

The Role of Psychological Factors in Developing Speaking Confidence Among Freshman EFL Students

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of psychological factors — specifically speaking anxiety and fear of oral performance — in shaping the speaking confidence of freshman EFL students at Tashkent International University of Finance and Technology (TIFT), Uzbekistan. Using a mixed-methods approach that combined Likert-scale questionnaires and systematic classroom observation, the study found that approximately half of the student participants exhibited notable anxiety during speaking tasks, particularly in whole-class settings. Pair work and repeated practice emerged as the most effective strategies for reducing anxiety and fostering confidence. The findings underscore the importance of creating psychologically safe learning environments and adopting graduated exposure strategies in EFL speaking instruction. Implications for EFL teachers and teacher trainers are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

Background

Speaking is widely regarded as one of the most challenging skills to develop in a foreign language, and psychological factors play a central role in shaping learners' oral performance. Among these factors, foreign language speaking anxiety — characterised by feelings of nervousness, self-consciousness, and fear of negative evaluation — has been identified as a significant barrier to the development of speaking fluency and confidence (Horwitz et al., 1986). For EFL learners at the university level, the challenge is particularly acute: students are expected to perform orally in an academic context while simultaneously managing the psychological pressures of a new educational environment.

Research consistently demonstrates that high levels of anxiety correlate with reduced willingness to communicate, avoidance of speaking opportunities, and diminished overall language performance (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Conversely, students who report greater speaking confidence tend to participate more actively, take more communicative risks, and demonstrate faster oral skill development (Krashen, 1982). Understanding the psychological dynamics that underpin speaking confidence is therefore essential for effective EFL pedagogy.

Problem Statement

Despite widespread recognition of the relationship between anxiety and speaking performance, relatively few studies have investigated these dynamics within the Central Asian EFL context. Uzbek learners, who typically begin formal English instruction in secondary school but rarely have opportunities for authentic English communication outside the classroom, may face unique psychological barriers that differ from those documented in Western or East Asian research contexts. There is a need for contextually grounded empirical

studies that examine how anxiety manifests in Uzbek university EFL classrooms and what instructional strategies most effectively support confidence development.

Research Context

This study was conducted at Tashkent International University of Finance and Technology (TIFT), where English is a core component of the freshman curriculum. The participants were freshman EFL students enrolled in compulsory speaking courses during the same study period in which a parallel investigation into gamification and motivation was conducted. The dual focus of data collection allowed for a rich, contextualised understanding of students' psychological and motivational experiences in the speaking classroom.

Research Gap and Aim

This study aims to contribute to the limited body of literature on EFL speaking anxiety in Uzbekistan by documenting the prevalence and triggers of speaking anxiety among freshman university students and identifying classroom-based strategies that support confidence development. Specifically, the study focuses on the differential anxiety responses provoked by whole-class versus pair work settings, and the role of repeated practice in gradually reducing affective barriers to oral communication.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

- What is the prevalence and nature of speaking anxiety among freshman EFL students at TIFT?
- In which speaking contexts do students experience the highest levels of anxiety?
- What instructional strategies are most effective in reducing speaking anxiety and building confidence?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative classroom observation to examine the psychological dimensions of speaking anxiety and confidence among freshman EFL students. The combination of instruments allowed for triangulation of findings and provided both breadth and depth in the analysis of students' affective experiences during speaking tasks (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Participants

The study involved 20–40 freshman EFL students at Tashkent International University of Finance and Technology (TIFT), Uzbekistan. Participants were enrolled in compulsory English speaking courses and were studying the same cohort observed in a concurrent study on gamification and motivation. Their first language was either Uzbek or Russian, and their English proficiency ranged from beginner to lower-intermediate level. The researcher served as both instructor and observer throughout the study period.

Instruments

Two data collection instruments were employed:

Likert-Scale Questionnaire. A structured questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) was administered to all participants. Items were designed to measure students' self-reported levels of speaking anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, willingness to communicate, and perceived confidence in oral tasks. The questionnaire drew on established anxiety measurement tools in the EFL literature, including items adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986).

Classroom Observation. Systematic classroom observations were conducted across multiple speaking sessions. The researcher recorded qualitative notes on visible anxiety indicators — such as hesitation, avoidance behaviour, reduced participation, and non-verbal signs of discomfort — as well as confidence indicators including voluntary participation, elaborated responses, and fluent delivery. Observations were organised around different activity formats to capture variations in anxiety levels across speaking contexts.

Procedure

Data collection took place over the course of several speaking classes at TIFT. Students participated in a range of speaking activities including whole-class discussions, pair work tasks, group activities, and structured debates. The questionnaire was administered at the end of the observation period to capture students'

cumulative self-assessments of their anxiety and confidence levels. Observational data were collected continuously throughout the sessions and cross-referenced with survey responses during analysis.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the questionnaire were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions and mean scores, to identify the overall prevalence of speaking anxiety within the group. Qualitative observational data were analysed thematically in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, with themes emerging inductively from the observational notes. Quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated during the discussion phase to produce a coherent and nuanced account of students' psychological experiences.

