Beyond the stage: Unravelling learners' public speaking anxiety, triggers, and coping strategies

Manalang, Ann Janette ✉

Ilocos Sur Polytechnic College, Tagudin, Ilocos Sur, Philippines (annjanette.manalang@deped.gov.ph)

Abstract

Public speaking is a vital skill that enhances communication, builds confidence, and supports academic and professional success. However, many students struggle with anxiety when speaking in public, affecting their performance and learning. This study explores the prevalence and causes of public speaking anxiety among Grade 9 students at the Regional Science High School for Region I, aiming to identify anxiety patterns and recommend effective interventions. Using an explanatory sequential mixed-method design, the study combined quantitative data from the Personal Report on Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA) by James McCroskey (2013) and qualitative data from interviews with students who showed moderate to high anxiety levels. A total enumeration of 34 Grade 9-Lanthanum students participated in the study, revealing a significant prevalence of public speaking anxiety. Results showed that public speaking anxiety was common, with key factors including overthinking, fear of judgment, perfectionism, and lack of preparation. Students also shared personal experiences, describing physical symptoms, emotional stress, and their coping strategies. The study emphasizes the importance of the use of strategic action plan to reduce public speaking anxiety and boost confidence. Key areas of it include structured practice, cognitive reframing, supportive classroom environments, and gradual exposure to public speaking. These measures can improve self-efficacy and help students express themselves more effectively. Lastly, the research provides practical insights for educators, curriculum planners, and administrators, highlighting the need to integrate confidence-building activities into educational programs. These findings lay the groundwork for further studies on effective public speaking training tailored to high school learners.

Keywords: public speaking anxiety, grade 9 learners, coping strategies, Personal Report on Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA), anxiety management, interventions

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1. Introduction

Public speaking is a vital communication skill essential for personal and professional success (Sahara & Nurcholis, 2022). It enhances one's ability to articulate thoughts, use effective tone and body language, and engage audiences (Tamayo & Caber, 2022). Developing this skill fosters self-confidence and helps individuals overcome speech-related anxiety (Nahliah, 2021). Beyond communication, public speaking offers several benefits. It builds self-confidence, encourages personal growth, and opens opportunities for career advancement and leadership roles (Tamayo & Caber, 2022). It also strengthens persuasion skills useful in negotiations and everyday interactions (Nahliah, 2021). Importantly, consistent practice helps individuals manage glossophobia—the fear of public speaking—marked by symptoms such as elevated heart rate, trembling, and fear of judgment (Sahara & Nurcholis, 2022). In English as a Second Language (ESL) learning, speaking is a key indicator of language mastery. However, many learners experience anxiety due to fear of negative feedback and prior criticism (Tamayo & Caber, 2022). Such fear leads to nervousness, mispronunciations, and mental blocks (Nahliah, 2021). Several studies suggest a deeper exploration of learners' public speaking challenges is needed (Bagalay et al., 2021; Soriano & Co, 2022). Addressing these issues is essential for improving learners' well-being and communication skills. Thus, this study aims to investigate learners' public speaking anxieties and difficulties using a qualitative approach (Soriano & Co, 2022; Tamayo & Caber, 2022).

Purpose of the Study - This study primarily aimed to determine the public speaking anxiety and tensions of Grade 9 learners at Regional Science High School for Region I.

Research Questions

➢ What is the level of public speaking anxiety of Grade 9 learners?

➢ What contributes to the public speaking anxiety of Grade 9 learners?

➢ What coping strategies do learners employ to overcome their anxiety in public speaking?

➢ What strategic action plan to address the public speaking anxiety of learners can be developed?

2. Review of Related Literature

There is a vast amount of literature on taxonomies of public speaking anxiety for the past decades from various perspectives.

Grieve et. al (2021), conducted a qualitative study on fears of oral presentations and public speaking among forty-six university learners of the West of England University, Bristol. The study aimed to learn more about the worries and methods employed by the participants who are afraid of public speaking as well as to determine if their fears had an effect on their college experience. Through thematic analysis, the fear of being evaluated, physical symptoms, ambiguity about the issue, negative influence on university experience, practice and preparation, and more practical support were all identified. The findings show that assignments on public speaking have a detrimental impact on learning and learners 'experience. Being judged and uncertain about the issues are the respondents' biggest anxieties. In spite of their dread of public speaking, the majority of the respondents in this study were aware of the need for practice and preparation. The findings also demonstrated a definite absence of and need for further comprehensive support for learners who are afraid of public speaking.

