



5 Ways to Create a Comfortable Speaking Environment for Adults

by [Chris Huang](#)

Reducing stress and breaking down psychological barriers for proactive engagement in the classroom is one of the most important responsibilities for teachers. Through my experience of teaching multilingual adult learners, I've found five methods that have been successful for me to create a comfortable and stress-free speaking environment for my students.

1. Establish a Safe Environment on Day 1

Making sure that the classroom is a safe and comfortable environment for students to speak up on the first day of class is extremely important because this will determine their confidence and willingness to speak on every day afterward. In the first lesson, instead of having your adult students introduce themselves in front of everyone, have students pair up for the introductions and rotate partners every 3–5 mins. This way, instead of one stressful self-introduction presentation, students get to practice their introductions five or six times without too much pressure. This helps them establish more confidence and comfort in the first class, meet some classmates individually and build some rapport, and practice speaking and listening, too. Establishing this type of safe and comfortable environment from Day 1 will help students feel that speaking English is enjoyable rather than stressful.

- *Pro Tip:* As the teacher, you can join the activity as well. This gives everyone in the classroom a chance to get to know each other—you included.

2. Offer Praise and Encouragement for Effort

Utilizing positive reinforcement builds on the safe and comfortable classroom environment you've established on the first day of class. If students are relaxed and confident, the psychological barriers of speaking up will naturally be broken. Attend to students' feelings by giving some form of praise to them every time they make an effort to speak up in front of everyone; this helps students establish a positive attitude towards learning and engagement in the classroom.

You can encourage other students to share positive comments after any student presentation. Create sentence starters and frames for this, and post them somewhere visible. Here are some good examples:

- That was so interesting, especially...
- What an awesome presentation! I totally agree with...
- I really enjoyed your presentation. I like the part where you talked about...
- Your presentation was fantastic. It was so easy to understand. I learned about...
- Now that I've heard you talk about _____, I have learned that...
- I agree with you that...
- I was impressed with...

Through praise and encouragement, you can create a cycle of positive reinforcement for students every time they challenge themselves to speak up in the classroom.

- *Pro Tip:* Establish a rule early on that whenever a student presents something, all the other students should respond with applause.

3. Make the Lesson Interactive and Fun

Reducing teacher talk as much as possible and having students pair up for interactive activities promotes a fun and interactive environment. Here are a few specific ways to turn traditional talk time into engaging tasks and activities:

Role-Plays

Have students pair up and make their own creative role-play using the target language. Introduce a scenario, such as “making an appointment on the phone,” and then have students work together to develop a skit, including creating new identities, and practice role-playing. Encourage students to make the skit funny or interesting. Interactive role-playing activities are not only fun, but they also encourage students to assume new identities in the dialogue, resulting in a higher level of security and willingness to be open and take risks.

Classmate Interviews

Provide some questions that incorporate the target language of the lesson and have students walk around and interview their classmates. Students take turns asking each other the questions and recording each other's answers. Classmate interviews are extremely helpful for reducing pressure during speaking for students because they are not speaking in front of large groups.

Group Debates

Prepare some debate topics that can be used to practice agreeing and disagreeing. Put students into groups of four and divide the group into two teams (of two students each). One team will make arguments agreeing with a topic and the other team will make arguments disagreeing. The goal for each team is to convince the other team to conform. Give students about 10 minutes to debate each topic.

- *Pro Tip:* Have your activities mirror real-life interactions so that students gain real-world skills in a low-pressure environment.

4. Provide Equal Feedback in a Positive Manner

Of course, providing students feedback is imperative for helping them learn from their mistakes. Students of any age expect feedback from their teachers, but adults can have a more delicate sense of pride when receiving criticism, and so the manner in which you deliver that criticism is especially important. When offering feedback to an adult learner, it can help to begin with several compliments. For instance, after a student's presentation, first offer compliments such as, "Fantastic job on giving clear details. Also, your fluency and flow for the presentation were awesome." Then, follow up with gentle but specific feedback: "Just don't forget to use past tense for past events."

Make sure every student receives the same treatment by consistently offering the same number of compliments and the same amount of feedback for assignments. Equal treatment is important because when a student is given more negative feedback than their peers, they may feel inferior, lowering their self-confidence and, as a result, their motivation to speak.

- *Pro Tip:* When providing constructive feedback to students, don't just point out their mistakes, but provide specific guidelines on how they can improve. This will give students a clear direction on how they can work on their weaknesses.

5. Emphasize That Mistakes Lead to Learning

Explain early and often to your language learners that communicating and getting their point across should be the top priority—not speaking perfectly. Encourage them to speak up and make mistakes rather than stay silent. It can be helpful, in the beginning (or periodically, if they need reminding), to show them videos of famous nonnative English speakers who make plenty of mistakes but speak very confidently. For example, one of the videos I show is [a video](#) of Jack Ma, the famous entrepreneur and founder of Alibaba. Jack Ma is not a native speaker of English; he makes many grammar mistakes, but he is so comfortable and confident in English that he can communicate his thoughts clearly in what appears to be an effortless way.

Encouraging your students to prioritize communication in English rather than perfection creates a lower stress environment, relieving them from the fear of making mistakes and making them more comfortable to speak up in the classroom.

- *Pro Tip:* In the beginning of every lesson, remind your students not to be embarrassed about making mistakes. The constant reminder helps them to remember to prioritize communication in English rather than perfection.

Conclusion

Speaking is one of the main components of language learning. It is imperative for teachers to create as many speaking opportunities as possible in the language classroom to facilitate

effective learning. Speaking in a second language, however, is often perceived as a very stressful activity by most adult students. Therefore, being able to create a comfortable speaking environment for students is an essential skill all language teachers should consider adding to their teaching repertoire. The five methods introduced in this article should serve as a useful benchmark for teachers who hope to reduce the stress of speaking for their students in the classroom.

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