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**Enhancing fluency and discourse connection in online english learning
through sensitization and emotional support**

*Mejora de la fluidez y la coherencia del discurso en el aprendizaje del inglés
en línea mediante la sensibilización y el apoyo emocional*

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RESUMEN

Hablar en un segundo idioma puede resultar especialmente desafiante para los estudiantes principiantes en entornos virtuales, donde las exigencias tecnológicas y la reducción de la interacción presencial pueden intensificar la ansiedad. En respuesta a esta problemática, este estudio basado en la práctica examinó si las estrategias de sensibilización y apoyo emocional podían ayudar a estudiantes universitarios de nivel A1 a sentirse más seguros y menos ansiosos al hablar inglés en un curso virtual de Inglés General. Durante un periodo de seis a siete semanas, dentro de un módulo de ocho semanas, el docente incorporó estas estrategias en las actividades habituales de expresión oral de una clase universitaria de primer año conformada por 23 estudiantes. Veintiún estudiantes completaron la intervención, mientras que dos presentaron una asistencia intermitente prolongada y no lograron finalizarla. Para observar los cambios en la participación y la confianza de los estudiantes, se recopilaron datos mediante grabaciones de las clases, notas de campo y breves encuestas de percepción. A medida que avanzó la intervención, la participación oral voluntaria aumentó de manera constante. La mayoría de los estudiantes manifestó sentirse más segura, menos ansiosa y más cómoda al hablar inglés que al inicio. Asimismo, sus intervenciones orales se volvieron más extensas y coherentes con el tiempo. Estos hallazgos sugieren que la combinación del apoyo emocional con la práctica oral frecuente puede mejorar la participación oral de los estudiantes principiantes en cursos virtuales de inglés y ofrecer orientaciones prácticas para docentes que trabajan en contextos educativos similares.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje virtual del inglés, ansiedad al hablar, confianza, apoyo emocional, fluidez.

ABSTRACT

Speaking in a second language can be especially challenging for beginner learners in online settings, where technological demands and reduced face-to-face interaction may exacerbate anxiety. In response, this practice-based study examined whether sensitization and emotional support strategies could help A1-level university students feel more confident and less anxious when speaking English in an online General English course. Over a six- to seven-week period within an eight-week module, the instructor incorporated these strategies into regular speaking activities in one first-year university class composed of 23 students. Twenty-one students completed the full intervention, while two showed prolonged intermittent attendance and did not complete the intervention. To monitor changes in students' participation and confidence, data were collected through classroom recordings, field notes, and short perception surveys. As the intervention progressed, voluntary oral participation increased steadily. Most students reported feeling more confident, less anxious, and more at ease speaking English than they had at the outset. Their oral contributions also became longer and more coherent over time. These findings suggest that combining emotional support with regular speaking practice can enhance beginner learners' oral participation in online English courses, offering practical guidance for instructors working in similar educational contexts.

Keywords: online English learning, speaking anxiety, confidence, emotional support, fluency.



1. INTRODUCCIÓN

In many universities today, online education has become a regular format for learning English. For some students, virtual classes provide flexibility and access to digital resources that would otherwise be difficult to obtain. For others, especially beginner-level learners, studying online can be demanding both academically and emotionally. A1 students often face a dual challenge.

Armstrong and Hart (2021) point out that students and instructors alike were often new to the demands of online teaching, lacking both technological preparation and a clear sense of what this mode of instruction would involve (p. 13). They must express themselves in a new language while also learning to navigate platforms, applications, and digital tools that may still feel unfamiliar. This combination of linguistic and technological demands can lead to anxiety, insecurity, and reluctance to participate orally.

In online General English courses, students are expected to use learning management systems, video-conferencing platforms, and external applications while interacting with classmates and the instructor through microphones and cameras. When learners do not feel comfortable with these tools, even a minor technical issue may be interpreted as personal failure. Some students feel exposed when their camera is on, worry that their pronunciation sounds incorrect, or fear that classmates will notice every mistake. According to Yulianawati et al. (2025), “many non-native English speakers primarily engage with English pronunciation during formal instruction, leading to limited opportunities for meaningful oral practice” (p. 412). As a result, they may keep their microphones off, give only brief answers, or remain silent even when they have ideas to share.

