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ENHANCING SPEAKING SKILLS THROUGH INTERACTIVE METHODS: AN  
ACTION RESEARCH STUDY WITH INTERMEDIATE-LEVEL SEVENTH-  
GRADE EFL STUDENTS

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**Abstract:** Developing speaking skills remains one of the most persistent challenges in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, particularly among young adolescent learners. Despite several years of formal instruction, many intermediate-level students demonstrate limited confidence, low motivation, and a reluctance to engage in oral communication, especially in teacher-centered environments. This study investigates the extent to which interactive, student-centered teaching methods can enhance speaking performance and willingness to communicate among seventh-grade EFL learners.

Adopting an action research design, the study was conducted over a 14-week academic term with 60 intermediate-level students (A2–B1). Three interactive methods — role-play and drama, structured group discussions, and language games — were systematically implemented. Data were collected through pre- and post-intervention speaking assessments, classroom observation checklists, and reflective teaching journals.

The findings revealed statistically significant improvements across all five dimensions of speaking performance ( $p < .001$ ), with the greatest gains observed in fluency and interactive competence. Additionally, 70% of students demonstrated substantial improvement in confidence and participation, while voluntary speaking contributions increased more than sixfold over the course of the intervention.

The results suggest that interactive methods can play a transformative role in both the cognitive and affective dimensions of speaking development. The study provides practical evidence supporting a shift toward student-centered speaking instruction in lower secondary EFL contexts.

**Keywords:** speaking skills, EFL, interactive methods, action research, willingness to communicate, student-centered learning

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Oral communication is widely regarded as a central component of second language proficiency; however, it remains one of the most underdeveloped skills in many EFL classrooms. Unlike receptive skills, speaking requires learners to process language in real time, manage interaction, and respond spontaneously — demands that often create significant psychological pressure, particularly among adolescent learners.

In many EFL contexts, opportunities for authentic communication are limited to the classroom environment. As a result, the effectiveness of speaking instruction depends heavily on the extent to which classroom practices promote meaningful interaction rather



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than passive participation. However, traditional teacher-centered approaches continue to dominate, often restricting students to controlled responses and limiting opportunities for genuine communicative engagement (Nunan, 2003).

Intermediate-level seventh-grade students represent a particularly sensitive learner group. At this stage, learners possess sufficient linguistic knowledge to express ideas but often lack the confidence and fluency required for spontaneous communication. Research suggests that this developmental phase is marked by heightened self-consciousness and sensitivity to peer evaluation, which can significantly reduce learners' willingness to speak (MacIntyre et al., 1998).

Motivation further complicates this issue. As Dörnyei (2001) argues, motivation is not a fixed trait but a dynamic construct shaped by classroom conditions. In environments where students are minimally engaged or rarely given opportunities to actively participate, motivation tends to decline, reinforcing passive learning behaviors.

Scholars have consistently emphasized the limitations of teacher-dominated instruction in developing speaking skills. While Harmer (2007) advocates for communicative activities that require meaningful interaction, such approaches are not always fully implemented in practice. In many classrooms, speaking activities remain controlled and form-focused, offering limited opportunities for authentic language use.

Interactive, student-centered methods offer a promising alternative. Role-play and drama, for example, allow learners to adopt alternative identities, reducing personal anxiety and encouraging risk-taking (Ladousse, 1987). Similarly, group discussion tasks, grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, enable learners to co-construct knowledge through interaction within their Zone of Proximal Development. Language games, meanwhile, can increase engagement by shifting attention away from accuracy toward participation and task completion (Wright et al., 2006).

While each of these approaches has been studied individually, relatively few studies have examined their combined implementation within a single classroom intervention, particularly at the lower secondary level. Moreover, research focusing specifically on intermediate-level adolescent learners remains limited.

### **Research Questions**

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. To what extent do interactive teaching methods improve speaking performance among intermediate-level seventh-grade EFL students?
2. How do these methods influence students' willingness to communicate and classroom engagement?

## **2. METHODS**

### **Research Design**

This study employed an action research design, which is particularly suited to classroom-based inquiry aimed at improving teaching practice (Burns, 2010). The cyclical process of planning, implementation, observation, and reflection allowed for continuous adaptation of instructional strategies while maintaining ecological validity.

### **Participants**



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The study involved 60 seventh-grade students (aged 12–13) enrolled in a state secondary school. All participants were classified at the A2–B1 level based on institutional assessments. The sample was selected through convenience sampling, as the researcher was also the classroom teacher.

### **Intervention**

The intervention lasted 14 weeks and incorporated three interactive methods, implemented in a systematic rotation to ensure balanced exposure across the study period:

- **Role-play and drama:** Activities progressed from structured scripts to open improvisation, allowing learners to gradually build confidence.
- **Structured group discussions:** Goal-oriented collaborative tasks designed to promote negotiation of meaning and shared decision-making.
- **Language games:** Competitive, communication-focused activities that shifted learner attention from accuracy to participation.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through three instruments: (1) a speaking assessment rubric evaluating five dimensions — fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and interaction; (2) structured classroom observation checklists; and (3) a reflective teaching journal maintained throughout the intervention period. Inter-rater reliability was established through independent double-scoring of a random subsample ( $r = .88$ ), confirming acceptable levels of consistency.

