

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Improving Students' Confidence and Motivation in The Speaking Process: Strategies, Theories, And Pedagogical Implications

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VOLUME: Vol.06 Issue06 2026

PAGE: 123-128

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Abstract

Speaking is widely regarded as one of the most challenging yet essential skills in language learning. Many students, regardless of their proficiency level, struggle with feelings of anxiety, self-doubt, and insufficient motivation when required to communicate orally in a second or foreign language. This article investigates the psychological, social, and pedagogical factors that contribute to low confidence and reduced motivation in the speaking process. The article concludes that a holistic, student-centered approach, combining positive reinforcement, meaningful communicative tasks, and consistent emotional support, is essential to sustainably improve students' confidence and motivation in oral communication.

KEYWORDS

Motivation, confidence, language proficiency, speaking competence.

INTRODUCTION

Among the four primary language skills including reading, writing, listening, and speaking, oral communication stands out as both the most socially significant and the most psychologically demanding. In educational settings worldwide, the speaking component of language learning is frequently cited by students as the greatest source of anxiety and apprehension. This widespread phenomenon is not limited to any particular age group, cultural background, or language proficiency level; rather, it represents a multifaceted challenge that language educators must address with deliberate and theoretically informed pedagogical strategies.

The ability to communicate effectively in a target language carries profound practical implications. In academic, professional, and social contexts, oral fluency is often perceived as a marker of linguistic competence. Consequently, students who lack confidence in their speaking ability may find themselves marginalized or at a disadvantage in situations where verbal communication is required. The psychological

tool of this limitation can be significant: repeated experiences of perceived failure or social embarrassment tend to reinforce cycles of avoidance, further impeding language development.

Motivation, a closely related construct, plays an equally critical role in the speaking process. Motivated learners are more likely to take communicative risks, engage actively in classroom activities, and persist despite setbacks. Conversely, students who lack intrinsic motivation may disengage from speaking tasks altogether, preferring passive participation over active verbal engagement. Understanding the interplay between confidence and motivation in the context of oral communication is therefore essential for designing instructional environments that promote meaningful language use.

This article aims to examine the theoretical underpinnings of confidence and motivation in language learning, identify the key barriers that impede students' speaking development, and propose a set of practical, research-informed strategies that

teachers can adopt to cultivate more confident and motivated speakers. The paper synthesizes insights from the fields of applied linguistics, educational psychology, and second language acquisition (SLA), with the goal of offering a comprehensive framework for oral communication instruction.

Theoretical Framework

Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis

One of the most influential theories addressing the emotional dimensions of language learning is Stephen Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982). According to this model, language acquisition is mediated by an internal 'affective filter'—a metaphorical barrier composed of emotional variables such as anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence. When the affective filter is high, learners experience increased psychological resistance to input, effectively blocking the acquisition process. Conversely, when the filter is low—that is, when learners feel safe, motivated, and self-assured—linguistic input is more readily processed and internalized.

The implications of Krashen's framework for speaking instruction are considerable. Teachers who create low-anxiety classroom environments, where errors are treated as natural stages of learning rather than failures, are effectively lowering students' affective filters. This, in turn, facilitates greater willingness to communicate (WTC) and promotes more authentic oral participation. Krashen's model thus underscores the primacy of emotional well-being in the language learning process and provides a theoretical basis for many affective pedagogical strategies discussed later in this article.

Dornyei's L2 Motivational Self System

Zoltan Dornyei's L2 Motivational Self System (2005, 2009) offers a comprehensive framework for understanding motivation in second language acquisition. The model comprises three components: the Ideal L2 Self, which represents the learner's vision of themselves as a proficient speaker of the target language; the Ought-to L2 Self, which reflects external expectations and obligations; and the L2 Learning Experience, which encompasses immediate contextual factors such as the classroom environment, teaching quality, and peer interactions.

Of particular relevance to speaking confidence is the concept of the Ideal L2 Self. Learners who possess a vivid and positive self-image as competent communicators are more likely to invest effort in developing their speaking skills. Teachers can

harness this motivational mechanism by helping students construct and visualize their ideal communicative selves—for example, through reflective journaling, goal-setting exercises, and exposure to inspiring role models. Dornyei's framework highlights the importance of fostering a long-term motivational orientation that goes beyond immediate task completion.

Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory

Albert Bandura's concept of self-efficacy (1997) refers to an individual's belief in their capacity to execute specific behaviors and achieve desired outcomes. In the domain of language learning, speaking self-efficacy reflects students' confidence in their ability to communicate effectively in the target language. Research consistently demonstrates that self-efficacy is a strong predictor of academic performance, persistence, and willingness to engage in challenging tasks.

Bandura identified four primary sources of self-efficacy: mastery experiences (past successes), vicarious experiences (observing peers succeed), social persuasion (encouragement from teachers and peers), and physiological states (managing anxiety). Language educators can draw on all four sources to build students' speaking confidence. Designing tasks that allow for incremental success, showcasing peer models, providing specific positive feedback, and teaching anxiety-reduction techniques are all strategies grounded in Bandura's theoretical framework.

Barriers to Confidence and Motivation in Speaking

Language Anxiety

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), as conceptualized by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), is one of the most extensively studied affective variables in language learning. It is characterized by feelings of tension, apprehension, and fear specifically associated with language use, and manifests most acutely in speaking situations. Three related anxieties contribute to FLA: communication apprehension (fear of speaking), test anxiety (fear of poor evaluation), and fear of negative evaluation (concern about others' judgments).

The consequences of language anxiety are far-reaching. Anxious learners tend to avoid voluntary participation, speak less fluently, make more errors under pressure, and develop increasingly negative attitudes toward language classes. Moreover, anxiety operates in a self-reinforcing cycle: the anticipation of failure generates anxiety, which in turn impairs

performance, thereby confirming the learner's negative self-assessment. Breaking this cycle requires deliberate instructional interventions that address both the cognitive and emotional dimensions of anxiety.

Fear of Negative Evaluation and Peer Pressure

Closely linked to anxiety is the fear of being judged negatively by peers and teachers. Adolescent and young adult learners are particularly susceptible to social comparison and peer evaluation, making the classroom a potentially threatening environment for oral performance. Students who fear ridicule or embarrassment are likely to self-censor, produce minimal output, and disengage from communicative activities. This social dimension of speaking anxiety underscores the importance of establishing a supportive, non-judgmental classroom culture.

Lack of Authentic Communicative Opportunities

Many students report that their speaking difficulties stem not only from psychological barriers but also from insufficient opportunities for genuine communication. Traditional language classrooms often prioritize grammatical accuracy over communicative fluency, leading to an overemphasis on controlled drills and form-focused exercises at the expense of meaningful interaction. When students do not perceive speaking activities as purposeful or relevant to their real-world communicative needs, their motivation to engage is understandably diminished.

Inadequate or Inappropriate Feedback

The manner in which teachers respond to students' speaking attempts has a profound impact on both confidence and motivation. Overly corrective or publicly critical feedback can be deeply discouraging, particularly for learners who are already self-conscious about their speaking ability. Conversely, vague or non-specific praise fails to provide the actionable guidance learners need to improve. Effective feedback must be carefully calibrated to support growth without undermining confidence.

Strategies to Improve Confidence and Motivation in Speaking

The classroom climate is a foundational determinant of students' willingness to communicate. Research in educational psychology consistently demonstrates that students perform better—and take more cognitive and communicative risks—in environments characterized by psychological safety, defined

as the shared belief that the class is safe for interpersonal risk-taking (Edmondson, 1999). Teachers can cultivate this climate through deliberate relationship-building practices: learning students' names and interests, establishing explicit norms of respect and encouragement, responding to errors with patience and curiosity rather than correction and judgment, and celebrating effort alongside achievement.

Humor, warmth, and genuine interest in students' lives can significantly reduce the social distance between teacher and learner, making the classroom a more inviting space for oral participation. Furthermore, teachers who model vulnerability—acknowledging their own communicative imperfections or sharing anecdotes of language learning struggles—implicitly signal that imperfection is acceptable and that the journey of language learning is inherently messy and non-linear.

Collaborative and Cooperative Learning Techniques

Collaborative learning structures, such as pair work, small group discussions, and cooperative tasks, have been shown to reduce speaking anxiety and increase motivation by diffusing the social pressure associated with whole-class performances. When students speak in smaller, more intimate groupings, the perceived stakes are lower, and the fear of public embarrassment is diminished. Moreover, peer interaction provides additional practice time, exposes learners to a variety of communicative styles, and fosters a sense of community that is conducive to risk-taking.

