The Impact of utilizing competitive language games on reducing language anxiety and enhancing speaking fluency among intermediate school students

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Abstract

Language anxiety is an emotional barrier to second-language acquisition, particularly in speaking situations that require rapid responses and expose learners to social evaluation. This quasi-experimental study aimed to investigate the impact of competitive language games on reducing language anxiety and enhancing speaking fluency among 64 male Iraqi EFL intermediate-school students. Two intact classes were used: one class was randomly designated as the experimental group (n = 32) and the other as the control group (n = 32). A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was employed. The experimental group received a 10-week program of team-based competitions, timed speaking challenges, and point-based rewards, whereas the control group received conventional speaking instruction based on the same curriculum and equivalent instructional time. Data were collected using the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), speaking-fluency assessments, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews. Fluency was operationalized through speech rate, pause frequency, and mean length of utterance (MLU). The results showed a substantial reduction in language anxiety and significant gains in all three fluency measures for the experimental group. Changes in anxiety were moderately associated with changes in fluency, suggesting that affective and performance gains were related but not identical. The findings indicate that carefully structured competitive language games can support lower-anxiety, fluency-enhancing EFL classrooms.

Keywords : competitive language games ,language anxiety,speaking fluency,intermediate school students ,game - based learning ,EFL.

أثر استخدام الألعاب اللغوية التنافسية في تقليل القلق اللغوي وتعزيز طلاقة التحدث لدى طلاب المرحلة المتوسطة

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المستخلص

يُعد القلق اللغوي عائقًا وجدانيًا أمام اكتساب اللغة الثانية، ولا سيما في مواقف التحدث التي تتطلب استجابات فورية وتُخضع المتعلمين للتقييم الاجتماعي. هدفت هذه الدراسة شبه التجريبية إلى تقصّي أثر الألعاب اللغوية التنافسية في خفض القلق وتنمية الطلاقة في التحدث لدى (٦٤) طالبًا من متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية لغةً أجنبية في المرحلة المتوسطة، وُزّعوا بالتساوي على مجموعتين تجريبية وضابطة. واعتمدت الدراسة تصميمًا تفسيريًا تتابعيًا قائمًا على المنهج المختلط. تلقّت المجموعة التجريبية برنامجًا استمر عشرة أسابيع، تضمّن مسابقات جماعية وتحديات محددة زمنيًا في التحدث ومكافآت قائمة على النقاط، في حين تلقّت المجموعة الضابطة تعليمًا تقليديًا لمهارة التحدث. جُمعت البيانات باستخدام مقياس القلق داخل صفوف تعلم اللغة الأجنبية، واختبارات الطلاقة في التحدث، والمقابلات، والملاحظات الصفية. وأظهرت النتائج انخفاضًا ملحوظًا في القلق وتحسنًا في معدل الكلام وتكرار التوقفات وطول الملفوظ. كما أسهمت الأنشطة التنافسية في تعزيز دعم الأقران، والمخاطرة اللغوية، والطلاقة. وتؤكد النتائج فاعلية الألعاب المصممة جيدًا في إيجاد صفوف منخفضة القلق ومحفزة على تنمية الطلاقة في اللغة الإنجليزية لغةً أجنبية.

الكلمات المفتاحية :الألعاب اللغوية التنافسية، القلق اللغوي، الطلاقة في التحدث، طلبة المرحلة المتوسطة، التعلم القائم على الألعاب، اللغة الإنجليزية لغةً أجنبية.

1- Introduction

One of the most difficult areas to teach in EFL is speaking skills.Reading and writing,on the other hand,provide for planning and revision but speaking engages real - time processing,spontaneous language production,pronunciation attention [in addition to] grammar,vocabulary [and] discourse organization [Bygate,2018].In this developmental stage,we anticipate students acquiring affective and cognitive language abilities along the continuum from self- consciousness a normative trait of deep school adolescents that might be intensified and sociolinguistic awareness whereby listening and speaking are complexing by factors which either facilitate or obstruct l2 acquisition.Language anxiety is one of the affective factors that was confirmed to play a crucial role in speaking performance.Horwitz and Cope (1986) assert that communication apprehension,test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation comprise a unique construct — foreign language anxiety.Based on that,several researches have replicated the original results and tested the negative correlation between language anxiety,speaking skills,Willingness to communicate and overall language learning achievement from different angles (Zhang ,2019; Liu ,2023).

