



# Pedagogical Challenges in Teaching Speaking Skills to Advanced Efl Learners in Four Beninese Secondary Schools Selected in the Ouémé Department

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**Abstract:** The present study entitled attempts to point out both teachers' and learners' perceptions of speaking problems in EFL classes. It thus proposes to study the way speaking skills are fostered in these classes. To reach its goals, a sample of 25 EFL teachers and 80 EFL learners has been selected through both simple random and purposeful sampling methods. Then, both quantitative and qualitative techniques such as questionnaire, interview and observation have been used for data collection. The findings reveal that the majority of learners like the English language, and most teachers are knowledgeable about the importance of speaking skills, as well as the strategies to teach them. Paradoxically, they fail in using those strategies efficiently, which is due to the lack of training of some of the teachers and the lack of experience in others. Such a situation urges mainly teachers to reinforce their abilities through training, immersion trip, regular practice of speaking and listening in order to solve the speaking problems their EFL learners frequently encounter.

**Key words:** EFL advanced learners, EFL teachers, Ouémé department, Speaking Skills, perceptions.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

English is one of the core subjects taught in Beninese secondary schools, where learners receive seven years of instruction before entering university. Such a long period of exposure should ideally enable students to communicate effectively, yet the reality shows otherwise. Many learners, even at advanced levels, continue to experience serious difficulties in oral communication. This paradox suggests that English is too often taught as a subject for examinations rather than as a lifelong communication tool. As Harmer (2001) reminds us, speaking requires more than linguistic knowledge; it involves processing language spontaneously and interacting meaningfully. In the same vein, Richards and Renandya (2002) emphasise the complexity of speaking as it serves multiple purposes such as persuasion, clarification and negotiation. These insights highlight the reasons why learners in Benin, despite sustained exposure to English, remain weak in oral communication, as frequently observed in national oral examinations like the *Brevet d'Études du Premier Cycle* (O'-Level) and the *Baccalauréat* (A-Level).

A major explanation for this gap lies in classroom practice and teacher preparation. Although many teachers acknowledge the centrality of speaking and are familiar with communicative strategies, their implementation often remains limited. In practice, grammar translation, textbook-driven lessons and exam-focused approaches overshadow opportunities for oral interaction. Learners, for their part, face structural obstacles such as large class sizes, limited exposure to authentic English and scarce chances for meaningful conversation outside the classroom. These issues persist despite the worldwide promotion of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which has demonstrated that oral proficiency improves when students participate in interactive, learner-centred tasks (Brown, 2001; Moon, 2000). Consequently, a mismatch persists between Benin's educational goals—preparing students to use

English as a global communication tool—and the outcomes observed in learners’ communicative competence.

Against this background, the present study investigates problems related to the teaching of speaking to advanced EFL learners in four selected secondary schools of the Ouémé Department. It focuses on both teachers’ and learners’ perceptions of the challenges involved. It also examines how speaking is actually fostered in classroom practices. The study seeks to answer the following research questions: How do teachers perceive the importance of speaking and the strategies to teach it? How do learners perceive their own speaking abilities and difficulties? How are speaking skills fostered in practice? Finally, what factors hinder effective teaching of speaking in Beninese schools?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to identifying the gaps between awareness and practice, and suggests practical ways forward. Its significance lies in providing teachers with insights for improving their classroom strategies, informing training programmes that emphasise oral communication, and enriching the broader debate on the teaching of English in francophone Africa, where the language is increasingly valued as a tool for social mobility and development.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The teaching of speaking skills in EFL classrooms has been widely discussed by scholars who emphasize the importance of oral communication for language acquisition. Speaking, as Harmer (2001, p. 269) asserts, is not merely the mastery of linguistic forms but the ability to process and produce language spontaneously. In the Beninese EFL context, learners frequently demonstrate difficulty in expressing themselves orally despite years of study. This fact holds to classroom practices where learners are passive recipients rather than active participants in meaningful communication (Brown, 2001, p. 270). Therefore, effective teaching of speaking requires strategies that actively engage learners, reduce anxiety, and promote confidence and participation (Richards & Renandya, 2002, p. 201).

