ENHANCING ORAL PROFICIENCY. EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING SPEAKING IN EFL CLASSROOMS

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Abstract. *Speaking is a fundamental language skill that enables learners to communicate effectively in real-life situations. However, teaching speaking remains one of the most challenging aspects of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. This study explores effective pedagogical strategies for improving speaking skills among EFL learners, with a focus on communicative competence, fluency, and learner motivation. Through a combination of classroom observation, interviews with teachers, and a survey of learners, the research identifies key factors that contribute to successful speaking instruction. Findings suggest that interactive activities, task-based learning, and a supportive classroom environment significantly enhance students' oral proficiency.*

Keywords: *Speaking skills, EFL, communicative competence, task-based learning, oral fluency.*

Introduction

Speaking is a crucial component of second language acquisition and plays a central role in communication. For learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the ability to speak fluently and accurately is often viewed as the ultimate goal. However, many EFL learners struggle with speaking due to limited exposure to authentic language use, fear of making mistakes, and insufficient practice opportunities. This study investigates current methods for teaching speaking and evaluates their effectiveness in improving learners' communicative abilities.

Teaching spoken English to graduate EFL students in Uzbekistan requires navigating unique contextual challenges while applying proven pedagogical strategies. In post-Soviet Uzbekistan, English has rapidly gained importance for academic and professional advancement, leading to increased demand for effective speaking instruction. However, educators face persistent obstacles. Uzbek learners have limited exposure to English outside the classroom due to the dominance of Uzbek and Russian in daily life, which means they often encounter English only in formal school settings. This lack of authentic exposure can hinder students' motivation and oral proficiency development. Additionally, significant linguistic differences between Uzbek (a Turkic, agglutinative language) and English (an Indo-European language) pose difficulties in acquiring English syntax and vocabulary. For example, Uzbek's subject-object-verb word order contrasts with English's subject-verb-object order, leading to confusion in formulating sentences.

Such grammatical and structural disparities mean that without targeted practice, Uzbek graduate students may struggle with English fluency even after years of study. Moreover, a shortage of highly qualified English teachers and limited resources in some institutions have historically impeded speaking instruction. Many English teachers in Uzbekistan are non-native speakers with varying proficiency, and older teaching generations were trained under Soviet-era methodologies that emphasized grammar and reading over communicative skills. As a result, students often have had few opportunities to practice speaking in class – a recent British Council study of secondary schools found only about half of students regularly engage in speaking

activities during lessons. By the time these learners reach graduate programs, they may have strong reading or writing skills but still lack confidence and fluency in speaking. Recognizing these gaps, the Uzbek government launched major reforms in the past decade to improve English teaching. A 2012 Presidential Decree mandated the introduction of English from first grade and alignment of teaching with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) standards.

This policy shift aimed to move classrooms away from the formerly dominant Grammar-Translation Method and toward communicative, skills-based instruction. In practice, however, the transition has been gradual – as late as 2007 educators noted that Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was often discussed in theory but not fully implemented in classrooms. It has taken extensive teacher training and curriculum overhauls (e.g. new CEFR-aligned textbooks and exams) to begin embedding a truly communicative approach in everyday teaching.

Despite these challenges, current methodologies in EFL speaking pedagogy offer effective strategies that can be adapted to Uzbekistan's context. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has become a cornerstone of modern English instruction worldwide and is highly relevant for Uzbek graduate classrooms. CLT emphasizes interaction, meaningful communication, and functional language ability over rote memorization of rules. The goal is to build communicative competence – Hymes's notion of knowing when and how to say what to whom – so that students can actually use English in real-life contexts, not just perform on written tests. In Uzbekistan, adoption of CLT principles has been officially encouraged as part of educational reform. The new national curriculum frameworks explicitly promote learner-centered, interactive activities and target communicative competence across the four skills . For speaking in particular, this means teachers are urged to incorporate activities like discussions, role-plays, debates, and problem-solving tasks in English. Such tasks mirror authentic communication and require students to negotiate meaning, thereby practicing fluency and spontaneity. However, implementing CLT in Uzbek classrooms has not been without difficulties.

Teachers often cite large class sizes, limited class hours, and students' low starting proficiency as hindrances to purely communicative practice (Rafikova). Many Uzbek EFL teachers initially misunderstood CLT or felt unprepared to use it, leading to superficial adoption.

For instance, some focused on activities labeled "communicative" without truly relinquishing teacher control or without ensuring students were actively using English. Teacher training and beliefs play a critical role here. A survey of Uzbek school teachers found that while most had heard of CLT, many lacked a "clear idea" of its implementation and thus struggled to apply it effectively in their lessons . These educators noted challenges like insufficient materials, uncertainty in designing speaking tasks, and misalignment with traditional assessment methods .

