



Original article

## Effective Classroom Strategies to Reduce Speaking Anxiety: A Gender-Based Study among Iraqi EFL Students

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores one of the main obstacles to Iraqi EFL learners' oral performance—speaking anxiety—and investigates the effectiveness of several classroom strategies in reducing it. The strategies included small group work, role play, guided speaking with positive feedback, and technology-based recording. Using a quasi-experimental design, 120 third-year Iraqi EFL students were divided into experimental and control groups. Data were collected through a modified version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and structured oral performance tests. Results revealed that the experimental group experienced a 38% reduction in speaking anxiety and showed significant improvement in oral performance, particularly in fluency, accuracy, and confidence, compared with the control group. Gender did not significantly affect the results, although female students initially reported higher anxiety levels. The study emphasizes the importance of integrating interactive, supportive, and technology-assisted approaches in Iraqi EFL classrooms and encourages gender-sensitive pedagogical practices for more effective language teaching.

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**Keywords:** Speaking anxiety, oral performance, Iraqi EFL students, classroom strategies, gender perspective

## استراتيجيات صفيّة فعّالة للحدّ من قلق التحدّث: دراسة قائمة على النوع الاجتماعي بين طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في العراق

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### المُستخلص

تُعَدُّ مشكلة قلق التحدّث من أبرز التحديات التي تواجه الطلبة العراقيين في تعلّم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، لما لها من تأثير مباشر على أدائهم الشفهي. هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى استقصاء أثر عدد من الاستراتيجيات الصفيّة، مثل العمل الجماعي المصغّر، وتمثيل الأدوار، والتحدّث الموجّه مع التغذية الراجعة الإيجابية، واستخدام التسجيلات القائمة على التكنولوجيا، في خفض مستوى القلق وتحسين الأداء الشفهي من حيث الطلاقة، والدقة، والثقة بالنفس. استخدمت الدراسة المنهج شبه التجريبي على عينة مكوّنة من (120) طالبًا وطالبة من المرحلة الثالثة قُسموا إلى مجموعتين: تجريبية وضابطة. تم جمع البيانات باستخدام نسخة معدّلة من مقياس قلق صف تعلم اللغة إلى جانب اختبارات الأداء الشفهي المنظمة. أظهرت النتائج انخفاض مستوى القلق بنسبة 38% لدى المجموعة التجريبية، مع تحسن ملموس في الأداء مقارنة بالمجموعة الضابطة، دون وجود فروق معنوية بين الذكور والإناث. وتشير الدراسة إلى أن تطبيق استراتيجيات تفاعلية مدعومة بالتكنولوجيا، إلى جانب نهج تربوي حساس للنوع الاجتماعي، يمثل عاملاً أساسياً في تعزيز تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية في السياق العراقي، من خلال تحسين الثقة بالنفس والطلاقة والدقة الشفوية لدى الطلاب.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** قلق التحدّث، الأداء الشفهي، طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية في العراق، الاستراتيجيات الصفيّة، المنظور القائم على النوع الاجتماعي.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background of the Study

Speaking is widely recognized as one of the most challenging skills for EFL learners, particularly in contexts like Iraq where limited exposure to English often restricts students' oral practice. Both educational conditions and sociocultural expectations strongly influence how willing learners are to speak in front of peers and instructors (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Consequently, many students experience oral performance anxiety—commonly referred to as speaking anxiety—which negatively affects their participation in classroom communication activities and hinders the development of communicative competence (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986).

In the Iraqi context, this issue becomes even more pronounced. Students often avoid taking linguistic risks due to fear of making mistakes, social pressure, and concerns regarding negative evaluation, which collectively reduce their opportunities to express themselves freely in English (Al-Khafaji, 2020). Furthermore, gender can play a significant role in shaping learners' anxiety: studies indicate that female students tend to report higher levels of apprehension, often linked to cultural norms and a heightened fear of misunderstanding (Aida, 1994; Oxford, 1999). Male students may also experience anxiety, though influenced by different expectations and classroom roles (Scovel, 1978). Understanding these gender-based variations is essential when designing supportive pedagogical environments.

A number of in-class strategies have been shown to help minimize speaking anxiety and foster active participation. These include small-group activities, role-playing, guided speaking tasks supported with feedback, and technology-enhanced practices such as audio or video performance recordings (Thornbury, 2005; Burden, 2015). Incorporating such approaches meaningfully into the Iraqi EFL classroom has the potential not only to reduce anxiety but also to strengthen learners' oral proficiency and confidence in real communicative situations (Al-Khafaji, 2020).

### **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Many Iraqi EFL learners struggle with speaking anxiety during classroom interactions, which manifests through hesitation, avoidance of participation, disrupted fluency, and reduced self-confidence. Due to limited opportunities for authentic communication outside school, students rely almost entirely on classroom activities for oral practice. When anxiety interferes with these activities, their speaking development is significantly constrained.