One of the major challenges in teaching speaking is learner inhibition. According to My Guru English (2010), students may fear making mistakes, losing face, or being criticized, which limits their willingness to speak. Suggested solutions include using group or pair work to increase the amount of learner talk, providing opportunities for low-stakes communication, and designing activities that encourage equal participation. Similarly, Celce-Murcia (2001, p. 85) emphasizes that motivation plays a critical role; students need meaningful, engaging activities that stimulate interest and reduce reliance on the mother tongue. Activities such as discussions, role-plays, and information gap exercises are especially effective in encouraging learners to speak while fostering collaboration and interactive learning (Harmer, 1984, p. 112; Terry, 2008, p. 15).

Another problem affecting oral communication is students having “nothing to say” or lacking the vocabulary to tell their mind. To overcome this, teachers should introduce or review essential vocabulary before speaking activities and choose topics appropriate to learners’ linguistic levels (My Guru English, 2010). Ellis (2005, p. 142) also stresses reducing task difficulty, providing adequate preparation time, and encouraging collaborative problem-solving to support reluctant speakers. When students feel prepared and equipped, their confidence rises, making them more willing to participate actively in class discussions and oral tasks (Nation, 2007, p. 54).

Classroom management is equally critical in promoting speaking. Tsiplakides and Keramida (2010, p. 67) argue that students often speak in their first language during pair or group activities if the task is uninteresting or too challenging. To counter this, teachers should carefully design tasks, provide clear instructions, and monitor participation. Tsui (1996, p. 160) adds that peer support, positive reinforcement, and structured interaction help learners practice language safely and effectively. Furthermore, maintaining a learner-centered classroom, where students do most of the talking, has been shown to enhance both communicative competence and learner engagement (Long & Richards, 1987, p. 33).

Practical classroom techniques have been extensively proposed to foster speaking. Harmer (1984, p. 120; 2001, p. 272) and Terry (2008, p. 18) highlight activities such as role-plays, simulations, storytelling, interviews, and brainstorming, which allow learners to produce language authentically and interactively. For example, role-play activities enable students to assume various social roles, reducing self-consciousness and promoting fluency, while storytelling encourages creative expression and logical sequencing of ideas. Similarly, picture-based tasks and information gap exercises stimulate

imagination and require learners to articulate their thoughts clearly, increasing both confidence and competence in speaking (Celce-Murcia, 2001, p. 87; Ellis, 2005, p. 145). Finally, effective teaching also depends on teacher preparedness and classroom dynamics. Martin (1994, p. 45) outlines principles for successful EFL teaching, emphasizing vocabulary teaching, enthusiasm, humor, student-centered instruction, and constructive feedback. Nation (2007, p. 56) and Ellis (2005, p. 150) further suggest that teachers should promote positive attitudes, reduce learner anxiety, and provide opportunities for English communication outside the classroom. Integrating these pedagogical principles ensures that learners develop not only linguistic proficiency but also the communicative skills necessary for real-life situations. In summary, a combination of well-structured, interactive activities, supportive classroom management, as well as motivated and, resourceful teaching form the cornerstone of effective speaking instruction in EFL contexts (Brown, 2001, p. 275; Harmer, 2001, p. 274).

### **3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The teaching of speaking skills in EFL classrooms is anchored in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) theory, which emphasizes learner-centered instruction and meaningful communication (Harmer, 2001, p. 269; Richards & Renandya, 2002, p. 201). CLT arose from the recognition that language learning is not merely the acquisition of grammatical rules and vocabulary but the development of communicative competence to interact effectively in real-life contexts (Brown, 2001, p. 270). Within this framework, speaking is viewed as an interactive process that requires learners to negotiate meaning, process information on the spot, and convey their ideas fluently (Harmer, 2001, p. 272). Therefore, teaching speaking effectively involves creating opportunities for learners to participate actively, express opinions, and respond appropriately in various communicative situations.

A second theoretical perspective guiding this study is the Affective Filter Hypothesis proposed by Krashen (1982). According to this theory, learner anxiety, inhibition, and low motivation can act as filters that impede language acquisition. As highlighted in the literature, many EFL learners in Beninese secondary schools are inhibited, fear making mistakes, and rely heavily on their mother tongue during classroom interactions (My Guru English, 2010; Celce-Murcia, 2001, p. 85). Strategies such as pair and group work, role-plays, and structured discussion activities are thus grounded in the notion that lowering the affective filter promotes greater student engagement and enhances oral proficiency (Ellis, 2005, p. 142; Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2010, p. 67).