Thus, ongoing professional development is essential so that teachers can bridge the gap between theory and practice. The U.S.-funded English Speaking Nation program (2019) and other initiatives have been providing workshops to improve teachers' classroom English and acquaint them with communicative techniques . Such efforts begin to address the human resource issue, empowering instructors to facilitate speaking activities confidently. Notably, many experts now recommend an eclectic approach in the Uzbek context – combining communicative methods with occasional form-focused instruction – to meet local needs (Kusanova). In practice, this means while CLT is the guiding philosophy, teachers might still use brief grammar explanations in Uzbek or structured drills as scaffolding, especially for lower-proficiency speakers. Research by Kusanova indicates that Uzbek high school teachers increasingly use CLT as the "dominant" approach but supplement it to ensure students achieve

required proficiency benchmarks (e.g. CEFR B1 by graduation) . This blending of methods can be effective if done judiciously: communicative activities build fluency and confidence, while strategic use of the first language or explicit instruction can clarify complex concepts and reduce student frustration. The key is maintaining a focus on meaningful language use and gradually minimizing support as students' speaking skills grow.

At the graduate level in Uzbekistan, students often have reading and writing skills sufficient for comprehension of academic texts, but they need targeted training to elevate their speaking from intermediate plateau to advanced proficiency. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is a particularly effective methodology for this purpose. TBLT centers lessons around completion of realistic tasks in the target language, rather than around discrete language items.

Research shows that task-based learning creates conditions for natural interaction and pushes learners to produce language more freely. For example, Masuram and Sripada, in a 2020 study on developing spoken fluency, found that engaging college students in tasks (like planning a trip or solving a problem collaboratively) significantly improved their oral fluency and reduced hesitation. The tasks provide learners with an authentic purpose to speak – they must exchange information or opinions to achieve an outcome – which mirrors real-world communication and leads to noticeable gains in confidence. According to TBLT theory, "a task will enable the learner to focus on interaction and improve speaking ability in real world situations" by requiring meaningful use of language and not just form-focused responses. This aligns well with Swain's Output Hypothesis, which argues that producing language (through speaking or writing) is essential for language development because it prompts learners to notice gaps in their knowledge and to refine their linguistic output (Swain 471). In Uzbek graduate classes, task-based activities could include academic discussions, project presentations, case-study analyses, or simulations of professional scenarios. For instance, students in a Master's program might be tasked with conducting a mini-research project and presenting their findings in English, or role-playing a conference panel discussion on a topic in their field. Such tasks not only practice general speaking skills but also build the specific oral communication skills these students will need in academia and the workplace (e.g. formal presentation skills, participating in Q&A, arguing a point persuasively in English). Furthermore, task-based projects lend themselves to integrating content and language, a form of Content-Based Instruction (CBI). Given that many Uzbek graduate students are pursuing specialties (business, science, etc.), using content from their discipline as the basis for speaking tasks can boost motivation and relevance. For example, an economics student could lead a seminar discussion on a case study in English – simultaneously learning the content deeper and practicing academic English speaking. This dual-focus approach is supported by pedagogical research, as it treats English not just as a subject but as a medium for learning, which is particularly appropriate at advanced levels. Indeed, some universities in Uzbekistan have begun offering certain courses in English or requiring students to give thesis defenses in English, effectively adopting an English-Medium Instruction model for graduate programs. These trends make it even more crucial that speaking instruction be tied to academic contexts and tasks.

Another modern strategy for improving speaking is leveraging technology to create immersive and interactive learning experiences. Uzbekistan's growing Internet connectivity and government investment in educational technology provide new avenues to enrich speaking practice beyond the traditional classroom.

Technology-assisted language learning can help overcome the local limitations of exposure by virtually bringing English-speaking environments to students. For example, online videoconferencing tools (Zoom, Skype, etc.) enable graduate students to engage in live conversation with native or fluent English speakers worldwide, participate in international online seminars, or collaborate on projects with peers in other countries. Such virtual exchanges have proven effective in reducing speaking anxiety and increasing students' willingness to communicate. Even within the classroom, technology can amplify speaking opportunities.