This situation is particularly significant for A1 university students. At this level, they are still consolidating basic vocabulary and grammar and need repeated opportunities to speak in a supportive environment. Without a safe space to try language, their fluency develops slowly, and speaking activities may become a source of stress rather than learning. Research on speaking anxiety in EFL contexts has identified fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and low confidence as key reasons why students avoid speaking, both in face-to-face and online settings (Quvanch et al., 2024, p. 16). In virtual environments, unstable



internet connection, unfamiliar interfaces, and the feeling of being constantly visible on screen can intensify these emotions.

At the same time, classroom-based studies suggest that anxiety can be reduced when learners receive both pedagogical and emotional support. Strategies such as relaxation exercises, preparation time, clear instructions, pair work, and supportive instructor feedback have been reported as useful for encouraging participation in speaking tasks, with teachers ranking positive feedback and collaborative, task-based activities among the most effective approaches (Khoudri, 2024, p. 246). These insights indicate that online speaking practice should not focus only on accuracy or task completion, but also on how students feel during the activity.

This study emerges from daily teaching experience in a private university where English is a compulsory subject organized in eight-week modules. In one A1 group of 23 first-year students, the instructor observed that many students felt anxious about speaking English online, lacked confidence in using the platforms, and were hesitant to participate orally. To respond to this reality, a six- to seven-week intervention was designed and implemented during the group sessions. Sensitization activities and emotional support strategies were integrated into regular lessons with the aim of creating a more comfortable environment in which students could gradually increase participation. As Fahmadi et al. (2025) note, “with consistent practice, students become more comfortable” (p. 60), thus enabling them to build confidence and reduce speaking anxiety while still meeting the academic demands of the course.

2. METODOLOGÍA

Research design

This study follows a practice-based intervention design carried out in an online classroom setting. The purpose is not to generalize statistically or compare standardized test scores before and after the intervention, but to document how sensitization and emotional support strategies shape the everyday experience of A1 university students when speaking in an online General English course. The focus is on classroom processes, instructor decisions, and changes observed across the six- to seven-week period in which the intervention was implemented within an eight-week module. This approach was considered appropriate given



that the challenges described earlier (speaking anxiety, low confidence, and discomfort with online tools) are best understood through close, situated observation rather than through isolated numerical comparisons. This is consistent with a growing body of intervention research in which teacher-practitioners design and implement studies within their own classrooms, allowing for a closer connection between research and everyday teaching practice (Yang & Lee, 2025, p. 7).

Context and participants

The research took place in a private university where English is part of the institutional curriculum as a mandatory subject. The General English program is organized into eight-week modules, each corresponding to a specific CEFR level. The intervention was carried out in one A1-level online class composed of 23 first-year students. Of these, 21 completed the full intervention, while 2 showed prolonged intermittent attendance and did not complete the intervention.

Classes were delivered fully online. Students were expected to use the university's learning management system, video-conferencing tools, and several external platforms to access materials, complete tasks, and submit assignments. Many had limited prior experience with online learning and expressed concern about both the technological and linguistic demands they faced, which aligns with previous findings that students were often unprepared for a fully online learning experience, with accessibility emerging as a particularly significant barrier (Aboagye et al., 2020, p. 6). This context made it necessary to design an intervention that addressed not only language objectives but also the emotional and motivational conditions that influence participation, as research has emphasized the importance of considering the immediate learning environment when exploring language learners' affective orientation and motivation (Huang & Kurata, 2024).

Ethical considerations

This study was conducted as part of regular classroom practice in a private university's General English program, following verbal authorization from the program coordinator to use classroom data for research and reporting purposes. As no formal institutional ethics committee review was available for this type of practitioner research at the time of the study, this authorization served as the institutional basis for proceeding. During the induction session and first class, the instructor explained that speaking tasks, audio and video



recordings, and surveys would be used for both instructional follow-up and research purposes; students gave verbal consent to participate, and participation was voluntary, with no effect on their grades or standing in the course. All participants were 18 years of age or older, so parental or legal guardian consent was not required. Recorded materials were subsequently analyzed to examine patterns related to participation, confidence, and speaking development. All data were handled confidentially: students were not identified by name in any recordings used for analysis or in the reporting of results, and identifying information was removed from the final manuscript to protect participants' privacy throughout the reporting process. Audio and video recordings were stored securely in a personal, password-protected cloud storage account accessible only to the instructor and were deleted once the study was completed.

