



Improving Iraqi EFL Learners' Speaking Performance, Anxiety and Willingness to Communicate Using Tiered Instruction

Mustafa Assi Okab¹, Mahdi Sarkosh^{2*}

¹Ph.D. Candidate, Department of English, Urmia State University, Urmia, Iran

^{2*}Assistant Professor, Department of English, Urmia State University, Urmia, Iran

Received: July 23, 2024

Accepted: September 16, 2024

Abstract

This study examines the impact of tiered instruction on Iraqi EFL learners' speaking performance, speaking anxiety, and willingness to communicate (WTC). Utilizing a sample of 109 upper-intermediate English learners at the College of Arts in Baghdad, Iraq, the research implemented a mixed-methods approach involving pre- and post-tests, anxiety and WTC scales, and semi-structured interviews. Participants were divided into experimental and control groups, with the experimental group receiving tiered instruction tailored to their proficiency levels. The findings demonstrate that tiered instruction significantly enhances speaking performance and WTC while reducing speaking anxiety. Learners expressed positive attitudes toward the tiered approach, highlighting its role in creating a supportive and communicative learning environment.

Keywords: Speaking performance, tiered instruction, willingness to communicate

INTRODUCTION

One of the major objectives of language learning in any context is achieving effective communication. Accordingly, one of the vital and significant issues is finding a way to facilitate the communication and comprehension between individuals from different countries with varying mother tongues in this globalized world. Therefore, one of the important issues in language learning is obtaining communicative competence. Grammatical proficiency, the ability to use language effectively in real-life situations, interpreting and producing meaningful messages, engaging in interactive discourse are among the essential features of communicative competence (Brown, 2007).

The emphasis on communication highlights the importance of speaking skills as one of the most vital aspects of language education. According to Edlund (2021), speaking is the chief mode of human interaction and is used for

transmission of ideas, emotions, and information. Additionally, through speaking rehearsal, language learners will be able to develop fluency, pronunciation, and the ability to get involved in real-world communicative activities. Therefore, language teachers try to utilize various techniques and methodologies that prioritize communication through using authentic materials, such as conversations, interviews, and multimedia resources to expose students to natural language usage and cultural nuances (Brown, 2007).

Nonetheless, the experience of learning a new language can be quite stressful for many learners as most foreign language students exhibit feelings of stress and anxiety while learning or trying to speak in the target language; hence, many researchers claim that speaking in another language is the most anxiety-inducing activity for most foreign/second language learners (Trang, Baldauf Jr., & Moni, 2013). Foreign language anxiety (FLA), According to

*Corresponding Author's Email:
m.sarkhosh@urmia.ac.ir

Gregersen and Horwitz (2021) is an affective state represented by negative feelings during learning, speaking or testing in a foreign language context. Gkonou, Daubney and Dewaele (2017) assert that speaking anxiety is considered as one of the most substantial affective factors that can seriously hinder the language learning process, mainly in an EFL contexts. The potential negative effects of speaking anxiety can affect the motivation to communicate in the classroom or in other settings, which in general can hinder language learning progress (Trang, Baldauf Jr, & Moni, 2013).

In the process of facilitating speaking process, Zhou and Lochtman (2023) refers to the concept of willingness to communicate (WTC) as a factor that impacts the learners' engagement in second/foreign language communication and increases frequency of foreign language use. Mohamad, Wahid and Tombahan (2008) define willingness to communicate for second language speakers as "a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using an L2" (p. 296). In other words, WTC is the learners' desire to look for speaking chances and communicate beyond their comfort zone (Konno & Koga, 2023). It is claimed by Nunan (2003) that the amount of a second language learner's willingness to communicate is a significant factor in raising proficiency levels in second/foreign language production. Consequently, in order to engage language learners in authentic communication not only in the classroom but also in natural situations, WCT must be taken into consideration.

