

# Speaking Skills Improvement at University Level English Lesson

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## Abstract

Acquiring English language skills has been significant for many decades, and the approach has undergone various transformations. Since the 1970s, the primary focus of studying has been speaking, and scholars worldwide have sought possibilities to improve the process as English is a global language. The situation differs from country to country in terms of teaching and studying English at different levels of schooling. The University of Presov (Slovakia) provides opportunities for students to continue their language education using different approaches. The language lessons emphasize speaking as much as other skills, enhancing the positive and successful approach to mastering any language. This article includes opinions of the University of Presov students about speaking at English lessons and their wishes and topic proposals for future lessons. The opinions were collected in a questionnaire and all the answers were included in this study. The overall opinion of students is positive. The need to speak is visible in everyday life. The lack of inner motivation can be seen when they do not discuss a topic that is interesting to them. They want more autonomy in speaking and do not want to speak. Therefore, teachers must prepare an environment suitable for students' positive development.

**Keywords:** English, lessons, speaking, global language, University of Presov

## Introduction

Learning languages may be a waste of time without actively using them. The learner should not only acquire the knowledge but also use it. One of the most important parts of acquiring a new language is production. Learning a language can open doors to new aspects of everyday life or professional pathways toward success. To gain new knowledge, a person can study a language individually, at school (different types of courses), or by being immersed in it through everyday use around them.

Learning languages at school is a crucial stage in learning. At schools, students acquire essential skills and become proficient users. However, it is necessary to find the best way to study for the students and teach knowledge while enjoying the process, which may include different studying methods.

## Four Language Skills

Each teaching process identifies learners' needs, current knowledge, and experience. Once the teacher knows the needs, the actual process can start. The teacher is responsible for the class's well-being, from understanding those needs to designing the lesson, monitoring progress, and providing feedback (Lindsay & Knight, 2006, pp. 3-4). While doing all of this, the teacher also needs to identify the motivation behind the learning and support it by doing activities suitable for the student(s). The lesson design allows all the skills to be practiced and improved. Each language skill is different, and there is a different way to teach it in class.

Listening is a skill that involves the learner's ability to comprehend spoken information, recognize individual words,

phrases, and sentences, and, ultimately, react and answer or continue in a possible conversation.

Reading as part of the learning process can include authentic or non-authentic texts (Lindsay & Knight, 2006, p. 68). The learner needs to grasp the information from written text and answer questions, repeat or retell the information, or generally understand the text for their own needs.

Writing is necessary for different reasons, not only at school but also in everyday life, as people write everything from text messages or shopping lists to emails and school assignments every day. Speaking is often considered one of the most challenging skills among language learners, as many experience a mental block when trying to communicate in a foreign language. It is rather strange, as the first thing children learn and what they acquire while learning a new language is speaking skills. Therefore, many students learn to speak early, and while studying the language, they forget their first speaking achievement. Dunn (n.d.) suggests three steps for teaching children English: The silent period is when a child cannot talk very early; it just listens and "saves" information. The second stage is the "Beginning to talk" stage, where children can repeat the word and understand what the word means. The final stage is "Building up vocabulary," where the child can say the word, understand the meaning, and form single phrases or sentences.

Most learners can speak a little English but are mostly hesitant due to an unexplained fear of making a mistake. This is perceived as a prevalent issue in Slovakia, as many English language users or learners are afraid to speak because of incorrect grammar or mispronunciation of words. Nevertheless, English is spoken worldwide with different accents—therefore, different

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pronunciations, varying levels of grammar knowledge, or vocabulary use.

### **The Theory Behind the Practice**

In the past, teachers did not consider speaking an important skill for teaching, and students did not teach it. In the 1980s, it changed due to the Communicative Language Approach. This approach was developed due to the cooperation of several linguists, as Sepešiová (2013) notes in her paper *Development of Speaking Skill in English Language Classes*. Linguists such as Brumfit and Johnson, Widdowson and Chomsky- responded to earlier Audio-Lingual Methods and Direct Methods used before the 1970s, emphasizing the importance of speaking in language learning.

