

Breaking the Silence: Understanding and Addressing High School Students' Hesitation to Speak in English

Chaimae Fertat¹, Yazid El-Iraqi², Hind Brigui³

¹⁻²⁻³ *Ibn Tofail University, Morocco*

e-mail: chaimae.fertat@uit.ac.ma, elyazid.iraqi@uit.ac.ma, hind.brigui@uit.ac.ma

Received 15 November 2025 | Received in revised form 12 February 2026 | Accepted 03 March 2026

APA Citation:

Fertat, C., El-Iraqi, Y., & Brigui, H. (2026). Breaking the Silence: Understanding and Addressing High School Students' Hesitation to Speak in English. *Journal of English Language Teaching and Linguistics*, 11(1), 2026, 61-78. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21462/jeltl.v11i1.1850>

Abstract

This research paper aims to investigate students' reluctance to speak in English classes. Most secondary education teachers struggle with the issue of having students involved in speaking activities. The purpose of this paper is to study the correlation between students' lack of motivation and reluctance to speak in English classes and to suggest ways to help teachers motivate their students to speak. An observation as well as a questionnaire were used to explore the research questions. Questionnaires were submitted to teachers while students' behaviors inside English classes were observed and analysed. The findings show that motivation does, in fact, determine students' engagement in speaking activities. They also reveal that there is a correlation between teachers not teaching speaking as a separate skill and students' hesitation to speak in class. More importantly, among the implications of the current study is that adopting a learner-centered approach in teaching speaking provides a wide range of solutions to reach out to students and improve their learning experience.

Keywords: Learner-centered teaching, motivation, reluctance, speaking skill

1. Introduction

The current research aims to investigate the core factors that influence students' motivation in language speaking classes. To be more specific, the objective is to shed light on how students show their lack of motivation to speak in language classes, and what the motivation-related factors are that contribute to their reluctance to speak. Since teachers in English classes tend to struggle with

students' engagement in class, it seems clear that students may lack a sense of belonging because it is a foreign language, or they may not understand the purpose behind studying it.

Recent studies have increasingly highlighted the complexity of students' reluctance to speak in EFL classrooms, particularly emphasizing motivational, psychological, and pedagogical dimensions. For instance, found that students' hesitation to speak is strongly associated with low motivation and insufficient instructional focus on speaking as a distinct skill, suggesting that learner-centered approaches can significantly enhance engagement. Similarly, El Antaki (2021) demonstrated that learner-centered teaching environments foster active participation and reduce speaking anxiety among learners. More recent research by Khoufri et al. (2024) indicates that integrating digital tools and AI-based platforms can increase students' willingness to communicate by creating interactive and supportive learning environments. In line with this, Rosdiana et al. (2024) reported that innovative teaching strategies, particularly those incorporating technology, positively influence students' confidence and speaking performance. Furthermore, studies such as Williams & Williams (2011) emphasize that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors, including teacher support and classroom climate, play a crucial role in shaping students' speaking behavior and participation. Collectively, these studies underscore that students' reluctance to speak is a multifaceted issue influenced by motivation, pedagogy, and learning environment.

Despite the growing body of research on speaking reluctance, several gaps remain evident. First, many previous studies have predominantly focused on isolated variables such as anxiety or motivation without examining their interconnected nature within real classroom practices. Second, limited attention has been given to how the integration versus separation of speaking instruction impacts students' willingness to communicate, particularly in secondary school contexts. Third, while recent studies have explored technology-enhanced learning, there is still insufficient empirical evidence on how traditional pedagogical practices can be transformed into learner-centered approaches in low-resource settings. Additionally, most existing research is conducted in specific regional contexts, making it difficult to generalize findings across different educational systems. Therefore, this study seeks to address these gaps by providing a more comprehensive investigation of students' reluctance to speak, focusing on the interplay between motivation, instructional practices, and classroom environment, while also offering practical pedagogical implications.

Eyeing the stated problem, it would only be reasonable to formulate the research questions as follows:

1. What makes students reluctant to speak in EFL class?
2. To what extent does motivation influence their reluctance to speak?
3. How do students show a lack of interest in speaking?
4. How could teachers help them get motivated to speak?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Motivation

“Motivation is the process whereby goal-directed activity is instigated and sustained” (Schunk et al., 2008, p. 4). Motivation is defined as empowering people to achieve high levels of performance and overcoming barriers in order to change (WCLTA, 2011). According to attitudes to the motivation phenomenon, psychologists have provided different definitions as outlined below: For the first time, motivation was inspired by the Latin phrase "Move", which implies movement; it is also an English word. Motivation is a factor that causes individuals to behave in a certain way, and from the perspective of management, the goal of motivating employees is to have them behave in a way that benefits the company the most (Jabarri & Tohidi, 2011). It is described as a state of being

within an organism capable of propelling it toward a goal and directing people to do a certain task. Nobody moves a yard or an inch for no apparent cause or motivation (Islam, 1999).

Motivation, in general, is the driving force behind human control and tenacity. That is to say, tackling motivation comes after the following questions: What strengthens a person's behavior? What guides such behaviors or directs them in a certain direction? What enhances or maintains the behavior? All these questions are directed towards motivation and the effects it has on a person's certain behaviors. Motivation is the consequence of internal or external factors that stimulate passion and tenacity in pursuing a certain path of action (Gary & Starke, 1984). An equation like "Performance = Motivation x Ability" can be used to convey this notion. In other words, motivation is a decision-making process in which an individual selects desired objectives and initiates the activities necessary to achieve them (Huczynski & Buchanan, 1991). It is the willingness to work hard in order to achieve organizational objectives (Monday et al., 1990). Habibullah (1974) claimed that motivation is the strength of a person's desire, which is affected by a number of circumstances. Khaleque (1990) explained motivation as a state of being that inspires or directs living creatures to accomplish labor or engage in internal action. Skinner (1953) considered this idea as behavior modification and called it Behavior Mod. Psychologist Maslow expressed that felt need is the basis of motivation (Maslow, 1954). Heilman & Hornsetien (1982) defined it as one's desire to work.

