

Female Voice: You are now listening to the IELTS podcast. Learn from tutors and ex-examiners who are masters of IELTS preparation. Your host, Ben Worthington.

Annemarie: My name is Annemarie Fowler and I created Speak Confident English. Today, I'm a guest on Ben's ieltspodcast.com and today Ben and I are going to talk about the role of confidence in building English fluency and speaking.

Just to give you a little bit of information about my background, I've been an English language teacher and fluency coach for over 20 years. I've worked in several countries around the world including Pakistan, the Czech Republic, Germany, France, and in many places in the United States.

Right now, I run the website speakconfidentenglish.com and I also have a course called Fluency School. So, I'm looking forward to chatting all about confidence and how to get confidence with Ben today.

Ben: Excellent. All right. Welcome to the podcast, Annemarie. It's a pleasure having you and by the way, listeners if you didn't catch the episode that we mailed out to you where I was a guest on Annemarie's podcast, you can go check that out and I'll put the links in this episode as well in the show notes and on the website. So, welcome to the podcast, Annemarie.

Annemarie: Thank you.

Ben: Let's jump straight into it. So, why would a student have issues with their confidence?

Annemarie: You know, I think that's such a good question and I think there are a few different reasons. Number one, some students just have a really negative experience. Maybe they've been laughed at or had a really difficult misunderstanding and just one situation like that can really remove or block someone's confidence when they are trying to learn another language especially as an adult. So, I think that's one cause.

I think the bigger issue is, in my experience and this is actually based on quite a bit of research as well, there are really two different kinds of language learners. I think there are learners who just really aren't afraid of making mistakes. As they learn a language, they are ready to jump in,

they try things out, they experiment, they talk to people and they don't really care if they make mistakes and so they kind of make a lot of progress right away and they appear very fluent.

Then there's the other group of language learners. I'm actually a part of this second group. These are the learners that are typically quite shy. They really want to be perfect. They focus on mastery. They really work to get the grammar right, the vocabulary right and they don't want to make mistakes. So as a result, they are less likely to practice speaking because there is that fear of being judged, making a mistake, sounding silly and as a result, their progress is much, much slower.

That's definitely the group to students I tend to work with quite a bit. The good news for that group of students is if they are able to persist, if they continue with their language learning, there's actually research that shows that when they get that confidence where they're willing to really activate the language, use the language, practice speaking, communicate regularly, they have an immediate spike in their fluency and their ability to speak.

They often actually surpass or are much better language speakers than the first group that looked so fluent and great at the beginning. So, it's kind of a funny mix. I think the hard thing is for anyone that's in that second group, I know this from myself being a language learner, most traditional classrooms actually cater to the first group.

You're in a large class of 20 students or more and it's the student's job to be aggressive and assertive and trying the language. Shy language learners just won't do that. So, immediately, it kind of makes it difficult for someone who is typically a shyer maybe more nervous learner to get that confidence upfront.

Ben: Yes, that is so true. It's so true. I remember in my class like unless the teacher, in my case, unless I was sort of like targeting the shy ones, they would be silent. Even then targeting them and putting them under that kind of pressure to speak, looking back maybe wasn't sort of like the best thing to do.

I think from a teacher's point of view, it's kind of a difficult thing to deal with. Do you just ignore these students and let them carry on in their perfectionist kind of world or do you just force

them to participate? It's really a catch twenty-- not a catch 22, but it's a difficult situation. Regarding the language learners, I think I unashamedly fall into the first batch.

Annemarie: No, that's great.

Ben: When you were explaining, I was like yes, yes, that's me. The amount of mistakes I have made, the amount of embarrassment as well, but I really just sort of-- for me, my viewpoint was okay, let's get some action.

Let's get some results and it doesn't matter if I just steamroll through these grammar rules, but I'm going to get my loaf of bread if it kills me. If I crucify this language, I don't care. I will get this loaf of bread. I think it's very wise, as you said, if you can know yourself when it comes to these issues.

Annemarie: Right. It's funny that you say that because my husband and I both learned French at the same time and he is very much the first group. He was more than happy to just put any words together to figure out how to communicate.