The Communicative Language Approach stresses real-life conversation and language production. It focuses on spontaneity in real-time, while the time for speech planning is shortened and is more focused on production. If the speaker focuses more on planning than production, production and fluency fail. If the speaker focuses more on production, the accuracy suffers. It could be addressed using "memorized routines – formulaic language," pause filler or turn-taking (Thornbury, 2006, p. 208).

Harmer (2007, p.123) describes speaking in class as beneficial for three reasons. The first one is that students can rehearse in a controlled environment what they learned from the point of view of grammar and vocabulary. The second reason is to provide feedback to the teacher and themselves; the last reason is that students may become independent speakers. Sometimes, classroom practice can bring situations when students do not want to participate in a foreign language and often use their native language. Harmer claims that it could be beneficial and sensitive for some students, but it needs to be controlled, and students should be given tasks where they start to use foreign languages. The teacher cannot give individual attention to each student if the classroom is too large. By creating pairs or groups, everybody would get the chance to work and speak as much as possible simultaneously. At the same time, the teacher can observe, help, and correct group after group and be sure all the students have the same time and help necessary.

Effective language learning focuses on the development of all four essential skills—listening, reading, writing, and speaking. Among these, speaking is considered the most significant challenge for the learners. While each skill contributes to overall language proficiency, speaking poses the most significant challenge for learners. The challenge lies in many aspects, such as dealing with grammar and using it correctly while choosing the vocabulary that fits the situation. Despite its importance, speaking has historically been overlooked in language education, with greater emphasis on grammar and written exercises. However, with the rise of communicative language teaching, educators have increasingly recognized the necessity of active language production in real-life contexts. The one possible method for improving speaking skills is task-based learning, which Straková (2014, p. 19) describes as the fluency-based language practice "focused on conveying the message rather than on the form of the language." Nayak and Patel (2024), in their study, speak about TBL (task-based learning) as "a method that should be utilized when the goal is to increase the number of possibilities for oral engagement in class." Further, they believe it could boost needs, motivation, and inclusion in activities and communication. The students participating in this study "enjoyed that they could communicate and exchange information with their partners."

This shift in approach aligns with a broader global trend—the increasing role of English as the world's lingua franca. The ability to speak English fluently is no longer just an academic achievement; it is a crucial skill in today's interconnected world. Given that English is spoken in numerous countries and is a mandatory subject in many educational systems, its prominence further underscores the need for effective speaking instruction. The following section explores English as a global language and the importance of prioritizing speaking skills in language education.

### **English as the Global Language – the Importance of Teaching Speaking Skills**

According to a 2022 British Council report, approximately 375 million students were learning English. Moreover, 55 countries worldwide use English as their official language, which makes up around 29% of the world.

English has been recognized as a global language for many years. Crystal (2003), in his book *English as a Global Language*, describes how a language can become global. The author noted that English is a global language in the sense of it being the official language or priority language in more than 100 countries around the world, which makes it a global language in comparison to Russian, which is preferred in ex-Soviet Union countries, Spanish in South America, or Mandarin Chinese in South-East Asia.

Another step into becoming a global language is the data from research conducted at the University of Winnipeg. There are 142 countries worldwide where English is a mandatory subject in the educational system, and 41 countries can study English at different levels of schooling. In some countries, such as China, Indonesia, or Sweden, it is a mandatory subject only at certain levels of education. Slovakia is one of 142 countries where English is mandatory, though it is not explicitly mentioned in the University of Winnipeg study.

According to the Slovak Ministry of Education, in 2019, there were changes in perceiving English as a mandatory subject. In the past, pupils who reached the third grade of primary school had to choose English as their mandatory subject. In 2019, the policy changed. Pupils can choose any language the school provides, and if they do not choose English in the third grade, they need to choose it later in seventh or eighth grade to gain at least a minimum of knowledge. So even though it is not mandatory for the whole time of learning at primary and secondary schools, there is a condition of basic knowledge.

