

The Challenges of Improving ELT Students ' Motivation in Speaking Classes

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Abstract. *Motivating English language learners to participate actively in speaking activities continues to pose a significant challenge for English language teachers worldwide, especially in contexts where English is not spoken outside the classroom. This article examines the persistent barriers to speaking motivation, drawing on up-to-date research and the practical experiences of a non-native English teacher. The paper identifies cultural factors, classroom anxiety, insufficient communicative practice, and teacher-related issues as key obstacles. It offers practical, research-supported strategies for overcoming these barriers, including scaffolded speaking tasks, meaningful topics, positive error correction, and contextually appropriate group dynamics. The aim is to help EFL teachers encourage even reluctant learners to speak more confidently and fluently.*

Key words: *speaking motivation, EFL classrooms, speaking anxiety, communicative competence, task-based learning, teacher strategies.*

Introduction

Speaking is often seen by learners and teachers alike as the ultimate test of language mastery, but in reality, it is one of the hardest skills to develop, especially for students in foreign language contexts. Many EFL learners remain passive in speaking lessons despite strong reading or grammar knowledge (Gan, 2012). This article analyses why this happens and how teachers can use recent research findings and tested classroom practices to tackle it more effectively.

Methods

The insights shared here come from three main sources: (1) a review of recent research publications from 2018 to 2024 focusing on speaking motivation, (2) reflection on my own teaching practice with secondary and adult learners in Uzbekistan, and (3) informal interviews with five experienced colleagues teaching EFL in Central Asia and Eastern Europe. Articles were selected from reputable journals such as *Language Teaching Research*, *TESOL Quarterly*, and *ELT Journal*, using keywords like “speaking motivation,” “speaking anxiety,” and “communicative activities in EFL.” The findings were combined with practical classroom observations to ensure relevance for real-life teaching.

Results and Discussion

Barriers to Speaking Motivation

Numerous studies confirm that speaking anxiety is one of the strongest demotivators (Jee, 2022; Liu & Jackson, 2008). Students, especially teenagers, fear being laughed at by peers or corrected too harshly by teachers. I have noticed that even high-achieving students often prefer to stay silent rather than risk a grammatical or pronunciation mistake. This anxiety tends to be stronger in cultures where public errors are seen as shameful (Woodrow, 2006). Teachers should normalise making mistakes by

sharing their own experiences learning languages and by highlighting mistakes as learning opportunities, not failures.

In addition, there is a limited amount of communication in EFL classes. Many textbooks still include controlled speaking tasks with little real communication. As Xu and Li (2022) found in their survey of Chinese high school EFL learners, students often see such tasks as boring or irrelevant. My own students regularly complain that topics like “Planning a Trip to Mars” do not connect with their actual interests or daily lives. To tackle this, the teachers should incorporate topics that feel real and relevant to learners’ contexts. For example, instead of hypothetical scenarios, use tasks like discussing future job interviews, debating local issues, or practising common phone conversations.

Cultural factors influencing speaking motivation extend beyond the classroom and are rooted in broader societal attitudes towards communication and authority. In many Asian and post-Soviet educational contexts, traditional norms prioritise accuracy and respect for hierarchy over open expression and experimentation (Oxford, 2017). Students raised in such systems often expect the teacher to dominate classroom discourse and may interpret student-led interaction as a lack of discipline. Moreover, face-saving cultures intensify the fear of losing respect due to mistakes, making students more likely to adopt passive roles in communicative activities. Research by Peng and Woodrow (2010) shows that learners from high power-distance societies are less inclined to initiate speech, even when they possess adequate language skills. Addressing these deeply ingrained patterns requires gradual cultural adjustment within the classroom. For example, explicit explanations about the value of interaction, the setting of clear speaking norms, and consistent encouragement of peer collaboration can help students slowly accept more active speaking roles. Such shifts must be handled sensitively to respect local educational traditions while promoting learner autonomy and confidence.

Teacher talk time remains high in many classrooms (Shin, 2023). In my early years of teaching, I often explained too much and gave too little time for pair or group interaction. Many novice teachers repeat this mistake, fearing students will misuse time if unsupervised. The educators should use clear task instructions and time limits to maximise student talk time. Teachers should act more as facilitators and observers rather than constant speakers.

Certain cultural backgrounds value listening over speaking (Oxford, 2017). Additionally, introverted students naturally feel uncomfortable speaking up in front of large groups. This explains why even highly motivated learners sometimes freeze in front of the class. The teachers should allow low-stakes practice through pair work and small groups before asking for whole-class speaking. For shy students, role-plays and anonymous online speaking tasks (for instance, EdPuzzle videos) can lower anxiety.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) encourages meaningful use of language to achieve a goal (Ellis, 2017). In my classroom, activities like “Find Someone Who”, problem-solving tasks, and mini-project presentations lead to more engaged speaking than textbook drills. By focusing on an end product, students care less about errors and more about conveying meaning.

Dörnyei and Ushioda (2021) emphasise that autonomy increases motivation. Giving students options — for example, letting them choose discussion topics or presentation formats — makes them feel more invested. Recently, I allowed my adult learners to select their own “How-to” presentation topics; attendance and participation increased markedly. Beginners and low-confidence speakers benefit from structured support (Nation & Newton, 2020). I often provide key phrases or conversation starters on the board. For debates, students prepare short arguments in pairs before sharing with the whole class. This reduces silence and hesitation.

Correcting every mistake interrupts fluency and increases fear (Rassaei, 2020). Research supports focusing feedback on content first and only later addressing common errors (Wang and Loewen, 2021). I now write down frequent mistakes while students speak, then discuss them after the activity instead of interrupting. A safe, friendly class atmosphere significantly raises willingness to communicate (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Small rituals like starting lessons with icebreakers, praising effort, and encouraging peer support will gradually build trust. In my classes, there is the application of “speaking partner of the week” system to encourage mixed-level collaboration.

Last but not least, emerging research increasingly highlights the potential of digital tools to support speaking motivation, especially among shy or low-proficiency learners. Platforms such as Flipgrid, Padlet, and mobile voice recording apps allow learners to practise spoken English in private or semi-public online spaces, thus lowering the fear of immediate judgement (Teng & Wang, 2022). Asynchronous speaking tasks offer flexible opportunities to rehearse, listen to oneself, and self-correct before sharing recordings with peers or teachers. Moreover, virtual exchange programmes and online conversation partners connect learners with authentic audiences beyond the classroom, fostering a stronger sense of purpose and real-world relevance (Sun & Yang, 2023). Integrating such tools does not require abandoning traditional speaking activities; rather, they can complement in-class practice by providing additional channels for expression and reflection. Teachers who strategically blend digital and face-to-face speaking tasks often report noticeable improvements in students' willingness to speak and general communicative competence.

Conclusion

Motivating EFL students to speak more in class is a multifaceted challenge, deeply tied to emotional, cultural, and pedagogical factors. While no single strategy guarantees success for all learners, the combined use of task-based activities, meaningful topics, scaffolding, supportive correction, and a safe classroom climate can produce tangible improvements. Teachers, especially non-native English speakers like myself, can relate to students' fears and should use this empathy to shape speaking lessons that focus on real communication rather than mere accuracy. Further research could explore how digital tools and online speaking platforms affect motivation, especially among shy students. For now, practical, human-centered teaching remains the key to helping learners find their voice in English.

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