### **Data Analysis**

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and paired-samples *t*-tests, with a significance level set at  $\alpha = .05$ . Qualitative data from observations and the teaching journal were analyzed thematically following the framework of Braun and Clarke (2006), allowing for triangulation of findings across data sources.

## **3. RESULTS**

### **Speaking Performance**

Pre- and post-intervention scores were compared across all five dimensions of the speaking assessment rubric. As presented in Table 1, statistically significant gains were recorded in every dimension ( $p < .001$ ). The largest improvements were observed in interaction (+1.43) and fluency (+1.17), while pronunciation showed the smallest but still significant gain (+0.76).

**Table 1. Pre- and Post-Intervention Speaking Assessment Scores**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Pre-Test Mean</b>	<b>Post-Test Mean</b>	<b>Mean Gain</b>
Fluency	2.44	3.61	<b>+1.17</b>
Pronunciation	2.58	3.34	<b>+0.76</b>
Vocabulary	2.71	3.69	<b>+0.98</b>
Grammar	2.63	3.47	<b>+0.84</b>



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Dimension	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	Mean Gain
Interaction	2.31	3.74	+1.43

Note. All improvements were statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ). Scores are based on a 5-point rubric.

### Engagement and Participation

Classroom observation data revealed a substantial increase in active student participation across the intervention period. Student talk time rose from 32% at the outset to 63% by the end of the 14-week program, representing a near-doubling of learner-generated output. Voluntary speaking contributions showed an even more dramatic increase, rising from a mean of 4.2 per lesson to 27.4 per lesson — an increase of more than sixfold. Overall, 70% of students demonstrated major improvement in observable engagement and willingness to communicate.

### Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of classroom observation notes and the reflective teaching journal yielded three recurring themes that illuminate the mechanisms through which interactive methods influenced learner behavior:

- **Reduced anxiety through role-play:** Students reported and demonstrated noticeably lower levels of speaking anxiety when engaging in role-play activities, as the adoption of alternative personas appeared to reduce the personal stakes of communication.
- **Peer support in group discussions:** Collaborative group tasks fostered mutual encouragement and scaffolding, enabling students to take communicative risks in a supportive social environment.
- **Increased motivation through competition:** The competitive element of language games was consistently associated with heightened learner engagement and sustained motivation throughout the activity.

### 4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that systematically implemented interactive methods can significantly enhance both speaking performance and learner engagement among intermediate-level seventh-grade EFL students. The consistent gains across all five dimensions of the speaking rubric provide strong quantitative evidence that communicative classroom activities, when carefully designed and sequenced, produce measurable improvements in oral language proficiency.

The strongest gains were recorded in fluency and interaction — the two dimensions most directly dependent on spontaneous, real-time communication. This pattern aligns with the core principles of communicative language teaching (Harmer, 2007), which emphasizes the role of meaningful practice in developing productive language use. Unlike form-focused drilling, interactive methods appear to engage learners in the kind of authentic communicative processing that promotes fluency over time.

The affective dimension of the findings is equally significant. The dramatic increase in voluntary contributions — from 4.2 to 27.4 per lesson — and the reduction in observable speaking anxiety support Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, which



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holds that lower anxiety and higher motivation facilitate language acquisition by reducing the psychological barriers to intake. Role-play, in particular, appears to serve as a powerful mechanism for anxiety reduction, as it permits learners to distance themselves from the personal vulnerability inherent in direct self-expression.

The peer support observed during group discussions is consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, wherein language development is understood as a fundamentally social process. By co-constructing language within their Zone of Proximal Development, students were able to engage in communicative tasks that might have been beyond their individual capacity, while simultaneously developing the interactional competence necessary for real-world communication.

However, while interactive methods proved highly effective, it is important to acknowledge that structured input may still play a complementary role, particularly for students at the lower end of the A2 band who require explicit guidance on form and function. A balanced approach integrating both communicative and form-focused instruction is therefore likely to be most effective across the full range of intermediate learners.

### **Limitations**

Several limitations should be noted when interpreting these findings. First, the absence of a control group means that observed improvements cannot be attributed exclusively to the intervention; maturation and other contextual factors cannot be ruled out. Second, the study was conducted in a specific school context in Uzbekistan, and findings may not generalize to other educational settings or cultural environments. Third, as the researcher was also the classroom teacher, potential bias in observation and assessment cannot be entirely eliminated, despite the use of inter-rater reliability measures.

### **5. CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrates that interactive, student-centered methods — specifically role-play and drama, structured group discussions, and language games — can produce statistically significant and practically meaningful improvements in speaking performance among intermediate-level adolescent EFL learners. Beyond measurable gains in fluency, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and interaction, the intervention achieved a profound transformation in classroom dynamics, shifting the learning environment from passive reception to active, communicative participation.

These findings carry important implications for EFL pedagogy in lower secondary contexts. Teachers are encouraged to move beyond controlled, form-focused speaking activities and to incorporate structured opportunities for meaningful interaction as a regular and central component of language instruction. The practical accessibility of the three methods studied — requiring no specialist equipment and minimal preparation — makes this approach feasible across a wide range of school settings.

Future research should address the limitations of the current study by incorporating control group designs, extending the intervention period, and examining the long-term retention of speaking gains. Cross-cultural replication studies would also contribute to a



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broader understanding of the generalizability of these findings across different EFL contexts.

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