Meanwhile, the Czech Republic is taking the opposite approach. To achieve the maximum positive effect, they want to start teaching their pupils mandatory English in the first grade of primary schools. Therefore, both countries should be on the list of 142 countries.

### **Situation in Slovakia**

The discussed data are publicly published each year after the completion of all the end-of-year testing of secondary school graduates. Those dates are published by the Ministry of Education on their website. In the year 2024, 41,000 students were undertaking the Maturita exam (mandatory exam marking the end of secondary school education) according to the Ministry of Education, Research, Development and the Youth of the Slovak Republic, published on their website after finishing the exams by the end of May 2024. Out of 41,000 students, 37,047 had the exam from a foreign language, and those who had chosen English were more than 96%. Those students are divided into three categories: level B1, B2, or C1. The success rate was 58% for B1 (18,018 students), for B2, it was 76,1% (15,259 students), and for C1, it was 76,7% (2,377 students). The statistics provided by the Slovak Ministry of Education are based on the written portion of the exam, which includes reading and listening with comprehension, grammar, language, and writing. The most successful part was listening with comprehension for levels B1, B2, and C1 of bilingual school students. The worst part was grammar for the B1 and B2 levels. These statistics do not involve the speaking part of the Maturita exam because their teachers and teachers from different schools conduct them individually at school. Each group of examiners follows the same set of expected knowledge standards. Generally, it is not a subjective evaluation of the experience of students and teachers. Assessing students' speaking fluency and accuracy remains challenging as the examination is not entirely standardized and is evaluated separately by teachers. Studying English as a Second Language at the University of Prešov.

While entering University, the students are considered skilled users of language in all four language competencies. As indicated in the Ministry of Education statistics, the students successfully

passed the Maturita exam and should be ready for further education or real-life situations.

At the University of Presov (Slovakia), the students have options (some study programs have the English language as a compulsory subject throughout their studies for a Bachelor's degree – as Geography and Geoinformatics – information obtained from individual Study programs) to choose English (also German, French, Spanish, Russian, Bulgarian and Italian languages provided by the Institute of Language Competencies of the University of Presov) and continue their language learning journey. During the lessons, all four skills (reading and listening with comprehension, speaking, and writing), as tested at the Maturita exam, are being improved in connection with different study programs and possible real-life situations.

The students at the University of Presov usually start their English language lessons in the first or second semester of their studies. They can continue until the last semester of their Master's degree.

The lessons are focused on improving grammar and speaking skills in connection with listening and reading comprehension. As mentioned, the students are considered at a certain level with specific skills (Maturita exam levels B1, B2, and C1). At the university level, they start with this level while improving in connection with unique vocabulary and speaking topics related to the field of study. The minimal requirement is level B1, but few students are at the level of beginners (those who took the Maturita exam in the German language or for other reasons).

The course book used during the lessons from the first semester is Global Pre-Intermediate Student's Book, authored by Lindsay (2010) (level B1) and later Global International

Intermediate by Lindsay and Rebecca (2011). Those course books interconnect grammar reviews with global topics, from the human body to social issues and crime.

