ETSW 2: Fear of making mistakes | Anxiety of speaking a foreign language | My story

Hey hey what's up, this is Ivan Ottinger from EnglishtheSmartWay.com

Welcome to the English the Smart Way podcast, session number 2.

Today I am going to talk about the anxiety of speaking a foreign language and the fear of making mistakes. I am also going to share with you the techniques that has helped me to become a confident English speaker.

When I read your emails - there's one common problem that almost **everyone** seems to be having. Most English learners I meet have perfect or very good English writing. They can read English articles easily and they also understand English when they are listening… But…

When it comes to speaking - when they are about to talk to someone in English, they get stuck and nervous. They are unsure and they can't say a word or they are speaking slowly with many pauses. But what's even more obvious - that they feel uncomfortable. It's like... you can see the fear in their eyes.

Well, in the past, it used to be exactly the same for me. And to illustrate, here's my short story:

I have been learning English for many years - starting from elementary school, then high school and following with the university. And still - after all these years I couldn't speak English. I could write, I could read and I could understand a lot when I listened to English. But speaking? No way!

For example, when I had to open my mouth and say something on the English class, I felt ashamed. I was thinking about what others think of me. I was scared of making grammar or pronunciation mistakes. And I wanted to be 100% correct. You know - I wanted to have perfect grammar and I wanted to have perfect pronunciation. So I kept thinking and thinking instead of talking.

And also, I could hear my nervous internal voice asking me questions. Questions like this for example:
- Should I use past simple or present perfect tense right now? I am not sure. Maybe past continuous...
- How exactly is this word pronounced? I am not sure!!!

- What is the teacher going to think if I make a mistake? Am I going to get a bad grade?
- What about classmates? Are they going to laugh at me and make fun of me if say something wrong?

Sometimes I even started blushing and my face became completely red. And then my internal voice started again. Maybe something like this:

- You see Ivan, now everyone can notice that your face is red, everyone knows you are scared and ashamed!

Yeah [it was] I was feeling pretty bad. It was a stressful situation for me. And I didn't want to speak anymore.

And can it get even worse? Yes of course it can! If you are or if you were like me, you know that it can get much much worse than this.

Every stressful situation with English speaking works like a reference in our mind. It means that every time we get to a new situation where there's a high probability of speaking, we become stressed. We become stressed even before the situation happens! And why? Because we remember. We remember the past unpleasant situation related to our English speaking. [It is] It is something similar like when you hear someone opening a chocolate or sweets and suddenly you feel hunger and cravings for chocolate. :)

So from my point of view and experience, the anxiety I just described is one of the top reasons why we - English learners - have so much trouble when it comes to speak in English. When we are afraid of speaking, we basicly prevent it. **We try to get out of every situation that could potentially include speaking.** And what it does, is, that, when we are not speaking, we are not improving our speaking skills. We are not getting better in speaking. It's a vicious circle that keeps us from any improvement.

Yeah, I know, it's sad, But now I am going to tell you what can we do about it. And how can we start speaking English with confidence. Once we break out of this negative circle we can actually start speaking and improve. **There's no magic and we need to practice, but we all can do it!** If I could, everyone can. :)

Imagine. How would that feel, if you just walked into the room full of English speakers from different parts of the world. What if you could start talking to anyone there with the fluency and confidence of native speaker? How would that be? How would that feel?

Imagine how would you meet nice people and share your stories with them. How would you create new friendships or establish business partnerships. How would you interact with others easily in your confident and fluent English. How would you tell them about your exciting trip or a new hobby or about your favourite book or a movie? How would that feel?.

Well, when I was a highschool student, besides that I was scared of speaking on English classes. I also observed my classmates - especially those that actually spoke without any problems. **I wanted to see what they do differently from me so I can learn from them.**

And, do you know what they did? Do you know?

They just talked like crazy. If they had an opportunity to talk, they just talked. They didn't give a sh#t of what mistakes they made. They didn't care. [And] every lesson I could hear them making so many mistakes. Grammar mistakes, pronunciation mistakes, they were using wrong tenses… I bet they didn't even know they are not using correct grammar.

Even though they had broken grammar, they got better and better every lesson. They were focusing on what they wanted to say and they enjoyed talking. Nothing more. And if they made a mistake? Do you think that anyone pointed it out? Yeah, maybe teacher did, but nobody in the class cared. Nobody cared about their mistakes.

So after the lesson finished, they:
- had a good time
- [they] enjoyed talking
- [and the most important, they] improved their speaking and grammar as well (without even realizing it)

[And] over the time, they got much better than me! Even though I knew grammar, they came out with advantage. Because they could actually **use** English and I couldn't!

Now, can you see where I am going with this? **The english language [speaking] anxiety has almost nothing to do with your English knowledge**. It is mostly psychological thing. It is a matter of our focus.

Where focus goes energy flows

When we focus on how bad our speaking is, if we focus on how everyone around is going to judge our mistakes - we are going to feel it - we are going to feel bad and it is going to affect our performance and speaking.

On the other hand, if we focus on how great conversation we are having, if we focus on how **funny** mistakes we can make, it completely changes our feelings. We will free up our minds and can actually be in the moment, enjoy speaking and think about what we want to say instead on what grammar rule to use...

So let's summarize. To overcome the anxiety of speaking in English we can do the following.

When you are about to talk in English. When you know you are going to talk in English. Do the following two simple **actions**:

1. [action number one] **Change your body posture** - Stand tall as a confident person would stand - chest up, head up, shoulders back. We need confidence and power. Changing the posture of our body affects how we feel about ourselves. Btw, there's a famous TED talk from Amy Cuddy called *Your body language shapes who you are*. I highly recommend you watching this talk. I will link to this video in the show notes so you don't need to make any notes right now. Basically in the video Amy is talking on how our posture changes the levels of hormones in our body. Just by standing in a bit different way can make you feel confident and powerful! **So stand as confident person would stand!** [And of course] **if you are sitting, sit as a confident person would sit.**
2. [The action number 2] **Change your focus**. Think about the situation differently. Think that you are going to have a nice conversation with another human being, your friend, colleague or classmate or even foreigner in the street. Focus on the **goal** of the conversation you are going to have instead of grammar or what others think. Again - change your focus.

And when the situation comes, focus on the **meaning** you want to deliver, focus on what you are saying. Focus on the person or people you are talking to, listen to them, enjoy the conversation.

Alright. Now I need to add something. Following these two simple actions will definitely help you. But, you need to practice and use them as much as possible. If you use them once and then forget about them, it's not going to get you anywhere. Practice and consistency is important.

Now I've got one extra **visualisation** exercise you can practice to get rid of anxiety faster. When you have some time for yourself - maybe a few minutes in the morning when you wake up, or during a lunch break, or even before bedtime.

Close your eyes and imagine yourself speaking confident English. Imagine people around you smiling, imagine how they enjoy the conversation with you and imagine yourself feeling confident. Imagine how your speaking is improving during the conversation. Do this visualisation for a few minutes every day and see how it works for you. ;)

Alright, that is for today's show. I would love to give you more tips but at the same time I don't want to overload you with the information of course.

Please, do share with me and other listeners your experience with speaking English and what do you think of what I just shared with you today.

Thanks for listening. I appreciate it and I am looking forward for the next episode. If you haven't done so, don't forget to get my free ebook at englishthesmartway.com/ebook. Thanks again for joining me. Cheers, take care and Enjoy English! Bye bye! :)

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