A study by Dansieh (2021) also looked at the fear of public speaking among forty-six ESL learners in Ghana.

The study utilized both qualitative and quantitative research approaches, with a survey serving as the primary instrument among Dr. Hilla Limann Technical University final year secretarial undergraduates. The participants acknowledged the importance of public speaking, but admitted that glossophobia had prevented them from making a favorable impression on the audience at some point. It was reported that the participants' ability to speak English in public was hampered by several factors namely low self-confidence, a lack of consistent speaking experience, inadequate preparation and fear of making mistakes and being ridiculed at. The findings suggest that lecturers and teachers alike use an interactive approach along with proper communication strategies to foster positive attitudes and establish the desired atmosphere for improving learners' confidence in order to help learners overcome their fear of public speaking. Both studies show that educators play an important role in assisting learners in overcoming their phobias of public speaking. Recognizing different learning styles and adopting a pleasant and inspiring classroom atmosphere are just a few of the steps that may be taken to guarantee that L2 learners have equal opportunities to succeed thereby aiding them in overcoming their public speaking anxieties (Mahmood, 2020; Singh, 2021).

Another study that have examined the difficulties encountered by ESL learners in public speaking. Tamayo and Caber (2022) found that learners experience moderate levels of speaking anxiety, primarily due to fear of negative feedback. Dansieh et al. (2021) suggested that past negative criticism from teachers in primary or tertiary education discourages learners from speaking in public. Additionally, Nahliah (2021) identified several anxiety-related symptoms learners experience during speech training, including heart palpitations, panic, nervousness, excessive worry, and fear of making mistakes. These difficulties often stem from a lack of confidence and self-belief, leading learners to perceive themselves negatively and fear others' judgment.

Based on these studies, it is evident that fear of public speaking is a prevalent type of anxiety among learners from elementary schools to tertiary education. It might range from mild anxiety to paralyzing fear and apprehension. Other glossophobia symptoms include stomach knots, sweaty palms, dry mouth, trembling legs, and throat tightness. According to the data gathered in the studies, learners may prefer more practical support in smaller group workshops in a supportive environment, with a focus on authenticity, letting go of perfection, and substance over style (Mahmood, 2020; Danis, 2021; Grieve et.al., 2021). Nevertheless, in terms of the need for public speaking assistance, the issue of how learners assessed existing support was not included and this deserves detailed investigation. Furthermore, most studies on glossophobia do not examine all three possible elements, namely situational, cognitive, and behavioral, at the same time and how these aspects affect the learners. As a result, the present study fits into existing literature.