2.2 Types of Motivation

2.2.1 Extrinsic Motivation

Extrinsic motivation is motivation "to engage in an activity as a means to an end" (Schunk et al., 2008). For instance, extrinsically driven students could study for an exam because they think it will help them get a good mark. Extrinsic motivation originates from sources external to the person. Coercion, the threat of punishment, financial gain, and intellectual advantages are examples of extrinsic motivations. Since it encourages the performer to win and outperform others rather than take pleasure in the inherent advantages of the activity, competition is typically extrinsic. Extrinsic incentives include a crowd cheering on the individual and awards. Extrinsic benefits, according to social psychology studies, can lead to excessive rationalization and, as a result, a decrease in intrinsic drive. One study found that children who were given an unexpected reward condition and children who did not receive any extrinsic reward spent more time playing with the drawing materials than children who expected to receive a ribbon and a gold star for drawing pictures. Self-determination theory states that if a person's employment is in line with their values and beliefs and thus meets their basic psychological needs, they may internalize extrinsic motivation (Schunk et al., 2008).

2.2.2 Intrinsic Motivation

Motivation to engage in an activity for its own sake is known as intrinsic motivation (Schunk et al., 2008). Students who are genuinely motivated, for instance, study because they want to understand the subject matter and view education as a worthwhile pursuit in and of itself. Intrinsic motivation has been studied by social and educational psychologists since the early 1970s. Students' assessment theory has found that it is often associated with high levels of academic achievement and satisfaction. Students who: Believe they can be effective agents in reaching desired goals (i.e., the results are not determined by luck); attribute their educational results to factors under their own control (e.g., the effort expended); and are interested in mastering a topic rather than just rote-learning to achieve good grades are likely to be intrinsically motivated (Brophy, 2004). Extrinsic and intrinsic motivation are on different scales, despite the fact that people frequently consider them to be at opposite ends of a continuum (the stronger the extrinsic motivation, the lower the intrinsic motivation, and vice versa) (Covington, 2000; Schunk et al., 2008). For instance, students might study a subject because they find it interesting and because they want to achieve high grades. Others

could study only to get a high academic standing. Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are high in the first group, while extrinsic motivation is high, but intrinsic motivation is low. Research shows that intrinsic motivation is better since it emphasizes learning and comprehension, as you might anticipate (Brophy, 2004).

2.3 Factors Affecting Motivation

According to Cavas (2011), since it supports previously learned skills, methods, and behaviors, motivation is a crucial educational variable that helps to promote new learning and performance. Good education and a suitable curriculum alone won't ensure students' success without motivation (Dornyei & Csizer, 1998). There are several factors that significantly affect student motivation and achievement based on the development of successful and efficient learning-teaching processes in educational systems. Among the numerous motivating factors (psychological, social, and cultural) are intrinsic and extrinsic guidance, parental involvement and influence, family history, peer pressure, expectations for self-efficacy, effort, value placed on a relative, anxiety, self-regulation and goal determination, talent perceptions, learning strategies, teaching style, and the school environment (Singh et al., 2002). For instance, motivation and learning are encouraged in a school environment that is approachable, secure, joyful, personalized, and empowered. Since teachers are an essential component of the school environment, they naturally play a significant role here. Studies have shown that a teacher's expertise, motivation, credentials, teaching style, systems of evaluation, and amount of passion may all assist inspire students. Teachers who are more enthusiastic, driven, and qualified to teach and assess have a greater chance of increasing students' motivation to study (Williams & Williams, 2011). Furthermore, a lack of parental involvement in their children's education may negatively affect their sense of incompleteness and the value of the materials they read, as research indicates a strong correlation between parental involvement and children's academic motivation and educational development (Gottfried et al., 1994). Additionally, teaching pedagogies and tactics are one of the main elements that influence motivation. This has a direct bearing on the instructor; for example, if we have two teachers and the first one uses a variety of teaching techniques, resources, and methods, we are fortunate to have motivated students and a well-run class. On the other hand, if a teacher continues to use the same old methods of instruction, we can find bored pupils who don't feel like they belong in that particular class.

2.4 Generating Motivation

Educators are frequently faced with the difficulty of creating education that inspires their students to pay attention to, absorb, adopt, and practice the material offered. Because knowledge alone rarely suffices to influence attitudes and actions, the difficulty remains (Strecher & Kreuter, 1999). Some students might not perceive the need to modify their present knowledge or habits; others do not understand the link between what they learn and how it can be used in real-world situations; and still others may find the material to be incompatible with their beliefs. Hearing or reading about a proposed attitude or acquired action is unlikely to pique one's interest in learning, much less result in a long-term change. However, by creating interest, an educator can use message design strategies to improve audience motivation to learn a given activity or adopt a suggested attitude. Interest plays a significant part in learning, thus boosting it is beneficial (Hidi et al., 1992). This is due, in part, to the fact that people who are interested in what they are learning will report that they put effort into the learning activity; they will also credit their task performance to competence (Boekaerts, 2002). The importance of a learner reporting a positive attitude about an activity is that they will be more likely to complete comparable work in the future (Bandura & Weiner, 1998). The challenge, on the other hand, is determining how to pique audience attention and, as a result, produce an incentive to study.

2.5 Speaking as a Skill in EFL Class

According to Torky (2006), speaking refers to “students’ ability to express themselves orally, coherently, fluently and appropriately in a given meaningful context” (as cited in Hammani, 2019, p. 30). It is “the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, in a variety of contexts” (Chaney, 1998, p. 13, as cited in Kayi, 2006). Being one of the pillars of English language learning/teaching, speaking is a productive skill that is usually considered to be the benchmark of how well a person knows the language. This correlation between language mastery and speaking may not be completely true according to Thornbury (2005) and Widdowson (1987, as cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p. 121), since knowing a language doesn’t necessarily lead to knowing how to speak it; yet, it is indicative of its importance in language learning/teaching.

Language teaching theories have viewed the speaking skill from different angles throughout their history. Speaking was downgraded during the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) era since the latter’s goal was to only allow learners to read foreign literature and write using the foreign language (Freeman, 2000, p. 18). Thus, speaking as a skill was not important. Later on, things started to change with the subsequent methods when the need for more functional and communicative teaching theories arose. Despite their differences and shortcomings, the Direct Method and the Audio-Lingual Method consider that speech is more basic to language than the written form. Therefore, speaking in a foreign language gained more attention in language teaching and was used as both a medium of instruction and a goal of language teaching/learning so that learners become capable of using the language, not only knowing it. In the sixties, a new method saw the light, asserting that speaking should be done only by learners and that the teacher should remain as silent as possible. The Silent Way stressed silence as a tool of teaching; hence, it encouraged interaction between learners and allowed them to practice and use the language (Freeman, 2000, pp. 61-62). Other methods, such as Suggestopedia, which was developed by Georgi Lozanov, and the Community Language Learning Method, which stemmed from the principles of the Counseling Learning Approach developed by Charles A. Curran (Freeman, 2000, p. 89), also encouraged speaking in the classroom right from the beginning. However, the Comprehension Approach, among others, regarded speaking as a skill that is learnt in a later stage after listening to and understanding the language in the same way an infant acquires his/her native language (Freeman, 2000, p. 107). Each method drew on the shortcomings of the previous ones and had recourse to the research available at that time to build its principles. Besides, many approaches and methods overlapped and converged. Most of the methods are aimed at allowing learners to communicate using the target language. Yet, educators noticed that this goal wasn’t attained; hence, the advent of the Communicative Language Teaching (Hymes, 1971; Widdowson, 1990, as cited in Freeman, 2000, p. 121). In the late seventies and early eighties, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) came to develop learners’ communicative competence. Thus, speaking was of paramount importance both as a medium and as a goal.

