recommendation

o   Convenience

o   Price

5.2 What is your main reason to further develop your English proficiency?

o   To apply for Erasmus.

o   To add to my CV.

o   To apply for a job outside Portugal.

o   To apply for a course outside Portugal.

o   To be able to communicate better with family/friends/colleagues.

o   Because I am interested in the language.

o   Because I believe it is necessary to communicate in this global era.

o   Because I enjoy it.

o   Because I need it for my future career.

o   Because it is a requirement in my work place.

o   For academic purposes.

o   Other

5.3 What is your main priority in this course in terms of English language development?

o   To acquire more vocabulary.

o   To pronounce English correctly and intelligibly.

o   To develop my writing skills.

o   To better understand the content and underlying meaning in texts.

- o To communicate effectively and appropriately in real life situations.

- o To develop my grammar knowledge.

Section 6| Attitude towards speaking in English.

6.1 Please read each statement carefully and choose an option for each.

Neutral= nor agree, nor disagree

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I feel nervous when speaking English in front of others.					
I worry about judgement from my peers.					
I feel insecure about my pronunciation.					
I make an effort to always speak in English during pair/group work.					
I orally participate more in classes where there is a more relaxed learning environment.					
I feel anxious about oral presentations in English.					
I shy away from orally engaging in class because I worry about making mistakes.					
I am reluctant to orally engage when the topic is not interesting or relevant.					
My confidence in speaking is low due to lack of previous practice.					
My oral interaction is influenced by my relationship with my teacher.					
I'd rather speak with a partner than in front pf the class.					
I feel others will not value my opinions or thoughts.					

I feel insecure about my vocabulary and/or grammar knowledge.					
I welcome all opportunities to develop my speaking skills.					
I feel more at ease to speak in smaller classes.					

Appendix B | Group Interview Questions

Engagement Question

1. Why is it important for you to learn English?

2. How do you feel about speaking in English in front of others?

Exploration questions

1. Why do you believe so many people struggle while speaking in front of others in English?

2. Which factors could influence learners' motivation to engage in speaking?

3. What are your thoughts in relation to the impromptu speech activities?

4. How did the podcast activities help you develop your speaking skills?

5. Do believe addressing controversial issues is important in an English lesson? How did this contribute to your engagement in speaking?

6. Did standing up to speak affect your motivation to engage? Was it positive in improving your speaking skills? Did the various seating arrangements promote speaking?

7. Did presenting your oral presentation as a group make you feel better about this assessment moment, or would you rather have done it alone?

Exit question

1. Is there anything else you would like to add about foreign language anxiety or motivation to speak in English?

Appendix C |Sstatement Categories

Attitude towards speaking in English

Category	Questions	Corresponding number in questionnaire
Anxiety	I feel nervous when speaking English in front of others.	1
	I feel anxious about oral presentations in English.	6
	I'd rather speak with a partner than in front of the class.	11
Social (fear of judgement)	I worry about judgment from my peers.	2
	I shy away from orally engaging in class because I worry about making mistakes.	7
	I feel others will not value my opinions or thoughts.	12
Confidence in Abilities (lack of self-confidence)	I feel insecure about my pronunciation.	3
	My confidence in speaking is low due to lack of previous practice.	9
	I feel insecure about my vocabulary and/or grammar knowledge.	13
Motivation	I make an effort to always speak in English during pair/group work.	4
	I am reluctant to orally engage if the topic is not interesting.	8
	I welcome all opportunities to develop my speaking skills.	14
Classroom environment issues	I orally participate more in classes where there is a more relaxed learning environment.	5
	My oral interaction is influenced by my relationship with my teacher.	10
	I feel more at ease to speak in smaller classes.	15

Appendix D | Results of Questionnaire

Personal Information			
Category	Answers	Students	
		N	%
Age	17-20	5	16,7
	21-25	7	23,3
	26-30	7	23,3
	Over 30	11	36,7
Affiliation to Institution	Student	14	43,3
	Former Student	5	16,7
	Employee	1	3,3
	Erasmus	0	0
	Research fellow	2	6,7
	Other	9	30
Cycle of Study	1st-Undergraduate	7	23,3
	2nd-Masters level	8	26,7
	3rd-Doctoral level	2	6,7
	post-Doctoral	1	3,3
	Other	0	0
	Not applicable	12	40

Contact with language

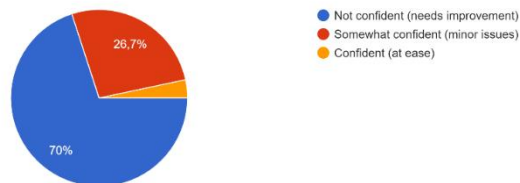| Category	Answers	Students	
		N	%
Nationality	Portuguese	27	90
	Other	3	10
Years studied English from 1st to 12th year at school	Less than 5	4	13.3
	5-8	13	43.3
	More than 8	12	40
	Uncertain	1	3.3
Attended private English lessons	Yes	15	50
	No	15	50
Years attending private English lessons	1-4	13	86.7
	5-10	5	13.3
	Over 10	0	0
At the Open Languages Courses at University	Yes	9	50
	No	9	50
Are any of your curriculum, units taught in English?	Yes	6	20
	No	24	80
If you are already working, is English the language of communication?	Yes	11	36.7
	No	19	63.3
How much do you contact with and/or use the English language in your social life (media, family, friends, peers, etc.)?	Less than 10%	12	40
	10% to 30%	8	26.7
	31% to 40%	6	20
	41% to 50%	3	10
	More than 50%	1	3.3