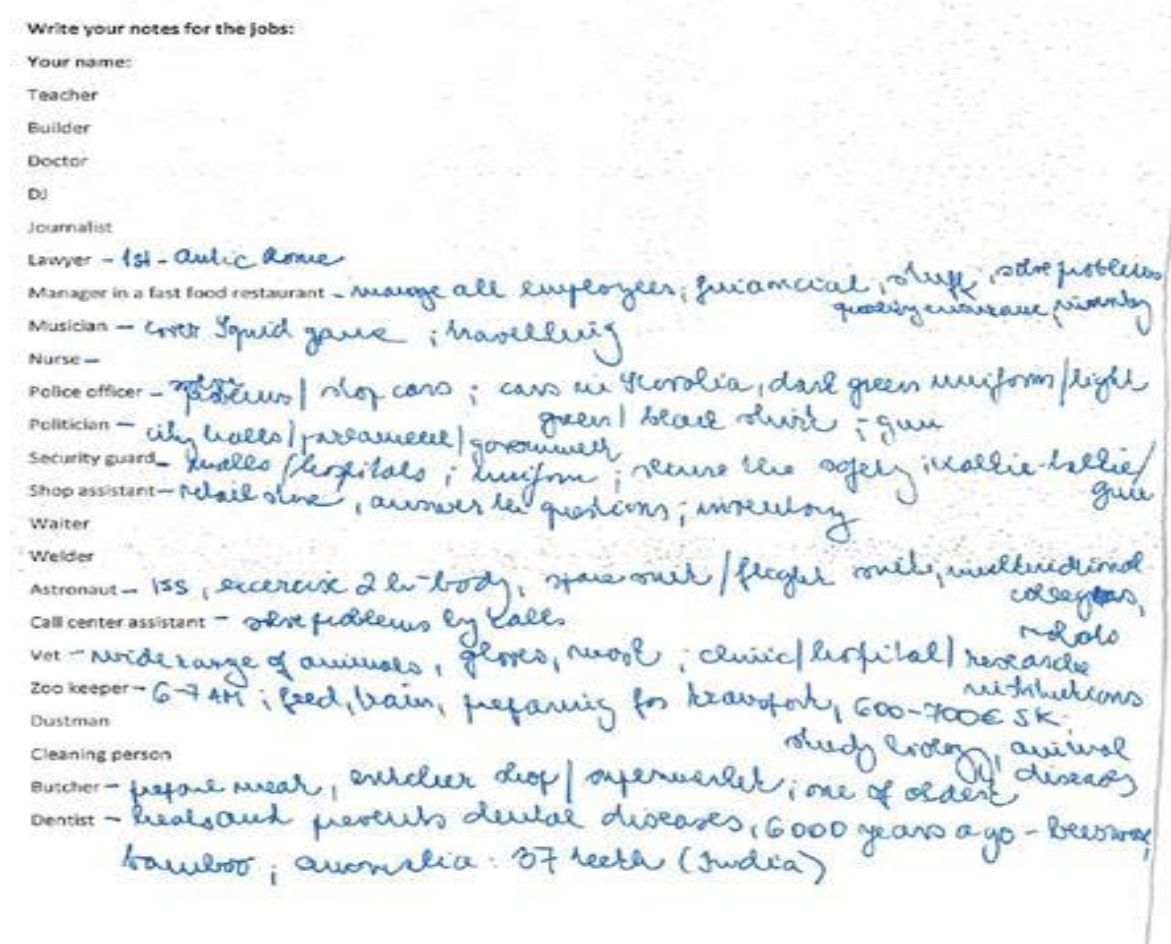
Five English language teachers provide English language courses to students at the University of Presov (the Institute of Language Competencies), and each has a unique teaching style. During lessons, we mainly focus on essential points (those points are specific to my lessons – as mentioned beforehand – each teacher has a slightly different style, methods, or course of the lesson)

- Everyday conversation: Talking about everyday things, basic conversation among people, showing interest in conversation, reacting to news or information acquired
- Grammar review: Explanation and exercises
- Speaking part (called The TALK): Each student chooses or is given part of the topic discussed in the lesson and prepares beforehand. They research fun facts or interesting information (from family to sports, the human body, energy sources, and fairy tales) and need to be able to speak about it for 1-2 minutes while other students ask questions and react to what is said.
- Unique vocabulary: Along with topics related to study programs (political studies, geography, and philosophy).
- Writing summaries: Speaking, videos, or other types of writing (CV, cover letter, story, and other written assignments) done during the lesson without using any technology, just an old-fashioned dictionary.

#### Samples of Students' Notes

Figure 1

Sample of Student's Notes



Note. Classroom material written by students of the University of Presov, names given on the handout materials are nicknames of students, not their real names.