He says often that he would create a word salad and let the other person figure out what he was trying to communicate and I was definitely the one that just stayed quiet because unless I felt that I can do it perfectly and be clearly understood, I didn't want to say anything.

So, at the beginning of our French learning, he jumped ahead of me so fast and it was really frustrating because we were in the same program, learning the same thing, we lived in France and then over a time when I finally found some ways to get confident, we reached the same level.

Then I think now when we communicate, my-- I think he has a bigger vocabulary than I do, but I would say I definitely speak in a clearer way. My grammar is correct, my pronunciation is a little bit better because I did that from the beginning. So, there are bonuses for each side.

As you said, I think it's just more challenging for shy language learners. They do often get either overlooked or put in difficult situations in a traditional classroom and that can make it more challenging to make that progress that they want.

Ben: Yes, yes, and just going back to the point of knowing what kind of learner you are and then just for the students, it's critical you know what kind of learner you are, what works for you and then adapt your strategy around that. If you know that you are a shy learner or just a shy person in general, a bit of more-- introverted, then perhaps go for a one-on-one class whereas if-- in single classes where you've got the-- and a patient teacher who's not going to be shouting at you.

If you're more of a steamroller like myself, bulldozer who just doesn't care, get that group class and dominate. You can participate-- you can join that group class and you'll be getting your money's worth. That's what I'm trying to say. It's going to work for you.

Okay, let's get back to the script because we've got to stick to the questions. Assuming a student has one week to learn, what techniques could you say-- and we'll start with one week, then one month and then three months. What techniques could they use to boost their confidence in seven days?

Annemarie: Sure, sure. I think that's an interesting question and to be really honest, I think it depends on what they are trying to get confidence for. I think if you're preparing for an exam, a speaking exam such as the IELTS or the TOEFL, and I'm focusing specifically on speaking here, not on building your vocabulary or anything. Just how do you get confidence in speaking?

If it's an exam or a job interview, there're definitely things you could do for one week to boost that confidence, but I think you need to have a clear end goal in mind. It can't just be confidence in general. I think one week is tough, but if you're preparing for a speaking exam or a job interview, typically you know the kinds of questions they're going to ask in advance.

There are two things I think are really helpful. Number one, if you've got one week, do a total immersion in English. You can actually do that from anywhere. It doesn't matter if you live in a

non-English speaking country. For months, my husband and I lived in the United States and as much as we could, we did a total immersion in French.

What that meant was we only listened to French radio, we only watched French TV shows, we only watched French videos on YouTube, we only watched French movies with French subtitles. As much as you possibly can, live your life in English for that month. That really helped us soak in information, get collocations that we would need to be familiar with and just get more comfortable with hearing and listening and using the language.

We would listen to a podcast or watch a TV show and then practice summarizing it in French so that we were repeating what we were hearing. It was just that constant repetition and the constant influence of hearing, seeing, and experiencing French that can really get you familiar and comfortable with the language that you need to use.

The second thing if you're trying to get confidence for a speaking exam or a job interview is people often talk about the importance of preparation. When students prepare, they often think about the question or how they would answer the question in their mind. They might think about their answers, but I would say that's not enough.

You have to say your answers out loud. You have to practice them out loud to get your-- again it's about getting yourself comfortable with your word choices, your pronunciation, hearing yourself speak and-- in a question we're going to talk about in a little bit, I'm going to take that whole idea of speaking out loud one step further, but I would really say those are two big things for building confidence if you've got one week to prepare for an exam or a job interview.

Immerse yourself as much as possible, do activities that force you to use the language such as summarizing what you've heard or talking about different things and then practicing out loud the questions that you expect to answer.

Ben: Excellent. That reminds me of one tutor I knew who offered immersion services in England. What she would-- well not immersion services. It was just like a live-in school, sort of

like two weeks immersion and what she did would be to send the students on errands around the village.

Annemarie: Oh, great.

Ben: Yes, so they were really forced them to use their English. They would go down to the butcher's and ask him for three pounds of boiled ham and just tasks like that. I think she even sort of like put mini challenges in there and the students loved it. It just goes back to using the language.