Regarding the importance of speaking anxiety in language learning contexts and also the significance of willingness to communicate, it is essential for the instructors, educators or researchers to look for the factors that affect these issues. Therefore, there is a great need to explore factors that exacerbate the situation and the ones that can contribute to removing learners' challenges and enhancing their motivation to communicate in the target language. According to different scholars such as Heacox (2012) and Tomlinson (2014), tiered instruction can be ranked among effective approaches through which the teachers can address these issues via

implementation of tailored teaching methods. Similarly, Grecu (2023) claims that teachers are provided with the opportunity design activities and assignments that could be applied to learners with different proficiency levels and learning needs within the same classroom using tiered instruction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In today's diverse classrooms, the idea of "one size fits all" cannot be applied to all modern instructions (Tomlinson, 2014); departing from the traditional one-size-fits-all approach, tiered instruction intends to increase students' success by identifying and accommodating diverse learning needs (Gaitas & Alves-Martins, 2017). By using tiered instruction and giving tiered tasks, teachers can provide their learners with appropriate levels of challenge and support making sure that all students can participate in the tasks evocatively and improve their speaking skills. For instance, advanced level learners may participate in open-ended discussions that motivate them to improve their fluency and critical thinking while beginner learners may participate in structured discussions and role-plays with a lot of scaffolding (Grecu, 2023). Mardhatillah and Suharyadi, (2023) refer to tiered instruction also called differentiated instruction as a method that can be utilized to differentiate the curriculum for mixed-ability classrooms assisting students to learn the similar objectives and content, but at their own pace based on their level of ability.

Pierce and Adams (2005) assert that each tier should be designed to boost comprehension of learners by matching their challenge level while referring to the curricular components of content, process, or product that need to be differentiated (Pierce & Adams, 2005). Using the tiered instruction method in teaching not only improves students' learning by presenting a range of paths for acquiring content and enhancing comprehension but also engage students in processing acquired knowledge and help teachers in utilizing and making teaching materials suitable for assessment and applicable for diverse learning needs (Weimer, 2013).

Research on tiered instruction aims to evaluate and measure whether using tiered instruction is

effective in addressing academic problems faced by different in different learning contexts. Accordingly, based on initial findings of such studies has revealed the efficacy of this type of instruction in improving learning of the students who faces challenges in the classrooms (Paloniemi, Pulkkinen, Kärnä, & Björn, 2023). This study aimed to investigate the effect of using tiered instruction on the speaking performance anxiety and willingness to communicate of Iraqi EFL students to not only contribute to the all conducted research but also inspect in what way tiered instruction, which implicates grouping students based on their language proficiency levels, affects anxiety, speaking performance, and willingness to communicate.

Tiered Instruction

The term "tiered instruction" or "differentiated instruction" was initially presented by Tomlinson (1999) as a student-centered approach in order to inspire educators to fine-tune the curriculum, instructional strategies and learning outcomes based on students' learning styles, needs, motivation, interests and readiness to increase their growth. Learners with varying skill levels and prior knowledge are capable of achieving meaningful academic progress in this approach. Richards and Omdal (2007) asserts that, tiered instruction provide opportunity for high-skilled students with substantial background knowledge to investigate deeper, add density and make comprehensive associates to the content.

Rooted in Vygotsky's (1987) sociocultural theory of mind (SCT), the tiered instruction model attempts to make sure that all the students have equal access to a well-designed curriculum and equivalent chances to become a successful learner. Accordingly, those students who are cognitively and socio-culturally different in the same classroom can get a differentiated instruction from the teacher. In a tiered program, according to Tomlinson (2000), the same learning objectives and content are presented for students to work with; however, they proceed in their own pace by processing the information and increasing their understanding at their own skill or challenge level; hence, tiered instruction involves customizing the curriculum in a mixed-ability classroom.

The following principles are among the most frequently occurring ones in tiered instruction model which can be used as invaluable guidelines for educators and researchers who want to implement differentiation in their teaching:

a) **Focus on important ideas and skills:** Stress the important notions and skills within the explicit content area as suggested by Tomlinson (1999), Tieso (2003), and Rock, Gregg, Ellis and Gable (2008)

b) **Changing learning content, process, and products:** adjust the learning materials, methods, and outcomes to students' individual needs, as highlighted by Tomlinson (1999), Subban (2006), and Bender (2012).

c) **Consider individual student differences:** Guarantee flexibility in replying to the various requirements of students, forming an environment where all students can gain success, as suggested by Tomlinson (1999), Tieso (2003), and Pham (2012).

d) **Allow flexible groupings:** make chances for flexible classification of students, as suggested by Ernst and Ernst (2005).