Nowadays, with AI playing an important role, students must develop their speaking skills and be able to select relevant information, and it is becoming hard to assign written assignments; therefore, talking during the lesson and writing during the lesson is preferred. During our talk, students pick topics one lesson ahead, and they can prepare some fun facts or interesting information about a given topic, which are used to provide new insights into the topic itself. The topics included social issues, favorite countries, languages, fairy tales, sports, leisure time, jobs, energy sources, mystical lands, films, music and books, historical events, and more. Those topics are easy to

discuss because they relate to daily life. Students' freedom to select any part of a broader topic created a more open, free, and confident atmosphere while sharing new information with others.

For the actual speech, they were required to do a little research and prepare this talk so students could interconnect their own opinions or experiences with unknown facts. There was no common knowledge, but they needed to research and find something unknown, new, and engaging. During these talks, all the students got handouts where they were supposed to write notes on what was interesting or new for them and prepare questions or comment.

Figure 2

Sample of Student's Notes

New and interesting facts I have learnt today from the DISASTER talk

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

Flooding **4 TYPES OF FLOODING, BIGGEST FLOOD IN CHINA - YELLOW RIVER**

Typhoon **WARM WATER, ATLANTIC OCEAN AREA**

Drought ~~WARM WATER~~ **EARTH IS COMPLETELY DRY, NO WATER**

Famine **- BIGGEST IN UKRAINE, CAUSED BY SOVIET REGIME, OVER 7 MILLION DEAD**

Wildfire **- BLACK SUMMER, MAINLY IN AUSTRALIA, CAUSED BY STRONG WIND, STORM, HIGH TEMPERATURE**

Heat wave **/**

Tornado **/ ROTATING AIR,**

Blizzard **EXTREM TYPE OF WINTER STORM, CAUSED BY BIGGEST WAS IN USA**

Volcanic eruption **FAMOUS PLACE - HAVANA ISLANDS, ETNA, VEZUV - DESTROYED POMPEY**

Landslide **GRAVITY, MOVING OF SOIL, HEAVY RAIN, 1. USA, 2. CHINA, 3. IRAN**

Avalanche **- RAPID FALL DOWN OF SNOW OR ICE BERG BIGGEST IN AUSTRIA, ITALY, FRANCE, 1924 - TATRAS**

Tsunami **- CAUSED BY UNDERWATER LANDSLIDE, BIGGEST IN INDIAN OCEAN**

Hurricane **CREATED BY LOW PRESSURE, MAKES WATER TEMPERATURE HIGHER**

**IN SLOVAKIA - MONKOVÁ POLINA, WHERE 2 PEOPLE DIED**

Note. Classroom material written by students of the University of Presov, names given on the handout materials are nicknames of students, not their real names.



Figure 3  
Sample of Student's Notes

### Leisure time talk

Name:

Reading books HARRY POTTER - FAMOUS SERIES OF BOOKS  
 Collect stamps/anything  
 Cooking WATERMELON HAS LESS WATER AS CUCUMBER.  
 Playing video games  
 Playing board games CLASSIC TYPE OF GAMES, FIRST 3500 B.C.  
 Watching films/series  
 Travelling ONE OF THE BEST HOW TO EXPLORE WORLD, CULTURE,  
 Doing sports/exercising SPORTS IMPROVE CARDIO SYSTEM  
 Talking to friends CAN IMPROVE MENTAL HEALTH - SOCIALIZATION  
 Using social media CONNECTION WITH FRIENDS, FAMILY  
 Studying  
 Manual work GARDEN THERAPY  
 Crafts IMPROVE CREATIVITY, POSSIBLE DOING OUT OR INDOOR  
 Knitting/crocheting/sewing FAMOUS MAINLY FOR OLD PEOPLE  
 Writing books/notes/diary ITS GOOD FOR PSYCHOHYGIEN  
 Painting ITS VISUAL ART, ITS GOOD FOR CONCENTRATION  
 Gardening  
 Programming IS POPULAR WAY TO SPEND LEISURE TIME  
 Baking  
 Cleaning - SOME TYPE OF PSYCHOHYGIEN,  
 PLAYING INSTRUMENTS - 1000 TYPE OF INSTRUMENTS,  
 AND 6 CATEGORIES  
 THE MOST PLAYED INSTRUMENT - PIANO  
 THE HARDEST - VIOLIN  
 SLEEPING - THE BEST WAY OF REST BODY

Note. Classroom material written by students of the University of Presov, names given on the handout materials are nicknames of students, not their real names.

