

A PRELIMINARY STUDY OF IELTS SPEAKING ANXIETY AMONG UZBEK EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract

The growing importance of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) in Uzbekistan has increased learners' attention toward developing effective English speaking skills. However, many Uzbek EFL learners experience psychological difficulties during speaking activities, particularly anxiety, stress, and lack of confidence, which negatively influence their oral performance. Numerous researchers, including Horwitz et al. (1986), MacIntyre and Gardner (1994), Young (1991), and Idrissi (2022), have investigated the relationship between foreign language anxiety and speaking performance, emphasizing that psychological barriers may significantly affect learners' communicative competence and fluency.

Despite the increasing number of international studies on foreign language anxiety, limited research has specifically examined IELTS speaking anxiety among Uzbek EFL learners. In particular, insufficient attention has been given to the major linguistic and psychological factors contributing to speaking anxiety in the Uzbek educational context. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate IELTS speaking anxiety among Uzbek EFL learners and identify the primary causes affecting their speaking performance during IELTS preparation.

The study employed a quantitative research design using an online questionnaire distributed through Google Forms. The participants consisted of 23 Uzbek EFL learners with different English proficiency levels and IELTS goals. The collected data were analyzed through descriptive statistical methods, including percentages, frequency distributions, and thematic analysis of open-ended responses.

The findings of the study revealed that many learners experience nervousness, lack of confidence, vocabulary retrieval difficulties, fear of grammatical mistakes, and anxiety during spontaneous communication. The results additionally demonstrated that stress negatively affects learners' fluency, idea organization, and ability to answer unfamiliar questions effectively. Furthermore,

the study identified regular speaking practice, supportive teacher feedback, mock speaking tests, and collaborative speaking activities as useful strategies for reducing speaking anxiety.

The study concludes that IELTS speaking anxiety among Uzbek EFL learners is influenced by interconnected linguistic, cognitive, and psychological factors. The findings may contribute to the development of more supportive speaking environments and more effective pedagogical approaches for reducing learner anxiety during IELTS preparation.

Keywords: IELTS speaking anxiety, EFL learners, foreign language anxiety, speaking performance, Uzbek learners, communicative competence, psychological barriers.

Introduction

In recent years, the demand for English language proficiency has increased significantly in Uzbekistan, particularly among students preparing for international examinations such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). Among the four language skills assessed in the IELTS exam, speaking is often considered the most challenging component for many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Despite possessing sufficient grammatical knowledge and vocabulary, many students experience fear, nervousness, and lack of confidence during speaking activities, which negatively affects their performance.

Foreign language anxiety has long been recognized as one of the major psychological barriers in second language acquisition. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) define foreign language anxiety as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process.” The researchers further describe anxiety as a subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with language learning situations. According to Horwitz et al. (1986), many learners experience a “mental block” that prevents them from performing successfully in foreign language classrooms.



Similarly, MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) explain language anxiety as the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning activities. They emphasize that anxiety can interfere with learners' cognitive processing, memory, and language production, particularly during oral communication tasks. Krashen (1982), through his Affective Filter Hypothesis, also argues that emotional variables such as anxiety, lack of confidence, and fear may create a psychological barrier that prevents language input from being effectively processed by learners. Speaking anxiety may stem from several factors, including fear of grammatical mistakes, limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, fear of negative evaluation, and low self-confidence. Young (1991) notes that speaking activities often generate high levels of stress because learners must produce immediate responses while worrying about correctness and social judgment. In IELTS preparation contexts, these psychological pressures may intensify because students frequently associate their speaking scores with academic opportunities, scholarships, and future career goals.

Several researchers have investigated the relationship between anxiety and speaking performance in EFL settings. Idrissi (2022) argues that anxiety serves as a significant psychological barrier to speaking fluency in IELTS preparation contexts, while Rahmadani (2022) highlights that fear of negative evaluation and lack of confidence are among the most common causes of speaking anxiety among EFL learners. These studies indicate that anxiety not only affects learners emotionally but also influences their fluency, participation, and overall speaking performance.

Although numerous studies have explored foreign language anxiety in various EFL contexts, limited research has focused specifically on IELTS speaking anxiety among Uzbek learners. Considering the growing importance of IELTS examinations in Uzbekistan, understanding the causes and effects of speaking anxiety has become increasingly important for both teachers and students. Investigating this issue may help educators create more supportive classroom environments and implement effective strategies to reduce learner anxiety during speaking activities.

Therefore, the present study aims to investigate IELTS speaking anxiety among Uzbek EFL learners and identify the major factors contributing to their anxiety during speaking tasks. Additionally, the study explores learners' perceptions of

anxiety-reduction strategies that may help improve their speaking confidence and overall speaking performance.