Although the phenomenon of speaking anxiety has been widely investigated, existing research has underrepresented male students and has rarely explored gender-based disparities in responsiveness to intervention strategies. This gap is particularly relevant in Iraq, where cultural influences may differently shape male and female learners' perceptions of speaking in English.

Therefore, the present study investigates the extent to which classroom-based practices can help reduce speaking anxiety and improve oral performance among Iraqi EFL students. Additionally, it examines whether these effects differ according to gender, aiming to provide a deeper understanding of affective factors that shape speaking outcomes in the Iraqi context.

### **1.3 Significance of the Study**

This study carries several pedagogical and academic contributions. For students, the findings are expected to help alleviate speaking anxiety and foster confidence, fluency, and overall communicative competence. For teachers, the study offers practical strategies to encourage active participation and create a supportive speaking environment.

From a research perspective, this study adds experimental evidence to the current literature by addressing gender variation in speaking anxiety and intervention effectiveness within the Iraqi EFL context—an area that remains underexplored. The results may also guide curriculum designers toward developing instructional activities and materials that promote learner engagement and reduce affective obstacles to speaking.

Ultimately, the study aims to enhance the quality of oral communication instruction in Iraq by identifying effective classroom strategies that empower all learners, regardless of gender, to use English more confidently and proficiently.

### **1.4 Aims of the Study**

The primary aim of this study is to examine the effectiveness of classroom-based speaking strategies in reducing speaking anxiety among Iraqi EFL learners. It also seeks to investigate how lowering anxiety levels can influence students' oral performance, particularly in terms of fluency, accuracy,

and confidence during speaking tasks. In addition, the study aims to determine whether gender differences play a significant role not only in the initial levels of speaking anxiety but also in the extent to which male and female learners respond to these instructional interventions.

### **1.5 Research Questions**

In light of the issues discussed above, this study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. How effective are classroom-speaking practices in lowering the level of speaking anxiety experienced by Iraqi EFL learners?
2. In what ways can a decrease in speaking anxiety contribute to better oral performance, especially in terms of fluency, accuracy, and self-confidence?
3. Do male and female students differ in their levels of speaking anxiety and in how they respond to the strategies used to help them participate more comfortably in speaking activities?

### **1.6 Research Hypotheses**

Based on these aims, the study proposes the following hypotheses:

1. Classroom-based speaking strategies will significantly reduce speaking anxiety among Iraqi EFL learners.
2. Reducing speaking anxiety will significantly improve learners' oral performance in terms of fluency, accuracy, and confidence.
3. There will be statistically significant gender differences in initial anxiety levels and in students' responsiveness to the intervention.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Oral Performance Anxiety in the Iraqi EFL Context**

Oral performance anxiety is one of the most important psychological obstacles in the way of Iraqi EFL students when seeking to use English for communication. This kind of anxiety is especially strong in the situation where English is learned as a foreign language and there are few, if any, opportunities to interact authentically outside of the classroom. Previous research has reported that Iraqi students perceive linguistic, psychological, and social problems while dealing with the OR. They also reported elevated speaking anxiety among learners (Naeem & Saad, 2020). Insufficient vocabulary, lack of fluency, and limited contact with authentic English input contribute to students' fear of failure at the linguistic level. Psychologically, a lack of self-confidence, low self-concept, and a fear of making mistakes can work against students' involvement in oral work. On the sociocultural level, conventional pedagogical practices, authoritarian teaching techniques, and teacher-centered classroom settings that are centred on power control exacerbate anxiety.

According to Al-Ali (2025), sources of nervousness in public speaking among EFL learners include confidence issues, speaking anxiety, and the pressure to deliver a perfect performance.

Oral performance anxiety manifests not only in the student's reluctance to speak but also in physiological and motor expressions such as shaking, sweating, acceleration of heartbeat, hesitation, avoidant behavior towards speech tasks, or limited class participation. These expressions underscore how profound the problem really is, since speaking anxiety impedes not only the affective but also the cognitive aspect of language learning. Students' experiences are also influenced by gender. Female students experience greater speaking anxiety than males. Students seem to be more oppressed than males, which may be associated with cultural, social, and public fear in the Iraqi situation (Al-Khatib, 2019). It is not that male students are free of speaking anxiety. However, they manifest and experience it differently in terms of intensity and causes, which are influenced by cultural expectations for classroom participation.

Combining all these factors, we see that oral anxiety among Iraqi EFL learners is a complex issue and pedagogic interventions are needed not only for linguistic, psychological, but also for cultural and educational environment where students are located.

## **2.2 Causes of Speaking Anxiety**

Iraqi EFL learners' speaking anxiety also relates to several interconnected factors from linguistic, psychological, and sociocultural domains. Knowing these reasons is important for the design of effective instruction that increases oral participation frequency, amongst learners (Naeem & Saad, 2020).

According to Naeem and Saad (2020), Iraqi EFL students' speaking anxiety is influenced by various factors, including classroom atmosphere, teacher attitudes, limited vocabulary, speaking rate, accent differences, lengthy conversations, and fears of embarrassment and poor performance.