Each student submitted two questions. Their comprehension was tested via a Kahoot! Quiz or by answering questions in printed form. The teacher prepared this quiz (questions were sent beforehand and sent to email so other students—classmates—could not prepare for them). It is also possible to see the writing mistakes of the students with the questions (below Vladyslav) that they submitted for the quiz. It is also possible to see the use of AI in creating these questions (Dorota).

The lessons were inclusive, and mistakes were welcomed, not punished. The students were motivated to speak even with

imperfect grammar or communicative skills. The motivation for speaking was encouraged by including speaking activities in the final evaluation. Mainly, the students who were unwilling to speak independently were gently forced to speak and answer questions from their classmates or the teacher. Without these speaking activities, some students only read one sentence in grammatical exercises and were quiet for the rest of the lesson. Over time, students became more confident in speaking naturally, even without tasks or assignments. They seemed comfortable answering everyday questions.

**Figure 4**  
Sample of Students' Questions

who author of Mona Lisa

A. Vincent van Gogh

B. Pablo Picasso

C. Leonardo da Vinci

D. Claude Monet

Correct Answer: C. Leonardo da Vinci

1. How else can we call the australian bushfire season? - Black summer

2. How many hectares did burn in 2019-20? - 24,3 milion hectares

Which country has the largest number of police officers?

India (right one)

United States

China

Brazil

What is another name for a security guard?

Trooper

Security inspector( right one)

Policeman

Serviceman

#### Methodology

The study employed a quantitative approach. The data was acquired by questionnaire on the speaking experience during the English lesson as a Foreign Language at the University of Presov in the winter semester of 2024-2025. Eighty-six students were invited to participate in this survey, which was conducted via Google Forms. The questionnaire included seven

questions covering different aspects of the speaking parts of English lessons at the University of Presov, dealing with preferred topics, being given enough time to express ideas and opinions, and their future needs in speaking and English lessons. The survey was distributed online. Out of 86 students, 20 answered the questions (23%). The collected answers were analyzed to better understand current students' likes, dislikes, and needs.

## Results

**Table 1**  
*Participants*

Field of study	Number of students		
	First year	Second year	Third year
Philosophy	0	5	2
Political Studies	0	1	4
Mass media studies	1	0	0
The teaching of sports in combination	0	2	0
Biology in combination with History	0	2	0
Slovak Language, in combination with Civil Education	0	1	0
Biology in combination with Pedagogy	0	1	0
History in combination with Slovak Language	0	0	1

**Table 2**  
*Response on What Do You Like at English Lessons in General?*

Responses	f (%)
Speaking	6 (30)
Grammar	2 (10)
Gaining new information	2 (10)
Good atmosphere	2 (10)
Kahoot! Quizzes	2 (10)
Games	01 (5)
Homework	01 (5)
Teacher's approach	01 (5)
Discussions	01 (5)

When the students were asked about the winter semester of 2024/2025, the answers were very similar, with few changes in the teaching style, talking about particular topics, and expressing individual ideas. Students were happy with the talking activities,

but some disliked preparing and giving presentations. This activity is not different from what the students were doing, but giving a presentation means a formal structure, while giving a talk – a little speech is more informal.

**Table 3**  
*Response on the Amount of Time Given for Speaking to Each Student*

Responses	%
I am happy with the amount	80
I would appreciate more time	15
Unhappy with the amount	05

**Table 4**  
*Response on Which Speaking Activities Did You Like the Most?*

Responses	%
Warm-up activity, which is about basic feelings and overall mood or experience	40
Answering particular questions about the lesson topic	35
The talk	20
Generally speaking and the talk	5

When asked about a possible change in question 6, the participants suggested a few adjustments—nothing, more grammar, working in teams more, and losing warm-up activities. When asked what would be good to change in the Talk part of the lesson (question 7), some students expressed their opinions that if they study Philosophy, they do not need to know anything about Biology or Geography. The “talkers” were happy with the mistake correction.