Another point that you mentioned right at the beginning was to break it down into smaller components. I love that because if we can break it down into bite-size pieces, then it suddenly becomes a lot easier and much less overwhelming.

If the student knows that they're going to have typical job interview questions for part one, then as you said, they can prepare for it, not just the questions but the answers and write down the answers. Write down what they would say and then get that checked.

Even if they could find a speaking partner, as you've just mentioned, get comfortable using the language that they expect to be using. So, yes, some super tips there. Now, let's move on to the next one. A lot of our students that are listening right now, they are studying at home by themselves. How could these students boost their confidence in speaking English?

Annemarie: Yes, that's a great question. There're a couple of things I was thinking about and when I-- my answers are going to be again, focused on the idea of getting confidence in speaking and maybe specifically catered to this group of students that tend to be shy and nervous and feeling like maybe they're just not a good English learner or maybe they just can't become advanced or confident because those things aren't true.

I work with students all the time who are shy, nervous, stuck and after working with them they don't feel shy, nervous, and stuck anymore. So, I would say there are a couple of things. There's a lot of advice online and I've heard teachers say if you're shy and you need to get practice and you need to become more fluent, just go talk to someone. Just go practice.

I think that advice never works for a shy speaker because shy people will not just talk to a stranger. I don't do that and I don't know anyone else who's shy that just loves talking to strangers. So, I always tell my students if you heard that advice and it didn't work for you, that's okay. It wasn't advice for you.

Ben: Exactly, yes.

Annemarie: So, I'd say the opposite is number one, find groups or situations that make you feel comfortable where you can practice. There are so many groups either online-- and now, I mean the way our world works there is, for example, a website called [meetup.com](https://www.meetup.com) and there are often clubs or groups associated with that that might be English speaking practice clubs.

Find one that makes you feel comfortable. Test it and go to one of their club meetings or their group meetings. See if you feel comfortable there. The nice thing about that experience-- one of the things I know about shy language learners is we feel especially nervous if we are practicing our language in front of a colleague or someone that knows us, that might judge us and we don't want to have a bad reputation or we don't want someone to think we are silly.

Sometimes if we find a group of people and there's no consequence if we make a mistake in front of them and we feel like we're all equals. We're all doing this together. If you can find a group like that, it's really freeing to practice with that group.

I had a similar group in France where we did kind of a speed dating and it was through [meetup.com](https://www.meetup.com)-- I found the group on [meetup.com](https://www.meetup.com) and we would meet at a cafe once a week. Half of the group was there to practice French. There were foreigners in France practicing French. The other group was French people practicing English.

We would sit one-on-one for 15 minutes and for the first seven minutes the conversation was in French. So for me, I was practicing and working on it, making mistakes, but I felt okay because I knew in seven minutes we were going to switch to English and the other person was going to make the mistakes and have some challenges and I would be the expert.

So, I felt equal and it felt like there were no consequences. I wasn't with a co-worker. I wasn't with someone I wanted to impress. It was just a peer, someone that we were equal. So, I really recommend groups like that and they are all over the world. You could find a group either online or where you live that makes you feel comfortable.

The other thing we talked-- I mentioned this about getting confidence for a job interview or speaking exam. I love working with students or others in my community speaking out loud, but when they speak out louder, I actually have them record themselves. So, I might tell them, "Imagine I asked you a question. Imagine I asked you about what you did today. I want you to tell me about your day and I want you to just practice speaking out loud for one or two minutes, but record it on your phone. When you're finished, go back and listen to it."

The first time you do this, if you've never done it before, it's super difficult to listen to yourself. It's embarrassing, it feels uncomfortable and you're often shocked about how you sound in English.

What makes it so powerful is that when you listen to yourself you can begin to evaluate and think, oh, I just spoke for two minutes. I did a pretty good job. I had some good vocabulary there. There might be some things that you hear and you think, why did I say that? I know that was a mistake. I should have used a different word. I should have used the past tense.

You start to recognize all these changes that you can make. What that does is empower you to delete that first one that you didn't like and re-record it, do it again and make those changes. You can do that as many times as you want constantly perfecting and improving.