e) **Provide a Student-Oriented Environment:** make a student-oriented setting where learners are struggling with meaningful tasks, as proposed by Ernst and Ernst (2005) and Subban (2006).

f) **Use formative assessment:** Join testing and training to make alterations in teaching methods through constant formative assessment, according to the insights of Ernst and Ernst (2005).

g) **Reflect on learners' critical thinking, preferred learning styles and prior knowledge:** according to Tieso (2003), and Rock, Gregg, Ellis and Gable (2008), it is important for the teachers to take students' prior knowledge into account, try to stimulate their critical thinking, and adjust the teaching according to their preferred styles of learning.

Speaking anxiety

Speaking is the productive oral skill dealing with the formation of structured verbal expressions to transfer meaning in communications between individuals (Nunan, 2003). Speaking is one of the vital factors for fostering relationships and effective interactions in both first and

second language contexts (Boonkit, 2010). It is considered as a fundamental aspect of language acquisition, chiefly in the area of learning English, showing its supreme importance in developing meaningful communication and language proficiency (Kayi, 2006).

Speaking anxiety is among the frequently cited issues especially in a foreign or second language learning setting. In this line, McCroskey (2006) asserts that speaking anxiety is a common issue among EFL students and 20% of university students experience anxiety when speaking in public.

Speaking anxiety is considered as a type of phobia by most psychologists and psychiatrists rather than a general sense of nervousness. Most language learners who experience speaking anxiety, also experience altering in their body too. For instance, anxiety can lead to symptoms like trembling, tension, rapid heart-beat, and extreme worry, all originating from language anxiety especially from speaking in public (Zed & Kassida, 2018).

Willingness to Communicate

When dealing with language learners' anxiety, it becomes apparent that their beliefs play a substantial role in language learning. These beliefs can sometimes lead to augmented feelings of pressure, stress and unrealistic expectations (Nunan, 2003). Therefore, it is pointed out by Lee and Ng (2010) that speaking anxiety, which arouse feelings of fear, and apprehension about speaking in a foreign language, can directly influence a learner's willingness to communicate.

In order to clarify the concept of WTC better, McCroskey and Richmond (1990) refer to varying degrees of communication exhibited by each individual. They point out that some individuals keep silent in the class unless they are directly addressed, whereas, others are more talkative, willing to speak even without being addressed. these varying degrees of speaking can be related to a personality trait called "willingness to communicate" (WTC).

In a classroom setting, factors affecting WTC according to Havwini (2019) include teacher-related factors, task-related factors, and interlocutor-related factors. While teacher-related factors refer to the teacher engagement,

strategies and teaching methodologies (Cao & Philip, 2006, as cited in Havwini, 2019), task-related factors refer to the types of tasks (Khatibi & Zakeri, 2014). Interlocutor-related factors on the other hand refer to the nature of communication partners (Keng, 2005). Since employing various teaching methodologies can either aggravate or improve issues related to WTC or speaking anxiety, it is essential for educators to use strategies that endorse a communicative and supportive learning environment; the present study aimed at investigating the effect of tiered instruction on English speaking, speaking anxiety and willingness to communicate.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The following research questions were addressed and investigated in this study:

RQ1: *Does using tiered instruction have any significant effect on Iraqi EFL learners' speaking performance?*

RQ2: *Does using tiered instruction have any significant effect on Iraqi EFL learners' speaking anxiety?*

RQ3: *Does using tiered instruction have any significant effect on Iraqi EFL learners' willingness to communicate?*

RQ4: *What is Iraqi EFL learners' attitude toward using tiered instruction and its effects on speaking performance, anxiety and willingness to communicate?*

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The researcher carefully selected a group of participants from a participant pool of 300 students learning English as a foreign language at the College of Arts in Baghdad, Iraq to conduct the study. Using a convenient sampling technique, a group of 120 junior learners aged between 20 and 32 who were actively engaged in English language learning, was selected as the initial sample of the study. In order to reach a convergent sample of study, the researcher used a convenient sampling technique and chose the participant among the pool of 300 EFL learners registered at the College of Arts in Baghdad, Iraq, with care to ensure language proficiency level consistency through implementing

a proficiency test. Accordingly, 109 out of the 120 participants who were aged between 20 and 32, and were actively engaged in English language learning, fell into a similar proficiency range based on the assessment criteria.