2.1 Theoretical Lens

Public speaking anxiety is a complex phenomenon rooted in various psychological and educational theories that address its physiological, cognitive, emotional, and social causes. The Fight or Flight Response Theory (Romero, 2019) explains the involuntary physical reactions—such as increased heart rate and muscle tension—that occur when individuals perceive public speaking as a threat. Rachman's Conditioning Theory and Hoffman et al.'s (1995) work suggest that past negative experiences and social cues can condition individuals to associate public speaking with fear, leading to avoidance and reinforcing anxiety. The Classical Response Contagion Theory posits that emotional responses like fear can be "caught" from observing others, especially in peer-influenced environments, while Processing Efficiency Theory (Eysenck & Calvo, 1992) explains how anxiety consumes working memory, impairing cognitive performance during speaking tasks. Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory emphasizes the role of self-efficacy and observational learning, asserting that low confidence and negative modeling can increase fear, whereas supportive environments and positive reinforcement enhance confidence. Lastly, Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis highlights how high anxiety can block language production and communication, even in well-prepared speakers. Collectively, these theories advocate for supportive, low-stress environments and interventions—such as gradual exposure, cognitive restructuring, and peer modeling—to effectively reduce public speaking anxiety.
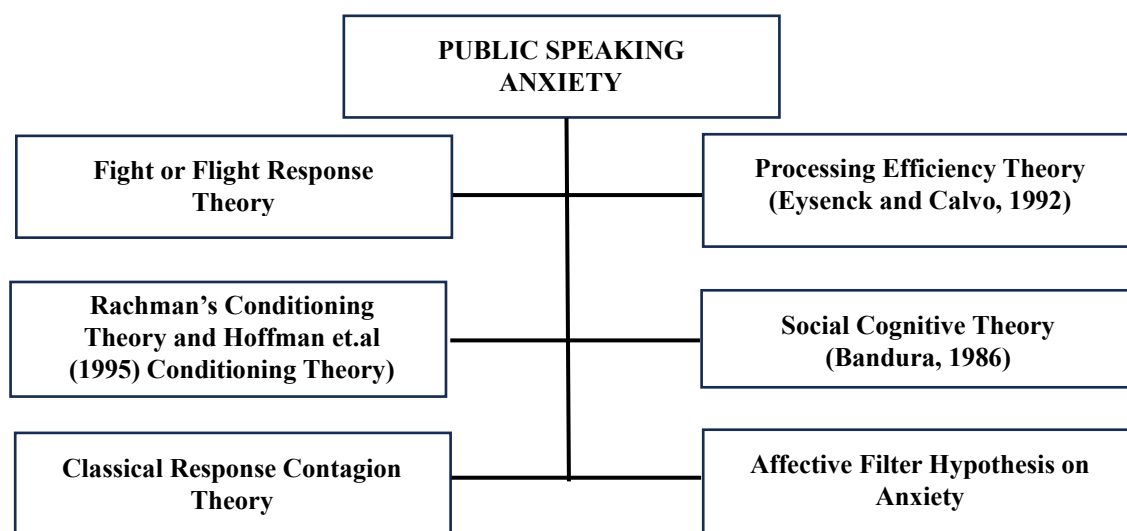
Figure 1: *Theoretical Framework*

As shown in Figure 2 below, The Research Paradigm, illustrates a study focused on reducing public speaking anxiety in learners aimed at developing measures in public speaking can be developed to ease the public speaking anxiety of Grade 9 learners. The quantitative part will employ a total enumeration sampling technique, including all 34 Grade 9-Lanthanum learners. To assess their levels of public speaking anxiety, the study will use the Personal Report on Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA) by James McCroskey (2013). This tool allows for the collection and analysis of numerical data, providing measurable insights into the learners' public speaking anxiety.

In contrast, the qualitative part will utilize a criterion sampling technique, selecting participants based on specific characteristics relevant to the study. The qualitative aspect will involve semi-structured interviews, which will enable a deeper exploration of the learners' experiences and perceptions of their public speaking anxiety, what contributes and what coping mechanisms do they employ to overcome their public speaking anxiety.

The analysis of both data sets—the quantitative data from the PRPSA and qualitative data from interviews—will inform the refinement and development of effective measures in public speaking can be developed to ease the public speaking anxiety of Grade 9 learners.
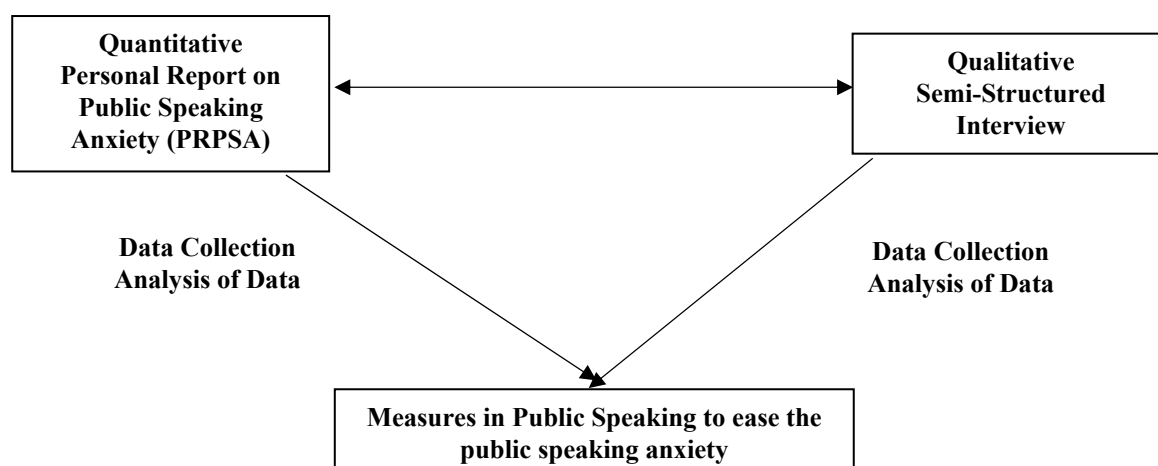

