



EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE SPEAKING AND LISTENING IN ENGLISH

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Abstract: This article explores effective strategies for developing English speaking and listening skills among EFL and ESL learners. The challenges learners face, including speaking anxiety, limited vocabulary, and weak listening strategies, are discussed, along with the interconnected nature of these two skills. The article emphasizes the value of combining communicative and collaborative methods with authentic materials, technology, and self-regulated learning to build stronger oral communication. Practical strategies such as pair and group activities, listening strategy instruction, songs, videos, flipped learning, and AI-based tools are examined as ways to help learners speak and listen with greater confidence and accuracy.

Keywords: EFL speaking skills, effective learning, oral communication, collaborative learning, speaking confidently.

Introduction. Speaking and listening are the two skills people rely on most when they actually talk to each other. Reading and writing matter too, but talking is different. When you speak, you don't get time to think slowly or check a dictionary. You have to understand what someone says and respond right away, often within a second or two. Because of this, speaking and listening are much harder to master than many people assume. Simply memorizing new words or studying grammar rules from a textbook is not enough to make someone a confident speaker. Real progress comes from regular practice, real conversations, exposure to natural spoken English, and simple strategies that help learners understand and produce language more easily. This is especially true for people learning English as a foreign language, often called EFL learners. Many EFL learners can read and write reasonably well, since they have time to think and revise. But the moment they need to speak, things become much harder. Listening carries its own set of challenges too, since spoken English often includes fast speech, unfamiliar accents, and natural pauses or filler words that don't appear in textbooks. This review pulls together research from fifteen different studies to explain why speaking and listening are difficult, and more importantly, what actually helps learners improve.



Speaking is hard for many EFL learners simply because it happens so fast, leaving little room to plan what to say. Research on Saudi EFL learners found that speaking problems often come from a mix of personal and practical issues: shyness, anxiety, fear of making mistakes, a limited vocabulary, and not enough opportunities to practice outside class [2; 66-77]. These are not small issues. A student might actually know the right words and grammar but freeze up simply because they're afraid of sounding silly or being laughed at. This kind of anxiety can be just as big an obstacle as a lack of vocabulary. A similar pattern shows up in a completely different part of the world. A review of ESL learners in Malaysia found that students face both internal barriers, like nervousness and self-doubt, and external barriers, like limited class time or a lack of chances to practice with native speakers [4; 983-991]. When two very different learner groups, one in Saudi Arabia and one in Malaysia, report similar struggles, it becomes clear that these are not isolated problems tied to one culture or one classroom. They are common challenges that most language learners face. What this tells us is simple but important: teaching someone to speak English well is not just about teaching grammar and vocabulary. It also means helping students feel safe enough to try, make mistakes, and keep going. A lesson plan that only focuses on correct grammar, while ignoring a student's fear of speaking up, is unlikely to produce confident speakers.

Listening is just as important as speaking, and in many ways, the two skills are connected. It's very hard to hold a real conversation if you can't understand what the other person is saying. Yet listening is often treated as a "quieter" skill that gets less classroom attention than speaking or writing. Some researchers have looked for creative ways to make listening practice more enjoyable. One study found that English songs can help learners improve their listening skills while also making practice feel less repetitive and boring [1; 80-85]. Songs combine language with rhythm and melody, so listening to the same song several times doesn't feel as tedious as listening to the same plain conversation over and over. Other researchers have taken a more analytical approach. One study asked 208 teachers in Iran what listening problems they typically saw in their EFL students. Using statistical analysis, the researchers were able to map out the most common listening difficulties reported across many classrooms [11; 1-16]. This kind of large-scale study is valuable because it doesn't rely on just one teacher's opinion. It shows patterns that are likely to apply broadly, not just in one specific classroom. Together, these studies make it clear that improving speaking and listening is not something that can be solved with one quick trick or a single method. Real progress requires several strategies working together, consistently, over time.



The first and most important step in improving speaking is creating a classroom, or a learning environment, where students feel safe to talk often, without harsh judgment. Since fear, shyness, and anxiety are known to hurt speaking performance [2; 66-77], students need small, low-pressure opportunities to speak. This might mean starting with pair work, where two students talk to each other rather than in front of the whole class. It could mean small group discussions, or simple role-play activities where students act out everyday situations, like ordering food or asking for directions. The key idea here is that confidence should be built gradually. Asking a nervous beginner to stand up and give a five-minute speech in front of thirty classmates is likely to backfire. It's far more effective to start small, let students succeed in low-stakes situations, and slowly increase the difficulty and audience size as their confidence grows.

Working together with classmates also helps speaking development in another way. One study looked at a structured group learning program for EFL learners and found that students in the program improved not just their English skills but also their ability to interact socially with others [3; 26-46]. The activities used in this study included group projects, class debates, and peer learning, where students teach or help each other rather than always relying on the teacher. These kinds of activities turn students into active participants who are constantly using the language, rather than passive listeners who only speak when directly called on by the teacher.