Instruments

To fulfill the purpose of the study, the following instruments were used:

Participation Consent Form

To observe the ethics of the study, the researcher provided the participants with a detailed introduction and explanation of the study processes for both teachers and participants. This step aimed to ensure that participants had a comprehensive understanding of the study, allowing them to make informed decisions regarding their participation. Accordingly, the researcher distributed a consent form to review and complete in order to formalize their consent. The filled consent forms were regarded as a solid expression of participants' voluntary participating in the research.

Cambridge Advanced English (CAE)

Prior to the start of the treatment, the researcher gave the Cambridge Advanced English (CAE) proficiency test which was a widespread used exam to measure competency in the four main language skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Because of its well-established reputation and broad acceptance in the field of English language instruction, this specific exam was carefully chosen. As the result of the implementation of the test, the sample of the study were divided into groups according to their proficiency levels and those who fell within the upper-intermediate group were selected as the participants of the study to take part in the research. This grouping system ensured that the tiered instruction and conventional groups included learners with similar levels of English proficiency.

Public Speaking Class Anxiety Scale (PSCAS-25)

The next instrument used in this study was speaking anxiety scale developed by Yaikhong and Usaha (2012) to assess the public speaking

class anxiety of the learners. Regarding the structure of the scale, it is comprised of 25 items in the form of a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree.' The scale measure different aspects of speaking anxiety, including speech anxiety, fear of failure, comfort, and overall negative attitudes towards speaking in a foreign language. By including different aspects and using both negative and positive statements, the questionnaire offers a thorough understanding of the complex aspects of participants' emotions and attitudes when it comes to speaking in a foreign language.

Willingness to Communicate Questionnaire

In the current study, the researcher used the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension-24 (PRCA-24) developed by McCroskey (1970) to measure learners' communication apprehension. This precisely designed instrument assesses individuals' communication apprehension within four different communication contexts as small groups, dyadic interaction, public speaking, and large groups. The PRCA-24 is designed in the form of a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree," to provide participants a delicate way to indicate their feelings of anxiety.

Speaking Pre-test and Post-test

As the next instruments used in this research, the researcher used the Test of Spoken English (TSE) to evaluate the impact of tiered instruction on the speaking skills of the participants as pre and post-tests. The Test of Spoken English (TSE) was used as the main measurement instrument, evaluating the participants' proficiency in spoken English. The TSE is a well-established and widely recognized assessment, selected for its reliability and validity in accurately measuring individuals' speaking proficiency.

Semi-structured Interview

For the qualitative part of the study, the researcher meticulously constructed a set of open-ended questions to investigate the learners' perspectives regarding the impact of tiered instruction on their speaking anxiety, willingness to communicate (WTC), and speaking

proficiency. The process of developing these questions was broad, using the knowledge of subject matter experts as well as inspiration from other surveys already in existence.

Data Collection Procedures

The data collection process of the study began with thorough provisions to confirm ethical and institutional consents. Formal requests were precisely given in to related educational authorities and the faculty dean, clearly projecting the objectives, nature and methodologies of the study. Written confirmations were obtained from all authorities, confirming their consent for the research within their educational departments.

Hence, the researcher selected 120 junior learners using a convenient sampling method. The sample of the study included learners ranked as upper-intermediate learners based on proficiency test within the age range of 20 and 32. The quantitative data collection procedure focused on speaking proficiency, applying Test of Spoken English (TSE) as pre and post-tests. Participants' speaking performances were recorded and transcribed for succeeding analysis. That is the Test of Spoken English (TSE) was once used as the pre-test to evaluate the learner's speaking proficiency prior to the treatment and later at the end of the study as post-test to check proficiency development. Furthermore, in the quantitative phase of the research, participants' Willingness to Communicate (WTC) and speaking anxiety were thoroughly measured.