The framework also draws on Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), which emphasizes learning through the completion of meaningful tasks rather than isolated linguistic exercises (Ellis, 2005, p. 145; Nation, 2007, p. 54). Tasks such as storytelling, information-gap exercises, interviews, and picture-based activities provide learners with authentic opportunities to practice speaking while reinforcing vocabulary, grammar, and interactional skills. This approach aligns with the principle that students learn language most effectively when they are actively involved in performing tasks that simulate real-life communicative contexts, fostering fluency, accuracy, and confidence (Harmer, 1984, p. 120; Terry, 2008, p. 18).

Finally, the framework incorporates Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), emphasizing the social nature of language learning. According to this perspective, learners acquire linguistic competence through interaction with more knowledgeable peers and teachers, where scaffolding and guided participation are key (Tsui, 1996, p. 160). In the EFL classroom, activities such as pair work, group discussions, and peer feedback provide structured opportunities for social interaction, enabling learners to internalize linguistic forms and strategies while developing communicative confidence (Celce-Murcia, 2001, p. 87; Ellis, 2005, p. 150). Thus, the integration of communicative, task-based, and sociocultural principles forms the theoretical foundation for understanding the challenges and solutions related to teaching speaking to advanced EFL learners in Benin.

In conclusion, the theoretical framework guiding this study combines CLT, affective filter theory, task-based approaches, and sociocultural perspectives to explain learners' difficulties in oral communication and to justify pedagogical interventions. These theories collectively emphasize the importance of meaningful interaction, motivation, learner-centered instruction, and social scaffolding as essential elements in fostering speaking skills among advanced EFL learners. This framework provides a lens through which the research examines classroom practices, identifies challenges, and proposes strategies to enhance oral proficiency in Beninese secondary schools.

#### **4. METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH**

This section presents the methodology employed to investigate the teaching of speaking to advanced EFL learners in four selected secondary schools of the Ouémé department. It includes a description of the target population, research instruments, design, and procedures used to collect and analyze data. The study aims to identify the factors contributing to learners’ difficulties in oral communication and to examine the strategies teachers use to foster speaking skills in the classroom. The target population for this study comprised EFL teachers and advanced EFL learners from five public secondary schools: CEG 1 Dangbo, CEG 1 Missérété, CEG d’Application and CEG Kessounou-kodonou. The learners included third- and fourth-year students of the first cycle of secondary education, chosen for their sufficient experience in learning English. The sample consisted of 30 teachers and 80 learners. Teachers were selected because of their first-hand experience with students’ speaking difficulties and their knowledge of classroom practices, while learners were included to provide insight into the challenges they encounter and the effectiveness of speaking activities in their English classes.

Data were collected using multiple instruments to ensure triangulation and reliability. Questionnaires were administered to both teachers and learners, with 25 teacher responses and 80 learner responses ultimately collected. Teachers’ questionnaires explored their qualifications, teaching experience, frequency of speaking instruction, types of speaking activities used, and classroom assessment practices. Learners’ questionnaires examined their attitudes toward English, participation in speaking activities, language used in and out of the classroom, and availability of language resources such as English clubs or language labs. In addition, interviews were conducted with pedagogical advisors, inspectors, and lecturers to gather expert perspectives on learners’ speaking difficulties and effective classroom strategies. Class observations were also carried out in CEG 1 Dangbo and CEG 1 Missérété to assess classroom practices, including warming-up activities, grouping strategies, task instructions, and materials used to present lessons and vocabulary.

The study adopted a mixed-method design, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches. Qualitative data from interviews and observations were analyzed thematically to identify patterns and causes of speaking difficulties, while quantitative data from questionnaires were analyzed statistically to measure frequencies, trends, and relationships among variables (Aliaga & Gunderson, 2000). The research was conducted during the 2019–2020 school year, with visits to the selected schools to administer questionnaires, conduct interviews, and observe classes. Both learners and teachers participated actively in the data collection process, providing valuable insights into classroom practices, teaching strategies, and the challenges faced in promoting oral proficiency in EFL classrooms.