The survey also explored students' diverse interests, revealing a strong preference for topics like travel, culture, jobs, politics, and history. These findings highlight the importance of a flexible and inclusive curriculum.

The last question (the 9th question) was open to students to give suggestions of future topics, including cooking, the future, business, the history of fashion, politics, mental health, art, religion, philosophy, and more specific or general topics depending on their study field.

## Discussion

The need for improvement of teaching speaking skills is not limited to one school to one university. Educators must find a way to secure English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) speaking proficiency. It may thrive when instruction is genuinely learner-centered and effectively supportive, while giving the students space for expression and a safe place for communication. The important person in the equation is the student.

Villacís and Camacho (2017) frame learner-centered instruction as highly beneficial to students in the language acquisition process, and recognition of each learner's uniqueness drives meaningful engagement in studying. In such settings, students select procedures, topics, or resources that resonate with their purposes, transforming speaking tasks into personally significant acts of communication rather than teacher-imposed drills.

Technologically mediated environments provide an additional pathway to learner agency. During the COVID-19 lockdown, Saudi universities moved oral-skills courses onto blackboard. Al-Mahmud (2022) documents how the virtual space muted face-to-face inhibitions: students reported lower embarrassment, spoke for longer turns, and perceived lessons as more skill-focused. The success of this emergency practice persuaded several institutions to retain blended or fully online speaking modules post-pandemic.

Anxiety, however, remains a stubborn barrier. An Indonesian survey (Septiawan et al., 2025) of first-year EFL majors found that while more than 59 % experienced only mild apprehension, almost 11 % suffered high anxiety linked mainly to fear of lexical gaps and public error. Encouragingly, repeated speaking opportunities gradually attenuated these fears, suggesting that structured exposure—rather than proficiency level per se—is the decisive variable.

To increase such exposure where native interlocutors are scarce, Saudi studies have harnessed YouTube. Synthesizing ten prior investigations, Chatta (2024) demonstrated that curated native-speaker videos, coupled with guided shadowing and subtitle manipulation tasks, yielded significant oral proficiency gains for an experimental cohort. Ready student acceptance of digital media, typical in the Saudi context, magnified the intervention's impact.

Finally, Vietnamese research points to systemic obstacles. Despite a decade-long national curriculum, learners seldom use English beyond the classroom. Hanh (2024) calls for a policy that repositions English as a medium of everyday interaction rather than a purely academic subject. Complementary classroom reforms proposed by Tung and Hoa (2023)—task-based learning and flipped instruction—aim to redress teachers' limited repertoire of communicative activities and to cultivate autonomous speaking practice.

### Conclusion

The University's students' abilities are based on their prior knowledge. Their future learning depends only on their willingness to improve and apply their skills. Each brings the knowledge of previous learning with them, and it is up to them if they want to improve it, widen it or make it more useful. Students who want to speak during the lessons, express their opinions and views, are active, and participate in every given activity, from individual speaking to games and quizzes. If students in the classroom are unwilling to speak or lack confidence, they are encouraged to speak through compulsory activities and partner discussions, along with learner-centered activities when they can choose the topic, the approach to speaking, and delivery. Overall, students range from pre-intermediate to advanced levels, with several exceptions of non-existent or elementary levels of English.

There is always room for improvement in the teacher's and students' positions. The teacher can include different topics as suggested, try new ways of incorporating students into the speaking process, and do more activities that involve pair work or teamwork.

### Recommendations

Limiting the classroom to 10 students gives them enough time to speak. Furthermore, the same level of language skills in one group would be preferable to boost their learning experience and the amount of knowledge they have gained. Having students of different study fields promotes inter-student relations, sparks

interest, and presents an opportunity for speaking. However, grouping students by field of study is preferred if lessons focus on specialized vocabulary.

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