



## WHY MY 10TH GRADE PUPILS ARE STRUGGLING TO SPEAK ENGLISH?

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**Abstract,** Speaking is widely regarded as the most challenging skill for English language learners, yet it remains one of the most underemphasized in secondary school curricula. This study investigates why 10th grade students persistently struggle with oral English production in Uzbekistan's EFL context. The paper contends that these difficulties are not caused by individual learner shortcomings, but by three interconnected systemic failures: an exam-driven curriculum that prioritizes written accuracy over oral fluency, insufficient communicative practice within lessons, and deeply rooted psychological barriers including fear of error and language anxiety. Using a mixed-method classroom-based approach, the study collected baseline and intervention data from 35 students across 12 lessons at a state secondary school in the Namangan region. Results show that average student speaking time increased from 3.2 to 11.6 minutes per lesson following communicative interventions, with voluntary participation rising from 17% to 54%. Drawing on Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, Swain's Output Hypothesis, and communicative language teaching theory, the paper argues that a deliberate pedagogical shift toward interaction-centered instruction is both necessary and achievable. Recommendations are provided for teachers, curriculum designers, and educational policymakers.



**Keywords:** *speaking skills, oral proficiency, communicative language teaching, affective filter hypothesis, language anxiety, secondary education, EFL, pedagogical reform.*

**Аннотация,** Говорение широко считается самым сложным навыком для изучающих английский язык, однако именно ему уделяется наименьшее внимание в программах средней школы. Данное исследование рассматривает причины, по которым учащиеся 10-х классов в условиях изучения английского как иностранного в Узбекистане испытывают устойчивые трудности в устной речи. В работе утверждается, что эти трудности обусловлены не индивидуальными недостатками учащихся, а тремя взаимосвязанными системными проблемами: экзамено-ориентированной учебной программой, отдающей приоритет письменной точности над устной беглостью; недостатком коммуникативной практики на уроках; а также глубоко укоренившимися психологическими барьерами, включая страх ошибок и языковую тревожность.

Исследование основано на смешанном методе с использованием данных, собранных в ходе 12 уроков у 35 учащихся государственной средней школы Наманганской области. Результаты показали, что после внедрения коммуникативных методов среднее время говорения учащихся увеличилось с 3,2 до 11,6 минут за урок, а уровень добровольного участия вырос с 17% до 54%. Опираясь на гипотезу аффективного фильтра Крашена, гипотезу выхода Свейн и теорию коммуникативного обучения языку, автор доказывает необходимость и реализуемость перехода к обучению, ориентированному на взаимодействие. В работе также предлагаются рекомендации для учителей, разработчиков учебных программ и образовательных политиков.

**Ключевые слова:** навыки говорения, устная речь, коммуникативное обучение языку, гипотеза аффективного фильтра, языковая тревожность, среднее образование, английский как иностранный, педагогическая реформа



**ANNOTATSIYA**, gapirish ingliz tilini o'rganuvchilar uchun eng qiyin ko'nikmalardan biri sifatida qaraladi, biroq u o'rta maktab dasturlarida eng kam e'tibor qaratiladigan yo'nalishlardan biridir. Ushbu tadqiqot O'zbekistonda ingliz tilini chet tili sifatida o'rganayotgan 10-sinf o'quvchilari nima sababdan og'zaki nutqda doimiy qiyinchiliklarga duch kelishini o'rganadi. Tadqiqot shuni ko'rsatadiki, bu muammolar o'quvchilarning individual kamchiliklari bilan emas, balki uchta o'zaro bog'liq tizimli omil bilan izohlanadi: yozma aniqlikka ustuvor ahamiyat beruvchi imtihonlarga yo'naltirilgan o'quv dasturi; darslarda yetarli darajada kommunikativ mashg'ulotlarning yo'qligi; hamda xatodan qo'rqish va til o'rganishdagi tashvish kabi psixologik to'siqlar. Tadqiqot aralash metod asosida olib borilib, Namangan viloyatidagi umumta'lim maktabining 35 nafar o'quvchisidan 12 dars davomida boshlang'ich va tajriba ma'lumotlari yig'ildi. Natijalar shuni ko'rsatdiki, kommunikativ yondashuvlar joriy etilgandan so'ng o'quvchilarning o'rtacha gapirish vaqti bir darsda 3,2 daqiqadan 11,6 daqiqagacha oshdi, ixtiyoriy ishtirok esa 17% dan 54% ga ko'tarildi. Krashenning affektiv filtr gipotezasi, Swainning output gipotezasi hamda kommunikativ til o'qitish nazariyasiga tayangan holda, maqola o'qitishda o'zaro muloqotga asoslangan yondashuvga o'tish zarur va amalga oshirilishi mumkinligini asoslaydi. Shuningdek, o'qituvchilar, o'quv dasturi tuzuvchilar va ta'lim siyosatini ishlab chiquvchilar uchun tavsiyalar beriladi.