Figure 2. *Research Paradigm*

3. Methodology

Research Design- This study used an explanatory sequential mixed-method design to explore strategies for reducing public speaking anxiety among Grade 9 students. It began with quantitative data collection using the Personal Report on Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA) by James McCroskey (2013) with all 34 Grade 9-Lanthanum learners to measure their public speaking anxiety levels. The quantitative part employed a total enumeration sampling technique, including all 34 Grade 9-Lanthanum learners. Based on these results, qualitative data was then gathered through semi-structured interviews with selected participants to gain deeper insights into their experiences, causes of anxiety, and coping mechanisms. The combined analysis of both data sets helped identify and develop effective public speaking strategies to alleviate students' anxiety.

Research Participants - The study involved 34 Grade 9 learners from Regional Science High School for Region I of Bangar, La Union, Philippines. These learners are currently enrolled for the School Year 2024–2025. Based on the suggestion of the research panel during the research proposal,, the participants were specifically selected from Grade 9 Lanthanum to ensure objectivity and minimize potential bias, as these students had not been previously taught by the researcher. This selection aimed to maintain impartiality in data collection and analysis, thereby enhancing the credibility and reliability of the research findings.

For the quantitative aspect of the study, the researcher employed total enumeration, a purposive sampling technique, wherein all 34 learners answered the Personal Report on Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA) developed by James McCroskey (2013). These participants included both male and female Grade 9- Lanthanum students enrolled during the specified academic year. Meanwhile, In the qualitative analysis of the study, participants were also selected using criterion sampling. Inclusion criteria are as follows: First, they must have prior experience speaking in front of large audiences. Second, they should exhibit moderate to high levels of public speaking anxiety, as measured by the Personal Report on Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA) developed by James McCroskey. Third, participants should have multiple reasons for feeling anxious about public speaking. Fourth, they must demonstrate poor performance in public speaking. Lastly, they must be willing to participate in the study.

Data Collection- The researcher prepared a letter of request addressed to the Schools Division Superintendent and secured approval from the Research Ethics Committee of Ilocos Sur Polytechnic State College. Informed consent was obtained from participants and their parents or guardians, as the participants were minors. Participants were oriented on the study's purpose, process, and their rights, including anonymity, voluntary participation, and the option to withdraw at any time. During the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted in a quiet, private classroom and lasted 15–30 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded (with consent), transcribed verbatim, and supplemented with written notes. Data was analyzed through thematic analysis, involving transcription, coding, and categorization of statements related to public speaking anxiety, its sources, and coping strategies. Pseudonyms (e.g., P1, P2) were used to maintain confidentiality. Data saturation was achieved, and triangulation methods, including Focus Group Discussions (FGD), were employed to ensure reliability and validity. The FGDs provided interactive, deeper insights that supported and validated individual interview findings. Participants' well-being remained a priority, especially for those who chose to withdraw from the study.

Analysis of Data- For the analysis of quantitative data, the researcher used the PRPSA and applied the mean statistical method to determine the level of public speaking anxiety of learners. To determine the score on the PRPSA, the following steps were followed:

Step 1. Add scores for items 1, 2, 3, 5, 9, 10, 13, 14, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, and 34

Step 2. Add the scores for items 4, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 15, 16, 17, 18, 24, and 26

Step 3. Complete the following formula:

PRPSA = 72 - Total from Step 2 + Total from Step 1. Score should be between 34 and 170. If the score is below 34 or above 170, there was a mistake in computing the score.