Intervention

The intervention lasted a six- to seven-week period within the A1 module. During this period, students attended approximately four hours of synchronous online instruction per week, supported by asynchronous activities. Sensitization and emotional support strategies were integrated into the natural rhythm of the lessons rather than introduced as isolated events.

Each session usually began with a short welcoming moment. The instructor greeted students by name, asked how they were feeling, and acknowledged visible signs of nervousness or tiredness. This was followed by a calm-down activity, which could be a brief breathing exercise, a short stretch, or an informal question that invited one or two students to speak in a low-pressure way. Findings from Liu and Wang (2023) suggest that when instructors intentionally incorporate strategies aimed at easing students' emotional state, learners tend to worry less about how their mistakes might be perceived by others (p. 3). These openings aimed to reduce tension and establish a climate of trust before moving into the lesson content. Throughout the class, the instructor used reassurance messages to normalize errors and emphasize effort. When a student hesitated or produced an incomplete sentence, the instructor recognized the attempt, offered a model, and invited the student to try again rather than focusing only on what was incorrect. Guided pair work was central to the speaking component. Students received clear prompts, sentence starters, or short vocabulary lists and worked with a partner in breakout rooms. This allowed them to practice speaking in a more private space, where they could experiment with language without the pressure of



speaking in front of the whole group. This is consistent with evidence that smaller group settings in breakout rooms can help students feel calmer and less threatened when speaking, while also encouraging quieter students to participate more actively (Hartono et al., 2023, p. 147).

Positive feedback was provided frequently, not only when students answered correctly, but also when they showed progress, took risks, or attempted to connect ideas in English. At the end of each class, students participated in a brief reflection moment. They were asked to comment orally or in writing on how they felt during the lesson, which activities made speaking easier or harder, and what helped them use English more freely. These reflections allowed the instructor to adjust future lessons and helped students notice their own progress over time.

In addition to these ongoing strategies, students completed short oral projects related to the topics covered in the module. These projects were done individually or in pairs, with a target duration of approximately 1 minute 20 seconds to 2 minutes per recording. Learners planned and recorded their videos asynchronously using their phones or computers, then submitted them through institutional platforms. During synchronous sessions, low-pressure speaking tasks were used to prepare them for these projects, including pair discussions on open topics, simple role-plays, and short dialogues focused on personal experiences, opinions, or daily routines.

Data collection

Data collection aimed to capture both observable changes in speaking behavior and students' perceptions of the experience. Three main sources of information were used, following the principle that examining a single phenomenon through different types of data can help researchers cross-check their interpretations and reduce the risk of relying on just one perspective (Donkoh & Mensah, 2023, p. 7).

First, audio recordings of pair discussions and video recordings of oral projects documented concrete instances of speaking. These recordings made it possible to compare early moments in the module, when some students appeared blocked or gave minimal responses, with later moments in which they spoke more continuously and engaged more actively in interaction. Second, the instructor kept detailed field notes after each session. These notes described participation patterns, such as how many students activated their microphones, who

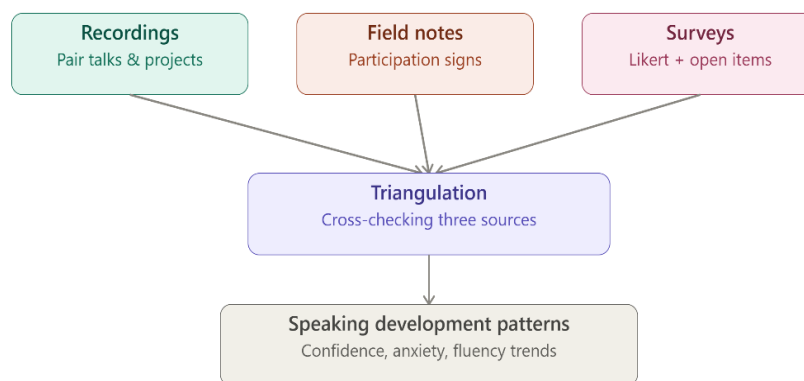


volunteered to speak, and how students interacted in breakout rooms, as well as visible signs of anxiety, including long silences, avoidance of camera use, and repeated comments such as “I can’t speak English.” Situations in which additional support was needed, or in which a specific activity seemed to reduce nervousness, were also noted. Instances of increased confidence, for example, students volunteering to share reflections, asking to repeat a speaking activity, or helping classmates form sentences, were highlighted as well.