#### **5. DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS**

This section presents the results of the study and provides a critical analysis of the data collected from the research instruments. The sources of data were observations, interviews and questionnaires administered to both EFL teachers and learners, which allowed for a comprehensive examination of classroom practices, learners’ speaking difficulties, and strategies employed to promote oral proficiency. The findings are displayed through statistical tables and figures, followed by interpretative analysis. The presentation of results is organized according to the structure of the questionnaires, ensuring a clear alignment between the data collected and the research questions guiding this study.

##### **5.1. Presentation and Analysis of Data from EFL Teachers**

**Table1.** *EFL teachers’ perceptions about the speaking skills*

Question 1: Participants’ Frequency in Teaching the Speaking Skills			Question 2: Participants’ Use of Teaching Skills			Question 3: About Learners’ Opportunities of Practising Fluency and Accuracy in the EFL Classroom		
Answers	Numb.	Percent.	Answers	Numb.	Percent.	Answers	Numb.	Percent.
No	00	00%	Always	25	100%	No	20	80%
Yes	25	100%	Sometimes	00	00%	Yes	05	20%
Total	25	100%	Never	00	00%	Total	25	100%
			Total	25	100%			

The above table informs that all the EFL teachers participating in the study tick “Yes” for question 1 to mean that EFL they all know the importance of the speaking skills and consequently make effort to

teach them to their learners. Then, to the second question, they all, i.e., 100 % of the participants acknowledge that they always teach speaking skills in the EFL Classroom. This suggests that most EFL Teachers in the selected secondary schools know the importance of Speaking Skills and teach them on a regular basis in their classrooms. In order to check the outcome these EFL teachers' declarations, the following question inspects the reason why the EFL learners show poor performance in oral communication.

As for question, 80 % of the participants answer "No" to indicate that a few cases (i.e., 20%) of learners who are supposed to be fluent and accurate in oral communication. The majority of EFL learners certainly have problems with fluency and accuracy. That is, these EFL learners show serious difficulty in oral communication as the EFL teacher participants confess it during interview. According to the participants' the factors that explain their learners poor performance in oral communication is that most of them are poor in vocabulary and pronunciation. Therefore, they always fear making mistakes if they are asked to speak English during oral activities. Thus, they think that English is too difficult for them without acknowledging that such attitude decreases their accuracy and fluency in speaking. Briefly, the EFL teachers report that their learners are confronted with the problem of inhibition, fear of being mocked at by their mates, fear of mispronunciation, fluency, deficit in vocabulary, to mention just a few.

**Table 2.** *EFL teachers position regarding EFL learners' speaking skills development*

Question 4: Learners' behaviours during speaking activities			Question 5: Assessing speaking in the classroom			Question 6: Responsibilities for learners' poor performance in oral communication		
Answers	Numb.	Percent.	Answers	Numb.	Percent.	Answers	Numb.	Percent.
Sleeping	03	12 %	No	20	20%	Learners	06	24%
Chatting	12	48 %	Yes	05	80%	Teachers	11	44%
Agitation	04	16 %	Total	25	100%	Parents & school administration	03	12%
Showing no interest	06	24%				Government	05	20%
Total	25	100%				Total	25	100%

First, the above table reveals some of the problems and situations that are likely to impede learners speaking development. Concerning the first aspect, it is openly remarked that learners' attitudes during oral activities are not conducive to the development of speaking skills. In fact, 12 % of the learners sleep in the classroom during speaking activities, while 48 % of the them chat, 16% of them are restless, and 24 % are said to be interested in speaking activities. In light of these results, one can question the quality of those speaking activities and how they are implemented in classroom. One may assume here that these learners are not well exposed to the English language.

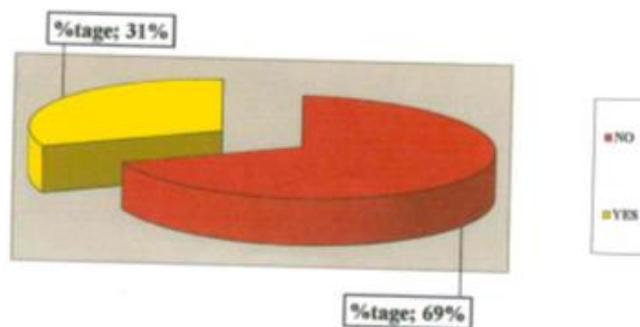
Second, regarding the testing mechanism of EFL teachers, the same table reveals that the majority of the learners' speaking skills are not tested or assessed during semestrial evaluations. The above results show that 80 % of the EFL teachers do not assess speaking in their classroom as they responded "No" arguing that oral performance is not taken into account during classroom evaluation or National Exams, except when candidates are successful in the Written Exam. They postulate that apart from those national oral examinations for successful candidates for BEPC or Baccalauréat exams, speaking is not a criterion to do well in English classroom. Then, appears the necessity to situate the responsibility for learners' poor performance.