Self-evaluation of language skills

Productive skills

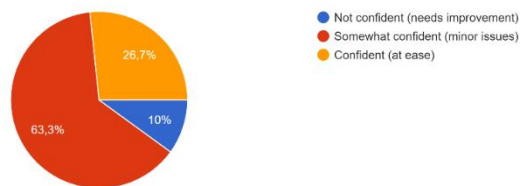4.1 How do you feel about your writing skills in English?
30 respostas

- Not confident (needs improvement)
- Somewhat confident (minor issues)
- Confident (at ease)

43,3%
53,3%

4.2 How do you feel about your speaking skills in English?
30 respostas

- Not confident (needs improvement)
- Somewhat confident (minor issues)
- Confident (at ease)

26,7%
70%
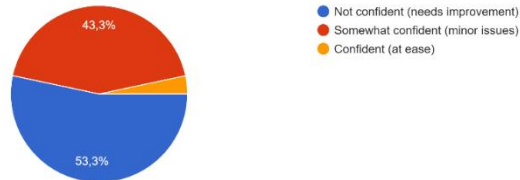
Receptive skills

4.3 How do you feel about your reading skills in English?
30 respostas

- Not confident (needs improvement)
- Somewhat confident (minor issues)
- Confident (at ease)

26,7%
10%
63,3%

4.4 How do you feel about your listening skills in English?
30 respostas

- Not confident (needs improvement)
- Somewhat confident (minor issues)
- Confident (at ease)

18,7%
56,7%
26,7%
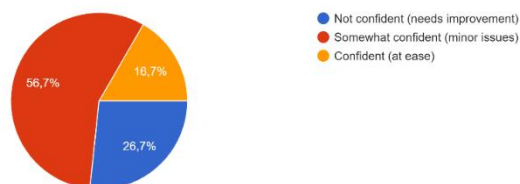
IV. Reasons for choosing the Open Language Courses

5.1 Why did you choose to attend English lessons at the Open Language Courses?
30 respostas

- Credibility of the Institution
- Recommendation
- Convenience
- Price
- By recommendation
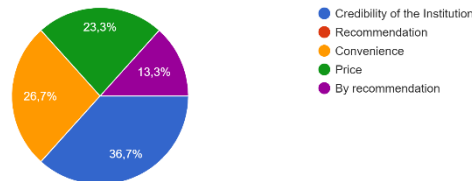
V. Reasons to further develop language proficiency

Category	Answers	Students	
		N	%
What is the main reason to further develop your proficiency?	Because I need for my future career	13	43.3
	To add to my CV	4	13.3
	To apply for a job outside Portugal	3	10
	Because it is a requirement in my workplace	2	6.7
	Because I believe it is necessary to communicate in this global era	5	16.7
	To be able to communicate better with family/Friends/colleagues	1	3.3
	For academic purposes	1	3.3
	To apply for Erasmus	0	0
	To apply to a course outside Portugal	0	0
	Because I enjoy it	1	3.3
	Because I am interested in the language	0	0

	Other	0	0

VI. Main priority in developing proficiency

Category	Answers	Students	
		N	%
What is your main priority in this course in terms of English language development?	To communicate effectively and appropriately in real life situations	21	70
	To develop my writing skills	4	13.3
	To pronounce English correctly and intelligibility	2	6.7
	To develop my grammar knowledge	1	3.3
	To acquire more vocabulary	1	3.3
	To better understand the content and underlying meaning in texts	1	3.3

VII. Attitude towards speaking in English

Category	Questions	Disagree		Neutral	Agree	
		N	%	N	N	%
	I feel nervous when speaking English in front of others.	3	10	4	23	76.6
Anxiety	I feel anxious about oral presentations in English.	2	6.6	2	26	86.6
	I'd rather speak with a partner than in front of the class.	6	20	7	17	56.6
	I worry about judgment from my peers.	5	16.6	5	20	66.6

Social (fear of judgment)	I shy away from orally engaging in class because I worry about making mistakes.	7	23.3	9	14	46.6
	I feel others will not value my opinions or thoughts.	15	50	11	4	13.3
	I feel insecure about my pronunciation.	5	16.6	2	23	76.6
Confidence in Abilities (lack of self-confidence)	My confidence in speaking is low due to lack of previous practice.	4	13.3	2	24	80
	I feel insecure about my vocabulary and/or grammar knowledge.	1	3.3	6	23	76.6
Motivation	I make an effort to always speak in English during pair/group work.	3	10	8	19	63.3
	I am reluctant to orally engage if the topic is not interesting.	7	23.3	11	12	40
	I welcome all opportunities to develop my speaking skills.	1	3.3	4	25	83.3
Classroom environment issues	I orally participate more in classes where there is a more relaxed learning environment.	1	3.3	4	25	83.3
	My oral interaction is influenced by my relationship with my teacher.	3	10	5	22	73.3
	I feel more at ease to speak in smaller classes.	1	3.3	3	26	86.6