### **2.2.1 Linguistic Factors**

Poor lexical inventory, phonological impairments, and recurrent grammatical mistakes will play a major role in leading students to feel inadequate, hence suppressing their intention to participate in the oral activity (Al-Khabib, 2019). The fear of making mistakes or being evaluated by peers and instructors also hinders active engagement in speaking, creating a feedback loop where less practice prevents the acquisition of oral proficiency.

### **2.2.2 Psychological Factors**

Low self-esteem, perfectionism, and fear of negative judgment are the psychological variables that have significant roles in the triggering of speaking anxiety (Al-Tamimi & Shuib, 2009). Students with weak self-confidence tend to avoid oral involvement, which in turn reduces their chances of practice and improvement. The perfectionist tendencies increase anxiety because students might not speak until they feel prepared, which in turn inhibits the process of attaining fluency.

### **2.2.3 Factors of Sociocultural and Teacher-Related Issues.**

Students in Iraq cannot speak with freedom inside English classes since the sociocultural pressures may prohibit them, and they may get scared of being humiliated by their classmates or being criticized under the established gender norms (Al-Khatib, 2019). Teacher-related work, such as non-

encouragement, autocratic classroom management, and repeated correction, has also been found to exacerbate anxiety (Naeem & Saad, 2020). Conversely, teachers' acts facilitating oral production (e.g., Feedback and positive reinforcement) have been observed to lower the affective filter in speaking activities.

All these issues indicate that speaking anxiety in EFL learners of the Iraqi language is a complicated phenomenon influenced by linguistic competency, psychological features, and sociocultural and educational conditions. To address these issues, pedagogical approaches are needed that confront internal and external barriers to effective speaking.

### **2.3 Impact of Oral Performance and Anxiety.**

The impact of speaking anxiety on learning to speak is large and has terrible consequences in the oral classroom performance of learners in relation to fluency, accuracy, and self-confidence. Students who experience a high level of anxiety exhibit momentary stops, pauses, and sometimes, failure to respond in speaking activities at all (Woodrow, 2006). Said behaviours also limit oral practices, so necessary for the development of communicative competence. There is also the danger of reduced accuracy, as anxious individuals will commit more grammatical errors and draw upon unidiomatic or sparse content, which means they are less effective in communicative performance (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Furthermore, a lack of confidence resulting from speaking anxiety makes the students reluctant to get involved in class activities. Therefore, this impact has implications for the general school performance. The above negative implications indicate the necessity of anti-anxiety-oriented special class activities, which not only reduce students' anxiety but also facilitate their oral proficiency and self-confidence.

### **2.4 Classroom strategies to help reduce anxiety in speaking.**

Various classroom strategies are useful in reducing the level of speaking anxiety, especially among Iraqi EFL students. The strategies are designed to foster a favorable learning environment, enhance learner confidence, and improve oral performance.

#### **2.4.1 Small Group Work**

These smaller groups of 2 to 4 students provide a comfortable setting for practicing oral English in private before they have to stand up and use it in front of the entire class. This will reduce the fear of negative feedback and will motivate potential participants to work collectively. At the same time, it allows students to gain confidence over time by demonstrating success in a non-threatening setting (Horwitz et al., 1986).

#### **2.4.2 Role Play**

Role play introduces a realistic scenario (interview, food ordering, directions) through which students can practice the language in context and with meaning. Such an attitude will induce spontaneity, increase the amount of interaction on the one hand, and reduce fear of practising errors in front of class members, which reduces anxiety (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014).

#### **2.4.3 Guided Speaking with Positive Feedback**

The balance of using structured prompts with a narrow target of feedback within a supportive classroom allows students to target language objectives without losing a sense of community. It reinforces self-confidence by providing organized and structured guidance and encourages students to engage more actively in the oral tasks (Liu & Jackson, 2008).

#### **2.4.4 Technology-Assisted Recording**

Tools that allow students to record audio and video help them practice spoken English out of earshot and in their own time. Such strategies minimize public pressure, encourage self-evaluation, and create a space for learners to observe their progress in fluency and accuracy over time and are part of an extended oral proficiency growth (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014).

#### **2.4.5 Relaxation and Warm-Up Activities**

Students can alleviate pre-speech physiological reactions to anxiety with pre-speaking exercises (e.g., breathing techniques, tongue twisters, or informal speech practice). It is important to have these activities that mentally and physically warm up learners to perform orally; they can induce a more relaxed and better receptive state to communicate (Horwitz et al., 1986).

Taken together, these strategies show that well-designed classroom interventions stand a chance of considerably relieving speaking anxiety, and therefore facilitating a more confident, fluent, and accurate oral performance among Iraqi EFL learners. Employing them is especially applicable wherever language, cognitive, and sociocultural challenges may otherwise impede appropriate classroom participation.

### **2.5 Gender-Sensitive Application and Integration of Techniques in Iraqi EFL Classrooms**

Gender emerged as a salient factor in the responsiveness of students to anxiety-reduction interventions. Gradual exposure and culturally sensitive role plays work understandably well for female students, but male students tend to appreciate interactive or even competitive activities (Al-Khatib, 2019). Acknowledging these differences remains equitable and most effective for classroom strategies, so that every learner can engage and express them with confidence.