RESULTS

Quantitative Findings

Survey results indicated a notably mixed distribution of anxiety levels within the participant group. Approximately half of the students reported experiencing significant anxiety during speaking tasks, with elevated scores on items related to fear of making mistakes in front of others, nervousness when called upon to speak, and concern about being judged negatively by peers or the teacher. The remaining half reported moderate to low levels of anxiety, indicating a degree of confidence and willingness to engage in oral tasks. Items related to whole-class speaking tasks consistently produced the highest anxiety scores across the group. Students reported feeling most self-conscious and apprehensive when required to speak in front of the entire class, as opposed to smaller group or pair settings. In contrast, items related to pair work activities yielded lower anxiety scores, with many students indicating that speaking with a single partner felt less threatening and more manageable.

Responses to items measuring the perceived benefit of repeated practice were largely positive, with the majority of students agreeing that their confidence improved incrementally as they had more opportunities to speak in structured, low-pressure contexts.

Qualitative Findings

Classroom observations corroborated and enriched the survey findings. The researcher consistently noted a visible divide between students who volunteered readily and spoke with relative fluency, and those who exhibited clear signs of discomfort — including prolonged silence, brief and minimal responses, avoidance of eye contact, and a tendency to decline speaking turns when given the option.

Whole-class activities, such as open discussions and presentations directed at the full group, were the most consistent triggers of observable anxiety. During these tasks, several students became visibly tense, spoke in unusually quiet voices, or lost their train of thought mid-sentence — behaviours consistent with the physiological and cognitive dimensions of language anxiety described by Horwitz et al. (1986).

In contrast, pair work activities produced a markedly different classroom atmosphere. Students who had appeared inhibited during whole-class tasks became noticeably more communicative and engaged when working one-on-one with a classmate. Conversations were longer, more spontaneous, and characterised by greater willingness to attempt new vocabulary and grammatical structures.

Observations across multiple sessions also revealed a gradual but discernible reduction in anxiety among several previously reticent students as the study period progressed. With repeated exposure to structured speaking tasks, these students began to participate more voluntarily, suggesting that familiarity and routine practice played a meaningful role in building confidence over time.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study align closely with established theoretical frameworks on foreign language anxiety and speaking confidence. The approximately equal split between anxious and confident students mirrors patterns reported in broader EFL anxiety research (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994), and suggests that speaking anxiety is a widespread but not universal phenomenon even within a single classroom cohort. This heterogeneity has important pedagogical implications: teachers cannot assume that all students experience speaking tasks in the same way, and differentiated instructional approaches are therefore essential. The finding that whole-class speaking triggered the most anxiety is consistent with Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis, which posits that high levels of anxiety raise an 'affective filter' that impedes language acquisition and performance. When students are required to speak before a large audience of peers, the stakes

of potential failure are perceived as higher, and the cognitive load of managing both linguistic production and social self-presentation becomes overwhelming for many learners. This is particularly relevant in the Uzbek cultural context, where concern for social face and peer perception may amplify the anxiety associated with public oral performance.

The protective function of pair work observed in this study supports Young's (1991) recommendation that teachers restructure speaking tasks to reduce the evaluative threat inherent in whole-class formats. When the audience is reduced to a single peer, students appear to experience a lower affective filter, freeing cognitive and linguistic resources for more fluent and adventurous communication. This finding has direct practical implications: EFL teachers should deliberately sequence speaking activities from low-stakes pair interactions toward higher-stakes whole-class performance, rather than introducing public speaking tasks before students have built sufficient confidence in smaller settings.

The observed role of repetition and practice in gradually reducing anxiety also resonates with the broader literature on desensitisation and confidence-building in language learning (Woodrow, 2006). Repeated, structured exposure to speaking tasks — particularly when feedback is encouraging and errors are treated as learning opportunities rather than failures — appears to recalibrate students' affective responses over time. This suggests that consistency and patience in speaking instruction are as important as the choice of specific activities or tools.

Taken together, these findings point toward a model of speaking confidence development that is gradual, contextually sensitive, and dependent on the creation of psychologically safe learning environments. For EFL teachers working with freshman university students in Uzbekistan, this means prioritising emotional safety alongside linguistic accuracy, and recognising that for many students, the psychological journey toward speaking confidence may be as significant as the linguistic one.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the role of psychological factors — specifically anxiety and fear of speaking — in shaping the oral confidence of freshman EFL students at Tashkent International University of Finance and Technology, Uzbekistan. The findings reveal that speaking anxiety is prevalent among a significant proportion of freshman students, is most acutely triggered by whole-class speaking contexts, and can be meaningfully mitigated through pair work and sustained practice over time.

These results carry important implications for EFL pedagogy at the university level. Teachers are encouraged to adopt a graduated approach to speaking instruction, beginning with low-stakes pair and small group activities before progressing to more public speaking formats. Positive reinforcement, error tolerance, and consistent practice opportunities are essential components of a psychologically supportive speaking classroom. Teacher trainers, meanwhile, should ensure that awareness of affective factors and anxiety-reduction strategies forms a core component of pre-service and in-service training programmes.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The reliance on self-reported survey data and single-observer classroom notes introduces potential subjectivity into the findings. The short duration of the study and the single-institution sample also limit the generalisability of the results. Future research should incorporate longitudinal designs, peer observation, and student interviews to provide a more comprehensive account of how speaking confidence develops over time in the Uzbek EFL context.

Nonetheless, this study makes a meaningful contribution to the growing literature on affective factors in EFL speaking instruction, and highlights the urgent need for psychologically informed, context-sensitive approaches to language teaching in Central Asian higher education settings.

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