Third, at the end of each class, students completed a short perception survey. The survey included Likert-scale items from 1 to 5 about their level of anxiety when speaking, their confidence, their comfort with online tools, and their level of participation, complemented by open-ended questions that added a qualitative dimension to the data, an approach also used in recent EFL research combining quantitative and qualitative self-report measures (Wu, 2024, p. 4). The survey comprised two open-ended questions asking students to describe briefly how they felt during the class and what made speaking easier or more difficult that day. Valid survey responses were obtained from the 21 students who completed the intervention, although the number of responses varied slightly from session to session depending on attendance.

Figure 1.

Triangulation of data sources used in the study.



Note. The three data sources were analyzed independently and then cross-checked to identify consistent patterns in students' speaking development.

Data analysis



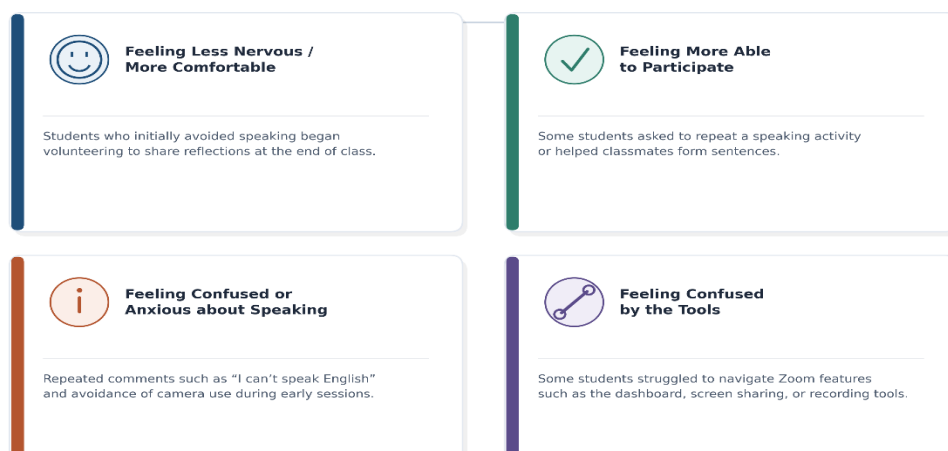
The analysis combined descriptive observation with a thematic analysis, a flexible and methodical way of examining qualitative data that helps strengthen the depth and credibility of research findings (Naeem et al., 2023, p. 15). Audio and video recordings were reviewed to identify changes over time in three aspects: the frequency with which students volunteered to speak without being individually selected, the approximate length of their speaking turns, and features of fluency and discourse connection such as fewer pauses, more complete sentences, and clearer links between ideas using basic connectors. Understanding how and where pauses occur can help both teachers and learners recognize what supports clearer, more effective spoken communication (Chang & Windeatt, 2024, p. 2).

Field notes were read repeatedly to identify recurring situations related to anxiety, confidence, and the perceived impact of the support strategies. Particular attention was paid to notes about the effect of calm-down activities, reassurance messages, and guided pair work on students' willingness to speak. The notes were also used to trace students who moved from minimal participation to more active engagement over the six to seven weeks.

Survey responses were summarized by examining general patterns in the Likert-scale items and grouping open-ended comments into common themes. Categories such as feeling less nervous or more comfortable, feeling more able to participate, feeling confused or anxious about speaking, and feeling confused by the tools emerged from this process. These themes were then compared with evidence from recordings and field notes to build a more complete picture of how the intervention shaped students' experiences.

Figure 2.

Emerging categories from field notes and open-ended survey responses.



Note. Examples reflect illustrative instances observed during the intervention rather than exhaustive or quantified counts.

3. RESULT

Over the six to seven weeks of the intervention, students' oral participation showed a gradual but consistent change. During the first sessions, many learners appeared uncertain and reluctant to speak, giving very short answers, pausing for long periods, and relying on the instructor to initiate and sustain conversation. Some students kept their cameras off and rarely activated their microphones, even in pair activities, and their spoken production was often limited to isolated words or short phrases.

As the module progressed, this initial pattern began to shift. After the second week, the instructor observed that more students were willing to activate their microphones and respond without being individually selected. Pair and group activities became more dynamic, and in breakout rooms several learners started to ask questions, share personal examples, and react to their partners' ideas rather than simply reading from the screen. Their answers became longer, and they increasingly used basic connectors and everyday expressions to link ideas. One example recorded in the field notes involved a student who, during the first week, responded only with "yes" or "no" and avoided speaking in pair tasks. By the fourth week, the same student was able to introduce themselves, describe their routine, and ask simple questions to a partner, maintaining a short dialogue for more than one minute. Cases like this were not isolated and contributed to the sense that the classroom climate had become more supportive.