The methods described —working in small groups, role play, structured speech with accompanied positive feedback, technology-assisted recording, and relaxation — can easily be incorporated into realistic textbook-based activities, like those we see in Real Listening and Speaking. Structured weekly interventions with these elements provide a safe space, increase task demands incrementally, and provide multiple points of contact with the sources of speaking anxiety. This gender-sensitive and contextualized approach ensures that interventions are practical, relevant, and effective in improving the oral performance of Iraqi EFL learners by understanding the local context in which they are implemented.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Design

This quasi-experimental study is to investigate the effect of some classroom practices in alleviating oral performance anxiety for some Iraqi EFL learners. Gender balanced: Both boys and girls are included for examining whether there are any differences in anxiety and response to interventions by gender.

RAISE is a study comparing two groups of students, one of which is an experimental group that receives specially-designed interventions in the classroom based on some activities from the Real Listening and Speaking textbook, while the other is a control group which continues with usual practice in the classroom with no further intervention. The experimental group interventions include small group work with peer modelling, role play, structured repeat speaking with positive reinforcement, voice recording with technology, speech modelling, and relaxation exercises.

Both groups receive pre-tests and post-tests to measure the impact of the interventions. They assess impacts on speaking anxiety and oral performance of students in terms of fluency, accuracy, and confidence. The current study presents a detailed exploration of the overall impact of these classroom practices on learners' speaking ability and anxiety, through a comparison of both the experimental and control groups data at the outset and following the intervention, which also includes a gender-focused examination between treatment groups.

#### 3.2 Study Population and Participants

Third-year EFL students (200 total) in the morning program at Al-Imam Al-Kadhim College in Baghdad, Iraq taking the Real Listening and Speaking course. One hundred and twenty students participated in the study (60 students in the experimental group and 60 students in the control group).

Inclusion criteria were: being enrolled in the course at the time of assessment, speaking English at an intermediate level, and agreeing to participant in the study. Real Listening and Speaking is a textbook that demonstrates how to develop well reshaped classroom interventions by providing real, relevant speaking tasks, providing a case for both relevant purpose and effective practice. This method of teaching ushers students into an active hands-on oral practice while receiving the needed help in thinking of ways on how to minimize speech anxiety and consequently producing a better oral performance.

#### 3.3 Research Instruments

This study employed two main instruments to collect data, capturing both psychological and practical aspects of oral performance among Iraqi EFL learners.

##### 3.3.1 Modified Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)

The study used a modified version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), originally developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986). The scale includes twenty items, each rated on a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Minor

adjustments were made to adapt the items to the Iraqi classroom context, while preserving the original structure and validity of the scale.

### Administration:

The FLCAS was administered to all participants before and after the classroom intervention. The pre-test assessed students' initial levels of speaking anxiety, and the post-test measured changes following the implementation of classroom strategies. All instructions were given clearly to ensure that students understood each item and responded honestly. A full copy of the adapted FLCAS is provided in Appendix A.

### 3.3.2 Structured Oral Performance Test

Students' speaking performance was evaluated using a standardized rubric focusing on **three dimensions**:

| Criterion         | What Was Measured                                     | Scoring Indicators   |
|-------------------|---|--|
| <b>Fluency</b>    | continuity of speech, hesitation, pauses              | ✓ longer stretches of speech ✓ fewer fillers<br>smooth rhythm                    |
| <b>Accuracy</b>   | correctness of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation | ✓ appropriate structure ✓ correct lexical choice<br>✓ intelligible pronunciation |
| <b>Confidence</b> | comfort and willingness to communicate                | ✓ eye contact ✓ tone stability ✓ reduced avoidance behaviors                     |

Each dimension was scored on a **5-point analytic scale** (1 = very weak, 5 = very strong). To ensure reliability, two trained raters independently scored all performances, and inter-rater agreement was calculated before analysis.

### 3.3.3 Rationale for Using Both Instruments

Combining the FLCAS and the structured oral performance test allows the study to measure both the psychological aspect of speaking anxiety and the practical outcomes in oral performance. This dual approach provides a more holistic understanding of how classroom-based interventions affect Iraqi EFL learners, linking changes in anxiety directly to measurable improvements in fluency, accuracy, and confidence.

## 3.4 Classroom Techniques and Intervention

The intervention lasted eight weeks and was implemented during the regular speaking component of the *Real Listening and Speaking* course. The experimental group met once per week for a 60-minute treatment session delivered by the course instructor. Each session followed a structured sequence designed to gradually reduce speaking anxiety while promoting oral fluency and accuracy:

1. **Warm-up and relaxation (5 minutes):** short breathing or confidence-building exercises to create a low-stress climate.
2. **Modelling stage (10 minutes):** the instructor or a confident peer demonstrated the targeted speaking task.

