



## RECEPTIVE COMPETENCE WITHOUT PRODUCTIVE FLUENCY: EXPLAINING THE DISCREPANCY IN EFL LEARNERS' ORAL PROFICIENCY AFTER YEARS OF FORMAL INSTRUCTION

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Walk into almost any classroom in Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, or parts of Europe, and you will find the same scene. Teenagers and young adults who have spent eight, ten, even twelve years studying English can conjugate verbs, identify relative clauses, and score decent marks on written exams. Ask them to order coffee, describe their weekend, or explain a simple idea in conversation, and many freeze. The words that looked neat on the page refuse to leave their mouths. This is not a rare personal failing. It is a widespread pattern that teachers and researchers have documented for decades.

The core problem is how English is usually taught. In most school systems, English is treated as an academic subject rather than a living tool for communication. The dominant approach remains a version of the grammar-translation method: students memorize rules, complete gap-fill exercises, translate sentences, and prepare for tests that reward accuracy on paper. Teachers often conduct much of the class in the local language. Speaking time is limited, tightly controlled, or reduced to choral repetition. Real conversation—messy, imperfect, interactive—is rare. As Hafsa (2026) observed in the Bangladeshi context, students learn to parse English but almost never use it to communicate. The brain's formal, analytical systems get trained; the systems needed for fluent production do not.

This creates a classic imbalance between comprehension and production. Years of reading and listening build a large passive vocabulary and a solid ability to understand. Speaking, however, demands something different: rapid retrieval of words under time pressure, the coordination of mouth and breath, and the willingness to risk mistakes in front of others. Knowledge stays locked in "recognition mode." Learners can recognize a word or structure when they see or hear it, yet cannot produce it spontaneously. Studies of EFL learners consistently identify this gap. Chulee et al. (2023), examining Thai tertiary students, found that limited active vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties linked to mother-tongue interference, gaps in grammatical control during speech, and a self-perception of being ineloquent were major barriers. Similar patterns appear elsewhere. Coşkun (2016) documented the widespread "I can understand English but I can't speak" syndrome among Turkish high-school students, attributing it largely to overemphasis on grammar rules, limited speaking practice outside class, anxiety, and materials that ignore colloquial language.

Psychological barriers amplify the problem. Fear of making mistakes, anxiety about being judged by teachers or peers, and low confidence rank among the most consistent findings in speaking research. Students who have been corrected harshly or laughed at in the past often develop a protective silence. Even when they know the language, the emotional



cost of speaking feels higher than the benefit. Large classes and exam-driven curricula make the situation worse: there is little safe space for low-stakes practice, and the high-stakes tests rarely measure spontaneous oral ability. The result is a cycle in which students avoid speaking, which further weakens their fluency (Chulee et al., 2023; Coşkun, 2016).

Environment matters enormously. Outside the classroom, most learners have almost no need or opportunity to use English. Their daily lives, media, and social circles operate in the local language. Without regular, meaningful output—conversations, discussions, even talking to oneself—the neural pathways for fluent speech remain underdeveloped. Research on receptive bilingualism shows that understanding can survive for years with almost no speaking practice; production does not. Comprehension develops from exposure, while speaking requires active use in contexts where it is needed and supported (Lozano-Argüelles, 2026).

Many English teachers themselves lack strong oral fluency or training in communicative methods. Classes are overcrowded. Materials focus on formal written English rather than the interactive language people actually use. Students therefore leave school with a formal, textbook version of English that feels unnatural when they try to speak. Motivation can also suffer: when the goal is exam success rather than genuine communication, the drive to push through the discomfort of speaking fades (Hafsa, 2026; Coşkun, 2016).

None of this means the situation is hopeless. The same research that diagnoses the problem also points to solutions. Fluency grows through deliberate output practice—speaking, even imperfectly, as often as possible. Creating low-pressure opportunities (language exchanges, conversation clubs, recording oneself, teaching others) helps more than another year of silent study. Teachers and schools that shift toward communicative activities, reduce the fear of error, and give students real reasons to use English see better results. Learners who treat speaking as a skill to be trained through repetition, rather than a performance that must be perfect from the start, gradually unlock the knowledge they already possess.

The paradox of years of study without fluency is not primarily about talent or intelligence. It is about mismatched methods, insufficient practice of the skill that matters most, and environments that do not demand or reward spoken English. Change those conditions—give students repeated, meaningful chances to speak and protect them from excessive fear of mistakes—and the frozen words begin to move. The knowledge is already there. What has been missing is the use.

### References:

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