The video projects also reflected this development. Early recordings often showed rigid or memorized speech, with some students reading directly from a notebook or screen and stopping abruptly when they lost their place. Later recordings displayed more flexible and spontaneous language use: learners appeared better prepared, added brief personal comments, and maintained speech for longer stretches without interrupting themselves. Although their pronunciation remained typical of beginner learners, they showed greater willingness to continue speaking even when mistakes occurred.

Survey results supported these observations. Approximately 17 of the 21 students (81%) reported feeling more confident when speaking English than at the beginning of the module,



15 of the 21 students (71%) indicated that they felt less anxious, and 16 of the 21 students (76%) stated that they were more comfortable participating in class activities. Many open-ended comments mentioned that guided pair work, reassurance from the instructor, and the opportunity to practice in breakout rooms helped them feel safer. Some students explained that knowing they would not be corrected in detail while they were still trying to express their ideas made it easier to speak.

At the same time, 2 students showed prolonged intermittent attendance and did not complete the intervention, which limited their opportunities to benefit from the sensitization and emotional support strategies, and their level of participation remained low.

4. DISCUSSION

The results of this classroom intervention suggest that sensitization and emotional support may play a central role in helping A1-level university students reduce speaking anxiety and develop more fluent, connected speech in an online General English course, aligning with broader evidence that interventions aimed at easing foreign language anxiety tend to produce a substantial positive effect on learners (Xiong et al., 2024, p. 639). At the beginning of the module, many learners approached speaking tasks with clear signs of discomfort: they avoided turning on their microphones, kept their cameras off, and limited contributions to very short answers. Speaking activities were perceived as a source of tension rather than as opportunities for practice and learning.

As emotional support strategies were maintained over time, the classroom atmosphere shifted. Welcoming openings and calm-down activities helped students begin each session with less stress, while reassurance messages before and during speaking tasks communicated an important idea: making mistakes is part of learning, and effort is valued. Repeated across several weeks, this message encouraged learners to test new words, try again after errors, and participate in pair conversations even when their sentences were not perfect.

Sensitization complemented this process by making the emotional dimension of speaking more explicit. Talking openly about nervousness, inviting students to reflect on how they felt, and listening to their comments at the end of each class validated their experience and helped them understand anxiety as a manageable part of language learning. Students received not only instructions on grammar and vocabulary but also support in recognizing and managing



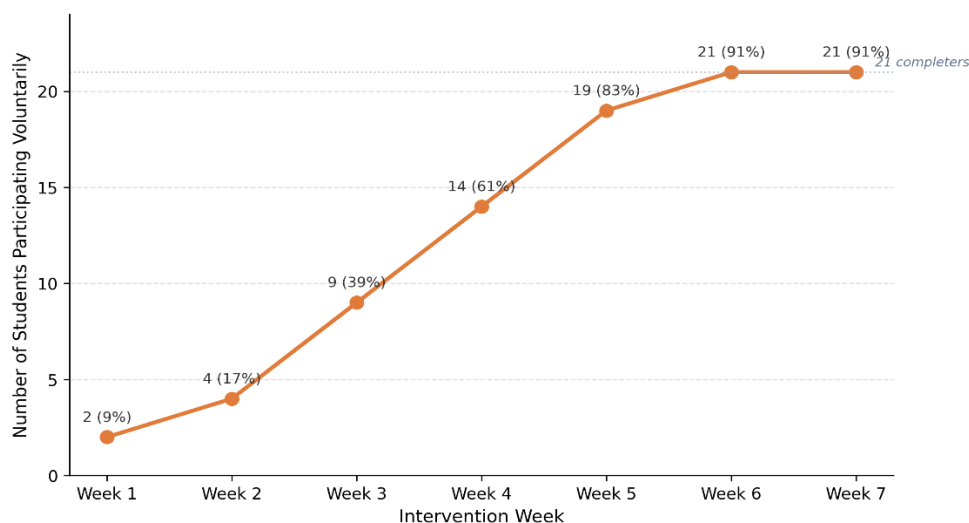
emotional reactions. This helped them reinterpret nervousness not as evidence of inability but as a natural response that could decrease with practice and support.