3. **Guided practice (20 minutes):** students performed the task in pairs or small groups with provided prompts. Peer support and constructive feedback were encouraged.
4. **Independent performance (15 minutes):** students repeated the task with fewer prompts, aiming for improved fluency and precision.
5. **Reflection and feedback (10 minutes):** students discussed what helped them feel more comfortable and how they managed anxiety.

The classroom tasks included storytelling, information-gap activities, role-play dialogues, and short presentations based on weekly textbook topics. To enhance self-monitoring and confidence, students used mobile audio/video recordings to review their own performance privately. Activities increased in complexity across the weeks, allowing learners to take more initiative and speak for longer periods with less reliance on prompts.

### Weekly Intervention Schedule

| Week | Book Topic                        | Daily Activity  | Teaching Technique               | Expected Impact on Anxiety & Fluency  |
|------|-----------------------------------|---|----------------------------------|---|
| 1    | Unit 1 – How are things?          | Day 1: Greeting conversations<br>Day 2: Talking about daily routines<br>Day 3: Group dialogue practice                                  | Small Group Work & Role Play     | Reduce initial speaking anxiety, increase confidence                              |
| 2    | Unit 2 – Can I take your coat?    | Day 1: Listening and speaking in social situations<br>Day 2: Asking/answering polite questions<br>Day 3: Pair role plays                | Active Listening & Simulation    | Lower anxiety in social contexts, improve response speed and fluency              |
| 3    | Unit 3 – I'm looking for a...     | Day 1: Asking for directions<br>Day 2: Responding to queries<br>Day 3: Group scenario role play   | Role Play & Cooperative Learning | Build confidence in real-life scenarios, reduce hesitation, improve pronunciation |
| 4    | Unit 4 – At the doctor's          | Day 1: Listening to doctor-patient dialogues<br>Day 2: Practicing visits to the doctor<br>Day 3: Role play doctor-patient conversations | Active Listening & Role Play     | Reduce anxiety in formal situations, increase fluency in structured dialogues     |
| 5    | Unit 5 – Making arrangements      | Day 1: Discussing plans<br>Day 2: Scheduling appointments<br>Day 3: Small group presentation  | Cooperative Learning & Role Play | Improve interaction skills, reduce fear of speaking in front of peers             |
| 6    | Unit 6 – Giving advice            | Day 1: Listening to advice dialogues<br>Day 2: Practicing giving advice in pairs<br>Day 3: Group discussion                             | Active Listening & Simulation    | Enhance fluency and confidence in expressing opinions                             |
| 7    | Unit 7 – Talking about the future | Day 1: Discussing future plans in pairs<br>Day 2: Small group scenario planning<br>Day 3: Class presentation                            | Small Group Work & Simulation    | Reduce speaking anxiety in planning/predicting scenarios, improve confidence      |

|   |                                       |  |                                    |  |
|---|---------------------------------------|--|------------------------------------|--|
| 8 | Unit 8 –<br>Talking about<br>the past | Day 1: Sharing past experiences<br>Day 2: Pair storytelling Day 3:<br>Whole-class storytelling | Active<br>Listening &<br>Role Play | Reduce anxiety in<br>narrating experiences,<br>enhance fluency and<br>expressiveness |
|---|---------------------------------------|--|------------------------------------|--|

### 3.5 Procedure

The research employed a step-by-step approach in assessing the impact of the classroom-based intervention. Firstly, the experimental and control groups took a pre-test, which was developed to measure speaking anxiety through the modified FLCAS and oral performance in terms of fluency, accuracy, and confidence. These pre-tests ensured that the two groups were equivalent at baseline.

Over the next 8 weeks, students in the experimental group participated in the structured intervention program once a week. They were encouraged to employ small group work strategies and role-play techniques, incorporating guided speaking and peer feedback in their practice activities. Additionally, they used audio/video recordings during open and closed pairs activities, as well as relaxation tasks, all of which were integrated into each unit course book, Real Listening and Speaking. The control group received a typical curriculum without this specialized instruction.

After the intervention, both groups underwent a post-test by means of applied assessments. So that the effect of applied methods could be estimated directly by the difference in pre-and post-intervention scores. The data were also analyzed to investigate gender differences, operationalised as whether male and female students differed in the way they responded to the interventions in relation not only to reductions in anxiety but improvements in oral performance.

This controlled process has achieved a dependable evaluation of how specifically planned classroom treatments, and how, measurably speaking, anxiety and oral proficiency in Iraqi EFL learners are related.

### Summary

Before the intervention began, both groups completed:

- **Modified FLCAS** (baseline anxiety measurement)
- **Oral performance pre-test** using the above rubric

The experimental group then received the eight-week instructional program, while the control group continued regular textbook-based lessons without structured anxiety-reduction techniques.

After the treatment period, both groups completed the same **FLCAS** and **oral post-test**, allowing the study to:

- determine changes in anxiety and performance within each group
- compare differences between groups
- explore whether gender influenced the outcomes

### 3.6 Data Analysis

The results obtained with the modified Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and the structured oral performance test were processed with the help of quantitative statistical analysis. To gain an overview of the anxiety levels and scores regarding the oral performance of students in both the control and experimental groups, prior to and after the intervention, descriptive statistics such as means and standard deviations were initially calculated.

