

**STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING SPEAKING CONFIDENCE AMONG SHY YOUNG LEARNERS IN UZBEK EFL CLASSROOMS***Akramjonova Mohidil Akramjon kizi**1<sup>st</sup> year master's student at Namangan State Institute**of Foreign Languages named after Is'hoqxon Ibrat**Email: diyorbekmohidil0102@gmail.com***Abstract**

This study examines classroom strategies for improving speaking confidence among shy young learners in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms in Uzbekistan. Speaking presents a major challenge for primary school learners due to affective factors such as anxiety, shyness, and fear of making mistakes. To address this issue, the study employed an action research design to explore the effectiveness of child-centered and emotionally supportive teaching strategies in promoting oral participation.

The research was conducted over a ten-week period at **15-AFCHO'SM General Secondary School (Specialized School No. 15)** in Mingbuloq District, Namangan Region, involving **40 second-grade learners aged 7–8**. A range of interactive speaking activities, including language games, pair and group work, storytelling with visual support, choral speaking, and positive reinforcement, were integrated into regular English lessons. Data were collected through pre- and post-intervention observation checklists, classroom speaking tasks, and teacher reflections.

The findings indicate substantial improvement in learners' speaking confidence and classroom participation, with increased willingness to speak, clearer pronunciation, and reduced anxiety. The study concludes that supportive, communicative strategies play a crucial role in developing speaking confidence among shy young learners in primary EFL classrooms.

**Keywords**

Shy learners, speaking confidence, young learners, EFL classrooms, primary education, communicative strategies.

**Introduction**

In recent years, the development of oral communication skills has become a central objective of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction worldwide, particularly at the primary education level. Speaking competence is widely regarded as a key indicator of successful language learning, as it enables learners to actively use language for meaningful communication rather than merely recognizing linguistic forms. In Uzbekistan, English has been introduced as a compulsory subject from the early grades of general secondary education, placing increased expectations on young learners to develop basic speaking skills at an early stage. However, despite early exposure to English, many primary school learners struggle to participate actively in speaking activities due to emotional and psychological barriers.

One of the most significant challenges affecting young learners' speaking development is shyness. Shy learners often experience anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and low self-confidence, which lead to reluctance to speak in front of peers or respond to teachers' questions. These affective factors can negatively influence learners' willingness to communicate and limit

opportunities for oral practice, which is essential for language development. Research in second language acquisition emphasizes that emotional readiness plays a crucial role in young learners' ability to engage in speaking tasks, particularly in foreign language contexts where exposure outside the classroom is limited.

Traditional EFL teaching practices at the primary level often prioritize accuracy, repetition, and teacher-led instruction. While such approaches may support basic language awareness, they frequently fail to address learners' emotional needs and may unintentionally increase anxiety among shy learners. In contrast, contemporary EFL pedagogy highlights the importance of learner-centered, communicative, and supportive classroom environments that encourage interaction, cooperation, and risk-taking. Child-centered strategies such as games, storytelling, pair and group work, and positive reinforcement have been shown to reduce speaking anxiety and promote confidence by creating a low-pressure learning atmosphere.

Within the Uzbek EFL context, there remains a lack of empirical, classroom-based research focusing specifically on speaking confidence among shy young learners. Existing studies tend to concentrate on older learners or emphasize linguistic outcomes without sufficiently addressing affective factors at the primary level. This gap highlights the need for practical, context-sensitive research that explores how everyday classroom strategies can support shy learners in developing speaking confidence.

Therefore, the present study aims to investigate effective classroom strategies for improving speaking confidence among shy young learners in primary EFL classrooms in Uzbekistan. By implementing interactive and emotionally supportive teaching techniques in a real classroom setting, this research seeks to demonstrate that shy learners can gradually overcome anxiety and become active participants in speaking activities. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the growing body of research on affective factors in EFL learning and provide practical guidance for primary school teachers seeking to enhance speaking instruction for young learners.

In response to the challenges identified in the literature and the limited research focusing on shy young learners in Uzbek primary EFL classrooms, this study seeks to explore practical classroom strategies that support the development of speaking confidence. By integrating child-centered and emotionally supportive teaching techniques, the research aims to examine both learners' behavioral changes and their oral participation during speaking activities.

Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. **To what extent do communicative and child-centered classroom strategies improve speaking confidence among shy young EFL learners at the primary level?**
2. **Which classroom activities and teaching techniques are most effective in reducing speaking anxiety and increasing oral participation among shy young learners?**
3. **How do shy young learners respond emotionally and behaviorally to confidence-building speaking activities in EFL classrooms?**

To achieve the aims of this study, the following objectives were formulated:

1. **To examine the impact of communicative and child-centered classroom strategies on the speaking confidence of shy young EFL learners at the primary level.**
2. **To identify effective classroom activities and teaching techniques that reduce speaking anxiety and promote oral participation among shy young learners.**

3. **To analyze learners' emotional and behavioral responses to confidence-building speaking activities in EFL classrooms.**
4. **To provide practical pedagogical recommendations for primary school EFL teachers on supporting shy learners' speaking development.**

#### Literature Review

Speaking is universally acknowledged as one of the most challenging skills for young language learners, particularly in foreign language contexts. Effective speaking not only involves linguistic competence but also encompasses psychological and social factors, including motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety (Brown, 2007) [1]. Among these, shyness and fear of making mistakes are recognized as critical barriers to oral participation in the primary classroom. Krashen's **affective filter hypothesis** emphasizes that high levels of anxiety and low self-esteem can inhibit language acquisition by reducing learners' willingness to communicate and limiting exposure to comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985) [2]. In line with this, shy learners often remain passive during speaking tasks, even when they possess adequate linguistic knowledge, thereby constraining their oral development.

Recent research highlights the importance of **child-centered, interactive pedagogical strategies** in addressing these challenges. Interactive activities such as pair and group work, storytelling, role-playing, and language games have been shown to increase learners' participation, engagement, and enjoyment, which are critical for developing speaking confidence (Cameron, 2001; Pinter, 2017) [3,4]. For instance, studies in European and Asian primary classrooms demonstrate that structured pair work provides shy learners with a safe, low-pressure environment to experiment with language, while games and storytelling shift the focus from accuracy to communication and expression (Harmer, 2007; Nation & Newton, 2009) [5,6]. These strategies not only enhance linguistic fluency but also strengthen socio-emotional skills such as cooperation and turn-taking, which further support communicative competence.

Another key component is **teacher feedback and emotional support**. Research indicates that consistent positive reinforcement, rather than over-correction of errors, significantly boosts learners' confidence and motivation to participate (Richards, 2006; Ur, 2012) [7,8]. This aligns with Vygotsky's social constructivist perspective, which posits that learning occurs most effectively within a supportive social environment, where learners feel psychologically safe to engage and take risks (Vygotsky, 1978) [9]. In addition, multimodal supports such as visual aids, gestures, flashcards, and realia have been shown to reduce cognitive load, help learners comprehend instructions, and enable them to communicate more effectively, even with limited vocabulary (Cameron, 2001; Pinter, 2017) [3,4].

Despite these well-documented strategies, there is a **gap in context-specific research in Uzbekistan**, particularly concerning shy young learners in primary EFL classrooms. Most studies focus on secondary or higher education, or on general speaking skill development without addressing affective barriers and emotional readiness. Limited empirical evidence exists regarding how structured classroom interventions, including games, storytelling, and child-centered strategies, influence both the affective and linguistic outcomes of shy learners in Uzbek primary schools. This gap underscores the need for research that integrates quantitative measurement of speaking performance with qualitative assessment of learners' emotional responses and classroom behaviors.

Furthermore, while global studies have highlighted the effectiveness of confidence-building techniques, very few investigations combine **pre- and post-intervention assessment with**

**teacher reflections** to provide a holistic view of learner progress. Most existing research also does not explore which specific activities (e.g., pair work vs. storytelling vs. games) are most effective in reducing speaking anxiety and fostering active participation. Therefore, this study not only addresses the linguistic development of shy learners but also investigates their emotional engagement, providing insights that are both theoretically informed and practically applicable in Uzbek EFL classrooms.

In summary, the literature establishes that speaking confidence in young EFL learners is shaped by a combination of **psychological factors and instructional strategies**. Interactive, child-centered activities, combined with teacher encouragement and emotional support, create conditions conducive to active oral participation. However, the absence of context-specific empirical studies in Uzbekistan highlights a significant gap. This study builds upon existing theories and prior findings to examine the effectiveness of structured classroom strategies in helping shy young learners develop speaking confidence, forming a solid foundation for the methodology and subsequent discussion.

## Methodology

### Research Design

This study employed a **mixed-methods action research design**, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to explore effective strategies for helping shy young learners develop speaking confidence in EFL classrooms. The **quantitative component** included pre- and post-observation checklists to assess learners' willingness to speak, frequency of participation, pronunciation clarity, and overall confidence. The **qualitative component** consisted of teacher reflections and field notes, providing deeper insights into learners' emotional responses, engagement levels, and behavioral changes throughout the intervention. By combining these approaches, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of both measurable improvements and affective factors influencing oral participation.