High = > 131   Low = < 98   Moderate = 98-131   Mean = 114.6; SD = 17.2

In analyzing the qualitative data, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to explore the sources that caused anxiety in public speaking and the coping strategies participants used to overcome these anxieties. Participants were informed of their right to privacy, and they were asked for permission to share their insights for the study. They were also notified that they could review the data collected from them. Interviews were conducted one-on-one to ensure confidentiality, and semi-structured interview questions, validated by an expert, guided the conversation. Follow-up questions were used to encourage detailed responses and further elaboration. After conducting the individual interviews of the selected participants in a private and comfortable setting within the school premises, the interviews were transcribed. Using thematic analysis, recurring themes, patterns, and key findings related to public speaking anxiety were identified. These were organized into categories and subcategories. The thematic analysis method used was not based on a philosophical premise but was guided by six stages identified by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

Ethical Considerations- The study involved 34 Grade 9-Lanthanum students from the Regional Science High School for Region I, who shared their experiences and anxieties regarding public speaking through interviews. Since the participants were minors, parental or guardian consent was obtained. The participants were briefed on the study's purpose and process, assured of their anonymity, informed that participation was voluntary, and that they could withdraw at any time. The findings would be shared with them after data collection. To ensure ethical standards and confidentiality, all data were securely managed. Audio recordings and transcripts were saved on a password-protected device accessible only to the researcher, while printed documents were stored securely and scheduled to be shredded six months after study completion. Digital files will also be permanently deleted after six months to ensure participants' privacy is maintained.

4. Results

Research Question 1: What is the level of public speaking anxiety of Grade 9 learners?

Table 1
Level of Public Speaking Anxiety Level of Grade 9 Learners based on PRPSA Results

Public Speaking Anxiety Level	Number of learners	Percentage
High Anxiety Level	12	35%
Moderate Anxiety Level	8	24%
Low Anxiety Level	14	41%
Total: 34		

Using the Personal Report on Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA) of James McCroskey (2013), the results indicate that out of 34 Grade 9 learners, 35% of respondents (12 learners) reported experiencing high levels of anxiety when speaking in public. Additionally, 24% of learners (8 learners) exhibited moderate levels of anxiety, while the remaining 41% (14 learners) reported low anxiety levels. These findings suggest that a significant portion of learners struggle with nervousness and apprehension when required to speak in front of an audience.

Research Question 2: What contributes to the public speaking anxiety of Grade 9 learners?

During the in-depth and focus group discussion, there were four major themes emerged for the data collected:

2.1 **Overthinking and Tensions as Catalysts for Public Speaking Fear.** This theme presents a profound psychological barrier to learners' success in public speaking. Rooted in heightened self-awareness and fear of negative evaluation, this fear extends beyond ordinary nervousness, as learners internalize imagined failures and

judgments even before any actual speaking begins.

2.2 **Fear of Judgment and Social Evaluation in Public Speaking**. This theme shows particularly the worry that the audience will be critical, dismissive, or even mocking. Adolescents at the Grade 9 level are at a developmental stage where peer validation plays a crucial role in self-esteem, making them especially sensitive to perceived social evaluation.

2.3 **Fear of Making Mistakes and Perfectionist Tendencies**. A recurring concern among learners is the fear of making mistakes, particularly forgetting lines, mispronouncing words, or failing to articulate thoughts clearly. The pressure to deliver a flawless performance often leads to heightened anxiety, making learners more susceptible to performance paralysis -- a state where fear of imperfection prevents effective speech delivery.

2.4 **Lack of Preparation and Self-Doubt in Public Speaking.** Many learners identified lack of preparation as a key contributor to their anxiety. When learners feel underprepared, they are more likely to experience self-doubt, hesitation, and a sense of vulnerability, which further reinforces their nervousness.

Research Question 3: What coping strategies do learners employ to overcome their anxiety in public speaking?

Based on the interview conducted, the following themes emerged:

3.1 **Practice and Preparation**. Many learners believe that rehearsing their speech multiple times helps them gain confidence and reduce nervousness before a presentation. Some learners reported that practicing in front of a mirror or speaking in front of their family members allowed them to become more comfortable with public speaking.