To analyze the impact of the intervention on the alleviation of speaking anxiety and enhancement of oral performance, paired tests were performed to compare the pre-test and post-test results in the groups. Differences between the experimental and control groups were compared using independent-samples t-tests, which made it possible to evaluate the overall impact of the intervention.

Besides this, a two-way ANOVA was used to explore any gender differences that existed in the level of speaking anxiety as well as the responsiveness to the classroom techniques. The analysis helped the study to establish whether male and female students realized various degrees of anxiety alleviation and enhancement in oral performance due to the intervention.

A series of statistical tests enabled a thorough analysis of the data, providing solid evidence of the connection between the target classroom methods and their quantifiable effects on the speaking anxiety levels, fluency, accuracy, and confidence of Iraqi EFL students. Within-group and between-group analysis, as well as gender comparisons, made the evaluation of both the effectiveness and equity of the intervention program complete.

### **3.7 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations were adhered to at all stages of the study. Participation was voluntary, and students were able to discontinue at any time. Anonymity and confidentiality of the participants were assured, and written informed consent was obtained from each participant. In addition, a participative and non-threatening classroom atmosphere was established to avoid any emotional damage, which would encourage students to feel secure enough to express themselves fully.

### **3.8 Associating Instruments with Research Aims**

There was a good fit between the instruments used in this study and its aim. The adapted FLCAS assessed students' anxiety baseline and identified the significant sources of deviation in oral performance. Pre and post-tests of speaking anxiety and oral production were used to gauge the efficacy of the classroom intervention. A gender analysis was conducted to examine the differences between male and female students. Thirdly, changes in speaking performance, fluency, accuracy, and confidence were reflected in the oral performance test as a result of the intervention.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

The results of the study provide clear evidence addressing the research gap regarding speaking anxiety and oral performance among Iraqi EFL learners. Detailed analyses are presented below, including descriptive statistics, inferential tests, and practical implications.

**Table 1: Speaking Anxiety (FLCAS Scores) – Pre- and Post-Test**

| Group        | Pre-Test Mean (SD) | Post-Test Mean (SD) | t-value | p-value | Cohen's d |
|--------------|--------------------|---------------------|---------|---------|-----------|
| Experimental | 68.2 (6.5)         | 42.3 (5.2)          | 18.45   | <0.001  | 2.35      |
| Control      | 67.9 (6.7)         | 65.8 (6.3)          | 1.23    | 0.224   | 0.15      |

The experimental group showed a significant decrease in speaking anxiety (38% reduction), while the control group's scores remained largely unchanged. This suggests that structured classroom interventions—including small-group work, role play, guided speaking, and technology-assisted recording—effectively reduce anxiety. Practically, this indicates that teachers can enhance students' willingness to participate in English speaking activities by integrating these methods. These findings align with previous studies (Horwitz et al., 1986; Al-Tamimi & Shuib, 2009) and extend the evidence to Iraqi EFL classrooms.

**Table 2: Oral Performance (Fluency, Accuracy, Confidence)**

| Variable   | Pre-Test Mean (SD) | Post-Test Experimental Mean (SD) | Post-Test Control Mean (SD) | t     | p      | Cohen's d |
|------------|--------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------|--------|-----------|
| Fluency    | 60.5 (7.2)         | 78.6 (6.8)                       | 63.2 (6.8)                  | 12.88 | <0.001 | 1.67      |
| Accuracy   | 62.1 (6.5)         | 80.4 (6.2)                       | 63.8 (6.5)                  | 13.25 | <0.001 | 1.70      |
| Confidence | 58.9 (7.0)         | 81.0 (6.5)                       | 60.5 (6.7)                  | 14.40 | <0.001 | 1.85      |

All oral performance measures showed significant improvement in the experimental group compared to the control group. Fluency, accuracy, and confidence improved substantially, with large effect sizes. Practically, these results suggest that the classroom interventions not only reduce anxiety but also translate directly into better oral skills. For example, students who were initially reluctant to participate in discussions became more active and confident in producing spontaneous speech.

The findings are consistent with recent literature (Liu & Zhang, 2023; Saleh & Rasheed, 2024) indicating that anxiety reduction positively affects oral proficiency. At the same time, they highlight context-specific differences: Iraqi students initially exhibited higher anxiety than populations in some other studies, emphasizing the need for culturally responsive interventions.

**Table 3: Correlation Between Anxiety Reduction and Oral Performance**

| Relationship                   | r     | p      |
|--------------------------------|-------|--------|
| Anxiety Reduction & Fluency    | -0.72 | <0.001 |
| Anxiety Reduction & Accuracy   | -0.69 | <0.001 |
| Anxiety Reduction & Confidence | -0.75 | <0.001 |

Significant negative correlations indicate that as anxiety decreases, students' fluency, accuracy, and confidence improve. These results confirm the hypothesized relationship between affective and linguistic factors and reinforce findings from MacIntyre (2017) and Zhang & Zhong (2022).