Third, the same findings reveal that 24% of respondents attribute the responsibility for learners' poor performance in oral communication to the learners themselves, while 44% attribute it to the EFL teachers. Moreover, 12% of participants consider parents and school administration accountable, 20% blame the government. Overall, the data suggest that EFL teachers tend to hold multiple stakeholders responsible for learners' poor oral communication skills.

## **5.2. Presentation and Analysis of Data from EFL Learners**

In fact, the majority (i.e., 63/80) of the advanced EFL learners likes the English subject as they generally grow enthusiastic about learning English in their first years at secondary school. Unlike, their minority (i.e. 17/80) says they do not like English. Since the majority declares their love to English as subject, the next question is oriented towards their attitude towards oral communication in English.

Question2: Do you like speaking English?



**Figure1.** Learners' Attitude about Spoken English

The above figure shows that 69 % of the Participants do not like speaking the English language whereas 31% of them like English. The participants' responses referred to the previous ones show a curious paradox and make anybody to wonder how can the same learners like a language and dislike speaking it at a time? This sounds difficult to understand. From this notice, it can be assumed that something matter with either the learners or their teachers. We may question what is missing in the teaching-learning-evaluating process and is responsible for this situation. Such a contradictory situation can rightly cause to question the teaching-learning objectives of the English language in those secondary schools under study to see whether English is taught simply for grading purpose or for communicative purpose via the development of learners' speaking skills. Other aspects regards the teachers teaching methods and the learners active participation in the teaching-learning process with a special focus on speaking.

**Table 3.** EFL learners and teachers attitudes about the spoken English

Question 3: Do you have opportunities to speak English out of the Language Classroom?			Question 4: What Language do you usually speak with your schoolmates?			Question 6: Does your English teacher mock at you when you give a wrong answer?		
Answers	Numb.	Percent.	Answers	Numb.	Percent.	Answers	Numb.	Percent.
Yes	03	11 %	English	00	00%	Yes	45	56%
No	12	89 %	French	15	19%	No	35	44%
Total	80	100%	Mother tongue	65	81%	Total	80	100%
			Total	80	100%			

First, the above Table 3 informs that 89 % of the students recognized having no opportunity to speak English out of the language classroom, whereas 11 % answered "Yes". It can be inferred from is that the majority of the learners speak their Mother tongue out of classroom since the linguistic context encourages it. Second, the same table reveals that 81 % of the students involved in this study speak their "Mother tongue" with their schoolmates while 19% only speak "French" and 00% use "English". Third, it is revealed in the above table that 56% of the learners recognize that they are mocked at by their teachers incase they fail to provide a good or correct answer as they try to speak English in class whereas 43 % of the participants reject such a humiliating practice from their teachers. This reveals that some teachers continue to demotivate their students by humiliating them when the latter, in their effort to learn the language, make mistakes. Those teachers are accountable for their students' disgust towards the English Language, since they do not allow them to learn by error. By the way, it should recognized that none of the schools involved in the investigation is equipped with a Language Laboratoy. In addition, none of the schools at stake has set up an English club. However, this is necessary to encourage learners to keep on with Oral English out of classroom.

The following section of discussion highlights key trends, recurring challenges, and the effectiveness of teaching practices in enhancing learners' speaking abilities, providing insight into the dynamics of EFL classrooms in the selected secondary schools.

## 6. DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Of the thirty (30) questionnaires administered to EFL teachers, twenty-five (25) were duly completed and returned, thereby constituting a sufficiently robust dataset for systematic analysis. The findings

elucidate salient patterns in pedagogical orientations, the frequency and typology of speaking activities implemented, and the instructional strategies mobilized to foster learners' fluency and accuracy. Moreover, the analysis underscores persistent challenges constraining learners' oral performance, notably limited classroom participation, dependence on the mother tongue, and difficulties in generating spontaneous speech. Interpreted through the lens of the research questions, these results yield a nuanced account of the multifaceted factors shaping EFL learners' speaking competence and delineate pedagogical implications for the enhancement of instructional practices and the promotion of more interactive, communicatively oriented classroom environments.