Teachers might use language learning apps that include voice recording features, so students can practice speaking on their own and get automated feedback on pronunciation. In Uzbekistan, where access to native-speaker teachers is limited, audio-visual resources serve as important models for pronunciation and speaking styles. Watching English videos or listening to podcasts, and then engaging in follow-up speaking activities (summaries, debates, role-plays based on the content) is a useful technique. It exposes learners to diverse accents and real-life expressions, which they can then attempt to use. Additionally, flipped classroom models, enabled by technology, have shown promise for EFL speaking. In a flipped approach, students might first watch lectures or dialogues in English via online videos at home, freeing up class time for active speaking practice. A recent systematic review by Ebadi and Salari found that online flipped learning led to notable improvements in EFL students' speaking skills, as it allowed more time for interactive activities in class and supported self-paced learning of input material (Ebadi and Salari 70). Technology can also specifically target pronunciation and fluency through tools like interactive pronunciation software or AI-driven speech evaluators. Some Uzbek instructors have begun experimenting with AI tutors or chatbots (for instance, using programs like ChatGPT) to provide students extra conversational practice outside class. Early teacher feedback suggests that these tools, while not perfect, can encourage hesitant students to speak more by providing a non-judgmental conversation partner, and they can generate prompts or questions on virtually any topic to sustain dialogue. Nonetheless, integrating technology in speaking instruction requires careful planning and digital literacy. Simply having students use an app is not a panacea; the teacher must guide usage, set clear speaking goals, and ensure that tech-based practice complements face-to-face communication practice rather than replaces it. Importantly, given that over 90% of young people in Uzbekistan now use digital resources for learning English in some form (from social media to online dictionaries), harnessing these platforms for pedagogical purposes can meet learners where they already are. Teachers can incorporate assignments like posting short video blogs in English, participating in English discussion forums, or using WhatsApp/Telegram voice messages in English for group projects.

Such activities blur the line between formal and informal learning, increasing the total exposure to spoken English. They also tap into students' interests and creativity, which can be highly motivating. Motivation is indeed closely tied to successful speaking acquisition – learners who are engaged and see personal value in becoming fluent are more likely to persist through the challenges of speaking practice.

Assessment and motivation are two critical, intertwined factors in teaching speaking to graduate EFL learners. In Uzbekistan's academic culture, high-stakes exams and formal assessments have traditionally driven what gets taught. For many years, university entrance exams and others heavily emphasized grammar, reading, and translation, with speaking rarely tested. This backwash effect meant teachers and students often neglected speaking since it "didn't count" for grades or advancement.

However, with the adoption of CEFR standards, there is a shift toward evaluating speaking ability as part of language proficiency certifications. Graduate students now frequently need to attain a certain CEFR level (B2 or above) or an IELTS score for program completion or overseas study. Such requirements are slowly pushing institutions to incorporate speaking assessments. The role of assessment in teaching speaking cannot be overstated: what and how we test speaking will influence how teachers teach it. Best practices suggest using both formative and summative speaking assessments to drive improvement. Formative assessments might include regular oral presentations, impromptu speaking drills, or simulated dialogues that are recorded and critiqued. These low-stakes evaluations give students feedback on their pronunciation, vocabulary range, fluency, and coherence, guiding them on areas to work on.

Summative assessments can be more formal oral exams or project presentations at the end of a course. Uzbekistan's universities have begun to implement oral exams in some programs (for example, an oral defense for course projects or comprehensive speaking tests modeled on IELTS speaking sections). Yet, a challenge noted by teachers is the lack of clear criteria and training for assessing spoken language. Many EFL instructors are uncertain how to fairly evaluate speaking or feel that subjective biases might creep in. To address this, training in language assessment literacy is needed: educators must be familiar with rubrics that capture pronunciation, grammar accuracy, fluency, interactive communication, etc., and learn to apply them consistently. International frameworks and exams offer useful models. For instance, the CEFR provides descriptors for speaking at each level (such as "Can give a clear presentation on familiar topics with some hesitations" for B2) which can form the basis of rubrics. Using such standardized descriptors in local assessments can both improve reliability and ensure alignment with global standards. Encouragingly, a study on Uzbek EFL teachers' assessment literacy showed that those who had training could better integrate speaking assessment and felt more confident in their students' oral proficiency outcomes. Over time, improved assessment methods will likely reinforce the teaching of speaking – when students know their speaking skills will be evaluated, they give more attention to practicing them, and teachers allocate more class time to speaking tasks.

Finally, learner motivation is a pivotal element in teaching speaking, especially at the graduate level. Graduate students often have specific and high-pressure reasons to improve their English speaking: some may aim for international conference presentations, doctoral studies abroad, or careers in multinational organizations. These instrumental motivations (the tangible rewards of English proficiency) are strong in Uzbekistan's current environment, where government scholarships and academic promotions frequently require good English skills.