That is giving you a few different benefits. Number one, you start to get more comfortable with your own voice in English, which I think is essential. Number two, you start to recognize the typical mistakes that you make. You can't fix something if you don't know that it's broken. So, it starts to show you the areas that you can improve and then allows you to make those changes.

Through that repetition, those good habits of using the right tense or choosing the right words start to become easier to use even in everyday conversation. It's a strategy I use with a lot of my students and it is surprising how fast it makes some progress.

Ben: Also, what I found with a lot of students is their grammar knowledge and especially the second type of students that we're focusing on today is that their grammar knowledge is vastly superior to their speaking knowledge. So, when they actually realize and they hear themselves making their mistakes, it's like, wow! I do know that this is a mistake so all I have to do is connect what's coming out of my mouth with what I know or what I call textbook English.

They've got it textbook perfect. They know the grammar rules, they know why, but it just hasn't yet floated down and become active English or their active spoken English and this recording gets them closer to basically speaking with-- using these grammar rules that they've learned. As one tutor told me, it's like getting it out of the writing brain and into the speaking brain or the production.

Another thing I'll just add to the recordings is that I would be willing to bet a large amount of money that what these students think-- they probably believe that their recording or their English is maybe 3 out of 10 or dreadful. When they actually listen to it, it's probably incredibly better than they had imagined and they're probably punishing themselves relentlessly, "I'm terrible. I'm terrible. I'm terrible." When they actually listen to it, they'll be like, "Wow! Actually, it's not too bad."

I think as well with this kind of students, just from working with them a lot, that they will still punish themselves because they will be just focusing on the mistakes. So, one thing I'd like to add for the students who adopt this technique is that don't just focus on the errors.

Also, acknowledge that you did construct so many sentences correctly. Don't just be punishing yourself. Focus on the good things and the bad things and praise yourself like, "Yes! I got five out of the ten sentences perfect. Genius!" Let's focus on these five. I think that's a super strategy there.

Just one last thing is and be forgiving. This isn't your native language and you don't have to beat yourself up. If you do beat yourself up, you're just going to make it more of a misery and it's bound to hinder your progress further. Be forgiving of yourself. Acknowledge that you're leaning and acknowledge that you're actually taking the time to learn and to improve. Give yourself that credit. Nobody speaks perfectly from the get-go. This is why it's called learning.

Annemarie: Right, you're right.

Ben: Let's move on to the next point. A lot of students struggle with "my mind goes blank in an interview setting." Why do you think this is and what could they do to solve this?

Annemarie: Yes, that's such a good question. It really is a common thing that we hear a lot is they just feel stuck and can't find the word or they have that word, but it's not coming out of their mouth or they suddenly forget the grammar that they wanted to use. I think there are a few things-- I think again if it's a job interview or speaking exam part of it might be due to lack of preparation or not doing the right preparation.

Again, going back to that idea of thinking about it isn't enough. It's really about saying things out loud and even better doing that recording process where you practice an answer out loud, get comfortable with it, listen to it, evaluate it, decide are those the words you want to use? Could you say it differently?

Then do it again and again and again. It's about getting that constant repetition, making it muscle memory in your mind for those words or collocations, groups of words that you want to use. I think that's a big part of it. We've talked about-- actually, Ben, you and I talked a lot about passive and active vocabulary when I interviewed you a week or so ago. That is the other side of it.

Yes, those words that you want to use in an interview are in your mind, but they're somewhere in the back of your mind. They haven't become active yet because you haven't used them enough. You've read them a lot and you've heard them, but there's a difference between learning a word when you read it or hear it and when you actually start using it regularly.

It's why I love that recording process because it gives you that constant repetition, that opportunity to use the word when you're speaking, when you're recording yourself, then hearing it when you listen to yourself again and then repeat-- rinse and repeat. Do it again and again. That gets it to the active part of your brain so it's easier for you to use.

Because you're going to that process, you're also getting more comfortable with the language. You're using the same sentences again and again. They're more familiar to you, which lowers your anxiety. When you have lower anxiety in a conversation or in an interview, you're able to think more clearly. You're able to recall those words more easily.