Literature Review

Foreign language anxiety has become one of the most widely discussed psychological factors in second language acquisition (SLA). Researchers have consistently emphasized that anxiety negatively affects learners' communicative performance, especially in speaking activities where learners are expected to produce language spontaneously. Over the past decades, numerous studies have examined the relationship between anxiety and language learning, identifying various emotional, cognitive, and social factors that influence learners' speaking performance.

One of the earliest and most influential studies on foreign language anxiety was conducted by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), who introduced the concept of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA). According to the researchers, foreign language anxiety is a unique psychological phenomenon directly connected to language learning processes. They argue that many learners experience tension, nervousness, and fear during language classes, particularly when they are required to speak in front of others. Horwitz et al. (1986) also developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), which later became one of the most widely used instruments for measuring language anxiety. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) further expanded research on language anxiety by explaining its cognitive effects on second language performance. The researchers state that anxiety interferes with learners' memory, concentration, and information processing abilities. According to their findings, anxious learners often struggle to organize their thoughts during speaking activities, which results in hesitation, reduced fluency, and communication breakdowns. The researchers also emphasize that anxiety is especially harmful during oral production because speaking requires immediate processing and spontaneous language use.

Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis also provides an important theoretical explanation for foreign language anxiety. Krashen argues that emotional variables such as fear, stress, and low self-confidence may create a mental barrier called the "affective filter," which prevents learners from effectively processing language input. When learners experience high anxiety, their affective filter becomes stronger, reducing both language acquisition and

communicative performance. In contrast, low-anxiety learning environments may facilitate greater language acquisition and learner participation.

Several studies have specifically focused on speaking anxiety in EFL classrooms. Young (1991) identifies speaking activities as one of the primary sources of classroom anxiety because learners fear making mistakes, being negatively evaluated, or appearing incompetent in front of teachers and peers. Similarly, Rahmadani (2022) found that many EFL learners experience anxiety due to pronunciation difficulties, lack of vocabulary, and fear of public speaking. The study also revealed that learners with low self-confidence tend to avoid speaking opportunities, which further limits their language development.

In recent years, researchers have increasingly examined IELTS speaking anxiety. Idrissi (2022) investigated anxiety as a psychological barrier to speaking fluency among IELTS learners and concluded that fear of low scores, time pressure, and fear of negative evaluation significantly affect learners' oral performance. The researcher also found that many learners possess sufficient linguistic knowledge but fail to demonstrate their abilities effectively because of anxiety-related psychological pressure. Likewise, Jingwen (2023) explored the sources of anxiety during IELTS speaking examinations and identified unexpected questions, examiner presence, and fear of grammatical mistakes as major causes of learner stress.

Researchers have also explored strategies for reducing speaking anxiety in language classrooms. According to Khouni (2022), supportive classroom environments, pair work, and regular speaking practice may significantly decrease learner anxiety and increase confidence. Similarly, communicative teaching methods and positive teacher feedback have been shown to encourage greater learner participation and reduce fear during speaking tasks. These findings suggest that teachers play an important role in creating psychologically supportive learning environments that help learners feel more comfortable using English orally.

Although foreign language anxiety has been widely investigated internationally, limited studies have focused specifically on Uzbek EFL learners preparing for IELTS examinations. Considering the increasing importance of IELTS scores for academic and professional opportunities in Uzbekistan, investigating speaking anxiety among Uzbek learners remains highly relevant. Therefore, the present study seeks to contribute to existing literature by examining the causes of IELTS

speaking anxiety and identifying possible strategies for reducing anxiety among Uzbek EFL learners.

Results and Discussion

The present study involved 23 Uzbek EFL learners preparing for the IELTS examination. The demographic findings revealed that the majority of participants belonged to the 20+ age category, representing 12 respondents, while 10 participants were between the ages of 18 and 19. Only one respondent belonged to the 16–17 age group. These findings indicate that most participants were adult learners pursuing academic or professional goals requiring English language proficiency.