During the treatment phase of the study, the tiered instruction was implemented through a carefully designed order of activities over the course of 18 sessions. The preliminary phase involved measuring learners' speaking proficiency using a pre-test to put them in one of three tiers: high, middle, or low. Students in the high tier received advanced speaking tasks, concentrating on complex language structures and advanced vocabulary. The middle tier

participants were guided to participate in activities that matched their intermediate proficiency, stressing fluency and accuracy. On the other hand, students in the low tier focused on foundational speaking skills, slowly developing to more focus and went through concentrated small group instruction personalized to their corresponding tiers. This approach allowed for targeted attention to individual needs within a supportive peer environment. However, the control group was taught using traditional instruction in which all learners received the same tasks and level of difficulty throughout the 18 sessions. The class was divided into three groups for administrative purposes, but the content and approach were constant within all groups. After the completion of treatment, learners speaking proficiency, anxiety and willingness to communicate were measure once more.

Finally, for the qualitative phase of the data collection procedure, the researcher interviewed the participants in the experimental group with a set of open-ended questions to elicit learners' perspectives on the effect of tiered instruction on their willingness to communicate (WTC), speaking anxiety, and speaking proficiency. The interview process followed a semi-structured format, allowing for flexibility and in-depth exploration of participants' views.

RESULTS

Following the homogenization of participants and the exclusion of outliers, a preliminary speaking test and the anxiety and willingness questionnaires were given to the participants of both groups. After getting assured of the distribution normality of the scores, the researcher employed independent samples t-tests to determine whether there were any differences in speaking performances and anxiety and willingness levels between the control and experimental groups.

Table 1
Comparing the Mean Scores of the Anxiety, WTC and Speaking Pretest Scores of both Experimental and Control Groups

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Anxiety Pretest	1.168	.286	-1.387	107	.172	-10.083	7.268	-24.731	4.564
WTC Pretest	.673	.422	2.938	107	.072	4.201	4.712	9.174	15.938
Speaking Pretest	.264	.610	1.710	107	.094	.697	.408	.125	1.519

Based on the results of the independent-samples t-tests which compare the scores of the experimental and control groups in the pretests regarding their speaking anxiety, willingness to communicate, and speaking proficiency, it was revealed since all the p-values exceeded the predetermined level for significance, there exist no significant differences between the mean scores of the groups. Consequently, it was concluded that there were no considerable differences between the experimental and control group participants concerning their language

anxiety, willingness to communicate, and speaking proficiency.

After implementing the intended treatments to the groups, once more a speaking posttest was given and the anxiety and willingness questionnaires were administered to all the participants. In order to compare the speaking performances of the participants and also compare their anxiety and WTC levels before and after the treatment, after getting assured of the distribution normality of the data. They were compared using paired samples t-test.

Table 2
Paired Samples T-Test Comparing the Mean Scores Obtained from Speaking Pretests and Posttests

Paired Samples Test									
		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Pre-experi- mental – post experimental	5.23	4.300	.938	-7.195	-3.281	-5.582	48	.000
Pair 2	Pre-control – post control	3.15	2.434	.544	-4.289	-2.011	-5.788	59	.000

Based on the data presented in Tables 2, and considering that the significance levels in both groups were lower than .05, it was deduced that the observed differences between the mean scores of the pretests and the posttests in both groups were statistically significant. That is the tiered instruction technique effectively contributed

to the development of learners' speaking ability. However, since the speaking development of learners in the control group were significant, it was imperative to compare learners' posttest scores to determine whether there existed any difference in the efficacy of the two techniques.

Table 3*Comparing the Mean Scores of the Speaking Proficiency Post-test Scores of Experimental and Control Groups*

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Differ- ence	Std. Error Differ- ence	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
Profi- ciency Posttest	Equal vari- ances assumed	12.785	.001	2.598	107	.013	2.549	.981	.572	4.527
	Equal vari- ances not as- sumed			2.523	106.688	.017	2.549	1.011	.482	4.617

The findings of the independent t-test indicated that there is a significant difference among the groups ($p=.01$) as the p-value falls below the predetermined alpha level (.05) set for inspecting differences in this study. A comparison of the mean score difference of the experimental and control groups led to the conclusion

that the experimental group outperformed the control group. Thus, the results suggest that participants in the experimental group, instructed using the tiered instruction approach, demonstrated greater success in terms of speaking proficiency. A similar process was taken to analyze the speaking anxiety scores of the participants.

