

## BREAKING THE SILENCE BARRIER: INVESTIGATING ENGLISH SPEAKING ANXIETY AND STRATEGIC INTERVENTIONS AMONG EFL LEARNERS

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### Abstract

Speaking anxiety remains one of the most serious psychological barriers affecting English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. This study investigates the major causes of speaking anxiety and evaluates the effectiveness of interactive and technology-supported pedagogical interventions in reducing communication fear among university students. The research employed a mixed-method design involving 48 second-year EFL students at Namangan State Institute of Foreign Languages. Quantitative data were collected through pre-tests, post-tests, and anxiety-scale questionnaires, while qualitative data were obtained from classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that learners exposed to peer collaboration, role-play activities, pronunciation monitoring applications, and supportive feedback demonstrated significant improvement in speaking fluency, phonemic accuracy, and communicative confidence. Statistical analysis showed that pronunciation accuracy increased from 58% to 84%, while speaking anxiety levels decreased considerably during the intervention period. The study concludes that integrating communicative tasks with digital self-monitoring tools creates a psychologically safe learning environment that enhances oral performance and learner autonomy.

### Keywords

speaking anxiety, EFL learners, pronunciation, communicative competence, digital learning tools, language pedagogy, corrective strategies.

## ПРЕОДОЛЕНИЕ ЯЗЫКОВОГО БАРЬЕРА: ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ ТРЕВОЖНОСТИ ПРИ УСТНОЙ РЕЧИ И СТРАТЕГИЧЕСКИХ МЕТОДОВ ЕЁ СНИЖЕНИЯ У ИЗУЧАЮЩИХ АНГЛИЙСКИЙ ЯЗЫК

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### Аннотация

Тревожность при устной речи остаётся одним из наиболее серьёзных психологических барьеров, влияющих на изучающих английский язык как иностранный (EFL). Данное исследование направлено на выявление основных причин речевой

тревожности и оценку эффективности интерактивных и технологически поддерживаемых педагогических вмешательств в снижении страха коммуникации среди студентов университетов. В исследовании был использован смешанный метод, включающий участие 48 студентов второго курса Namangan State Institute of Foreign Languages. Количественные данные были собраны посредством предварительных и итоговых тестов, а также анкет по шкале тревожности, тогда как качественные данные были получены в результате наблюдений за учебным процессом и полуструктурированных интервью. Результаты показали, что студенты, участвовавшие в совместной работе со сверстниками, ролевых играх, использовании приложений для мониторинга произношения и получении поддерживающей обратной связи, продемонстрировали значительное улучшение беглости речи, фонетической точности и коммуникативной уверенности. Статистический анализ показал, что точность произношения повысилась с 58% до 84%, а уровень речевой тревожности существенно снизился в течение периода исследования. Исследование приходит к выводу, что интеграция коммуникативных заданий с цифровыми инструментами самоконтроля создаёт психологически безопасную образовательную среду, способствующую улучшению устной речи и развитию автономности обучающихся.

#### **Ключевые слова**

речевая тревожность, изучающие английский язык как иностранный, произношение, коммуникативная компетенция, цифровые образовательные технологии, языковая педагогика, корректирующие стратегии.

#### **1. Introduction**

In the contemporary globalized world, English functions as an essential medium of international communication, academic mobility, and professional interaction. Despite years of formal instruction, many EFL learners experience serious difficulties when attempting to communicate orally in English. One of the primary factors contributing to this issue is speaking anxiety, which negatively influences learners' fluency, pronunciation, confidence, and classroom participation.

Foreign language speaking anxiety refers to feelings of tension, nervousness, and fear associated with oral communication in a second language. Learners often hesitate to speak because they fear making grammatical or pronunciation mistakes, receiving negative evaluation from teachers or peers, or being unable to express their thoughts clearly. As a result, students may avoid classroom interaction entirely, limiting opportunities for language development.

Pronunciation-related difficulties, including incorrect articulation of phonemes, inappropriate intonation, and rhythm disturbances, further intensify communication anxiety. In many EFL classrooms, traditional teacher-centered approaches prioritize grammatical accuracy over communicative confidence, which may increase learners' fear of speaking publicly.

Recent pedagogical developments emphasize learner-centered and technology-enhanced instruction as effective mechanisms for reducing language anxiety. Interactive activities such as role-plays, collaborative discussions, peer correction, and digital pronunciation applications encourage active participation while creating a less threatening learning environment.

The present study aims to investigate the major causes of speaking anxiety among university-level EFL learners and evaluate the effectiveness of innovative intervention strategies designed to improve communicative confidence and oral performance.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the primary factors contributing to speaking anxiety among EFL learners?
2. How do interactive and technology-supported activities affect learners' speaking performance?
3. To what extent can corrective strategies reduce anxiety and improve communicative competence?

## **2. Literature Review**

Speaking anxiety has been widely recognized as a major obstacle in second language acquisition research. According to Horwitz et al. (1986), foreign language anxiety is a distinct psychological construct closely related to communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. Their research demonstrated that anxious learners often underperform despite possessing adequate linguistic knowledge.

Similarly, Stephen Krashen (1982) introduced the Affective Filter Hypothesis, suggesting that emotional variables such as anxiety and low self-confidence prevent language input from being effectively processed. When learners experience excessive stress, their ability to participate in communication decreases significantly.