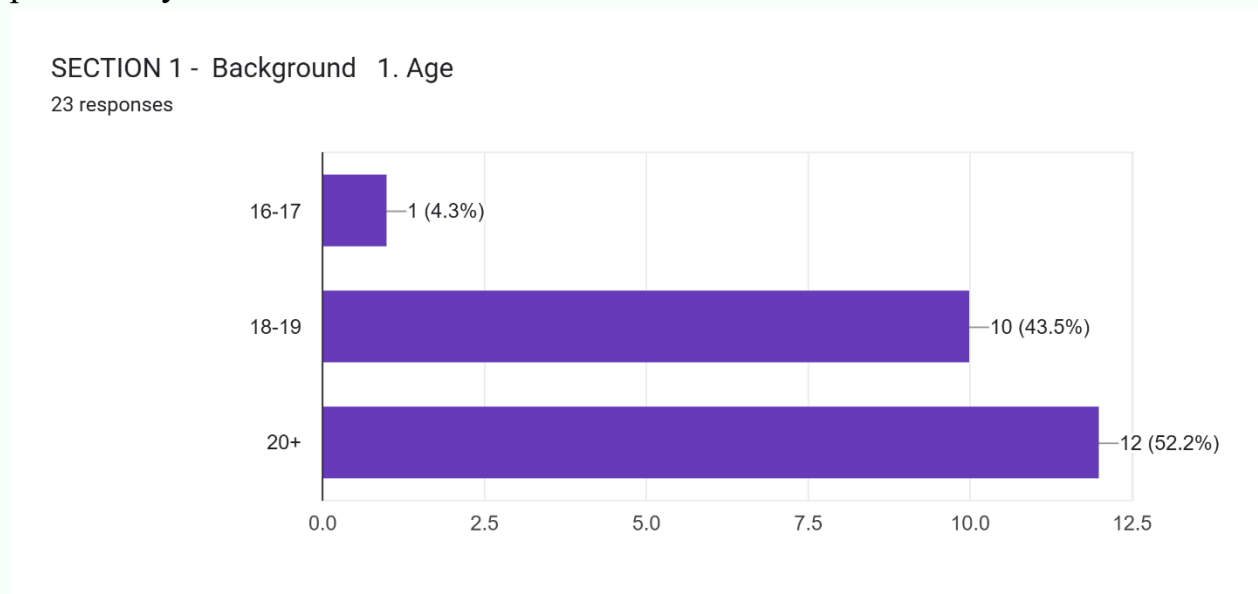


Figure 1. Age Distribution of Participants

The analysis of participants' English proficiency levels demonstrated that the majority of respondents identified themselves as Upper-Intermediate learners (9 participants). Additionally, 7 respondents reported having an Advanced level of English proficiency, while 4 participants identified as Intermediate learners and 2 participants reported Pre-Intermediate proficiency. These findings suggest that speaking anxiety exists not only among lower-level learners but also among students with relatively strong language competence. Similar observations were made by Rahmadani (2022), who found that speaking anxiety may affect learners regardless of their language proficiency level.

2. Current English level

23 responses

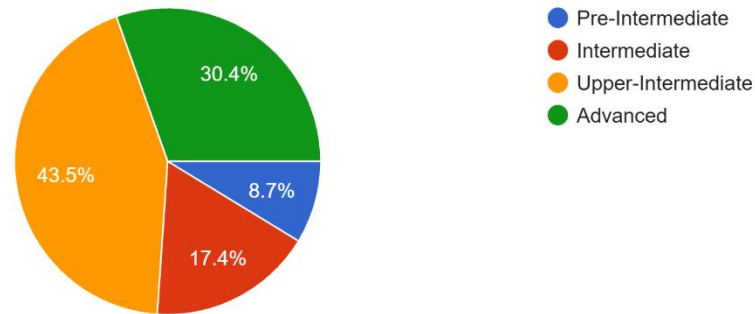


Figure 2. English Proficiency Levels of Participants

The survey results further revealed that 14 participants were actively preparing for the IELTS examination, whereas 8 respondents indicated that they were not currently engaged in IELTS preparation. This demonstrates that the majority of respondents possessed direct familiarity with IELTS speaking requirements and examination-related pressure.

3. Are you currently preparing for IELTS?

23 responses

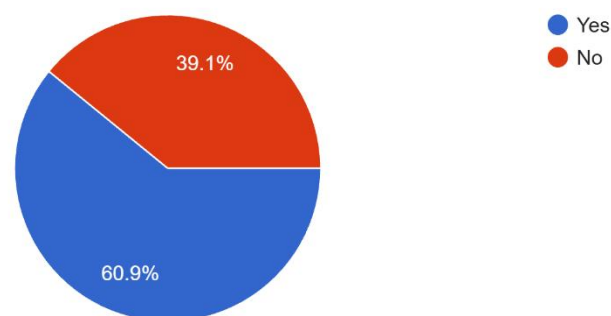


Figure 3. Participants Currently Preparing for IELTS

Regarding target IELTS band scores, the largest group of participants aimed to achieve a band score of 8.0 or higher, accounting for 12 respondents. Meanwhile, 5 participants reported a target band score of 6.0–6.5, 3 respondents aimed for 7.0–7.5, and only 2 participants selected 5.0–5.5 as their target score. These

findings indicate that many respondents possessed ambitious academic goals, which may contribute to increased speaking anxiety and performance pressure during IELTS preparation. Idrissi (2022) similarly argues that learners often associate IELTS performance with future educational and professional opportunities, which increases psychological pressure during speaking tasks.