Structured cooperative learning approaches—such as Think-Pair-Share, Jigsaw, and Information Gap activities—ensure that all students have a defined communicative role, preventing the dominance of more confident speakers and encouraging the participation of reticent learners. These techniques align with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of learning, which emphasizes the central role of social interaction in cognitive and linguistic development, particularly within the Zone of Proximal Development.

Task-Based Language Teaching and Authentic Communication

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), as developed by Willis (1996) and Long (2015), places communicative tasks at the center of language instruction. Unlike traditional exercises that focus on the manipulation of linguistic forms, tasks require learners to use language purposefully in order to achieve a real-world outcome—such as planning an event, solving a problem, or conducting an interview. The intrinsic

purposefulness of task-based activities enhances learner motivation by making the speaking act feel meaningful and consequential.

The use of authentic materials—real newspaper articles, video clips, podcasts, and social media content—further enhances the relevance of speaking tasks. When students engage with materials that reflect genuine communicative contexts, they are better able to see the practical value of developing their oral skills. This connection between classroom learning and real-world use is a powerful motivational driver, particularly for older learners whose instrumental and integrative motivations are well-developed.

Formative Feedback and Positive Reinforcement

Effective feedback is specific, timely, constructive, and actionable. Rather than interrupting students mid-utterance to correct errors—a practice that can be deeply disruptive to communicative flow and confidence—teachers are encouraged to adopt delayed or reformulation-based feedback strategies. Recasts, in which the teacher subtly reformulates a student's erroneous utterance in correct form without explicitly marking it as an error, have been shown to be effective in promoting both accuracy and confidence.

Positive reinforcement plays an equally vital role in motivation. Carol Dweck's research on growth mindset (2006) demonstrates that praising effort, strategy, and persistence—rather than innate ability—cultivates resilience and a greater willingness to tackle challenging tasks. In the speaking classroom, this translates to acknowledging students' communicative attempts, highlighting improvements over time, and framing errors as valuable learning opportunities rather than indicators of inadequacy.

Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (TELL)

The integration of technology into speaking instruction offers a range of innovative possibilities for building confidence and motivation. Digital tools such as language learning applications, video-conferencing platforms, podcasting software, and AI-powered pronunciation trainers provide students with low-stakes environments in which to practice speaking outside the classroom. These tools allow learners to rehearse, record, review, and revise their oral production at their own pace, reducing the social pressure that characterizes face-to-face communication.

Platforms that enable interaction with native or proficient

speakers—such as tandem language exchange programs or virtual conversation clubs—add an authentic communicative dimension to technology-enhanced practice. Research on computer-mediated communication (CMC) suggests that text-based and video-based digital interactions can serve as a confidence-building bridge for learners who are not yet ready to engage in spontaneous face-to-face conversation. Over time, positive experiences in digital communicative spaces can transfer to greater confidence in in-person speaking contexts.

Goal Setting and Self-Regulated Learning

Encouraging students to set personal speaking goals and monitor their own progress is a powerful strategy for developing intrinsic motivation and autonomous learning. Goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 1990) posits that specific, challenging, and attainable goals direct attention, enhance effort, and promote persistence. In speaking instruction, teachers can guide students in formulating individualized communicative goals—such as participating at least twice per class session, preparing a two-minute presentation on a personal topic, or practicing pronunciation for ten minutes daily.

Self-assessment tools, such as speaking portfolios, reflective journals, and audio/video recordings, enable learners to document their progress, identify areas for improvement, and celebrate milestones. This metacognitive engagement fosters a sense of ownership over the learning process, which is a cornerstone of sustained motivation. When students can perceive their own growth tangibly, the experience of improvement itself becomes a powerful reinforcer of continued effort.

DISCUSSION

The strategies outlined in the preceding section share a common theoretical foundation: they are all designed to reduce the psychological barriers that impede speaking engagement while simultaneously enhancing the motivational forces that drive it. It is important to recognize, however, that these approaches are most effective when implemented as part of a coherent and consistent pedagogical philosophy rather than as isolated techniques deployed on an ad-hoc basis.

A recurrent theme across the literature is the critical importance of the teacher-student relationship. Numerous studies confirm that students' perceptions of teacher supportiveness, accessibility, and enthusiasm are among the

strongest predictors of classroom motivation and speaking engagement. Teachers who invest in knowing their students as individuals—understanding their fears, aspirations, and cultural backgrounds—are better positioned to design instructionally responsive environments that meet diverse affective and communicative needs.