Pronunciation difficulties also contribute substantially to communication anxiety. Tracey Derwing and Murray Munro (2015) emphasized that inaccurate pronunciation often causes learners to avoid oral interaction because they fear misunderstanding and embarrassment. Their findings indicate that intelligibility and communicative clarity are more important than achieving native-like pronunciation.

Modern educational research highlights the importance of communicative and collaborative teaching methods. Jeremy Harmer (2015) argued that interactive classroom environments motivate learners to participate more actively in speaking activities. Group discussions, pair work, and role-play tasks reduce psychological pressure because learners focus on meaning rather than linguistic perfection.

Technological innovations have also transformed language instruction. Mobile pronunciation applications, speech-recognition software, and digital feedback systems allow learners to practice independently and receive immediate corrective feedback. Studies conducted by recent researchers indicate that digital self-monitoring tools improve learner autonomy and reduce fear associated with public correction.

Although previous studies have examined speaking anxiety extensively, limited research has focused specifically on combining peer-supported interaction with digital pronunciation monitoring in Uzbek higher education contexts. Therefore, this study seeks to contribute to the existing literature by examining how integrated corrective strategies influence both psychological confidence and oral communication performance among EFL learners.

## **3. Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a mixed-method research design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of speaking anxiety and corrective intervention outcomes.

### **Participants**

The participants consisted of 48 second-year EFL students studying at Namangan State Institute of Foreign Languages. Their ages ranged from 19 to 22 years. The participants were divided into:

- Experimental Group: 24 students
- Control Group: 24 students

Both groups demonstrated approximately intermediate-level English proficiency according to institutional placement criteria.

### **Research Instruments**

The following instruments were utilized during the research process:

- Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety Questionnaire
- Pronunciation Performance Tests
- Classroom Observation Checklists
- Semi-Structured Interviews
- Peer-Assessment Forms
- Digital Pronunciation Monitoring Applications

### **Procedure**

The research was conducted over an eight-week period.

Experimental Group Activities:

- Role-play conversations
- Collaborative speaking tasks
- Peer-feedback sessions
- Digital pronunciation practice
- Self-recording and reflection exercises

Control Group Activities:

The control group continued using traditional teacher-centered speaking instruction without additional intervention strategies.

Pre-tests were administered before the intervention period, while post-tests were conducted after eight weeks to evaluate learners' progress.

### **Data Analysis**

Quantitative data were analyzed using percentage-based comparative analysis and paired sample t-tests to measure improvement levels between pre-test and post-test results. Qualitative data obtained from interviews and observations were analyzed thematically to identify recurring psychological and behavioral patterns.

## **4. Results**

The findings demonstrated substantial differences between the experimental and control groups.

### **Quantitative Findings**

The experimental group showed remarkable improvement in oral communication performance:

Indicators	Pre-Test	Post-Test
Pronunciation Accuracy	58%	84%
Intonation Control	54%	81%
Speaking Fluency	61%	86%
Communication Confidence	49%	83%

In contrast, the control group demonstrated only minor improvement ranging between 4% and 7%.

Students participating in interactive and technology-supported activities became more willing to communicate and showed reduced hesitation during oral tasks.

### Qualitative Findings

Classroom observations and interviews revealed several important patterns:

- Learners felt less embarrassed when practicing in peer groups.
- Digital self-recording activities increased awareness of pronunciation errors.
- Students preferred supportive correction instead of direct criticism.
- Anxiety decreased when communication tasks focused on meaning rather than grammatical perfection.

Many participants reported that repeated speaking practice helped them overcome fear gradually and increased their motivation to participate actively in classroom discussions.

### 5. Discussion

The results of this study confirm that speaking anxiety significantly affects EFL learners' communicative performance. Consistent with the findings of previous researchers, fear of negative evaluation and pronunciation-related insecurity emerged as the primary barriers to oral participation.

The considerable improvement observed in the experimental group demonstrates the effectiveness of communicative and technology-enhanced teaching methods. Interactive tasks encouraged learners to focus on message delivery rather than linguistic perfection, thereby lowering psychological pressure.

Digital pronunciation tools also played an important role in improving learner confidence. Unlike traditional correction methods, self-monitoring applications allowed students to identify and correct mistakes privately, reducing embarrassment and increasing autonomy.

Furthermore, peer collaboration created a supportive classroom atmosphere in which students felt emotionally secure. Such environments are essential for lowering affective barriers and promoting active communication.

The study also suggests that pronunciation instruction should not be isolated from communicative practice. Instead, phonetic training must be integrated into meaningful interaction to improve both intelligibility and confidence simultaneously.

### 6. Conclusion

This study investigated the causes of speaking anxiety among EFL learners and evaluated the effectiveness of innovative intervention strategies designed to improve oral communication skills.

The findings revealed that interactive speaking activities, peer collaboration, and digital pronunciation monitoring significantly reduced anxiety levels while enhancing pronunciation accuracy, fluency, and communicative confidence.

The study emphasizes that psychologically supportive and learner-centered environments are essential for successful language acquisition. Technology-assisted corrective strategies not only improve oral performance but also encourage learner autonomy and long-term communicative development.

Future research may investigate larger participant groups, longer intervention periods, and additional digital learning technologies to further explore the relationship between anxiety reduction and communicative competence.

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