4. Target IELTS band score

23 responses

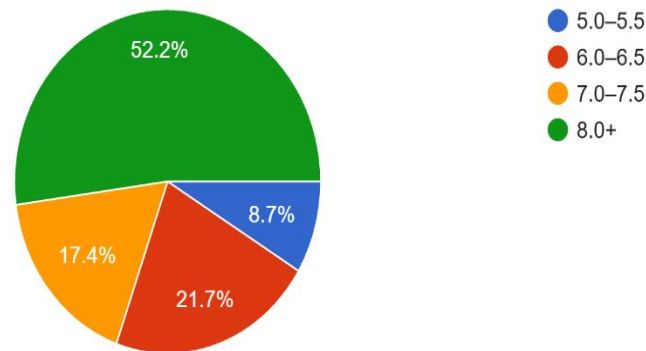


Figure 4. Target IELTS Band Scores

Levels of IELTS Speaking Anxiety

The findings of the study demonstrate that speaking anxiety remains a noticeable issue among Uzbek EFL learners. In response to the statement “I feel nervous during IELTS speaking activities,” 10 participants selected “Agree,” while 3 respondents selected “Strongly Agree.” In contrast, 9 participants disagreed with the statement. The results, therefore, indicate that more than half of the respondents experience nervousness during IELTS speaking activities to varying degrees. These findings correspond with Horwitz et al. (1986), who describe foreign language anxiety as feelings of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with language learning situations.

SECTION 2 - Anxiety Scale 5.I feel nervous during IELTS speaking activities.
23 responses

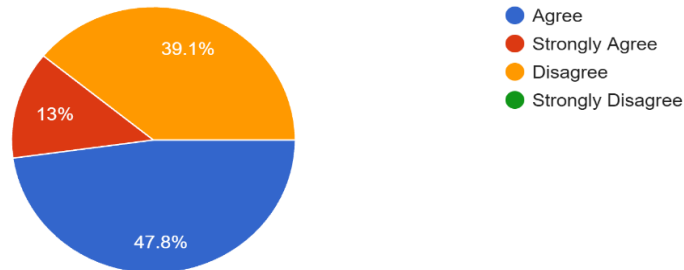


Figure 5. Nervousness During IELTS Speaking Activities

The findings further revealed several important psychological and linguistic factors contributing to IELTS speaking anxiety among Uzbek EFL learners. One of the most significant causes of anxiety identified in the study was fear of making grammatical mistakes during oral communication. In response to the statement “I worry about making grammatical mistakes while speaking,” 12 participants selected “Agree,” while 2 respondents selected “Strongly Agree.” In contrast, 8 participants disagreed with the statement. The findings therefore indicate that grammatical accuracy remains an important source of stress for many learners during speaking activities. Young (1991) similarly states that learners frequently experience anxiety during oral communication because they fear making mistakes and being negatively evaluated by others.

6. I worry about making grammatical mistakes while speaking.
23 responses

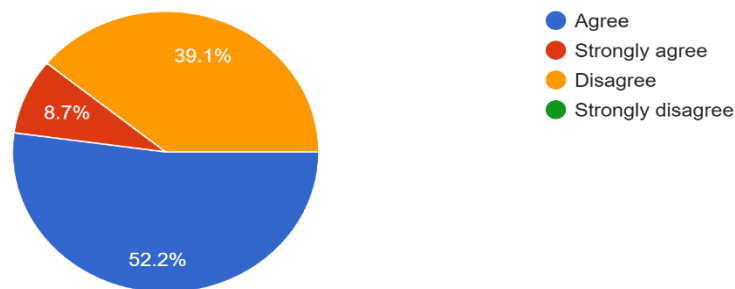


Figure 6. Fear of Grammatical Mistakes During Speaking

The findings additionally demonstrated that stress strongly affects learners' ability to recall vocabulary while speaking English. A considerable majority of respondents acknowledged that they tend to forget vocabulary items during stressful speaking situations. Specifically, 13 participants selected "Agree," while 6 respondents selected "Strongly Agree." Only a small number of participants disagreed with the statement. These results support the findings of MacIntyre and Gardner (1994), who argue that anxiety may interfere with learners' memory, concentration, and cognitive processing during oral communication.