The last thing I would say that might be a good tip particularly for interviews, sometimes we hear the interviewer ask a question, for example, "If I asked your supervisor to describe you in three words, what would she say?" is a common interview question. We might freeze for a moment and think oh, my gosh! What are the words I wanted to use? I forgot them. I don't know what to do.

Sometimes, if when you answer the question you include the same words the interviewer asked you, it starts to trigger things. Here's an example. The interviewer asks me that question I could say in my answer, "Well, if you ask my supervisor to describe me in three words, I would say..." When you repeat that language, it's a trigger in your mind that starts to recall or activate some of that language that you wanted to use. It's a little trick that often helps us in those moments when we start to forget what we want to say.

Ben: Yes, this is a super tip. That's something very similar in the actual speaking course that we've got on the site and it's called-- we called it reflective listening. Exactly like you said, if you can just reflect what the examiner or the speaker has asked you, then it frees up resources especially if you've got it on auto-pilot, it frees up resources, you buy yourself a few seconds to get your brain geared up to get an answer.

Also, if you've done it accurately, you're going to answer the correct question that has been asked of you. You're not going to go off on a tangent and especially in test preparations--

settings you're also going to get the correct tense obviously, if you do it correctly and getting the correct tense is quite an important aspect of answering the question.

Just one other thing for the listeners: this is a really good skill to have and we've got tutorials about this, but just one word of advice. If you do this parrot fashion all through the exam, the examiner is going to go crazy.

Annemarie: Yes, you can't do it with every question. You can't do it with all of them.

Ben: He or she will think you're a robot and just probably fail you. What I also suggest is to not only just reflect on it, but sort of elaborate on it. If my supervisor were to ask me-- maybe you can just do it like, "That's a good question." That's one way or you could say, "Well, my supervisor's never really asked me a question like that, but if he did..." It's kind of just a small transformation there and we're answering the same question, but we've just elaborated on it a little bit and we've put in some extra collocation, some more vocabulary and just made it sound more natural. That's a super tip.

I just recalled one other tip that goes back to the point you were saying before about putting yourself in an environment where you're sort of like allowing yourself to make mistakes. When you mentioned meetup, I remembered this. A good point to add to this is if you can put yourself in an English speaking environment, but where you know the subject matter inside out.

This way is going to help you because you're going to be even more confident. The grammar is-- you're still going to have to work on the grammar maybe, but the actual content of what you're saying you're probably going to be very certain that it's accurate and it is confident. That will help you considerably.

If it is a subject matter that you know quite well, maybe it's IT, maybe it's music, then you've probably got a vaster vocabulary for this which will help you with your accuracy. All of this compounded is going to boost your confidence. Just one point I'd like to add there. I think that's everything. Would you like to add anything else there?

Annemarie: No, I think we've covered quite a few things. I hope that some of the tips and strategies were useful for your listeners. I think maybe the last thing I would say is if you are someone who has constantly felt shy, nervous, and stuck and you thought it's just because you're a bad language learner, just know that that's not true.

It's okay if other strategies haven't worked for you. You just have to find another one that does. It's something I work with my students on all the time. We find the strategies that do work particularly well for shy language learners. So, just know that it's possible and there's definitely the opportunity for you to become the confident and fluent English speaker that you want.

Ben: Super, super. Where could a student find you and what services would they find on your website?

Annemarie: Right. You can find me at speakconfidentenglish.com. Every Wednesday I release a new lesson that's available on my YouTube channel and on my website. I also have courses. I have a one-month intensive speaking course called Fluency School. We only offer it three times a year and the next one is coming up in July of 2019. The April one just closed for registration. It sold out early, so we don't have any room in April.

That course is specifically designed for shy language learners and helping them get over some of their fears and learn to unlock some of that confidence and get unstuck. I also have a Confident Job Interviews course as well.

Ben: Excellent. Super. That's everything, Annemarie. Thank you so much for coming on the podcast. By the way, students, if you do check her-- or when you do checkout Annemarie's tutorials and lessons you'll be able to find the podcast that we did together as well. So there's another reason to go.

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