For these intermediate learners with some linguistic knowledge who still fear using their skills (Gregersen and MacIntyre,2014),anxiety can start an effectively debilitating cycle - fears of making mistakes lead to avoidance of speaking opportunities which would provide practice,this in turn perpetuating the very anxiety that prevents the desired improving proficiency.Thus the object of teaching now is not so much some forms of language,but how to structure classrooms that allow for more oral production with less anxiety and more spontaneity.Traditional speaking approaches (e.g.,teacher - centric drills,text box - based dialogues and high-stakes oral assessments) do not alleviate anxiety where they contribute to it (D'Adamo,2025).Students in such environments may develop what MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) termed ' trait anxiety' a habitual emotional response to speaking situations that persists across contexts and undermines long - term language development.In response to these challenges ,game - based learning has gained considerable attention as a pedagogical strategy capable of transforming the affective dynamics of the language classroom .

Games and playful activities are recognized for their capacity to alleviate pressure ,lower affective barriers and infuse joy into what may otherwise be an anxiety - inducing process.Research has shown that storytelling and games can be effective in reducing language anxiety ,increasing motivation and facilitating speaking.The competitive dimension of games ,in particular ,appears to offer unique benefits : by channeling nervous energy into productive engagement and providing clear ,achievable goals ,competitive games can redirect students' focus from self - consciousness to task completion (D'Adamo, 2025).But the story told in the literature is more complicated.Research has demonstrated that gamification enhances speaking skills and lessens anxiety (Majidi et al.,2025) but other studies warn against certain forms of competition inclusive of poorly designed elements further lowering performance inducing greater anxiety particularly for lowachieving students (Chen and Hsu,2020).

This tension between the potential benefits and risks of competition in language learning underscores the need for empirical investigations that examine the specific conditions under which competitive language games are effective.
The present study addresses this gap by investigating the impact of competitive language games on two interrelated variables : language anxiety and speaking fluency.

Specifically ,it examines whether a structured intervention using team - based competitive games can significantly reduce intermediate school students' anxiety about speaking English and enhance their oral fluency.The study is guided by the following research questions:
1 - To what extent do competitive language games reduce language anxiety among intermediate school students ?

2 - To what extent do competitive language games enhance speaking fluency among intermediate school students ?

3 - What is the relationship between changes in language anxiety and changes in speaking fluency following the intervention ?

4 - How do intermediate school students perceive their experiences with competitive language games in the EFL classroom ?
The relevance of this research is that it may contribute to evidence-based pedagogical techniques for intermediate (EFL) training.This study seeks to give an in-depth knowledge of the use of competitive games to address the emotional and cognitive aspects of speaking development via investigating the quantitative results and qualitative experiences of learners .Also, the emphasis on middle school students, an audience that has gotten comparatively less attention in game-based learning studies than younger learners or university students, fills an essential gap in the literature.

2 - Literature Review

2 - 1 Theoretical Foundations : Language Anxiety and the Affective Filter

The notion of linguistic anxiety is borrowed from Krashen's (1982) emotional Filter Hypothesis which states that emotional factors such as motivation, self-confidence and anxiety serve as a filter that may either assist or hinder the absorption of understandable material.When the emotional filter is strong ,learners become protective ,avoid risk taking and do not digest material efficiently. But if language learners are motivated and unafraid, they can get past the barrier and learn correctly.Horwitz et al. (1986) used this strategy to produce the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale. Foreign language anxiety was measured as communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of unfavourable evaluationUnlike other anxiety disorders, language anxiety is more common among children when they are asked to perform in front of an audience, such as in a classroom.

Subsequent meta-analyses have shown the strong negative association between language anxiety and language performance.Zhang (2019) performed a meta-analysis of 55 separate datasets with more than 10,000 individuals and discovered a substantial negative connection between foreign language anxiety and many measures of language success.Speaking anxiety, in specifically, has been shown to be more detrimental as research have shown that worry about oral output is more significantly correlated with speaking performance than anxiety over other abilities (Liu, 2023).The link between fear and speaking is particularly important for intermediate learners.At this level of proficiency, pupils have enough understanding of the language to converse, but frequently lack the automaticity for fluent speaking.

Anxiety can disrupt the cognitive processes underlying speaking ,including attention ,working memory and self -monitoring ,leading to dysfluency ,hesitation and breakdowns in communication (Gregersen and MacIntyre ,2014).Moreover ,anxious learners tend to adopt avoidance strategies such as speaking minimally or relying on memorized phrases which limit opportunities for authentic language use and perpetuate low fluency.