The analysis of data collected from questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations highlights significant challenges in the teaching and learning of EFL speaking skills in the selected secondary schools i.e. CEG 1 Dangbo, CEG 1 Missérété, CEG d'Application and CEG Kessounou-kodonou. Classroom observations revealed that noisy, poorly managed classrooms hinder the effective implementation of speaking activities. Teachers often struggle with discipline issues, limiting learners' opportunities to speak English freely (Harmer, 2007). This context-specific challenge confirms that, despite the availability of teaching strategies, the classroom environment in these schools does not always facilitate oral communication, which is critical for language acquisition. Another key finding is the lack of formal assessment of oral skills. In the observed schools, students are rarely evaluated on speaking performance, reflecting a broader trend in Benin where English is often taught as a subject primarily for written examinations rather than as a medium of communication (Nunan, 1991). Consequently, learners are not sufficiently motivated to practice speaking outside classroom settings. Interviews with teachers and retired pedagogical advisors revealed that the absence of English clubs and language-focused extracurricular activities further limits learners' exposure to authentic language use. The social and linguistic context, dominated by French in both school and home environments, discourages learners from practicing English informally, reinforcing the findings of Swain (1985) regarding the importance of real-life practice in developing oral proficiency.

Teacher qualifications and professional preparation also emerged as a contextual factor influencing learners' speaking outcomes. Most EFL teachers in the case-study schools hold bachelor's or master's degrees, yet few have received in-service training focused on oral communication. As a result, their pedagogical strategies often lack creativity, adaptability, and learner-centered approaches, which are essential for fostering fluency and accuracy (Celce-Murcia, 2001). Observations showed that teachers rarely use structured role-plays, information-gap activities, or guided discussions in a way that maximizes student participation, leading to uneven speaking opportunities among learners. Moreover, the lack of resources such as language labs and instructional materials specific to oral practice was evident in the schools studied. Teachers reported that activities requiring simulation, storytelling, or field trips are seldom practiced due to budgetary and logistical constraints. This limitation directly affects learners' opportunities to practice English in meaningful contexts, corroborating Ellis's (2005) assertion that scaffolded, resource-supported activities are essential for communicative competence. The combination of these contextual challenges — classroom management, teacher preparation, limited resources, and the socio-linguistic environment — explains the persistent difficulties students face in oral communication. In conclusion, the case study context highlights that improving EFL speaking skills in Beninese secondary schools requires more than classroom-based strategies. Effective intervention should combine teacher professional development, structured oral assessments, and the creation of English-rich environments both in and outside the classroom. By addressing these context-specific factors, learners can develop confidence and fluency in speaking, aligning instructional practices with the broader goal of communicative competence in English (Tsui, 1996; Medeghan, personal communication, 2020).

## **7. CONCLUSION**

This study has examined the challenges of teaching speaking to advanced EFL learners in four selected secondary schools in the Ouémé Department. The findings from questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations revealed that teacher-centered practices, low learner participation, and frequent use of the mother tongue limit students' opportunities to develop oral communication skills. The lack of formal oral assessments, language labs, and English clubs further reduces learners' exposure to practical language use, reinforcing an exam-focused rather than communicative approach to English learning (Celce-Murcia, 2001; Nation, 2007).

The investigation also highlighted that EFL teachers face significant challenges due to insufficient pedagogical training, limited in-service professional development, and classroom management issues. These factors negatively affect their ability to implement effective speaking activities, resulting in learners' low confidence, poor fluency, and restricted oral output (Swain, 1985; Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2010). Nevertheless, structured communicative tasks such as role-plays, discussions, and information gap activities were shown to enhance learner motivation, participation, and speaking performance when properly implemented (Harmer, 1984; Ellis, 2005).

Overall, enhancing EFL learners' speaking skills requires a combination of teacher preparation, learner-centered instructional strategies, and increased opportunities for oral practice both inside and outside the classroom. Schools should prioritize communicative activities, provide language labs, and establish English clubs to create an environment conducive to meaningful language use. By addressing these factors, the gap between learners' potential and actual oral performance can be narrowed, fostering a more dynamic, engaging, and effective English language learning experience.

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