7. I forget vocabulary when I feel stressed.

23 responses

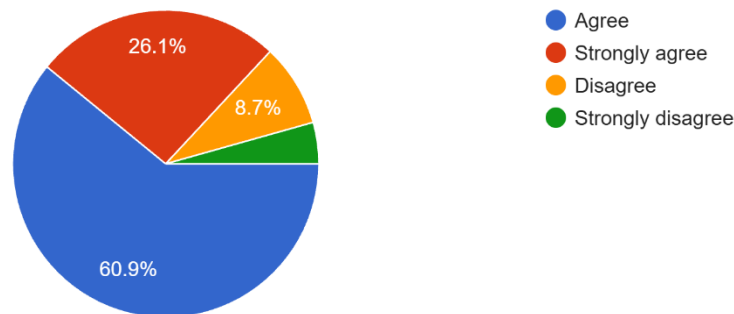


Figure 7. Vocabulary Loss Under Stress

Another important finding concerns learners' reactions to unexpected questions during IELTS speaking tasks. The majority of respondents reported experiencing anxiety when answering unfamiliar or spontaneous questions. Eleven participants selected "Agree," while 4 respondents selected "Strongly Agree." Meanwhile, 7 participants disagreed with the statement. These findings indicate that spontaneous communication and real-time language production remain psychologically challenging for many learners. Jingwen (2023) similarly found that unexpected questions and oral examination pressure significantly increase anxiety levels among IELTS learners.

8. I feel anxious when answering unexpected questions.

23 responses

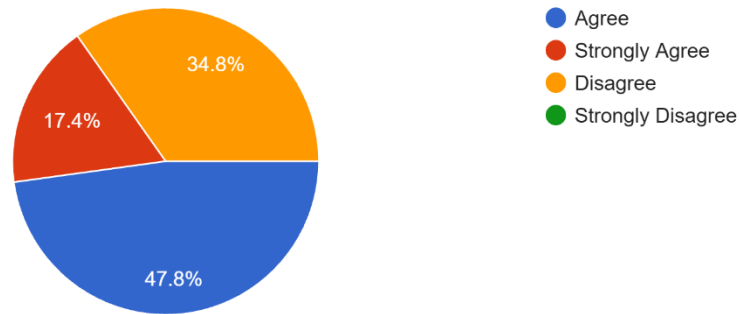


Figure 8. Anxiety Caused by Unexpected Questions

The results also revealed that anxiety significantly affects learners' speaking performance. In response to the statement "My anxiety negatively affects my speaking performance," 13 participants selected "Agree," while 5 respondents selected "Strongly Agree." Only 4 respondents disagreed with the statement. These findings demonstrate that speaking anxiety may reduce learners' fluency, confidence, and ability to express ideas effectively during oral communication tasks. Similar findings were identified by Idrissi (2022), who concluded that anxiety acts as a psychological barrier to speaking fluency among IELTS learners.

9. My anxiety negatively affects my speaking performance.

23 responses

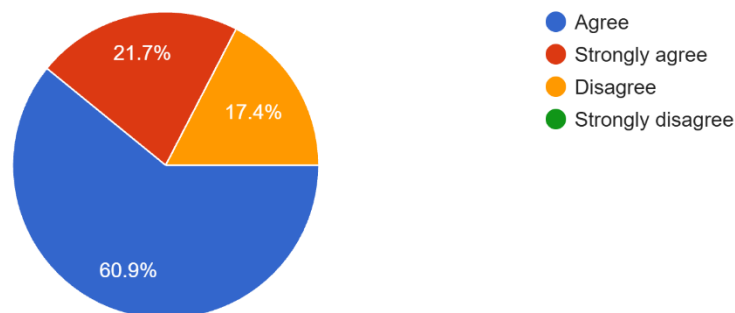


Figure 9. The Negative Impact of Anxiety on Speaking Performance

Furthermore, the survey findings showed that many participants experience lack of confidence while speaking English. Ten respondents selected “Agree,” and 2 participants selected “Strongly Agree” regarding the statement “I lack confidence when speaking English.” Although several participants disagreed with the statement, the findings still indicate that self-confidence remains an important psychological factor influencing learners’ speaking experiences and communicative performance. Krashen’s (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis also suggests that low confidence and anxiety may create psychological barriers that negatively affect language acquisition and oral communication.