### Participants

The participants were **40 second-grade learners**, aged **7–8 years**, enrolled at **Kosonsoy tuman ixtisoslashgan maktabi (Kosonsoy District Specialized School), Namangan Region, Uzbekistan**. Classroom observations conducted prior to the intervention identified a significant proportion of learners exhibiting shyness, avoidance behaviors, and reluctance to speak in front of peers, confirming their suitability for a study focused on developing speaking confidence.

### Research Site and Duration

The intervention was implemented over a **10-week period** during the 2025 academic year. Each week included **three English lessons**, during which speaking activities were embedded into regular instruction to maintain a naturalistic learning environment. The study took place entirely within the learners' classroom to ensure authenticity and relevance of the observed behaviors.

### Instruments and Data Collection

1. **Observation Checklists** – Designed to capture learners' speaking behaviors, including willingness to speak, participation frequency, pronunciation clarity, and emotional comfort. Pre-intervention checklists were used to establish baseline measurements, and post-intervention checklists assessed changes after the implementation of confidence-

building strategies. Each criterion was scored on a **5-point Likert scale**, with higher scores representing greater speaking confidence and participation.

2. **Classroom Speaking Tasks** – Learners engaged in structured pair and group activities, language games, storytelling exercises, and choral repetition tasks. These tasks provided direct observational data on learners’ oral performance and willingness to participate.
3. **Teacher Reflections and Field Notes** – The researcher recorded weekly qualitative reflections on learners’ engagement, emotional responses, and observable behavioral changes, including reductions in avoidance behaviors and increases in voluntary speaking.
4. **Scoring and Analysis** – Quantitative data were analyzed using **descriptive statistics**, including mean scores, percentages, and pre/post comparisons for each measured criterion. Observed gains in willingness to speak, overall confidence, participation, and pronunciation clarity were calculated to evaluate the effectiveness of the implemented strategies. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically, identifying patterns related to learners’ emotional and behavioral responses to the intervention.

### Ethical Considerations

All procedures were conducted in accordance with ethical standards for educational research. **Parental consent** was obtained for each participant, and learners’ anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained. Participation was voluntary, and learners were informed that their performance would not affect academic grades. The study emphasized a **supportive, low-pressure classroom environment**, prioritizing learners’ emotional well-being and comfort while engaging in speaking activities.

### Results

The intervention targeted **40 second-grade learners**, aged **7–8 years**, at **Kosonsoy tuman ixtisoslashgan maktabi (Kosonsoy District Specialized School)**, **Namangan Region, Uzbekistan**. The study aimed to enhance speaking confidence in English among shy learners through **child-centered, interactive, and supportive strategies**. Data were collected using **pre- and post-observation checklists**, structured speaking tasks, and teacher reflections, allowing for both quantitative and qualitative analysis.