Pair and group work were especially effective in creating a path toward fluency and discourse connection. Working with classmates in breakout rooms allowed students to rehearse language in a more private setting where they could make mistakes without feeling observed by the entire group. Over time, many learners moved from fragmented utterances to short dialogues in which they linked ideas and responded to their partners. This pattern supports the view that pair work can reduce speaking anxiety and foster more active participation in online contexts, echoing findings that structured collaboration between classmates in virtual settings can lighten the emotional strain of online learning while making students more comfortable interacting with one another (Zheng & Zhou, 2023, p. 12).

From the instructor's perspective, one of the most meaningful moments during the intervention was seeing students who had been almost silent at the beginning of the module volunteer to share brief reflections at the end of class or ask for more time to practice speaking activities. These small gestures suggested that the classroom climate had become more welcoming and that students were beginning to see themselves as confident speakers of English, even at an elementary level.

Figure 3

Weekly increase in students' voluntary oral participation (N = 23 enrolled; 21 completed the intervention).

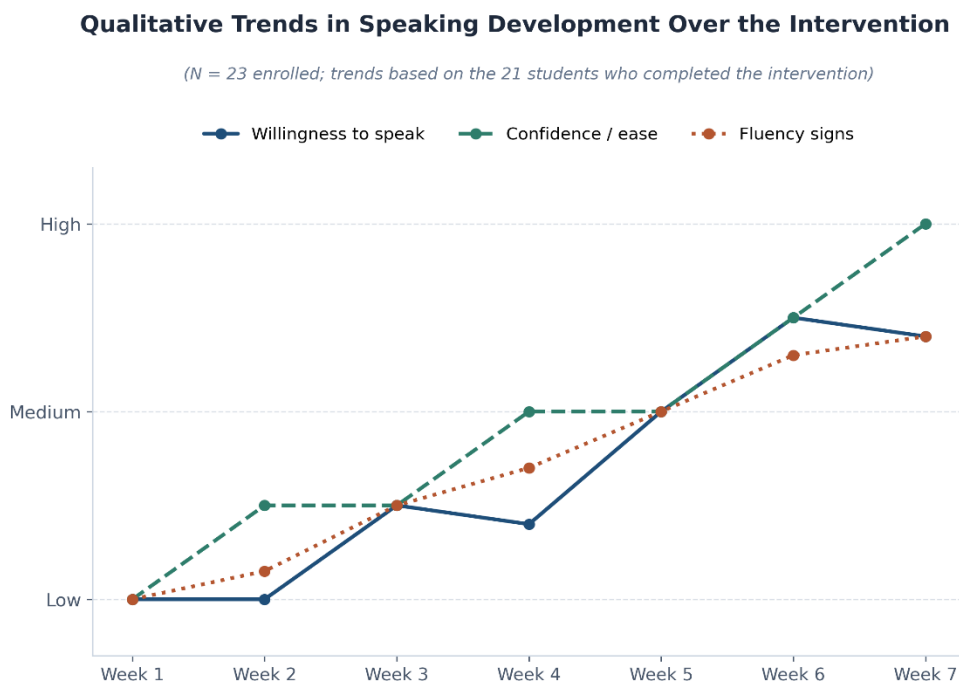


Note. The chart reflects the number of students (out of 23 enrolled) who voluntarily participated in speaking activities each week during the intervention (Weeks 1–7). Participation stabilized at 21 students in the final weeks, corresponding to those who completed the full intervention.

The improvement observed in the video projects suggests that repeated low-pressure practice, combined with emotional support, can strengthen both fluency and confidence. As the module advanced, students' speech became more continuous and their discourse became more connected; they began to use simple connectors, add brief explanations or examples, and organize ideas more clearly. Although their level remained A1, the qualitative shift in attitude and willingness to speak was evident and meaningful for their development as language learners.

Figure 4

Qualitative trends in students' willingness to speak, confidence, and fluency signs over the intervention (N = 23 enrolled; trends based on the 21 students who completed the intervention).



Note. Trends reflect the instructor's cumulative impressions based on field notes and recordings for the 21 students who completed the full intervention, not a standardized numerical scale.