10. I lack confidence when speaking English.

23 responses

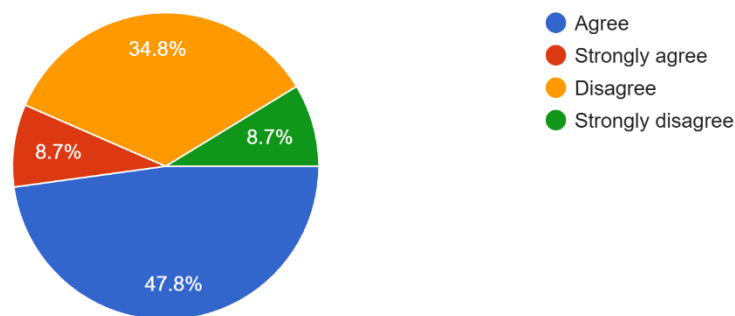


Figure 10. Lack of Confidence in English Speaking

The findings related to learners’ perceptions of IELTS speaking difficulty produced slightly mixed results. In response to the statement “Speaking is the most difficult IELTS skill for me,” 9 participants selected “Disagree,” while 7 respondents selected “Agree.” Additionally, 3 participants selected “Strongly Agree,” whereas another 3 respondents selected “Strongly Disagree.” These findings suggest that although speaking is not universally considered the most difficult IELTS component, a considerable proportion of learners still experience substantial challenges during speaking tasks.

11. Speaking is the most difficult IELTS skill for me.

23 responses

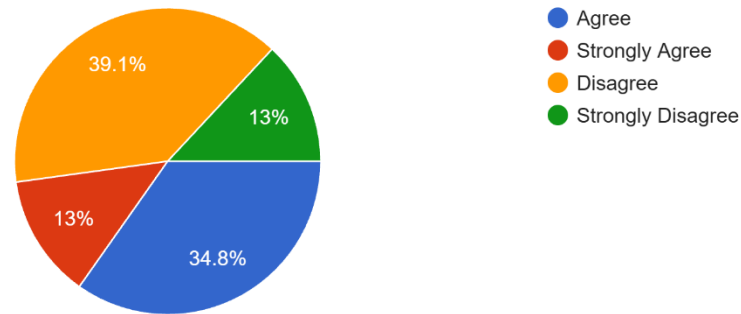


Figure 11. Speaking as the Most Difficult IELTS Skill

Overall, the findings of the study suggest that IELTS speaking anxiety among Uzbek EFL learners is influenced by multiple interconnected factors, including fear of grammatical mistakes, vocabulary limitations, lack of confidence, and stress during spontaneous communication. These findings strongly support previous studies conducted by Horwitz et al. (1986), Young (1991), MacIntyre and Gardner (1994), Idrissi (2022), and Jingwen (2023), all of whom emphasize the close relationship between psychological factors and foreign language speaking performance.

Major Causes of IELTS Speaking Anxiety

The analysis of participants' responses revealed several major factors contributing to IELTS speaking anxiety among Uzbek EFL learners. Among the most frequently mentioned causes were lack of vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, fear of grammatical mistakes, fear of negative evaluation, lack of confidence, lack of speaking practice, and time pressure during speaking tasks. One of the most commonly reported factors was a lack of vocabulary knowledge. Many participants indicated that limited lexical resources prevent them from expressing ideas clearly and fluently during speaking activities. Rahmadani (2022) similarly found that vocabulary limitations significantly contribute to speaking anxiety and reduced learner participation in oral communication tasks. Similarly, pronunciation difficulties were repeatedly identified as another important source of anxiety, suggesting that learners fear being misunderstood or

negatively evaluated because of inaccurate pronunciation. Cedar (2024) also emphasizes that pronunciation-related concerns often reduce learners' confidence and willingness to participate in oral interaction.

Fear of grammatical mistakes additionally emerged as a significant factor influencing learners' speaking confidence. Several participants reported feeling anxious about producing grammatically incorrect responses during oral communication. Furthermore, some respondents indicated that fear of being judged by others increases their nervousness during speaking tasks, particularly in examination situations. These findings correspond with Horwitz et al. (1986), who identify fear of negative evaluation as one of the major components of foreign language anxiety.

Lack of confidence and insufficient speaking practice were also identified as important contributors to speaking anxiety. The findings suggest that learners who rarely participate in oral communication activities may experience greater stress during IELTS speaking tasks due to limited speaking experience and fear of making mistakes. In addition, time pressure appeared to create considerable psychological stress for some participants, especially during tasks requiring immediate responses and spontaneous idea generation.

SECTION 3 - Causes & Solutions 12. What causes the MOST anxiety during IELTS speaking?

