

Tools to Alleviate Teenager's Anxiety in Learning ESL

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Abstract

This paper explores a variety of different approaches teachers can take with technology assistance to alleviate the negative effects of learning anxiety, specifically in teenage students learning ESL. This paper focuses on online tools that teachers have used in studies before. Still, it includes offline tools teachers can use in the hopes that whatever the issue of learning anxiety may be, the educator and teacher understand the multitude of solutions available.

Keywords: online learning, learning anxiety, English as a Second Language.

1. Introduction

Learning anxiety comes in many shapes, forms, and sizes. This paper will focus on learning anxiety in teenagers taking ESL (English as a Second Language) worldwide. Some teenagers may have test anxiety, and others may have speaking anxiety. But whatever the type of anxiety, learning anxiety is detrimental to learning progress.

Anxiety leads to a less “positive and fulfilling mental state related to English learning” [1]. While students may be required to learn English in school, once external motivations such as grades are removed, their mindsets and attitudes toward English will be the key to sustaining learning. If their mindsets are negative, it is much less likely that they will voluntarily seek to learn more English in the long term.

Speaking anxiety is another hurdle to their learning; it affects a student's willingness to communicate. Since communication is the goal of every language, a lack of a student's willingness to communicate could pose a significant barrier to using the language. Even the most brilliant student's English skills will not be sufficient if they do not practice, and a student who is nervous about communicating will often fail to practice said language with others.

This is why it is so essential that teachers try to create a learning environment to relieve learning anxiety as much as possible. Many people have ideas on how to do this, but these familiar problems can have new, exciting solutions with the most recent technological advancements.

Additionally, while this paper mainly focuses on various online tools that teachers and schools can use to help ESL students struggling with learning anxiety, a couple of unique offline solutions that could help relieve learning anxiety are included as well.

2. Literature Review

The first two sites found to improve speaking &

writing skills were Facebook and Skype. Asynchronous (outside of class time) online discussion on Facebook & synchronous (during class time) online discussion on Skype were found to provide a helpful environment where students could have a space to speak and write with each other [2]. Talking with peers can be easier than talking in front of a class or to a teacher who might not understand the struggles of learning another language. By giving students a space to do that online, the awkwardness or pressure they might feel interacting with others in person could decrease for many.

Another study reveals that self-motivated or bored students who spent six to ten hours a day on Facebook felt that their writing skills had also improved on the platform [3]. Simply using a social media site in English could be an easy way to allow students to interact with the language and practice real-life comprehension and communication with posts they find interesting. Instead of making learning feel boring, Facebook's algorithm is already preprogrammed to discover students' interests and keep them learning outside of the classroom.

Social media apps such as Facebook and Skype can be powerful tools for peer-to-peer communication and writing practice, but they are only two specific tools. Concepts such as gamification and speaking practice may also be improved upon online.

As the name suggests, gamification is the process of making something into a game. In this case, that something is learning. Many people have implemented aspects of gamification into their classroom offline with rewards as elementary as stickers and gold stars or rankings based on grades or performance that extend even into adult life. Online sources use the same ideas but instead have digital feedback, points, quizzes, badges, leaderboards, and rewards.

Online gamification has been found to positively affect students' attitudes and emotional responses; however, this positive effect is often short-lived or derailed by

the negative influence caused by in-game competition [4]. This is not to say that online gamification cannot be useful. A positive effect on attitude and emotional response ties directly into and actively combats one of the problems that learning anxiety causes: a negative mental state. Cultivating an environment where students can be in a positive mental state is essential, and if the teacher can develop a sense of healthy competition and balance out the lesson with other resources, online gamification with students can be extremely rewarding.

Something else that can be extremely rewarding is speaking practice with an Artificial Intelligence application. A survey of Indonesian students who participated in the program NovoLearning showed that many believed the program would decrease their speaking anxiety, as talking to an AI was less stressful than talking to another person [5]. While this may not help speaking anxiety in the long term when students will have to talk to people in real life, this program could be ideal in the beginning to reverse the effects of speaking anxiety. Practice is essential no matter what it is. Having an opportunity to begin practice can improve the student's language skills and boost their confidence in using it.

Many online resources have been listed, but of course, having a piece of technology is not required in the classroom. Unplugging and getting fresh air outdoors could be a healthy alternative to increase students' willingness to communicate. A Norwegian study found that after teenagers went outdoors and engaged in a series of activities that required them to talk with each other in English, they reported wanting to communicate more due to a combination of an interesting learning style and real-life language use [6]. This study reveals that one does not need to go as far as to make students head outdoors every day in class. However, changing the teaching style or making the classes as entertaining as they are educational could make a big difference in student engagement.

Collaboration can also increase student engagement. In a drama class, when students were required to work together in small groups, the learners' engagement in the class increased, and their speaking anxiety decreased [7]. This idea is great, but tying the positive effects of collaboration with online tools could be even more advantageous. With access to native speakers worldwide, ESL students collaborating with other students in different English-speaking countries could increase their English skills and make memories that last for a lifetime.

Finally, positive feedback is a big factor in students' perceptions of themselves and their learning. However, not all positive feedback is created equal. A study found that when teachers praised intelligence, students' growth mindsets decreased, contrasting the fact that when

teachers praised the effort, students' growth mindsets increased, as well as their speaking abilities, willingness to communicate, and lack of speaking anxiety [8]. This displays how much a teacher's words can change students' mindsets and perspectives on learning and how simple improving the quality of learning for ESL students might be.

3. Discussion

This paper has explored some fascinating ideas and tools, but a couple of other factors outside of these studies should be carefully considered before implementing them. The first is that each student is a different individual, and though these methods might work for one group of students, they might not work for everyone. Everybody has their reason for getting anxious- or don't- about something, and the best thing a teacher can do to understand the reasoning behind the anxiety is to go to the source themselves: the student. Communicating with a student about the problems could help enlighten teachers and allow students to feel more comfortable.

Second, these studies were conducted across various countries, including Indonesia and Norway. Cultural differences, language differences, and geographic location differences could impact how each student perceives their respective learning challenges and the tools or surveys they were given.

Third, the teenage age of the subjects in many of these studies could also greatly impact how they reacted to the online tools. Adults or elementary school-level children may not have the time, attention span, or tech-savviness to navigate the online world of learning that's just beginning to grow. Finally, none of these studies have looked at the effectiveness of online tools longer than a couple of years and not the long term. Like everything online, Facebook or Skype are not meant to replace the teacher but simply to help make their jobs much easier.

4. Conclusion

Concluding, there are many options for teachers struggling to get through to a student with learning anxiety. They can use Facebook and Skype to increase interaction with English outside of class or assist with communicating with peers, AI to help those with speaking anxiety practice their language without discomfort, or gamification online to increase student engagement in class. They can also encourage collaboration among small groups, temporarily change their teaching styles for interesting outdoor activities, or give tons of positive feedback regarding the efforts a student takes.

Whatever teachers choose to do, technology and

knowledge regarding education and how best to teach a student continue to advance with time. All one must do is embrace new possibilities and adapt to what's best for each student.

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