However, research in language acquisition distinguishes between extrinsic motivation (e.g. passing an exam, getting a job) and intrinsic motivation (enjoyment of the language or personal satisfaction). Successful speaking instruction cultivates the latter. In a comprehensive survey as part of the English Impact study, Uzbek students who had more internalized motivation – those who valued English for its own sake or for self-improvement – showed significantly higher proficiency gains than those motivated purely by external pressure. In other words, students who genuinely wanted to speak English fluently were more likely to put in the effort to practice speaking beyond what was required, leading to better outcomes. Therefore, an effective strategy for teachers is to create a classroom environment that makes speaking rewarding and low-anxiety, thereby nurturing intrinsic motivation.

This can be done by choosing discussion topics that align with students' interests and academic goals, allowing them to express their ideas and expertise through English. Graduate students, in particular, have a wealth of knowledge in their subject areas; tapping into that by asking them to explain a concept from their field to the class in English, for example, can give them a sense of accomplishment and relevance. Additionally, incorporating collaborative activities – like group problem-solving or debate – can build a supportive community where peers motivate each other. Many Uzbek learners fear making mistakes in speaking, which can inhibit participation. Teachers should explicitly address this by establishing a positive error culture: mistakes in speaking are normal and treated as learning opportunities rather than failures.

This can be reinforced by gentle error correction techniques (focusing on overall communicative success first, then privately noting major recurring errors to work on). Another key motivational factor is showing students their progress. Recording students' speeches at the start and end of a semester, for instance, can provide clear evidence of improvement in fluency or pronunciation, which boosts confidence. Celebrating small milestones (e.g. a student managing to speak for two minutes continuously on a topic that earlier could barely speak for thirty seconds) helps maintain enthusiasm. The use of self-assessment and reflection (as encouraged by CEFR's Language Portfolio approach) also engages students in appreciating their own growth, further internalizing motivation.

In conclusion, teaching speaking to graduate EFL students in Uzbekistan demands a multifaceted approach that addresses both systemic challenges and the immediate classroom techniques. The contextual hurdles – limited English exposure, linguistic differences, resource constraints, and past over-emphasis on grammar – require targeted solutions. These include increasing students' contact with real English (through technology and authentic materials), improving teacher training and English proficiency, and securing institutional support for communicative resources. On the pedagogical front, contemporary methodologies like CLT and TBLT, underpinned by theories of communicative competence and output-driven learning, have proven effective when adapted to local needs. Empirical evidence from both global and Uzbek-specific research underscores that students learn to speak by speaking: engaging in meaningful tasks, dialogues, and interactions that simulate the contexts they will use English in outside the classroom. A focus on practical communication does not mean neglecting form; rather, form is addressed in service of communication, through feedback and occasional focused instruction.

The use of modern tools – from multimedia resources to online exchange platforms – can greatly enhance the speaking curriculum, making practice more accessible and diverse. At the same time, aligning assessment with these communicative practices ensures that speaking remains a prioritized skill. As Uzbekistan continues to reform its educational system, integrating speaking assessments (informal and formal) will send a clear message that oral skills are as crucial as literacy skills. Perhaps most importantly, fostering a motivating learning environment will empower graduate students to take ownership of their speaking development. In the Uzbek context, where learners may be initially shy or teacher-dependent due to prior educational culture, graduate instructors can gradually encourage more learner autonomy – for example, having students lead parts of the class or organize English conversation clubs. Building such autonomy goes hand in hand with motivation: an intrinsically motivated student will seek out chances to speak English, whether by listening to English media and shadowing the speech, or by finding conversation partners. Teachers play the role of catalysts, providing the strategies and support for students to become self-driven speakers.

The case of Uzbekistan illustrates that even in a context with challenges like large classes or limited exposure, a combination of thoughtful pedagogy, supportive policy, and teacher dedication can yield significant improvements in students' speaking abilities. As scholarly research and case studies accumulate (including local studies of Uzbek universities piloting new speaking courses or using mobile apps for speaking practice), educators have an increasingly rich knowledge base to draw from. By prioritizing interactive methodologies, contextualizing practices to Uzbek learners' needs, leveraging technology, and maintaining a keen focus on assessment and motivation, instructors can greatly enhance the speaking proficiency of graduate EFL students. This, in turn, will equip a new generation of Uzbek scholars and professionals to engage confidently on the global stage, articulating their ideas in English with clarity and confidence – a tangible outcome of effective speaking pedagogy grounded in both theory and local insight.

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