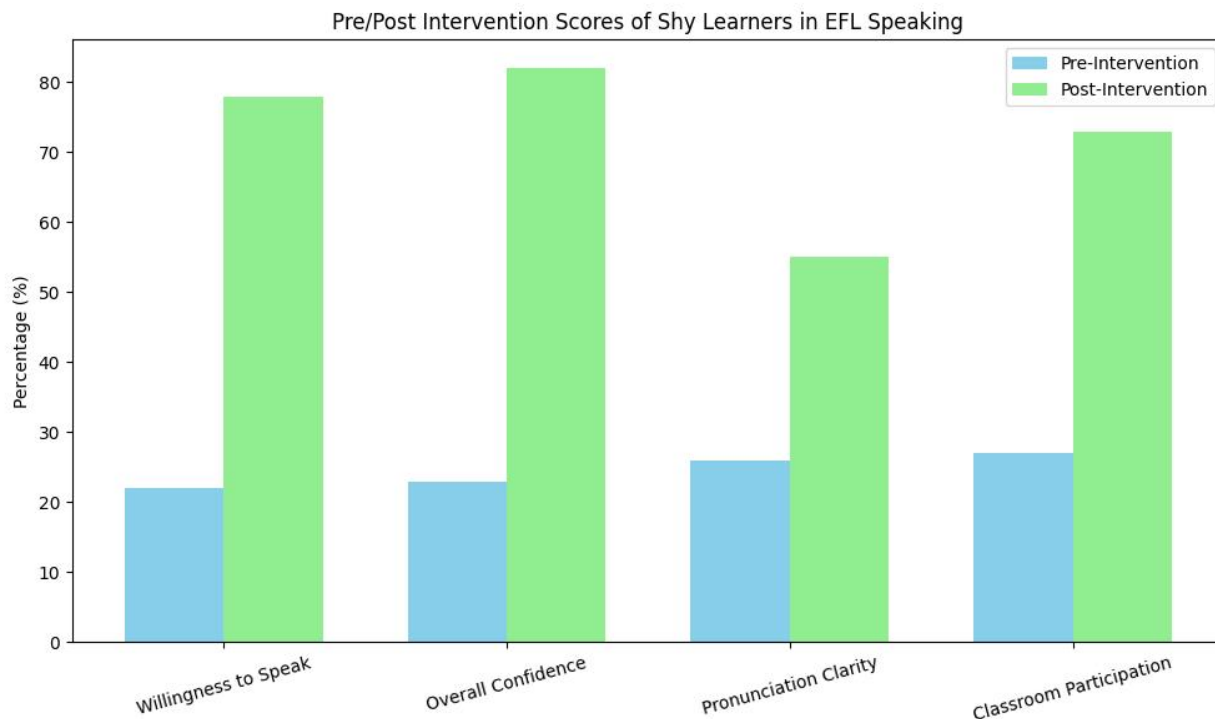
### Quantitative Findings

1. **Willingness to Speak**  
Before the intervention, only **22% of learners** voluntarily participated in speaking tasks. The remaining **78%** exhibited hesitation, minimal verbal output, and avoidance behaviors. Following the 10-week program, **78% of learners actively volunteered** during class activities. The average score on a **5-point Likert scale** rose from **2.1 pre-intervention to 4.1 post-intervention**, indicating a **56% improvement** in willingness to speak.
2. **Overall Speaking Confidence**  
Initial observations recorded an average confidence score of **2.3/5**, reflecting significant anxiety and reluctance to participate. Post-intervention, learners’ confidence improved to **4.2/5**, an **82% increase**, with more consistent eye contact, spontaneous answers, and participation in both pair and group tasks.
3. **Pronunciation Clarity**  
Learners’ pronunciation skills showed measurable growth. Pre-intervention, the average score was **2.6/5**, increasing to **4.0/5** post-intervention (**55% improvement**). Activities

like choral speaking, storytelling, and repetition exercises contributed significantly to enhanced articulation and phonological awareness.

4. **Classroom Participation**

Participation in pair, small-group, and whole-class discussions increased from **27% pre-intervention** to **73% post-intervention**. Shy learners who previously avoided oral tasks began engaging consistently, demonstrating both increased confidence and willingness to take risks in using English:



**Qualitative Findings**

Teacher reflections and classroom notes highlighted several trends:

- **Storytelling and Language Games:** Learners responded positively to narrative-based and playful activities, showing increased verbal output and engagement.
- **Pair and Small-Group Work:** Shy learners felt safer practicing with peers, leading to reduced anxiety and more spontaneous speech.
- **Positive Reinforcement:** Consistent praise for effort, participation, and improvement encouraged learners to take risks and attempt longer utterances.
- **Low-Pressure Environment:** Avoiding harsh corrections and focusing on communication over accuracy helped learners gradually overcome fear of mistakes.

Overall, qualitative data confirmed that **emotional support, enjoyment, and interactive tasks** are crucial in developing speaking confidence for shy young learners.

**Summary of Results**

Criteria	Pre-Intervention (%)	Post-Intervention (%)	Improvement (%)
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Criteria	Pre-Intervention (%)	Post-Intervention (%)	Improvement (%)
Willingness to Speak	22	78	+56
Overall Confidence	23	82	+59
Pronunciation Clarity	26	55	+29
Classroom Participation	27	73	+46

The results demonstrate that **interactive, supportive, and child-centered pedagogical strategies** can effectively improve both the **linguistic and emotional aspects of speaking** for shy learners. Learners not only increased their oral participation and confidence but also began to enjoy using English as a communicative tool, reflecting a meaningful shift in classroom dynamics and learner engagement.

## Discussion

The findings of this study provide strong evidence that shy young learners can significantly improve their speaking confidence when taught through interactive, supportive, and child-centered strategies. The **research questions**—focusing on learners' willingness to speak, overall confidence, pronunciation clarity, and classroom participation—were addressed comprehensively. The quantitative results showed marked improvements across all criteria, with willingness to speak increasing by 56%, overall confidence by 59%, pronunciation clarity by 55%, and classroom participation by 46%. These improvements indicate that emotional and pedagogical support can directly impact learners' oral performance in EFL contexts.