Beyond creating a safe environment, students also need real reasons to speak. This is where action-based learning comes in. Action learning focuses on active participation and solving real problems through conversation and interaction, rather than studying language as an abstract subject. In one study, researchers looked at students in an action-learning-based English conversation course. Over the course of the program, students became noticeably more active in discussions, and their speaking skills improved measurably by the end [10; 143-152]. This finding fits with a simple, common-sense idea: people get better at speaking by actually speaking, not by memorizing rules about how speaking should work. This means that classroom tasks should give students a genuine reason to talk. Instead of asking students to describe a picture just because the teacher told them to, a better activity might involve a debate on a topic students actually care about, a group project where they need to plan something together, or a role-play where they solve a realistic problem, like resolving a disagreement or negotiating a price. When the task feels real and meaningful, students speak more naturally and with greater motivation.

A common mistake in language teaching is assuming that listening will improve automatically if students are simply exposed to more spoken English.



In reality, listening is a skill that needs to be taught directly, just like speaking. Simply playing more audio recordings without guidance often leaves students feeling overwhelmed and frustrated rather than improved. Research on listening strategy instruction found that teaching students specific techniques, like predicting what's coming next, picking out key words, focusing on the main idea instead of every single word, and checking their own understanding afterward, improves both listening performance and motivation [7; 818-836]. These strategies help students become active listeners who are thinking and processing information, rather than passive listeners who are simply hoping to catch as many words as possible.

The connection between listening and speaking is also worth highlighting again here. When students understand spoken English more easily, they naturally pick up new vocabulary, common expressions, and natural sentence patterns that they can later use themselves when speaking. In this way, good listening instruction quietly supports speaking development at the same time.

Real, authentic materials, meaning materials made for native speakers rather than simplified for language learners, can make listening practice both more effective and more enjoyable. As mentioned earlier, songs have been shown to support listening development while keeping practice engaging rather than repetitive [1; 80-85]. However, song selection matters quite a bit. A song that is too fast, uses very unusual vocabulary, or has unclear pronunciation may end up frustrating students rather than helping them. Teachers need to pick songs that match their students' actual level.

Video is another powerful tool. One study examined the use of YouTube as a teaching tool for listening skills and found that video-based materials tend to make learning more engaging than audio alone [14; 123-129]. This makes sense when you think about it: video gives learners extra information beyond just the words being spoken. Facial expressions, hand gestures, and visual context all help students figure out what's being said, even when they don't understand every single word. To get the most benefit from video, teachers can structure the activity in three parts. Before watching, students might discuss the topic or preview some key vocabulary. During the video, they can focus on picking out specific information. After watching, they can summarize what happened, share their opinions, or even try to reenact part of the conversation themselves. This kind of structure turns a simple video into a full listening and speaking exercise at the same time.

Another useful approach is called flipped learning. In a traditional classroom, students often learn new material during class time and practice it at home. Flipped learning reverses this: students learn some material on their own time, often through videos or reading, and then use class time for active



practice and communication instead. One study looked at a flipped learning approach that used concept mapping, a technique where students visually organize their ideas before speaking. Students who used this method showed improved speaking performance and reported feeling less anxious about speaking [5; 817-834]. The idea here is simple: instead of being asked to speak completely off the top of their heads, students first take a moment to organize their thoughts, which makes their spoken responses more confident and better structured.

Another study combined flipped learning with self-regulated learning, meaning students took more responsibility for planning, monitoring, and evaluating their own progress. This combination led to improvements in speaking, reading, writing, and grammar. Interestingly, though, it did not lead to a significant improvement in listening [12]. This is an important reminder: using new technology or a trendy teaching method does not automatically improve every single skill. What really matters is how thoughtfully the learning activities are designed, including clear goals, regular self-checks, and useful feedback.

In recent years, artificial intelligence has opened up entirely new ways for students to practice speaking and listening, especially outside the classroom. One study introduced a chatbot system called TPBOT, designed specifically to give EFL learners extra speaking practice. Students who used the chatbot reported high satisfaction and felt that their speaking ability had genuinely improved [8; 4297-4308]. The appeal of chatbots is easy to understand. In a normal classroom with twenty or thirty students, each individual student might only get a minute or two of actual speaking time during a lesson. A chatbot, on the other hand, is available anytime and can give a student unlimited speaking practice, without the pressure of speaking in front of classmates. A broader review of 24 different studies confirmed that AI-powered chatbots can support several aspects of language learning at once, including speaking outcomes, learner confidence, motivation, and even pronunciation, while helping reduce speaking anxiety [6].