Table 4*Comparing the Mean Scores of the Speaking Anxiety Post-test Scores of Experimental and Control Groups*

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Inter- val of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Pre-experimental – post experimental	9.636	13.671	2.915	3.575	15.698	3.306	48	.003
Pair 2	Pre-control – post control	7.417	15.634	3.191	.815	14.018	2.324	59	.029

The results of the test summarized in Table 4 indicated that the significance level for comparing the mean scores in both groups was $p = .00$ for the experimental group and $p = .02$ for the control group, respectively. Both p-values are smaller than the predetermined cut-off value, signifying that the observed differences were statistically significant. Consequently,

upon comparing the mean scores, it was proven that the use of tiered instruction significantly reduced learners' anxiety. Since the results for both experimental and control group were statistically significant, further investigations were conducted to determine if there was any superior efficacy of one method over the other.

Table 5*Comparing the Mean Scores of the Speaking Anxiety Post-test Scores of Experimental and Control Groups*

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Differ- ence	Std. Er- ror Dif- ference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Anxiety Posttest	Equal vari- ances assumed	6.357	.015	-1.871	107	.068	-12.303	6.575	-25.554	.948
	Equal vari- ances not as- sumed			-1.904	102.230	.064	-12.303	6.462	-25.362	.756

According to Table 5, it can be inferred that the difference in the efficacy of traditional and tiered instruction in reducing learners' speaking anxiety was not statistically significant ($p = .06$). In other words, it can be claimed that employing tiered instruction to diminish learners' anxiety was not significantly more effective

than traditional instruction and did not contribute to a lower anxiety level among Iraqi EFL learners.

Moving on with the data analysis, to investigate the impact of tiered instruction on learners' willingness to communicate, the scores obtained from the first and second administrations were compared.

Table 6*Paired Samples T-Test Comparing the Mean Scores Obtained from WTC Pretests and Posttests*

		Paired Samples Test							
		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Devia- tion	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Inter- val of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Pre-experimental – post experimental	- 11.350	12.119	2.710	5.678	17.022	4.188	48	.000
Pair 2	Pre-control – post control	-6.900	10.161	2.272	2.144	11.656	3.037	59	.007

Based on the results, it can be concluded that tiered instruction ($p = .00$) has a significant effect on students' willingness to communicate. However, considering the point both teaching approaches were effective in improving participants' willingness to communicate and considering the ho-

mogeneity of all participants in the first administration of the questionnaire, indicating that their willingness to communicate was at the same level, the researcher opted to conduct another independent samples t-test to compare the groups and determine the outperforming group.

Table 7

Comparing the Mean Scores of the Willingness to Communicate Post-test Scores of Experimental and Control Groups

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Differ- ence	Std. Er- ror Dif- ference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
Anxiety Posttest	Equal vari- ances assumed	7.342	.072	-2.871	107	.021	-8.654	6.575	-23.657	.987
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.564	102.230	.021	-8.651	6.462	-23.657	.867

Based on the results of the independent samples t-test, it was determined that there was a significant difference between the groups' willingness to communicate. Consequently, it was concluded that EFL learners in the experimental group showed a significantly higher willingness to communicate compared to the control group.

Based on the results of the semi-structured interviews using predefined questions designed to explore participants' attitudes and experiences, it was found that almost 85% of participants expressed positive impressions after one semester of being taught using tiered instruction, with 10% remaining neutral and 5% willing to go back to traditional and conventional instruction. In addition, 76% of the interviewees reported improvement in their speaking anxiety, while 24% claimed that they had no significant change which in details included anxiety level decrease for 68% of participants, while 22% reported no change, and 10% claimed an increase after one semester of tiered instruction.

Considering their perspectives on the efficacy of this type of instruction in affecting willingness to communicate 82% felt positively influenced, while 18% reported no significant impact on their willingness to communicate. All in all, when comparing tiered instruction with conventional methods, almost 62% considered tiered instruction more effective, 30% believed both methods were equally effective, and 8% favored traditional approaches.

DISCUSSION

Generally, the complications related with speaking anxiety, willingness to communicate, and speaking proficiency within the context of English language learning are intricate, involving psychological, linguistic, and social components (Baran-Łucarz, 2014). Recognizing these complexities and applying focused strategies to alleviate them is crucial for creating an educational setting wherein learners are encouraged to express themselves with confidence and actively participate in spoken tasks. To address these challenges, the implementation of new teaching methodologies such as tiered instruction is vital. The study determined that tiered instruction can effectively address the speaking proficiency issue, considerably enhancing learners' speaking skills, willingness to communicate, and lowering speaking anxiety.