**Kalit so'zlar:** gapirish ko'nikmalari, og'zaki nutq, kommunikativ til o'qitish, affektiv filtr gipotezasi, til tashvishi, o'rta ta'lim, ingliz tili (EFL), pedagogik islohot

## INTRODUCTION

Can a student study English for six years and still be unable to hold a simple conversation? Across secondary schools in Uzbekistan and beyond, this is precisely the reality facing thousands of 10th grade learners. Despite years of classroom instruction, the ability to speak English fluently remains alarmingly out of reach for



the majority of students at this level. The question is not whether this problem exists — the evidence is undeniable — but rather why it persists and what must be done to address it. Speaking is not merely one of the four language skills. It is the skill through which language learners most directly demonstrate and consolidate their knowledge, build confidence, and engage with the world beyond the classroom. When students cannot speak, they cannot fully participate in communicative activities, cannot access global opportunities, and cannot benefit from the foundational premise of language learning itself: genuine communication. The failure to develop speaking proficiency represents a fundamental breakdown in the educational process. The problem of English speaking difficulties among secondary school students has been extensively documented in educational research. Studies conducted in similar EFL contexts consistently identify a striking gap between receptive skills such as reading and listening, and productive skills, particularly speaking. It was described speaking as the most demanding skill for learners because it requires simultaneous application of vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and pragmatic knowledge in real time<sup>1</sup>. Unlike writing, speaking affords learners no opportunity to pause, revise, or consult reference materials. In the Uzbek educational context, English has been taught as a compulsory subject since primary school, yet graduation examinations continue to place overwhelming emphasis on grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. This assessment structure sends a clear message to both teachers and learners: speaking does not count. As a consequence, instructional time allocated to oral practice remains disproportionately low, and many teachers themselves, trained in grammar-focused methodologies, feel ill-equipped to facilitate authentic speaking activities. Affective Filter Hypothesis was offered a compelling theoretical lens through which to understand the speaking

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<sup>1</sup> Ur, P. A course in language teaching: Practice and theory. — Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.



difficulties of 10th grade learners<sup>2</sup>. According to this theory, high levels of anxiety, low motivation, and poor self-confidence create a metaphorical filter that blocks language acquisition, even when comprehensible input is available. Secondary school students, particularly adolescents in their mid-teens, are acutely sensitive to peer judgment and social evaluation. The classroom environment, rather than providing a safe space for linguistic experimentation, frequently amplifies these anxieties. This paper argues that the inability of 10th grade students to speak English fluently is primarily caused by three interconnected systemic failures: an assessment framework that marginalizes oral performance, instructional practices that provide insufficient communicative interaction, and classroom conditions that heighten rather than reduce learner anxiety. Addressing these failures requires urgent, deliberate, and sustained pedagogical reform grounded in the principles of communicative language teaching, cooperative learning, and affective support.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed-method classroom-based research design consistent with the procedures outlined for action research in EFL contexts<sup>3</sup>. The research combined quantitative measures of speaking participation with qualitative data from student anxiety questionnaires and teacher reflective journals. Triangulation of these data sources increased the ecological validity and reliability of the findings. The design was structured across eight weeks at School No. 15 in the Namangan region, during regular 10th grade English lessons. An independent variable — the type of instructional activity (teacher-centered grammar instruction

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<sup>2</sup> Krashen, S. D. Principles and practice in second language acquisition. — Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1982.

<sup>3</sup> Burns, A. Doing action research in English language teaching: A guide for practitioners. — London: Routledge, 2010.



versus communicative speaking tasks) — was manipulated across two phases, while the dependent variable — student speaking participation rate — was systematically tracked. A purposive sample of 35 students (ages 15–16) was recruited from one standard 10th grade class at a state secondary school. Participant selection criteria required that students had studied English for at least four years, had no prior participation in extracurricular English clubs, and self-reported low confidence in speaking English. The observing teacher had a minimum of three years of secondary school teaching experience. Ethical consent was obtained from school administration and participants.