The fundamental idea behind all communicative techniques is that students need to learn how to utilize language to accomplish tasks in addition to making propositional, grammatically sound assertions about the experienced world. The interaction between interlocutors is a crucial factor in achieving this, which is why learner-centered teaching was developed (Nunan, 2013, p. 18-19). Other methods that continue to emphasize speaking, like content-based, task-based, and interactive language teaching, are built on the ideas of CLT.

2.6 Motivation-related Factors that Hinder Learners from Speaking in Class

A wealth of research tackled learners’ barriers to learning in general and to speaking in particular from different perspectives. Many of these contributions classified motivation as an affective barrier that is separated from other barriers, like linguistic or cognitive barriers. Yet, a close look at those non-motivation-related obstacles shows us that learners’ performance and

competence are webbed with their motivation, especially at this young age, where they have not yet developed their self-discipline and self-regulation mechanisms. For example, the absence of motivation to learn a language when first encountered causes the learner to lack the level-appropriate linguistic knowledge to speak in class. This lack results, in turn, in an increased loss of any motivation left, which will continue to cause the learner a lack of linguistic knowledge. It is a never-ending vicious circle if the root problem is not dealt with. Though it is not exhaustive, the present chapter explores the different barriers that cause learners to have poor motivation to speak in class.

2.6.1 Linguistic Barriers

L1 or L2 interference. It is when the learner uses patterns, structures, or phonological rules of their native or second language to speak in another language they are currently learning. In such cases, learners can't get rid of their L1 or L2 patterns while using the new language. They still can't think or express themselves using the language they are currently learning.

Lack of exposure to English. In the Moroccan context, for example, learners are exposed to English only in class, which automatically lessens their chances to hear, practice, and be immersed in the language.

The influence of accent. Some learners, especially teenagers, refrain from speaking because of the interference of their own accent when they speak English. Although their neuromuscular plasticity is still active until puberty, they find it difficult to acquire the so-called authentic (native like) control of the phonology of the foreign language. In such cases, they are unaware of the tremendous effort needed to gain control over their muscles to be fluent as a native speaker and deem that they are not good enough to speak (Brown, 2014, p. 58).

2.6.2 Cognitive Barriers

The first studies on SLA concentrated on cognitive factors, including linguistic aptitude, intellect, learning styles, and so on. The following are some examples of cognitive barriers to speaking.

Rote learning. People of all ages have little use for rote, mechanical learning that is unrelated to prior knowledge and experience, according to Ausubel (1964). Instead, the majority of knowledge is acquired through meaningful learning, which involves connecting new ideas and experiences to previously learned knowledge (Brown, 2014, pp. 62-63).

Metacognition: Awareness of language learning. Metacognition is the ability to critically and healthily evaluate and reflect on one's knowledge, actions, reactions, feelings, strengths, and weaknesses in order to improve. In contrast, lacking metacognition inhibits learners from improving their self-awareness, self-regulation, and making informed decisions, as far as speaking is concerned. Therefore, it becomes challenging for them to identify their need to speak a foreign language.

2.6.3 Affective Barriers

Affective and emotional characteristics have grown more relevant in the language learning field. The affective domain involves the emotionally significant features of a learner that determine how he or she will respond to any event (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1992). The following are some of the affective factors that hamper learners from speaking:

Anxiety. Anxiety is one of the emotional filters in the notion of affective filter hypothesis, which explains how emotive elements influence the learning of a second language. Some people are unable to learn a foreign language well due to a subjective sense of stress, anxiety, uneasiness, and worry (Horwitz & Cope, 1986). It has been discovered that poor language achievement is linked to

higher levels of language anxiety. Moreover, it can be developed, in certain circumstances, into a chronic anxiety or some other form of mental problems, such as depression, especially if it is ignored.

Language ego. Learners' self-identity is tied to their native language. They both interacted throughout the years, constituting a language ego. Thus, a new language might pose a 'threat' to the ego (Guiora et al., 1972; Ehrman, 1993; Dörnyei, 2005, as cited in Brown, 2014, p. 64). Young adults, in particular, make sure to protect their ego through avoiding making mistakes and looking foolish, which eventually hinders their participation in EFL class.

Other factors. Motivation is a broad domain that includes a lot of facets and components. Other factors, such as curiosity, perceived value of the course (Williams & Burden, 1997, as cited in Dörnyei, 2001, p. 19), need for achievement, expectancy of success (Ushioda, as cited in Mercer et al., 2012, p. 60), and perceived value of learning in general, might hinder learners from developing their speaking skills.

3. Research Methods

3.1 Research Design

Due to the aim of this research and grounded on the research question, the present study employs qualitative and quantitative methods. A qualitative method is used for the examination of the data and, therefore, endeavours to meet the objectives stated at the beginning. This is because this method is mainly regarded as more efficient and suitable for gaining deep insights into the area of the subject matter, and interpreting the findings in a way that explores possible relationships between the variables. In addition, the method sets the ground for the validity of explanations to the psychological as well as the linguistic factors with a view to establishing relevant interpretations, and inferring general conclusions. On the flip side, the quantitative method offers a toolkit to uncover the correlation between the target variables. Thereby, it constitutes the ideal method to draw conclusions with a considerable degree of objectivity.

3.2 Participants

It is beyond any shadow of doubt that participants are a key part of any scientific endeavour. In this regard, the informants in the current study are teachers of different levels in the region of Tanger-Tétouan. These teachers are diverse in every possible way, namely in level, age, gender, interests, and years of expertise. Hopefully, this diversity will result in findings, adequate representation of attitudes, and the validity of the conclusions. The researchers tried their best to share the questionnaire with teachers they know. This would greatly influence the study in terms of diversity of attitudes and perspectives, because students are different in every school. Therefore, 80 participants took part in this study.