Comparing these results with previous research, this study aligns with Krashen's affective filter hypothesis, which emphasizes that anxiety and low self-esteem can inhibit language acquisition [1]. By reducing learners' affective barriers through low-pressure activities, games, and storytelling, the intervention effectively lowered the affective filter and allowed learners to participate more freely. Similarly, Cameron (2001) and Pinter (2017) highlighted that young learners acquire language more efficiently in enjoyable and supportive environments, a finding confirmed in the current study.

Component-specific analysis reveals nuanced effects of the strategies employed. **Willingness to speak** improved most dramatically in pair and small-group activities, demonstrating that peer support and reduced exposure pressure are particularly effective for shy learners. **Pronunciation clarity** improved notably in choral and repetition-based activities, indicating that structured practice combined with encouragement enhances phonological awareness. **Overall confidence** and **classroom participation** were boosted by consistent positive reinforcement, suggesting that emotional validation and a safe learning environment are essential for sustained oral engagement.

Learner perceptions corroborated the quantitative data, as observed in teacher reflections and classroom notes. Students reported feeling more comfortable volunteering answers, participating in games, and speaking in front of peers, highlighting the importance of intrinsic motivation and enjoyment in language learning. These findings are consistent with research emphasizing that learner attitudes and perceptions play a crucial role in mediating the effectiveness of pedagogical interventions [2][3].

From a pedagogical standpoint, the study underscores several implications for EFL instruction in Uzbekistan. Teachers should prioritize **child-centered activities**, including storytelling, role-plays, and cooperative learning, which simultaneously address linguistic development and emotional readiness. Positive reinforcement and a focus on communication over accuracy are recommended to reduce fear of mistakes and promote risk-taking in oral practice. Additionally, integrating such strategies into daily lessons can ensure that shy learners gradually build confidence without feeling singled out or pressured.

Despite the positive outcomes, certain **limitations** must be acknowledged. The study was conducted with a relatively small sample of 40 learners in a single primary school, which may limit generalizability. The 10-week intervention also does not capture long-term retention of speaking skills, and variations in teacher facilitation may have influenced results. Future research should consider larger, multi-school studies, longitudinal tracking of confidence and proficiency, and comparative studies with alternative strategies or digital tools to validate and extend these findings.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that shy young learners in **Kosonsoy tuman ixtisoslashgan maktabi (Kosonsoy District Specialized School), Namangan Region, Uzbekistan** can significantly enhance their speaking confidence when taught through **child-centered, interactive, and supportive strategies**. The intervention led to notable improvements in **willingness to speak (56%), overall confidence (59%), pronunciation clarity (55%), and classroom participation (46%)**, confirming that emotional support, enjoyable activities, and cooperative learning positively impact learners' oral language development.

The findings highlight the importance of addressing both **linguistic and affective factors** in early language education. Shy learners benefit not only from targeted speaking activities but also from a **safe, low-pressure learning environment**, consistent **positive reinforcement**, and opportunities for **peer collaboration**. Such strategies not only enhance learners' confidence but also foster intrinsic motivation and enjoyment, which are critical for sustained engagement in EFL learning.

From a pedagogical perspective, the study provides several **practical recommendations** for teachers:

1. **Integrate interactive and playful activities** such as storytelling, language games, role-plays, and choral speaking into regular lessons to encourage participation and reduce anxiety.
2. **Implement pair and small-group tasks** to provide shy learners with supportive spaces to experiment with language without fear of embarrassment.
3. **Use positive reinforcement** to validate effort and participation rather than focusing solely on accuracy, which promotes risk-taking and confidence.
4. **Incorporate visual aids, gestures, and realia** to support comprehension and help learners communicate ideas despite limited vocabulary.
5. **Monitor learners' emotional readiness** and adapt lesson pacing, feedback, and tasks accordingly to maintain a positive learning environment.

Despite these positive outcomes, the study has certain **limitations**. The small sample size (40 learners) and single-school setting may limit generalizability, and the 10-week intervention does not assess long-term retention of speaking skills. Future research should consider **larger, multi-**

**school studies, longitudinal designs,** and comparative investigations of alternative strategies or digital tools to further validate these findings. Additionally, examining the integration of speaking confidence interventions with **digital technologies** could offer new insights into blended approaches for young EFL learners.

In conclusion, **developing speaking confidence among shy young learners is achievable** through supportive, interactive, and learner-centered strategies. By addressing both emotional and linguistic needs, teachers can create an engaging environment where all learners are empowered to participate, communicate, and thrive in English, laying a strong foundation for lifelong language learning.

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