Survey findings reinforce this interpretation. The fact that most students reported feeling more confident, less anxious, and more comfortable participating suggests that the strategies influenced not only observable behavior but also internal perceptions of speaking English. This is important because speaking anxiety is closely related to how learners imagine themselves as language users, and research shows that a clearer, more positive self-image as an English speaker tends to go hand in hand with lower anxiety and a greater readiness to communicate, particularly in digital environments (Lee & Chiu, 2023, p. 77). When they feel that the environment is supportive and that the instructor is attentive to their emotional needs, they are more likely to take risks, speak spontaneously, and remain engaged in tasks.

At the same time, the group of students who continued to struggle reminds us that emotional support alone cannot resolve issues related to irregular attendance or lack of engagement. Learners who miss sessions or do not complete key tasks have fewer opportunities to build confidence, and their progress is slower. Future interventions may need to include additional support for absent students, such as recorded explanations, follow-up messages, or more personalized guidance.

Pedagogical implications

This study offers several practical implications for instructors working with beginner learners in online General English courses. First, it suggests that fluency and discourse connection at A1 level are more likely to emerge when speaking tasks are framed within a supportive emotional climate, consistent with evidence linking supportive classroom environments to stronger gains in learners' speaking fluency (Tran et al., 2024, p. 3988). Short check-ins, calm-down activities, and explicit reassurance before oral work help students approach speaking with less fear, which increases the likelihood that they will attempt longer and more connected turns.

Second, the results highlight the value of guided pair work and low-pressure practice as a bridge between silence and more fluent speech. By designing pair tasks with clear prompts and giving students space to rehearse in breakout rooms, instructors can help them move gradually from isolated words to short but meaningful dialogues. Encouraging the use of simple connectors and everyday expressions in these tasks supports the development of basic discourse connection.



Third, the study invites institutions to view emotional support not as an optional addition but as an integral part of effective online speaking pedagogy. Instructor training and course planning should include attention to anxiety, confidence, and classroom climate alongside syllabus content and assessment, especially at beginner levels, as teachers themselves tend to welcome this kind of preparation, recognizing its potential to strengthen their own emotional readiness and their capacity to support students' socio-emotional needs in the classroom (Najjarpour, 2025, p. 9).

Recommendations for practice

Based on the intervention described, several recommendations can be offered to instructors working with A1 students in online environments. It is advisable to include short emotional check-ins at the beginning and end of each session, giving learners an opportunity to briefly express how they feel and what helps them speak. Instructors may also structure speaking tasks so that students move from guided pair work to more public performances, allowing confidence to develop gradually before they record videos or speak in front of the whole class.

In addition, delaying detailed error correction until after students have expressed their main ideas can help maintain their willingness to speak, an approach supported by evidence that giving learners time to reflect before addressing errors tends to boost their readiness to take part in collaborative language tasks (Mai, 2025, p. 1014). Targeted positive feedback can then reinforce small gains in fluency and discourse connection. Future modules could also include simple routines for students to set personal speaking goals and monitor their own anxiety levels, turning emotional support into a shared responsibility between instructor and learners rather than a one-sided intervention, an approach consistent with evidence that goal setting and self-evaluation are among the self-regulation strategies EFL learners actively use and rely on in online English courses (Apridayani et al., 2023, p. 6).

5. CONCLUSION

This practice-based study shows that, within an eight-week A1 module at a private university, a six- to seven-week intervention centered on sensitization and emotional support can make online speaking practice more accessible and less threatening for beginner learners. The integration of welcoming openings, calm-down activities, reassurance messages, guided pair



work, positive feedback, and reflective closing moments contributed to a classroom climate in which students became increasingly willing to speak.

A central strength of the approach lies in its human focus. The instructor did not limit instruction to grammar and vocabulary, but also paid attention to how students felt when facing speaking tasks. This attention to emotions, combined with clear pedagogical strategies, helped learners move from silence and avoidance to more active and sustained participation. The findings suggest that A1 students need both linguistic scaffolding and emotional reassurance in order to engage successfully in online speaking activities.

Although a minority of learners continued to face difficulties due to absences or incomplete project work, the overall tendency was positive. Students reported greater confidence, lower anxiety, and more comfort in class, and these perceptions were reflected in their oral performance. For instructors working in similar contexts, this study offers a practical message: when academic guidance is intentionally combined with emotional support and sensitization, online English courses can become spaces where beginners not only learn the language but also gain the confidence to use it.

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CONFLICTO DE INTERESES

No existe.

FINANCIAMIENTO

No aplica.

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