3.3 Data Collection Techniques

3.3.1 Observation

According to Burns (2010), observation stands for "making familiar things strange" (p.57). That is the teacher should attempt to pierce through the familiar and routine in class, and pay meticulous attention to students' behavior in class. Since, as the old saying goes, the devil is in the details, the faintest movement, gesture, or facial expression can reveal a great deal about learners' psychology. One of the advantages of this data collection technique is that it is stress-free for students, as students are not asked to do anything out of the ordinary. Subsequently, learners are in a position to showcase genuine reactions which will, hopefully, unveil their attitude towards new

techniques and strategies used to engage them in language speaking classes. It is worth mentioning that this technique is a way of eyeing this issue from the perspective of the teachers themselves.

3.3.2 Questionnaires

In addition to observations, the researchers placed faith in questionnaires as an effective way to collect data directly from the participants. The questionnaire was launched via social media, targeting exclusively Moroccan EFL teachers based in the Tanger-Tétouan region. It is crystal clear that the utility of this technique of data collection materializes in terms of saving time, since questionnaires are easy to distribute among a large number of participants, especially using ICT like Google Forms. The questionnaire was distributed online via social groups on WhatsApp and Facebook, and some of the colleagues received the links privately. The goal was to reach as many teachers as possible. The criteria of the survey only had to focus on the field of teaching English. The only criteria were the field of teaching and years of teaching, meaning in this case, the teachers' age and gender were not the center of focus whatsoever. On another level, surveys enable researchers to tap into various types of data, namely factual, behavioural, and attitudinal pieces of information. Factual or demographic data encompasses providing a profile of participants, including their personal information, background, and experiences. As for behavioural, they are mainly centered around the present and the past actions of people involved. On its part, attitudinal information revolves around opinions, beliefs, interests, and values of participants (Burns, 2010, p. 81). In this study, the researchers opted for relying on questionnaires composed of an amalgamation of closed-ended and open-ended items. The rationale behind including closed-ended items is to narrow the range of answers and guarantee the accuracy of replies, which will make it easier to interpret the data. Besides, owing to the need to elaborate answers and extended descriptions, the researchers judged it wise to make room for open-ended items as well. Thereby, it is adequate to point out that the objective of the employed questionnaire is to paint a comprehensive picture of teachers' experience of and towards motivating students to speak in a language class and how this is perceived by students.

3.4 Ethical issues

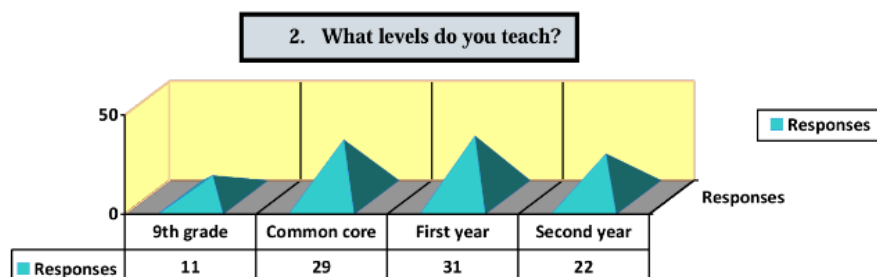
Action research is evidently a noble cause. Yet, it is of utmost importance to highlight the ethical issues that researchers need to place the accent on. Notably, Burns (2010) maintains that: "Ethics in action research are actually pretty simple to understand. First, you treat others as you wish to be treated. Basically, the researchers don't risk the safety, privacy, or dignity of our learners or collaborating researchers. Second, the researchers are role models for our learners in everything they do. So, how the researchers set about research is a message to them about how to do research" (p.34). In the name of moral integrity, we, as researchers and educators, addressed a plethora of ethical concerns. First of all, the researchers insisted on disclosing all the relevant information about the research, including the topic, the objectives, the research questions, the participants, and the duration of the research. Also, the researchers ensured that anonymity is guaranteed and that neither the participants' personal information nor their responses is disclosed. It is a truism in any kind of research that plagiarism is one of the most despicable sins that any researcher can commit. Thereby, all the ideas reported here are ours unless otherwise stated.

4. Results and Discussions

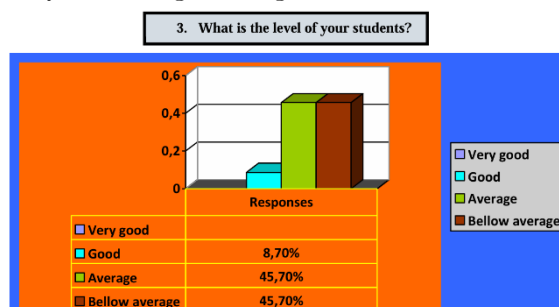
The analysis of both the questions and our own observations of EFL classrooms will be presented hand in hand so as to have a clear, systematic view of the findings. The researchers also opt for analyzing and discussing the data conjointly for the same reason.

As mentioned earlier, 48 EFL teachers working in the Moroccan education sector responded to our questionnaire. The questionnaire comprised 15 questions divided into four sections: General information, speaking and motivation in EFL class, motivation and speaking perceptions, and improving speaking in EFL class. As for observation, the researchers are teaching 10 high school classes (Sayyida Al Hurra High School in Sidi Yamani and Ibn Zohr High School in Ouazzane) and were able to observe 7 other classes, i.e., common core, first year baccalaureate, and second year baccalaureate. The learners were from different streams, ranging from experimental sciences, literature and humanities to economics. The results are as follows:

The majority of our respondents are in their first five years of experience; hence, they are young teachers, which is understandable since they are the group who is more connected to the web compared to older teachers. This also implies that they may, or may not, be more open to follow the latest teaching approaches and to use the newest strategies since they are relatively newly trained in what is expected to be an advanced, up-to-date training. Besides, they constitute the age group that is supposed to be more inclined to use ICT in their classes, for some of them are digital natives. This percentage also suggests that they probably still lack the necessary professional wisdom that usually accompanies the long years of experience. For better or worse, our results are hopefully going to provide some insights into how motivation influences speaking in class and how we, teachers, can play a positive role in increasing this motivation, allowing learners to speak.



The questionnaire was directed to middle school and high school English teachers. English is taught as a foreign language in Moroccan public and private schools. Learners in public schools, who constitute 82 % of the overall Moroccan students, start learning it in their final year of middle school (9th grade) and carry on throughout high school.