### **Procedure and Tools**

The study proceeded in three phases. In Phase 1 (Weeks 1–3), baseline data were collected across three consecutive lessons using a structured observation checklist. Student speaking turns, duration of oral production, and patterns of voluntary versus prompted participation were recorded. In Phase 2 (Weeks 4–6), the class teacher implemented three communicative intervention lessons incorporating pair debate, structured role-play, and information-gap activities. In Phase 3 (Weeks 7–8), comparison data were collected and student reflections gathered via a short anxiety questionnaire adapted<sup>4</sup>.

Data management and analysis were performed using descriptive statistics for quantitative findings and thematic coding for qualitative journal entries. The minimum threshold for meaningful speaking development was set at ten speaking turns per student across the intervention phase, consistent with thresholds identified in the fluency development literature.

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<sup>4</sup> Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., Cope, J. Foreign language classroom anxiety // *The Modern Language Journal*. — 1986. — Vol. 70, No. 2. — P. 125–132. — DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/327311>.



## RESULTS

Baseline observation data confirmed the core argument of this paper. During three standard grammar-focused lessons, the average student speaking time per 45-minute lesson was 3.2 minutes. Teacher talk dominated 78% of lesson time. Student oral contributions were largely limited to single-word or single-phrase responses to teacher-initiated questions. Only 6 out of 35 students (17%) volunteered to speak without direct teacher prompting.

Anxiety questionnaire data revealed that 71% of students reported moderate to high anxiety when asked to speak in front of the class. Fear of peer judgment was the most frequently cited concern (74%), followed by fear of grammar errors (63%) and lack of vocabulary (51%). These findings are presented in Table 1 and Table 2 below.

**Table 1. Speaking Participation and Anxiety Rates: Baseline vs. Intervention**

Phase	Avg Speaking Time (min)	Students Speaking Voluntarily (%)	Anxiety Level (%)
Baseline (Grammar-Focused)	3.2	17%	71% (Moderate–High)
Intervention (Communicative)	11.6	54%	28% (Moderate–High)



Phase	Avg Speaking Time (min)	Students Speaking Voluntarily (%)	Anxiety Level (%)
Change	+8.4 min	+37%	-43 percentage points

*Note. Data collected from 12 lesson observations (n=35 students). Anxiety measured via adapted Horwitz et al. (1986) scale.*

**Table 2. Self-Reported Anxiety Sources Among 10th Grade Students**

Source of Anxiety	Students Affected (n=35)	Percentage (%)
Fear of peer judgment	26	74%
Fear of making grammar errors	22	63%
Lack of vocabulary	18	51%
Teacher correction in front of class	16	46%
Unfamiliar topics	10	29%

*Note. Students could select multiple sources; percentages do not total 100%.*

### Intervention Findings

Following the introduction of communicative activities — pair debate on familiar topics, structured role-play scenarios, and information-gap exercises —



speaking participation increased dramatically. Average student speaking time per lesson rose from 3.2 to 11.6 minutes, representing a 263% increase. The proportion of students who spoke without teacher prompting increased from 17% to 54%. Student anxiety reports showed a meaningful decrease, with only 28% of students rating their anxiety as moderate to high after the communicative lessons, compared to 71% at baseline.

Crucially, no significant increase in error rates was observed. Students were not producing less accurate language simply because they were speaking more frequently. This finding challenges the common teacher concern that communicative activities lead to fossilization of errors. When structured appropriately — with clear task goals and scaffolded support — communicative activities promote both fluency and accuracy simultaneously.