23 responses

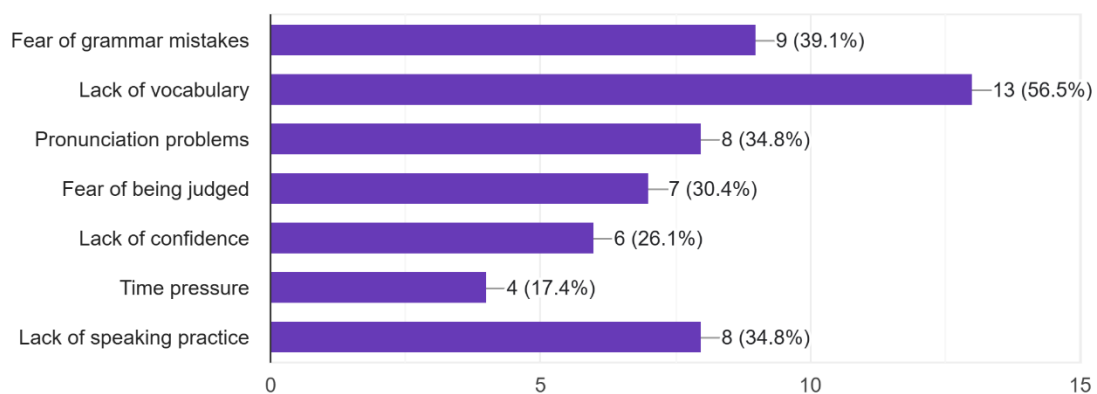


Figure 12. Major Causes of IELTS Speaking Anxiety

The qualitative responses provided by participants in the open-ended section of the questionnaire further support these findings. Many respondents identified vocabulary limitations, fluency problems, lack of ideas, pronunciation

difficulties, and stress during spontaneous communication as their greatest speaking challenges. Several learners specifically mentioned difficulties related to IELTS Speaking Part 3, where candidates are expected to answer abstract and unpredictable questions in greater detail.

One participant explained that maintaining fluency under time pressure becomes particularly difficult because learners often attempt to translate ideas directly from their native language into English. Another respondent stated that forgetting familiar vocabulary items during stressful situations significantly reduces speaking confidence and communicative performance. Such responses support MacIntyre and Gardner's (1994) argument that anxiety interferes with learners' cognitive processing and spontaneous language production.

Overall, the findings indicate that IELTS speaking anxiety among Uzbek EFL learners results from a combination of linguistic limitations and psychological pressures. Vocabulary difficulties, fear of mistakes, lack of confidence, and stress during spontaneous communication collectively contribute to learners' anxiety and negatively affect their oral performance.

Strategies for Reducing Speaking Anxiety

The survey findings additionally revealed several strategies that learners consider effective for reducing speaking anxiety. Among the most frequently mentioned strategies were regular speaking practice, mock speaking tests, teacher feedback, pair and group discussions, watching English videos or podcasts, and learning new vocabulary.

Regular speaking practice appeared to be one of the most commonly preferred anxiety-reduction strategies among participants. Many respondents emphasized that continuous oral communication practice helps increase fluency, improve confidence, and reduce fear during speaking tasks. Similar findings were identified by Khouni (2022), who states that regular speaking activities and supportive classroom interaction may significantly reduce learner anxiety.

Mock IELTS speaking tests were also identified as beneficial because they familiarize learners with examination conditions and decrease psychological pressure during actual speaking examinations. Idrissi (2022) similarly emphasizes that repeated speaking practice may help learners overcome fear and improve speaking fluency in IELTS contexts.

Participants additionally highlighted the importance of supportive teacher feedback and collaborative classroom activities such as pair and group discussions. These findings suggest that positive classroom interaction and constructive feedback may help learners feel more comfortable and confident while communicating in English. Furthermore, several respondents reported that watching English videos and podcasts contributes to pronunciation improvement, vocabulary development, and greater speaking confidence.