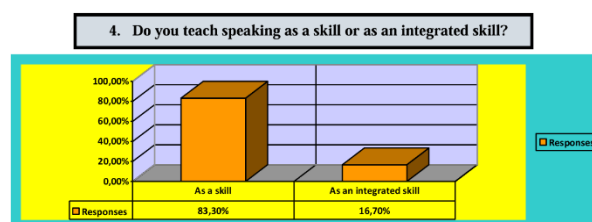


As shown in the graph, almost half of the respondents asserted that the level of their students is below average. The other half declared that their level is average, while the remaining 8.7% of them maintained that their students have a good level. None of them claimed that their students' level is very good. Though this cannot be considered a holistic diagnosis of middle and high school learners' ability in English in Moroccan public schools, it does reveal that, at least for our participants, learners are suffering from low performance in their English classes. The present results do not contradict what studies and statistics report. The World Bank statistics show that the quality of the education system in Morocco was and still is below the world median and that it

experienced a decline according to its last statistics in 2017 (The Quality of the Education System, Index, 2017). Moreover, the Program for International Students Assessment (PISA) of 2018 ranked Morocco in 75th place out of 79 countries based on the assessment of Moroccan students at the age of 15 years old. As far as our observation is concerned, the level of our learners, as well as those of other classes the researchers observed, is, in general, below average. Learners face problems not only with speaking, which is usually regarded as an unpleasant production phase in class, but also with the other language skills and components. Common core learners, however, seem to be more participative and engaging in learning, especially the science stream - French option.

83.3 % of the teachers expressed that they teach speaking as an integrated skill. This means that they don't dedicate a full session to teaching speaking skills in each unit of the curriculum. Instead, they integrate it in other lessons with either reading, listening, writing, grammar, functions or vocabulary. Yet, 16.7 % of the respondents acknowledged that they devote a session each unit to speaking. The findings correlate with our observations. Observed classes, including ours, don't teach speaking separately.

The following question provides more insights about the reasons behind the teachers' choice. 50 % of teachers who teach speaking as an integrated skill do so because of the learners' low level.



Understanding difficulties, lack of language knowledge, and inability to form simple utterances cause the teacher to waste valuable time explaining and trying to get the learners to speak when he/she tries to teach speaking as a separate skill. Therefore, it's a waste of time and effort for them to dedicate a whole session to speaking.

The low level of learners makes 15.38 % of the same category choose not to teach speaking as a separate skill, at least for the time being, for another reason. They find that their learners do better when speaking is integrated because they are learning it indirectly, which is encouraging, especially for shy learners. This way, slow but sure improvement can be made. In the same vein, 7.70 % of this category affirmed that their learners are beginners (9th grade) who are still unable to use the language since they don't have the linguistic baggage yet. As for some others, 11.53 % of the 83 %, it is a matter of following the curriculum, which either has speaking integrated into all lessons without being presented as a stand-alone skill or has been neglected because it is not included in the summative assessments.

The remaining participants, four participants constituting 3.84 % of this category each, expressed the following reasons each for teaching speaking as an integrated skill in their classes:

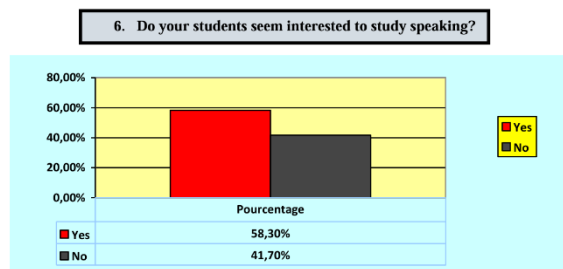
1. Preference to integrate speaking in the production phase of other lessons after learners learn the necessary language prompts they need.
2. Absence of the need to teach speaking separately since it is already incorporated in almost all lessons.
3. Preference to focus on reinforcing other skills.
4. Following the communicative approach that stresses the use of integration of speaking in all other language skills and components.

One of the most striking but also thought-provoking answers was from one respondent who said: "I don't see how speaking can be taught as a lesson; how do you teach someone how to speak?"

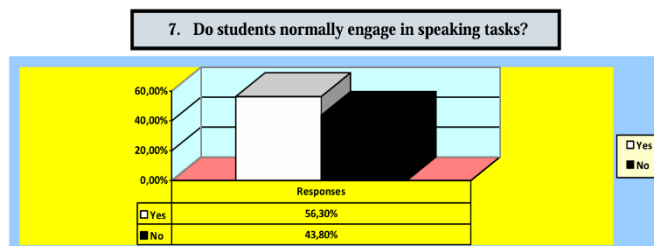
On the other side of the coin, the other 17 % of respondents who teach speaking as a separate skill do so for a few reasons. First, learners' low level necessitates special attention and more effort and time dedicated to speaking. Hence, it should be taught separately, although it is also inherently integrated into other lessons. Second, speaking skills are very important, especially in a communicative fluency-oriented curriculum (English Horizons as a provided example), so it should be taught both separately and integrated. Finally, one respondent asserted that he/she sets a yearly objective for his/her learners so that by the end of the year, they will be able to speak and express their thoughts in English; therefore, teaching speaking separately and integrated is of paramount importance.

Our observation reveals that the teachers the researchers observed, and ourselves, belong to the first category of teachers who teach speaking as an integrated skill because both learners' level and interest usually turn speaking activities into failed activities. Reflecting on the data at hand demonstrates that it isn't a wise choice.

While integrating skills is great since it is about hitting two birds with one stone and assuring more opportunities for communication to happen in class, literature shows that it is neither healthy nor beneficial for learners to study speaking solely as an integrated part of a lesson. By doing so, the researchers send an indirect yet clear message to learners that speaking is not important. Language skills and components are not learnt isolated from each other. They naturally interact with each other. Thus, it is good to aim at maximizing learning and intentionally integrate speaking with other skills. Yet, dedicating a whole lesson to it is of paramount significance if the researchers want English to serve learners in real life. Activities can be adapted to the learners' level and difficulties, and this is why LCT was developed. It is certainly daunting and tiring, yet literature reveals that though it is an absolute patience and perseverance process, it is not impossible.