3.2 **Mental Reframing and Self-Encouragement**. Some learners attempt to change their mindset about public speaking by reassuring themselves that the experience is not as intimidating as they initially believe. Encouraging themselves to remain calm and confident helps them overcome their fear.

3.3 **Visualization Techniques**. This includes imagining that they are speaking in an empty room or convincing themselves that the audience is not present. This mental strategy helps them detach from the fear of being judged and concentrate on their delivery.

3.4 **Breathing and Relaxation Techniques.** Deep breathing exercises allow learners to feel more focused and calmer, though some learners report mixed results. Extracts show how learners use deep breathing and other methods to cope with their nerves.

Research Question 4: What strategic action plan to address the public speaking anxiety of learners can be developed?

The strategic action plan outlines a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach to overcoming public speaking anxiety among Grade 9 learners. It targets key areas such as fostering a supportive classroom culture, adjusting performance expectations, providing skill-building workshops, and involving parents and peers in the learning journey. With clearly defined activities, timelines, and success indicators, the plan ensures that interventions are measurable, consistent, and sustainable throughout the school year.

5. Summary

In conclusion, the convergence of quantitative data, qualitative themes, and psychological theories clearly shows that public speaking anxiety is a multifaceted issue shaped by cognitive, emotional, and social variables. However, it is also a manageable one. The key lies in early intervention through structured practice, supportive environments, and cognitive-behavioral strategies that enhance self-belief. By applying theories such as Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, McCroskey's Communication Apprehension Theory, and Krashen's

Affective Filter Hypothesis, educators can design more effective programs that not only reduce anxiety but also build lifelong confidence in learners. These conclusions call for a proactive, theory-informed approach to help students not just survive public speaking, but thrive in it.

6. Conclusion

The study titled "Beyond the Stage: Unravelling Learners' Public Speaking Anxiety, Triggers, and Coping Strategies" investigated the underlying causes of public speaking anxiety among Grade 9 learners and identified strategies that help them cope with these challenges. Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, the research revealed that many learners experience anxiety rooted in the fear of negative evaluation, low self-confidence, and limited public speaking experience. These factors often lead to nervousness, embarrassment, self-doubt, and avoidance behaviors such as reduced class participation and poor performance in oral tasks. The study emphasized the need for early intervention, as strong communication skills are essential for both academic and future personal or professional success.

Despite these challenges, the study found that learners are not passive in the face of anxiety. They actively employ a range of coping strategies to manage their fear and gradually build confidence. Regular practice emerged as the most common approach, as it helps learners feel more familiar with their material and reduces the fear of forgetting lines or making mistakes. Mental reframing—replacing negative thoughts with positive affirmations—also proved effective in shifting learners' focus from fear of judgment to the meaningful sharing of ideas. Visualization, which involves imagining a successful presentation beforehand, and relaxation techniques like deep breathing and mindfulness, helped learners manage physical symptoms such as shaking or rapid heartbeat. These strategies demonstrated that with proper guidance and tools, learners are capable of regulating their emotions and performing more confidently in public speaking situations.

The study further emphasized the importance of fostering a supportive and low-pressure classroom environment to help learners overcome anxiety. When students feel safe and supported, they are more likely to take risks, participate in oral activities, and gradually develop their public speaking skills. A classroom atmosphere built on mutual respect and encouragement helps ease the fear of making mistakes, promoting a growth mindset. Constructive feedback that focuses on students' strengths before addressing areas for improvement boosts confidence and motivation. Additionally, regular opportunities for skill-building—such as guided presentations, group discussions, and low-stakes speaking tasks—allow learners to gain experience and progressively improve their communication skills. Over time, these repeated small successes contribute to greater confidence in more formal speaking situations.

For teachers, the findings highlight the need to create a positive and respectful environment where learners feel comfortable expressing themselves. Educators should incorporate gradual exposure to speaking tasks, teach coping strategies like visualization and mental reframing, and celebrate students' small achievements to build their confidence. Providing constructive, encouraging feedback is essential in helping learners develop a sense of competence. For learners, actively practicing their speeches, reframing negative thoughts, visualizing success, and using relaxation techniques can help manage anxiety and improve performance. By working together, teachers and learners can create an inclusive and empowering space that supports the development of confident, capable communicators.

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