Practically, this means that interventions targeting emotional barriers can have a measurable impact on students' spoken English performance

#### 4.3 Relevance to the Research Questions, Objectives, and Hypothesis

The findings of the study directly address all three research questions and align with the study's objectives and hypotheses. First, the pre-test results regarding sources of speaking anxiety respond to **Research Question 1** and the corresponding objective of identifying the main anxiety factors. These findings support **Hypothesis 1**, confirming that fear of negative evaluation and limited opportunities for authentic communication are the primary contributors to speaking anxiety among Iraqi EFL learners.

Second, the significant reduction in anxiety observed in the experimental group provides evidence for **Research Question 2** and confirms **Hypothesis 2**, demonstrating that classroom-based strategies—such as small-group work, role play, guided speaking tasks, and technology-assisted recording—effectively reduce speaking anxiety while enhancing oral performance in terms of fluency, accuracy, and confidence.

Finally, the analysis of gender differences addresses **Research Question 3** and supports **Hypothesis 3**, showing that although female students initially reported higher anxiety, both male and female learners benefited similarly from the intervention. This indicates that the implemented strategies are effective across genders and fulfill the objective of examining gender-based differences in response to anxiety-reduction techniques.

In conclusion, the results show strong coherence between the findings, research questions, objectives, and hypotheses, while providing context-specific insights applicable to Iraqi EFL classrooms.

#### 5.1 Discussion of Findings

The results of this study demonstrate that the intervention produced a **38% reduction in speaking anxiety** among the experimental group. This percentage reflects not only a statistically significant improvement in post-test scores but also a **practically meaningful** shift in classroom behavior. A decline of this magnitude suggests that learners are not merely less anxious on paper, but more willing to speak and take risks during actual communication tasks. This supports the hypothesis that structured communicative practices can reduce fear of making mistakes and negative evaluation in Iraqi EFL classrooms.

These findings align with **Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986)**, who indicated that anxiety strongly interferes with language performance, and they also echo **Thornbury (2005)** who argued that role-play and guided practice help students reorganize their thoughts and speak more freely. Similarly, **Al-Khafaji (2020)** found that culturally sensitive teaching interventions in Iraq significantly lower anxiety and allow students to participate more confidently. Compared with these earlier studies, the present research not only confirms the effectiveness of anxiety-reduction strategies but also quantifies their impact within a quasi-experimental design, offering stronger empirical support.

Regarding oral performance, the findings showed a consistent improvement in **fluency, accuracy, and confidence** following the intervention. The strong negative correlation observed between anxiety reduction and performance gains reinforces **MacIntyre and Gardner's (1991)** argument that anxiety

limits language processing capacity. In post-test speaking samples, students paused less frequently and displayed clearer pronunciation and more appropriate vocabulary choices. This suggests that lowering anxiety allows learners to devote more cognitive resources to language formulation rather than self-monitoring and fear management.

The gender-based results add a further contribution to the literature. While female learners initially exhibited higher levels of anxiety—consistent with **Oxford (1999)** and **Aida (1994)**—both genders benefited similarly from the intervention. This indicates that the set of classroom techniques used in this study is **inclusive**, countering previous claims that females remain more vulnerable to persistent anxiety even after intervention. The finding is particularly relevant to Iraqi society, where social expectations may differently influence males and females; thus, demonstrating **equitable outcomes** enhances the pedagogical value of these strategies.

In the Iraqi context specifically, these results are valuable because real opportunities for spoken English outside the classroom remain limited. When students feel supported, receive structured feedback, and practice in staged, low-pressure environments, they begin to perceive English not as a threat but as a tool for communication. Therefore, this study shows that anxiety is not a fixed barrier, but a manageable factor that instructional design can directly influence

## 5.2 Conclusions

The present study confirms that speaking anxiety is a significant factor that impedes effective oral communication among Iraqi EFL learners. The implementation of targeted classroom techniques—including small-group work, role plays, guided speaking with affirmative feedback, and technology-assisted recording—proved highly effective in reducing anxiety while simultaneously enhancing participants' fluency and accuracy.

Importantly, both male and female students benefited from the intervention, despite females initially reporting higher anxiety levels. This suggests that gender-related differences in learning outcomes can be mitigated through carefully designed, culturally sensitive pedagogical strategies.

Beyond the empirical findings, the study emphasizes the importance of fostering **supportive, interactive, and low-stress learning environments** in Iraqi EFL classrooms. Educators who integrate such approaches (i.e., small group work, role plays, guided speaking with affirmative feedback, and technology-aided recording) can increase students' motivation to communicate, reduce fear of negative evaluation, and ultimately improve overall oral competence. Consequently, curriculum designers and policymakers are encouraged to incorporate anxiety-reduction strategies systematically into language programs, ensuring that oral communication courses address both **linguistic and psychological needs** of learners.

At the theoretical level, this research contributes to the literature on affective factors in second-language learning by demonstrating that reducing anxiety not only offers emotional benefits but also promotes measurable progress in language performance. The findings highlight the interconnectedness of psychological and linguistic dimensions, providing insights that are valuable for both empirical research and practical classroom applications.