13. What helps reduce your speaking anxiety the most?

23 responses

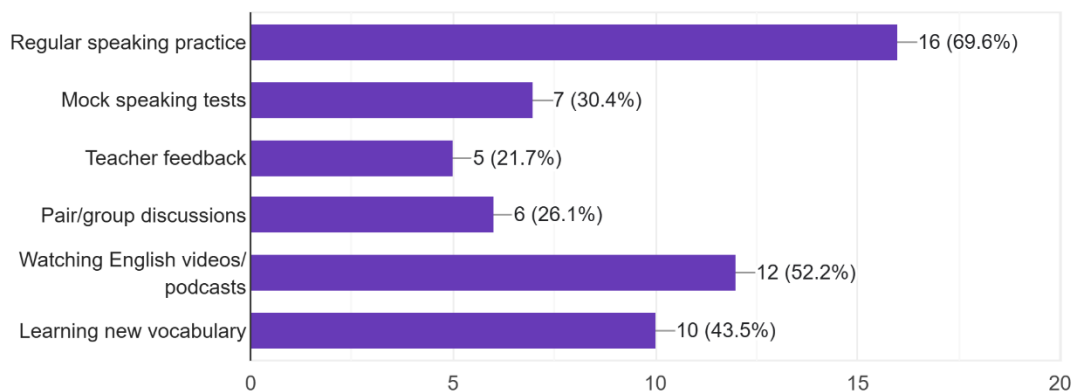


Figure 13. Strategies for Reducing IELTS Speaking Anxiety

The findings therefore indicate that both pedagogical support and regular communicative practice play an essential role in reducing speaking anxiety among Uzbek EFL learners. These results correspond with previous studies emphasizing the importance of supportive learning environments and communicative teaching approaches in promoting learner confidence, reducing anxiety, and improving oral fluency.

Analysis of Open-Ended Responses

The qualitative responses obtained from the open-ended section of the questionnaire provided deeper insight into the specific difficulties experienced by Uzbek EFL learners during IELTS speaking activities. The participants most frequently mentioned vocabulary limitations, fluency problems, lack of confidence, grammatical mistakes, pronunciation difficulties, stress, and difficulties organizing ideas while speaking.



A considerable number of respondents reported that forgetting vocabulary during communication represents one of their greatest challenges. Several participants explained that although they possess passive vocabulary knowledge, they struggle to recall appropriate words during stressful speaking situations. This finding supports the quantitative results presented earlier, where many learners acknowledged forgetting vocabulary under pressure. Similar findings were identified by MacIntyre and Gardner (1994), who argue that anxiety negatively affects memory retrieval and cognitive processing during oral communication tasks.

Fluency-related difficulties also emerged as a major concern among respondents. Many learners reported experiencing hesitation, pauses, and difficulty maintaining continuous speech during IELTS speaking tasks. One participant provided a particularly detailed explanation, stating that learners often attempt to translate ideas directly from their native language into English, which results in hesitation and reduced fluency. The participant further explained that overcomplicating vocabulary usage and attempting to use advanced lexical items may increase grammatical mistakes and negatively affect natural communication. Several respondents additionally identified difficulties related to idea generation and organization of speech, particularly during IELTS Speaking Parts 2 and 3. Learners reported struggling to maintain extended responses, remain on topic, and provide well-structured answers to abstract or unfamiliar questions. One participant specifically highlighted difficulties associated with IELTS Speaking Part 3, where candidates are required to express opinions and discuss broader social issues spontaneously. These findings correspond with Jingwen (2023), who found that unpredictable and abstract speaking questions significantly increase learner anxiety during oral examinations.

Lack of confidence and psychological stress were also repeatedly mentioned in participants' responses. Some learners described feeling nervous, stressed, or unable to produce ideas effectively despite possessing sufficient language knowledge. Horwitz et al. (1986) similarly emphasize that foreign language anxiety may create psychological barriers that negatively influence learners' communicative performance and self-confidence.

Pronunciation and grammatical accuracy were identified as additional sources of speaking difficulty. Several respondents expressed concern about making grammatical errors or being misunderstood because of pronunciation problems.

Such findings support Young's (1991) argument that fear of negative evaluation and concern about linguistic accuracy frequently contribute to anxiety during speaking activities.

Overall, the qualitative findings reinforce the quantitative results of the study and demonstrate that IELTS speaking anxiety among Uzbek EFL learners is influenced by interconnected linguistic, cognitive, and psychological factors. Vocabulary retrieval difficulties, fluency problems, lack of confidence, stress, and challenges related to spontaneous communication collectively affect learners' speaking performance and communicative effectiveness.

Conclusion

The present study investigated IELTS speaking anxiety among Uzbek EFL learners and identified the major factors contributing to learners' speaking difficulties during IELTS preparation. The findings revealed that many learners experience anxiety due to fear of grammatical mistakes, vocabulary limitations, lack of confidence, pronunciation difficulties, and stress during spontaneous communication tasks. The results additionally demonstrated that speaking anxiety negatively affects learners' fluency, idea organization, and overall speaking performance.

The study also revealed that regular speaking practice, mock speaking tests, supportive teacher feedback, and collaborative classroom activities may help reduce speaking anxiety and improve learners' communicative confidence. Both quantitative and qualitative findings indicate that psychological and linguistic factors are closely interconnected in IELTS speaking contexts.

Despite the relatively small number of participants, the study provides useful preliminary insights into IELTS speaking anxiety among Uzbek EFL learners. The findings may contribute to the development of more supportive and communicative speaking environments in IELTS preparation classrooms. Future studies involving larger participant groups and mixed research methods may provide deeper understanding of foreign language speaking anxiety in Uzbek educational settings.

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