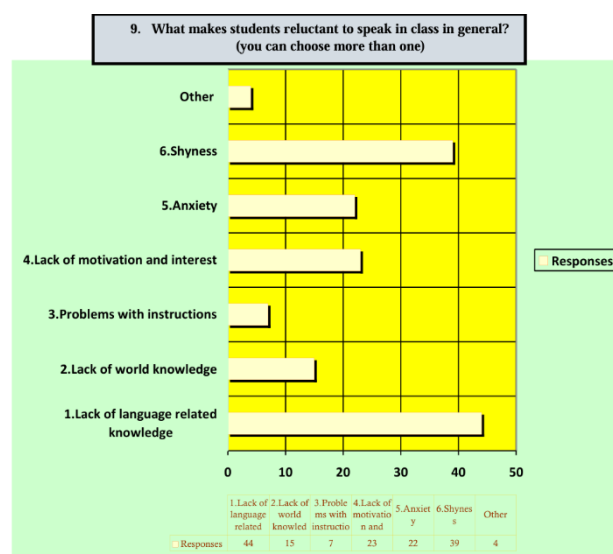


58.3 % of the participants said that the learners in their classes seem interested in studying speaking, while 41.7 % responded that they don't. These results contradict our observation, whereby the researchers noticed that many learners look disinterested or even intimidated when introducing a speaking task. It is also noteworthy that they seem extremely reluctant to speak or even utter 'Yes' or 'No' answers to the teacher's questions when he/she tries to make sure that they understand the instructions. This is what prompted this research paper in the first place. Our observation shows that, when it comes to speaking, the observed classes are dominated either by seemingly uncomfortable learners, who are avoiding eye contact with the teacher and waiting for the session to end, or hyperactive/disruptive learners who need constant monitoring to stay calm but not necessarily engaged in the activity. A third minority category is that of learners who follow but are also reluctant to speak.



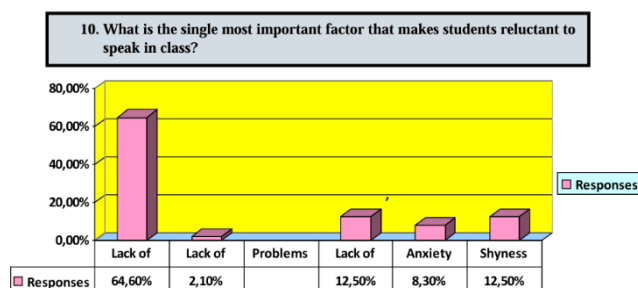
There is a slight statistical difference between the results of this question and those of the previous one. 58.3 % of participants asserted that their learners seem interested in studying speaking, whilst 56.3 % (2 % drop) of participants stated that their learners normally engage in speaking tasks. This means that there are some learners who might be interested in studying speaking, but don't engage in speaking activities when they happen. The results suggest that the activities themselves may not be engaging. However, 43.7 % of the participants said that the learners in their classes are normally engaged in speaking tasks, as opposed to 41.7 % of them who asserted that learners seem interested in studying speaking. Again, the numbers signify that some learners (2 %) engage in speaking activities, although they do not seem interested in studying speaking, which indicates the use of effective speaking activities or learners' intrinsic motivation to learn or succeed.

In this question, the researchers asked teachers whose learners don't normally engage in speaking activities to explain why. 42.42 % of them attributed learners' lack of engagement to their low level, wherein the latter lack the necessary language tools, such as vocabulary and structure, to express themselves. 21.21 % think that it's because learners are shy, and 12.12 % of them think they fear embarrassment and being laughed at. Another 12.12 % of participants said that it's due to the lack of self-confidence that the learners are not engaged in speaking activities, whereas only 6.06 % considered that the lack of motivation and interest are the causes for the low participation of some learners. In addition, one participant cited that learners generally hate speaking not only in English class, but also in other language classes. A second participant had no idea as to why they don't engage in speaking activities.



The findings show that learners' reluctance to speak in class is the result of linguistic challenges or affective challenges. In either case, motivation plays a critical part in initiating the interest in speaking.

As the graph illustrates, participants were asked to decide which of the following factors makes their learners reluctant to speak in class: lack of language-related knowledge, lack of world knowledge, problems with instructions, lack of motivation and interest, anxiety, shyness, and others. Most of them (91.7 %) think that the lack of language knowledge is a driving factor of learners' reluctance to speak in class. 81.3 % of them believe that shyness is also an instrument that restrains learners from speaking, while 47.9 % of the respondents assert that the lack of motivation and interest makes learners hesitant to engage in speaking activities. Contrastingly, only 14.6 % of participants consider that the problem of disinclination to speak is related to the instructions given to them.



Our aim from this question is to find out how many teachers would consider motivation as the most important factor in learners' reluctance to speak in class. Apparently, most of them (64.6 %) consider the lack of language-related knowledge as the prime factor controlling learners' engagement in speaking activities. Only 12.5 % of the participants chose the lack of motivation and interest to be the driving factor. However, the lack of language-related knowledge can be explained by the lack of motivation when learners first encounter the language. They consequently grew inept and started to face linguistic challenges, which in turn fueled a reduced sense of motivation. Most learners frequently convey disinterest in speaking through low participation. They also show unwelcoming facial expressions and become disruptive. This is confirmed through our observation, during which learners didn't participate, and their facial expressions showed that they weren't excited to engage in the activity.

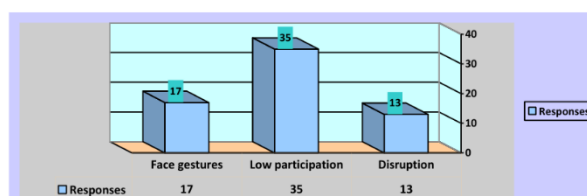
Participants were asked to give their position concerning seven statements so as to have an insight into how they perceive the teaching/learning process, motivation, and speaking; hence, how they go about teaching it. The English language is boring: Most participants (95.83 %) believe that English is not a boring language. This is one of the good indicators of a healthy environment in class. When teachers like the subject they are teaching, they transfer those emotions to learners. However, 4.17 % of participants stayed on the neutral side, which indicates that they don't know or are not sure whether or not the statement is true. Though it was only two participants who responded 'neutral', it is worrying to have a teacher teaching something he/she doesn't know for a fact whether it is boring or not.

The methods of teaching speaking are outdated: 41% of the respondents agree with the statement, 22.91 % disagree, and 35.41% are neutral. Therefore, many of them think that the way speaking is taught is outdated. Believing so won't serve the teacher in his/her practice. On the contrary, it will constitute a psychological barrier to finding solutions and is more likely to be the reason why speaking is not taught as a separate skill. Yet, when 35.41% of them convey that they are neutral about it, a breeze of uncertainty mixed with carelessness is conveyed. As for those who disagree, the researchers believe that they, in fact, have come to the phase where they skillfully and easily implement the up-to-date strategies for speaking in their classrooms. These inferences need more research using more instruments, such as interviews.