As Magableh and Abdullah (2020) point out, a widespread problem in educational settings regarding strategies is the unchanging application of a single strategy to all learners, ignoring their individual differences and neglecting the variety in their learning abilities and preferences. Consequently, the effectiveness of the tiered instruction technique can be rationalized by the appreciation that modifying different instructions to different learners facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of the materials and a more successful development of their abilities.

In terms of the effectiveness of tiered instruction, Koehler (2010) asserts that its application

enhances student involvement and engagement, particularly in cooperative tasks of varied nature. Moreover, students perceive their instructor as a facilitator who promotes learning, encourages independence and self-direction, exhibits sympathy, extends support, and provides feedback as needed (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2015).

Empirically, the findings of current study are in line with Kintz and Robinson (2021) who investigated the effectiveness of tiered instruction in middle school science classrooms in the southeastern United States. In a way or other, the study had similar findings signifying that tiered instruction, which tailored instruction and tasks to students' prior knowledge and abilities, enhanced motivation and engagement in science. In terms of the effectiveness of tiered instruction, the findings of the present study support those of Sapan and Mede (2022), which revealed the improvements in participants' overall achievement, motivation, and autonomy.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study provide compelling evidence that tiered instruction is an effective pedagogical strategy for improving speaking performance, reducing anxiety, and increasing willingness to communicate among Iraqi EFL learners. By addressing the diverse proficiency levels and individual needs of students, tiered instruction fosters a more engaging and supportive learning environment. This tailored approach not only enhances learners' language skills but also boosts their confidence and motivation to participate in communicative activities. The positive attitudes of learners toward tiered instruction further underscore its potential as a valuable method in EFL contexts. Future research should continue to explore the long-term effects of tiered instruction and its applicability across different educational settings and learner populations.

References

- Baran-Łucarz, M. (2014). The link between pronunciation anxiety and willingness to communicate in the foreign-language classroom: The Polish EFL context. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 70(4), 445-473.
- Bender, W. N. (2012). *Differentiating instruction for students with learning disabilities: New best practices for general and special educators*. California: Thousand Oaks.
- Boonkit, K. (2010). Enhancing the development of speaking skills for non-native speakers of English. *Procedia-social and behavioral sciences*, 2(2), 1305-1309.
- Brown, H.D. (2007). *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy, 3rd ed.* New York, NY: Pearson.
- Gregersen, T., & Horwitz, E. K. (2021). *Language anxiety: From theory and research to classroom implications*. Routledge.
- Havwini, T. (2019). Indonesian EFL students' willingness to communicate in the 2013 curriculum implementation: a case study. *TEFL in journal*, 30(1), 105-120.
- Heacox, D. (2012). *Differentiating instruction in the regular classroom*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing.
- Ismail, M. (2023). Developing Reading Skill among Iraqi ENGLISH AS FOREIGN LANGUAGE learners: A Sociocultural Perspective. *Al-Adab Journal*, (147), 37-56.
- Kayi, H. (2006). Teaching speaking: Activities to promote speaking in a second language. *The internet TESL journal*, 12(11), 1-6.
- Keng, S.-J. (2005). Dynamic emergence of situational willingness to communicate in a second language. *System*, 33(2), 277-292.
- Khatibi, M. B., & Zakeri, J. (2014). Iranian EFL learners' willingness to communicate across different context-and receiver-types. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 98, 932-939.
- Kintz, A. J., & Robinson, D. H. (2021). Student reactions to instructor equity-mindedness: Exploring the influence of student