## 5.3 Pedagogical Implications

The results highlight the educational importance of integrating interactive and supportive teaching methods in the Iraqi EFL classrooms. Teachers are encouraged to incorporate role play, small group conversations, and guided speaking activities because these delivery methods are effective in reducing anxiety and also developing learner confidence over time. Constructive feedback plays a crucial role in mitigating the fear of negative feedback, whereas technology-supported activities (such as audio and video recording) offer opportunities for self-reflection and gradual progress. To curriculum developers, the data points to the necessity to incorporate anxiety-reduction strategies into the oral-communication coursework in a bid to create conducive learning conditions that are both linguistically challenging and psychologically supportive.

## **5.4 Recommendations**

### **5.4.1 Recommendations for Teachers**

Teachers are encouraged to integrate structured speaking tasks and provide students with gradual exposure to communicative activities. Creating a supportive and low-pressure classroom environment can help reduce anxiety and motivate learners to participate more confidently. In addition, offering constructive feedback that highlights improvement rather than focusing solely on errors can further strengthen students' self-confidence and willingness to speak.

### **5.4.2 Recommendations for Researchers**

Researchers are encouraged to investigate similar interventions using larger and more diverse samples to validate the findings. Comparative studies examining different types of speaking tasks and their effects on anxiety could provide deeper insights. Longitudinal research would also be valuable in determining whether the decrease in anxiety and the improvement in oral performance are maintained over time.

### **5.4.3 Recommendations for Policy Makers**

Policy makers may consider developing professional training programs that equip English language teachers with strategies for communication-focused instruction and methods to address psychological barriers such as speaking anxiety. Providing schools with updated and well-designed instructional materials can also support the development of students' oral proficiency.

## **6. Suggestions for Future Research**

Future studies could investigate gender-based differences in speaking anxiety, explore the influence of technology-supported speaking activities, or examine the impact of teacher immediacy and classroom rapport on learners' willingness to speak.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Weekly Intervention Schedule for Real Listening and Speaking

This appendix presents the detailed weekly schedule for the experimental group in the study, integrating activities from the Real Listening and Speaking course. Sessions are conducted twice a week (Monday and Wednesday) to reduce speaking anxiety and improve oral performance among Iraqi EFL students. The schedule incorporates techniques supported by research, including small group work, role play, guided speaking with positive feedback, technology use, and relaxation activities. Each session lasts approximately 90 minutes with 60 students divided into small groups of 4–5.

| Day | Time | Group Size | Activity | Teaching Technique | Expected Impact on Speaking Anxiety & Oral Performance | Practical Notes for Instructors |
|-----|------|------------|----------|--------------------|--|---------------------------------|
|     |      |            |          |                    |  |                                 |

|           |           |                       |  |   |  |  |
|-----------|-----------|-----------------------|--|---|--|--|
| Monday    | 0–20 min  | Whole class           | Warm-up and relaxation (deep breathing, tongue twisters) | Relaxation and Warm-Up                    | Reduces physiological anxiety, prepares students mentally                    | Conduct brief warm-up before main activities; maintain supportive environment  |
| Monday    | 20–50 min | Small groups (4–5)    | Listening comprehension & discussion                     | Small Group Work                          | Reduces fear of judgment, builds confidence, encourages participation        | Assign topics in advance; gradually expand discussion to whole class           |
| Monday    | 50–80 min | Pairs or small groups | Role-play scenarios (e.g., ordering food, interviews)    | Role Play                                 | Provides contextual practice, reduces fear of mistakes, increases engagement | Adapt scenarios to culturally familiar contexts; assign roles based on comfort |
| Monday    | 80–90 min | Whole class           | Reflection and feedback                                  | Guided Speaking and Positive Feedback     | Strengthens self-confidence, motivates participation                         | Give constructive feedback; highlight positive performance                     |
| Wednesday | 0–15 min  | Whole class           | Warm-up & relaxation                                     | Relaxation and Warm-Up                    | Reduces physiological anxiety, prepares students mentally                    | Encourage informal conversation and stretching exercises                       |
| Wednesday | 15–45 min | Small groups (4–5)    | Pronunciation & intonation drills                        | Guided Speaking and Positive Feedback     | Enhances clarity, reduces hesitation, improves oral accuracy                 | Provide modeling and gentle corrective feedback; use visual aids               |
| Wednesday | 45–75 min | Small groups or pairs | Speaking recordings & mini-presentations                 | Use of Technology (Audio/Video Recording) | Promotes self-reflection, reduces performance anxiety                        | Students record and review before live presentation;                           |

|           |           |             |                                     |                                    |   |  |
|-----------|-----------|-------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---|--|
|           |           |             |                                     |                                    | pressure, increases confidence                              | encourage peer feedback  |
| Wednesday | 75–90 min | Whole class | Group discussion & teacher feedback | Small Group Work + Guided Feedback | Encourages participation, reduces anxiety, improves fluency | Ensure all students contribute; provide supportive corrective feedback |