Students' prejudgments about speaking are negative: Almost half of the participants (47.83 %) think that learners come to the classroom with negative prejudgments, 13 % think they don't, while 39.13 % are neutral. Having learners with unfavorable preconceptions about the subject might be frustrating for the teacher, for it is not always easy to regularly break up ideas and perceptions and reach the deep convictions behind them to motivate learners to see things differently. This might be psychologically taxing for teachers, especially if the general atmosphere is dominated by negative perceptions about the subject and the job of teaching it. Yet, if learners come to the classroom with negative prejudgments, then motivation will be absent, and learning is, consequently, impossible, unless those preconceptions are dealt with. Besides, neutrality on the part of the teacher in this case means that they don't know for sure, for one reason or another, how their learners perceive the subject. Therefore, knowing is the first step towards dealing with these negative prejudgments. The second step entails taking action and trying to dismantle them.

Speaking activities are not learner-centered: Half of the participants disagree with the statement and believe that speaking activities are learner-centered, which contradicts a previous statement where 41 % of participants agreed that the methods of teaching speaking are outdated. Here, the researchers can infer that either the participants think that learner-centered activities are outdated, or that they mean that the activities they use in teaching speaking are learner-centered (up-to-date), but it is the general program and curriculum that is still following old methods and therefore not learner-centered. Moreover, 25 % of participants agree that they find/use speaking activities that are not learner-centered. 25 % of them stay on the impartial side.

11. How do students show lack of interest in speaking?



It is the teacher's job to motivate the learner to speak in class: More than half of the participants agreed with the statement (66.66 %), acknowledging the prime and crucial role the teacher has in managing learning and taking part in shaping learners' motivation. This validates the idea that motivation is an active criterion that could be managed and enhanced. It is also a clear indication that external factors, the teacher's actions in this case, have to some extent an influence on learners' internal drives. Contrarily, 4.16 % of the participants believe that motivating learners is not a part of the teacher's job or that it is not the responsibility of the teacher alone, and that there are other intervening factors. 29.16 % of them are neutral about it. The aim behind this question is not to corner the teacher and blame him/her for learners' lack of motivation. It is more of an attempt to discover the various ways through which learners' motivation can be enhanced in the classroom.

Speaking skill is not as important as the other skills: As expected, 95.80 % of the participants disagree with the statement, 2.20 % agree, whereas 2.20 % are not sure. The results show that speaking and other skills stand on the same footing for the participants, although they don't teach them as separate skills. Students' motivation is what decides their engagement in speaking tasks: 74.47 % of the participants find the statement to be true, which illustrates the teachers' awareness of the motivational role in engaging learners in speaking tasks. The present results seemingly counter that of question 10, where only 12.5 % of teachers believe that motivation is the most important

factor that determines learners' participation in speaking. If the researchers take a close look, it seems that the motivation is not the sole ingredient to learners' engagement in speaking activities; it is the most important. Going back to our statement, 19.14 % of participants asserted that they are neutral towards the statement, while only 6.38 % disagreed with it.

The participants shared the different techniques, strategies, and activities they usually employ in their classes to encourage learners to speak. The answers were diverse and reflected the teachers' awareness of learner-centered teaching and the incorporation of techniques belonging to other approaches, such as drilling (Audio-lingual method). The following are the shared activities classified according to the most mentioned to the least mentioned:

Games: The most voiced type of activity among all. 24.32 % of the participants asserted that they use games to involve learners in speaking activities. They believe that they should be well-planned, fun, engaging, and competitive;

Role plays: 10.81 % of the participants use role plays to encourage learners to speak, especially at the production phase.

Short talks and mini presentations: 8.10 % of them resort to short talks and mini presentations.

Drilling: 5.40 % of participants drill expressions and dialogues as a means to incite learners' participation in speaking activities, although it is a way to give learners a chance to orally practice what they learn, it is not productive since it's not the learner who use his/her mental processes and produces an utterance. It is more of a mechanical rather than a creative process.

Task-based activities: 5.40 % of participants build activities around a task in speaking activities.
Brainstorming: 2.70 % of the participants.

Hot potato: 2.70 % of the participants.

Think, pair, and share: 2.70 % of the participants.

Open-ended questions: 2.70 % of the participants.

Group discussions: 2.70 % of the participants.

In addition to the above-mentioned activities, participants provided several concepts and tips to boost learners' participation in speaking activities. The researchers organized them from the most suggested to the least suggested:

- **Adopt simple, clear, and comprehensible input/instruction:** 18.91 % of the participants.
- **Cultivate a tolerant, accepting environment where mistakes are permissible and, hence, self-confidence is developed:** 18.91 % of the participants.
- **Choose topics that they are interested in to create a need to speak for them:** 16.21 %
- **Provide enough input:** 13.50 % of the participants believe in the need to provide enough input before asking learners to speak. Input involves providing prompts like cards and pictures, modeling, pre-teaching vocabulary, etc.
- **Group work:** 8.10 % of the participants think that group work is key and that groups should consist of mixed-ability learners.
- **Rewards such as extra marks and small gifts:** 8.10 % of the participants.
- **Integrate ICT:** 8.10 % of the participants.
- **Break activities into mini tasks and arrange them from easy to difficult:** 5.40 % of the participants.
- **Pair work:** 2.70 % of the participants.
- **Adopt level appropriate content:** 2.70 % of the participants.

- Encourage the use of gestures and body language instead of Arabic: 2.70 % of the participants.
- Incorporate fun: 2.70 % of the participants.
- Build rapport: 2.70 %. Allocate appropriate time for learners to think and interact: 2.70% of the participants.

Participants were asked about their go-to tips, strategies, and activities for motivating students in their classes. The answers to this question are approximately similar to the last one. They show teachers' awareness of a learner-centered approach anew. The following are the shared activities classified according to the most mentioned to the least mentioned:

- Rewarding: 46 % of the participants declared that the chief generator of motivation in their classes is rewards. Rewards can come in the form of extra marks, awards, chocolate, sweets, money, praise, and so on.
- Games: 29.72 % of the participants use games to motivate learners. They also assert that games should be inclusive, fun, and competitive.
- Nurture an encouraging, tolerant environment: 13.50 % of the participants tolerate mistakes, avoid negative feedback, and don't allow learners to laugh at each other.
- Select topics of their interests: 13.51 % of the participants opt for topics that their learners like or know about.
- Incorporating ICT: 13.51 % of the participants.
- Motivational talks: 10.81 % of the participants resort to motivational speeches to inspire learners and make them believe they can do it.
- Group and pair work: 10.81 % of the participants.
- Catering for different learning styles and levels: 5.40 % of the participants.
- Extracurricular activities: 2.70 % of the participants.
- Showing learners the importance of the English language in their lives: 2.70 % of the participants.
- Relationship building: 2.70 % of the participants.
- Careful planning: 2.70 % of the participants.