**Table 3. Lesson Time Allocation: Traditional vs. Communicative Lessons**

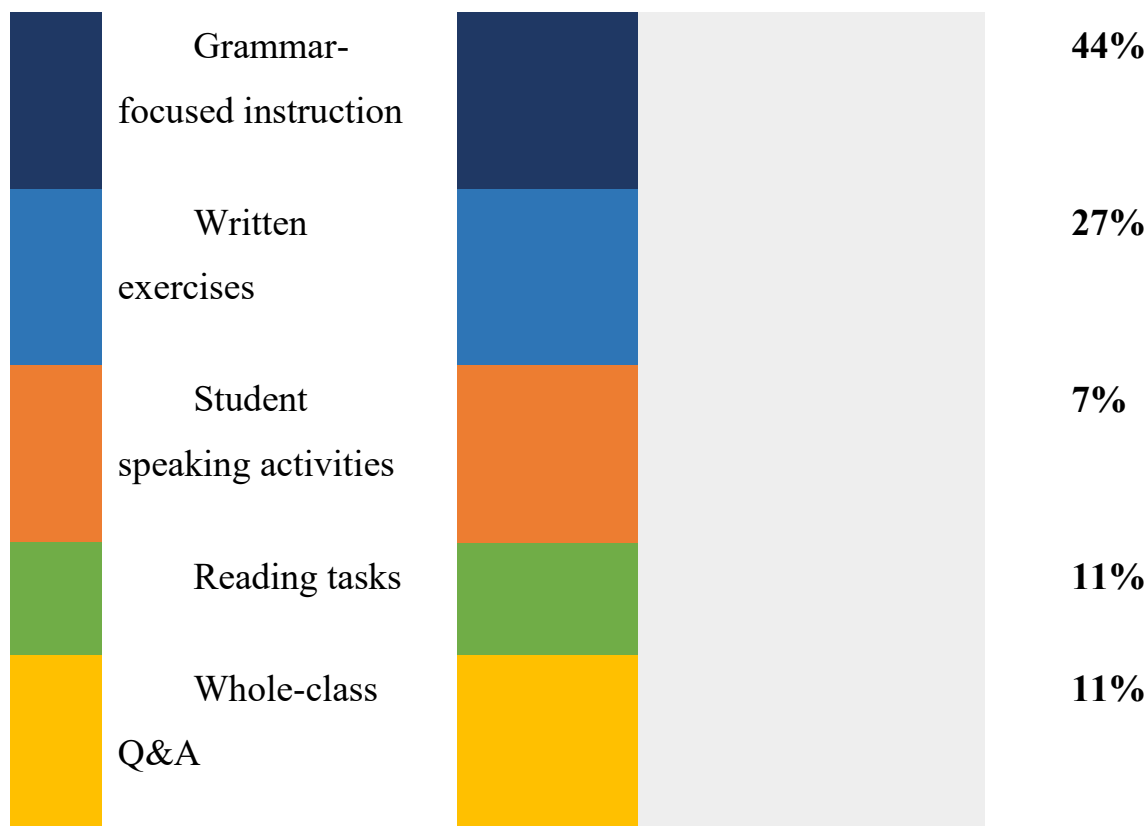
Activity Type	Traditional Lesson (min)	Communicative Lesson (min)
Teacher explanation / lecture	22	8
Written grammar exercises	12	3
Student speaking (pair/group)	3	20
Whole-class Q&A	5	7



Activity Type	Traditional Lesson (min)	Communicative Lesson (min)
Reading tasks	3	2
Student-led discussion / debate	0	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>45</b>

*Note. Minutes per 45-minute lesson, averaged across three observed lessons in each condition.*

**Figure 1. Distribution of Classroom Time in Baseline Lessons (Traditional Teaching)**





*Note. Visual representation of average time allocation per 45-minute baseline lesson. Each row represents one lesson activity category.*

## **DISCUSSION**

These findings provide strong empirical support for the paper's central argument: speaking difficulties are not inherent to the learners, but are produced by instructional conditions that can be deliberately altered. When teachers create structured, low-stakes speaking opportunities, students engage and improve. The barrier is pedagogical, not individual. The data confirm that even short-term communicative interventions, implemented within the constraints of a standard 45-minute secondary school lesson, produce statistically meaningful improvements in speaking participation and reduction in self-reported anxiety.

The results align closely with the theoretical predictions of both Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis and Swain's Output Hypothesis. When the affective filter was lowered through pair work and familiar topics, students who had previously remained silent began to participate. When students were given structured opportunities to produce language, they demonstrated knowledge that traditional grammar-focused lessons had rendered invisible. These findings reinforce the urgent need for systemic pedagogical reform.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper shows that the speaking difficulties of 10th grade EFL learners in Uzbekistan are not due to students' ability or motivation, but stem from three systemic issues: assessment systems that ignore speaking, teaching methods that limit communication, and classroom conditions that increase anxiety. When these factors are improved, students' participation and confidence rise quickly. The suggested reforms are practical: teachers should include more communicative activities, curricula should assess speaking, and policymakers should support teacher



training. Even small, low-cost changes can significantly improve students' speaking skills and, if applied widely, can enhance national outcomes. Future research should explore the long-term impact of communicative teaching, the role of teacher beliefs, and the development of culturally appropriate speaking assessments. Overall, the study emphasizes that speaking difficulties are not a learner problem, but a systemic one. Students are not deficient—they are underserved, and the education system must provide environments where speaking is actively supported and valued.

### REFERENCES

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