Cultural considerations also merit attention in any discussion of speaking confidence and motivation. In many educational cultures, particularly those shaped by Confucian heritage, high-power-distance norms, or strong collectivist values, students may be socialized to prioritize harmony and face-saving over individual self-expression. For learners from these backgrounds, public speaking activities can carry heightened social risks, and teachers must be especially sensitive to the cultural dimensions of participation and silence. Culturally responsive pedagogy, which acknowledges and values diverse communicative norms, is essential for ensuring that confidence-building strategies are inclusive and equitable.

It is also worth noting the bidirectional relationship between speaking confidence and language proficiency. While greater linguistic competence generally supports increased confidence, the relationship is not deterministic: many linguistically advanced learners remain highly anxious speakers, while some lower-proficiency learners communicate with remarkable confidence and effectiveness. This observation underscores the importance of addressing the affective dimension of speaking independently of, and in parallel with, formal language instruction.

Finally, the role of formative assessment in shaping speaking motivation deserves emphasis. High-stakes speaking examinations, if poorly designed or administered in threatening conditions, can undermine confidence and create negative associations with oral communication. Assessment practices that are dialogic, reflective, and focused on growth—rather than summative and judgment-oriented—are more likely to support the development of confident, motivated, and communicatively competent speakers.

Pedagogical Implications

The research reviewed in this article has several concrete implications for classroom practice. First, language teachers should receive professional development training in affective pedagogy, equipping them with the knowledge and skills to recognize and respond to students' emotional needs in the speaking classroom. This includes training in anxiety-reduction

techniques, culturally sensitive communication, growth-mindset facilitation, and effective feedback practices.

Second, curriculum designers and educational policymakers should ensure that speaking assessment frameworks privilege communicative competence over grammatical accuracy, and that they incorporate measures of confidence and risk-taking alongside more traditional linguistic criteria. Assessment rubrics that reward effort, fluency, and communicative effectiveness send powerful messages to students about the values of the educational system they inhabit.

Third, institutions should invest in creating speaking-rich learning environments beyond the formal classroom. Extracurricular language clubs, debate societies, drama productions, and community language partnerships all provide valuable opportunities for students to develop oral fluency in authentic, low-stakes contexts. These environments allow learners to accumulate the mastery experiences and positive social reinforcement that Bandura identified as fundamental to self-efficacy development.

Fourth, the design of speaking tasks should explicitly attend to student agency and choice. When learners have a voice in selecting topics, formats, and interlocutors for speaking activities, their sense of autonomy—a fundamental psychological need identified by Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985)—is satisfied, resulting in enhanced intrinsic motivation. Wherever possible, teachers should offer options and encourage students to take ownership of their communicative performances.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the complex and interrelated factors that contribute to students' confidence and motivation in the speaking process, drawing on a range of theoretical frameworks from applied linguistics and educational psychology. The evidence reviewed clearly demonstrates that speaking anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and insufficient communicative opportunities represent significant obstacles to oral language development—obstacles that cannot be addressed through linguistic instruction alone.

Rather, improving students' speaking confidence and motivation requires a holistic, student-centered approach that attends simultaneously to the psychological, social, cultural, and pedagogical dimensions of oral communication. The strategies discussed—including the cultivation of psychologically safe classrooms, the implementation of

collaborative and task-based learning, the use of formative feedback and positive reinforcement, the integration of technology, and the promotion of self-regulated learning—collectively constitute a robust framework for affectively informed language teaching.

Central to this framework is the recognition that every student brings a unique configuration of anxieties, motivations, cultural orientations, and communicative histories to the language classroom. Effective speaking instruction must therefore be responsive, adaptive, and deeply human—capable of honoring the complexity of individual learner experience while maintaining high expectations for communicative growth.

Looking ahead, further empirical research is needed to investigate the long-term effects of affective pedagogical interventions on speaking development, particularly in diverse cultural and institutional contexts. Longitudinal studies, action research, and mixed-methods designs that capture both the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of confidence and motivation will be essential for refining and validating the strategies proposed in this article.

Ultimately, the goal of speaking instruction is not merely to produce linguistically accurate utterances, but to cultivate communicatively competent, emotionally resilient, and intrinsically motivated individuals who can engage confidently and effectively with the world in their target language. Achieving this goal demands a sustained commitment from educators, institutions, and policymakers to place the affective well-being of students at the very heart of language education.

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