- and instructor characteristics. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 14(2), 162-175.
- Koehler, S. (2010). *Effects of differentiating for readiness, interest and learning profile on engagement and understanding* [Unpublished master's thesis]. St. John Fisher University. Retrieved January 2, 2024 from http://fisher-pub.sjfc.edu/mathcs_etd_masters/91
- Konno, K., & Koga, T. (2023). Factors Affecting WTC during a Speaking Task. *Journal of the Chubu English Language Education Society*, 52, 77-84.
- Lee, W., & Ng, S. (2010). Reducing student reticence through teacher interaction strategy. *ELT journal*, 64(3), 302-313.
- Magableh, I. S. I., & Abdullah, A. (2020). On the Effectiveness of Differentiated Instruction in the Enhancement of Jordanian Students' Overall Achievement. *International Journal of Instruction*, 13(2), 533-548.
- Mardhatillah, M., & Suharyadi, S. (2023). Differentiated instruction: Challenges and opportunities in efl classroom. *Journal of English Language Teaching and Linguistics*, 8(1), 69-77.
- McCroskey, J. C. (2006). The role of culture in a communibiological approach to communication. *Human Communication*, 9(1), 31-35.
- McCroskey, J. C., & Richmond, V. P. (1990). Willingness to communicate: A cognitive view. In M. Booth-Butterfield (Ed.), *Communication, cognition, and anxiety* (pp. 19-37). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- McCroskey, J. C. (1970). Measures of communication-bound anxiety. *Speech Monographs*, 37, 269-277
- Mohamad, A. R. B., Ab Wahid, N. D. B., & Tambahan, J. T. (2008). Anxiety And Speaking English As A Second Language Among Male And Female Business Students In Universiti Industri Selangor. In AFBE 2008 Conference Papers, 65-84.
- Nunan, D. (2003). The impact of English as a global language on educational policies and practices in the Asia-Pacific Region. *TESOL quarterly*, 37(4), 589-613.
- Paloniemi, A., Pulkkinen, J., Kärnä, E., & Björn, P. M. (2023). The work of special education teachers in the tiered support system: The Finnish case. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 67(1), 35-50.
- Pham, H. L. (2012). Differentiated instruction and the need to integrate teaching and practice. *Journal of College Teaching & Learning (Online)*, 9(1), 13.
- Pierce, R. L., & Adams, C. M. (2005). Chapter 4 Tiered Lessons one way to differentiate mathematics instruction. *Math Education for Gifted Students*, 49, 1-15.
- Richards, M. R. E., & Omdal, S. N. (2007). Effects of tiered instruction on academic performance in a secondary science course. *Journal of advanced academics*, 18(3), 424-453.
- Rock, M. L., Gregg, M., Ellis, E., & Gable, R. A. (2008). REACH: A framework for differentiating classroom instruction. *Preventing school failure: alternative education for children and youth*, 52(2), 31-47.
- Sapan, M., & Mede, E. (2022). The effects of differentiated instruction (DI) on achievement, motivation, and autonomy among English learners. *Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research*, 10(1), 127-144.
- Subban, P. (2006). Differentiated Instruction: A Research Basis. *International Education Journal*, 7, 935-947.
- Tieso, C. L. (2003). Ability grouping is not just tracking anymore. *Roeper Review*, 26, 29-36.
- Tomlinson, C. & Imbeau, A. (2015). Assessment and student success in a differentiated classroom. ASCD.
- Tomlinson, C.A. (2014). *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners* (2nd ed). Pearson: Boston.
- Tomlinson, B. (2000). Discovering English with Sketch Engine: A Corpus-Informed Approach to Language Exploration. *The Modern Language Journal*, 84(4), 561-566.

- Tomlinson, C. (1999). *The differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Trang, T. T. T., Baldauf Jr, R. B., & Moni, K. (2013). Investigating the development of foreign language anxiety: an autobiographical approach. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 34(7), 709-726.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1987). *Thought and language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Weimer, M. (2013). *Learner-centered teaching: Five key changes to practice*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Yaikhong, K., & Usaha, S. (2012). A Measure of EFL Public Speaking Class Anxiety: Scale Development and Preliminary Validation and Reliability. *English Language Teaching*, 5(12), 23-35.
- Zed, B. C. & Kassida, H. (2018). Investigating Teachers' and Students' Strategies to Reduce Anxiety in EFL Speaking Classes Case of 1st year students at M'sila University. Retrieved January 12, 2024 from <http://dspace.univ-msila.dz:8080/xmlui/handle/123456789/7724>
- Zhou, L., Xi, Y., & Lochman, K. (2023). The relationship between second language competence and willingness to communicate: the moderating effect of foreign language anxiety. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 44(2), 129-143