77 % of the participants in this study answered the last two questions enthusiastically and were generous in sharing their practices inside their classrooms. One participant, however, voiced a different opinion, explaining that a horse can be led to the river, but it is impossible to make it drink; therefore, it is all about the intrinsic motivation of the learner. Another participant expressed concern and asked for help on how to encourage learners to speak in class. He/she says, "I myself need tips because I'm suffering as well. I tried pictures, videos, dialogues, throwing the ball, and giving opinions". While the researchers don't know the details of his/her teaching experience, to attempt to suggest solutions, the researchers hope that this paper will answer his/her concerns and provide alternatives as to how to engage learners to speak in class.

The findings of this study reveal that students' reluctance to speak is primarily driven by a complex interplay between linguistic limitations and affective factors, with motivation acting as a central mediating variable. This result aligns with prior research emphasizing the pivotal role of motivation in EFL speaking performance. For instance, Dörnyei (2001) and MacIntyre et al. (1998) highlight that low motivation and high anxiety significantly hinder learners' willingness to communicate. Similarly, Horwitz et al. (1986) found that anxiety and fear of negative evaluation suppress oral participation, which resonates with this study's identification of shyness and fear of embarrassment as dominant barriers. In addition, studies by Al-Hosni (2014) and Tuan & Mai (2015) confirm that limited vocabulary and grammatical knowledge are major constraints, supporting the current finding that lack of linguistic resources (91.7%) is the most cited factor.

However, unlike some studies that position motivation as the primary cause (e.g., Dörnyei, 2001), this study shows that teachers tend to prioritize linguistic deficiencies over motivational issues, suggesting a contextual difference in perception between theory and classroom realities.

In contrast, the findings also demonstrate a strong alignment with learner-centered pedagogy research, particularly in emphasizing the importance of engaging, interactive strategies to enhance speaking participation. This supports studies by Nunan (2013) and Weimer (2002), which argue that student-centered environments foster higher engagement and communicative competence. Moreover, the use of games, role plays, and task-based activities in this study parallels findings by Kayi (2006) and Harmer (2007), who advocate communicative activities to promote speaking. When compared to the works of Fauzan, particularly Fauzan & Saparuddin (2023), there is a notable convergence in emphasizing discourse-based and learner-centered approaches in Indonesian EFL contexts. Fauzan's work highlights that meaningful interaction and contextualized discourse practices significantly enhance students' speaking ability and reduce anxiety, which is consistent with this study's conclusion that learner-centered strategies can gradually improve motivation and participation.

5. Conclusions

The present study stems from our desire to find a solution to our learners' reluctance to speak. The research findings show that learners are reluctant to speak due to a lack of motivation, which influences many other factors. As teachers, the researchers have control over external factors. Therefore, the researchers opted for a set of measures in the hope of using the external environment of learners to influence their inner drives. Literature shows that setting a learner-centered environment constitutes the most suitable way to involve learners. The researchers started the implementation of some learner-centered strategies. The options are countless, from "Small Talk Activities and Find Something in Common" to "Never Have I Ever". The challenge is to adapt those tasks to our own classroom environment and have the patience and persistence to give them time to work. The researchers believe that change is going to be gradual and will necessitate constant reflection. Yet, this is an invitation to other researchers to broaden the scope of this study. Our ultimate aim is to help learners become more aware of their inner drives and external environment, and become lifelong learners.

References

- Al-Hosni, S. (2014). Speaking difficulties encountered by young EFL learners. *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature*, 2(6), 22-30.
<https://www.arcjournals.org/pdfs/ijSELL/v2-i6/4.pdf>
- Brown, H. D. (2014). *Principles of language learning and teaching: A course in second language acquisition*. (6th edition). Pearson Education.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2001). *Motivational strategies in the language classroom*. Cambridge University Press
- El Antaki, R. (2021). *Managing learning in a learner-centered setting: LCT key concepts and practices acquisition and mastery*. Regional Center for Education and Training Professions (CRMEF Tanger - Tetouan - Hoceima).
- Fauzan, U., & Saparuddin, M. (2023). Discourse-based Teaching in English Classrooms in the Indonesian Islamic Universities. *Eurasian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 9(3), 73-82.
- Hammani, M. (2019). Enhancing Moroccan EFL learners' speaking skills. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 24(4), 50-56.
- Harmer, J. (2007). *How to teach English*. Longman.

- Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign language classroom anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, 70(2), 125-132. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1986.tb05256.x>
- Islam, N. (1999). A Few Aspects of Motivation: An Overview of Concepts, Theories and Techniques. *Khulna University Studies*, June 1999, 1(1): 103-108
- Kayi, H. (2006). Teaching speaking: Activities to promote speaking in a second language. *The Internet TESL Journal*, 12(11). <http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Kayi-TeachingSpeaking.html>
- Khoudri, I. ., Zeriouh, M., Fauzan, U., & Khoudri, A. (2024). The use of AI in learning English: a comparative study between Moroccan and Indonesian undergraduate students from the English department. *Edelweiss Applied Science and Technology*, 8(4), 1271-1282. <https://doi.org/10.55214/25768484.v8i4.1504>
- Larsen-Freeman, D. (2000). *Techniques and principles in language teaching*. (2nd Edition). Oxford University Press
- MacIntyre, P. D., Clément, R., Dörnyei, Z., & Noels, K. A. (1998). Conceptualizing willingness to communicate in a second language. *The Modern Language Journal*, 82(4), 545-562. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1998.tb05543.x>
- Mercer, S., Ryan, S. & Williams, M. (2012). *Psychology for language learning: Insights from research, theory and practice*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Nunan, D. (2013). *Learner-Centered English Language Education: The selected works of David Nunan*. Routledge.
- Rosdiana, S., Noercolies, M. A., & Fauzan, M. H. (2024). The Use of Artificial Intelligence in Teaching Writing Skills. *EDUCASIA: Jurnal Pendidikan, Pengajaran, Dan Pembelajaran*, 9(1), 45-56. <https://doi.org/10.21462/educasia.v9i1.251>
- Thornbury, S. (2005). *How to teach speaking*. Pearson Education.
- Tuan, N. H., & Mai, T. N. (2015). Factors affecting students' speaking performance at Le Thanh Hien High School. *Asian Journal of Educational Research*, 3(2), 8-23.
- Weimer, M. (2002). *Learner-centered teaching: Five key changes to practice*. Jossey-Bass.
- Williams, K., & Williams, C. (2011). Five key ingredients for improving motivation. *Research in Higher Education Journal*, 11. <http://aabri.com/manuscripts/11834.pdf>