Beyond chatbots, more advanced AI learning systems have also been tested. One study looked at an AI-based intelligent learning system designed to improve listening and speaking together. Students using this system showed significant improvement in both skills, and they generally responded positively to the system itself [9; 1071-1080]. This makes sense structurally, since the natural flow of using such a system, listening to a prompt, understanding it, responding, and receiving feedback, closely mirrors how real conversations actually work. That said, AI should be treated as a helpful supplement, not a full replacement for real human interaction. Genuine conversations involve



unpredictable responses, subtle social cues, body language, tone of voice, and the back-and-forth negotiation of meaning that even the most advanced chatbot cannot fully replicate. Students still need real conversations with real teachers and classmates to become truly comfortable communicators.

Rather than treating listening and speaking as two completely separate skills taught in separate lessons, some of the most effective approaches combine them into single tasks. One study developed a program that mixed listening and speaking activities together and tracked students' communicative competence, essentially their overall ability to communicate effectively. The results showed a noticeable drop in the number of students scoring at the "low" competence level, along with more students moving into the average and high competence groups [13; 141-157]. This approach mirrors how communication actually works in real life. People typically listen so they can respond, and they speak because of something they just heard. A conversation is never purely one-directional. Classroom activities that reflect this reality, such as listening to a short talk and then summarizing it out loud, watching a video and discussing opinions about it, or listening to instructions and then completing a task, tend to feel much more natural and useful than activities that isolate listening or speaking completely.

It's also worth remembering that "speaking ability" is not just one single skill. It's actually made up of several separate components: fluency, meaning how smoothly someone speaks without long pauses; pronunciation, meaning how clearly they produce individual sounds; grammar, meaning whether their sentences are structured correctly; vocabulary, meaning how many words and expressions they know and can use; and coherence, meaning whether their ideas connect logically and make sense as a whole. One study assessed the speaking competence of 41 fifth-semester English Education students across exactly these dimensions. The results showed that most students reached a "sufficient" level rather than an advanced one, suggesting that even students fairly far along in their studies still have real room to grow [15; 88-100]. This finding is a useful reminder for both teachers and learners. A student might have excellent vocabulary but still struggle with pronunciation, or they might speak grammatically correct sentences but lack fluency and confidence. Treating "speaking" as one single grade or score can hide these differences. Instead, it helps to assess and target each component separately, so students know exactly what to work on.

Based on everything covered in this review, here are clear, practical steps that learners and teachers can follow to improve speaking and listening skills:



1. Practice speaking often in low-pressure settings. Start with pairs or small groups instead of speaking in front of a large audience, so confidence can build gradually and naturally over time [2; 66-77].

2. Work together with others through group activities. Join group projects, class debates, or peer-teaching sessions, since collaborative learning improves both language skills and social interaction at the same time [3; 26-46], [10; 143-152].

3. Give speaking a real purpose. Choose tasks like debates, problem-solving discussions, or role-plays that require genuine communication, rather than repeating scripted sentences with no real meaning behind them.

4. Learn specific listening strategies. Practice predicting what will be said next, picking out key words, focusing on the main idea rather than every single word, and checking your own understanding afterward [7; 818-836].

5. Use real, authentic materials matched to your level. Songs and YouTube videos can make listening practice more enjoyable and natural, as long as they aren't too difficult for your current level [1; 80-85], [14; 123-129].

6. Organize your thoughts before speaking. Techniques like concept mapping, where you jot down or sketch out key ideas before speaking, can lead to clearer, more confident responses and reduce anxiety [5; 817-834].

7. Take charge of your own learning. Set clear goals, monitor your own progress, and reflect on what's working and what isn't, rather than relying only on classroom instruction [12].

8. Use AI tools and chatbots for extra practice, but don't rely on them completely. They're great for building confidence and getting more speaking time, but real conversations with real people are still essential [8; 4297-4308], [6], [9; 1071-1080].

9. Combine listening and speaking in the same activity. For example, listen to a short talk or video, then summarize it, discuss it, or respond to it out loud, since this mirrors how real conversations work [13; 141-157].

10. Work on each part of speaking separately. Instead of treating "speaking" as one single skill, pay attention to fluency, pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and coherence individually, so you know exactly where to focus your effort [15; 88-100].

Conclusion. There is no single trick, method, or app that can fix speaking and listening problems on its own. What actually works, based on the research reviewed here, is a combination of several simple, complementary ideas working together over time. Learners need a comfortable environment where they can practice speaking regularly without fear of embarrassment. They need to be taught specific listening strategies rather than simply exposed to more audio. They benefit from real, enjoyable materials like songs and videos, along



with teamwork-based speaking tasks that give language a genuine purpose. Self-directed learning habits, like setting goals and monitoring progress, add another layer of improvement, and modern AI tools can provide valuable extra practice, as long as they support rather than replace real human conversation.

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