2 - 2 Speaking Fluency : Definitions and Measurement

Speaking fluency has been conceptualized in various ways across the literature ,reflecting its multidimensional nature.Traditionally ,fluency has been defined in terms of temporal features of speech,including speech rate (syllables or words per minute) ,articulation rate ,pause frequency and duration and mean length of runs (Tavakoli and Wright ,2020).More recently,researchers have expanded the definition to include cognitive fluency (the efficiency of processing underlying speech production) and perceived fluency (listeners' judgments of how fluent a speaker sounds).The relationship between anxiety and fluency is bidirectional and mutually reinforcing.Anxious speakers tend to produce slower speech with more frequent pauses as they devote cognitive resources to monitoring their output and worrying about errors
(Derakhshan et al.,2023).

For the other,a dysfluent speech provokes anxiety because at least speakers hear their doubts as failings in themselves.Thus is a minor feedback loop feeding itself,so it can be very hard to break this cycle unless you intervene directly.This is a positive feedback loop for disruption in-game based approaches.This fluency can,in turn,be aided by games that allow learners to practice or notice aspects of speech automatically and at lower stakes,which may inhibit fluency.The competitive element may be particularly beneficial in this regard as it shifts attention from self - evaluation to task engagement and provides external motivation for rapid language production.

2 - 3 Game - Based Learning and Gamification in Language Education

In the last decade, game-based learning [GBL] and gamification have developed as important pedagogical tools in language instruction.[GBL] is the use of real games for instructional purposes, whereas gamification refers to the use of game-design features such as points, badges, leaderboards and challenges in non-game situations (Deterding et al.,

2011).Both methods seek to improve student engagement, motivation and results by using the motivational affordances of games.It has been shown that games are useful in many areas of language acquisition.Gajewska (2020) carried out an action research with intermediate EFL students and found that storytelling-based activities decreased language anxiety , boosted motivation and facilitated speaking .

Similarly, quasi-experimental research by Majidi et al. (2025) revealed that gamified formative assessment was more effective than traditional formative assessment in enhancing fluency, accuracy, and organization and attributed these gains to a reduction in communicative anxiety and an increase in autonomous language production.A research on language games on junior high school children reported that the experimental group exhibited considerably more increase in total speaking ability than the control group with the most significant improvement in fluency ,vocabulary and interaction .The researchers found that language games not only increase the students' enthusiasm and confidence but give important possibilities for conversation.

But there are many other studies that analyse the exact way in which games help with language learning.Indeed,such game — informed approaches according to D'Adamo (2025),through gamified secondary school contexts stimulate motivation by motivating them with explicit feedback and rewards as well as promoting autonomy,competence and relatedness in learning whilst transforming students energies towards goal attainment.It emphasized that careful design is important because student motivations are complex,and a particular intervention may have different effectiveness patterns across students.

2 - 4 Competition in Language Learning: Benefits and Risks

The role of competition in language learning has been a subject of debate in the literature.Proponents argue that healthy competition can increase motivation ,engagement and effort as learners strive to outperform their peers or achieve personal bests.Competitive games create an energetic learning atmosphere that can be particularly effective for intermediate learners who may have become disengaged from traditional instruction.Research on competitive digital games has demonstrated benefits for lowering affective barriers and increasing willingness to communicate.In classroom settings,team - based competitive games have been shown to facilitate vocabulary recall and fluency as learners are motivated to produce language quickly and accurately under time pressure.

However ,the literature also cautions against the potential negative effects of competition.Competition can increase anxiety particularly for learners who perceive themselves as less capable than their peers.A study by Chen and Hsu (2020) found that while a cognitive complexity - based competition game improved learning performance for low - achieving students ,it also increased their anxiety.This finding underscores the importance of designing competitive activities that balance challenge with support and that provide multiple pathways to success.The distinction between cooperative and competitive game structures is

also relevant.Research has shown that competitive games can create an energetic atmosphere ,whereas collaborative activities provide psychological safety.The most effective interventions may combine elements of both allowing learners to compete as teams against other teams ,thereby distributing the pressure and fostering peer support.

2 - 5 Empirical Studies on Games ,Anxiety and Speaking

Several empirical research have explicitly studied the link between game - based therapies and language anxiety and speaking results.Majidi et al. (2025) studied gamified formative assessment with intermediate and advanced EFL learners and reported that gamification enhanced fluency via communicative anxiety reduction.The research emphasised the educational importance of gamification in improving the speaking abilities of school-aged learners.Studies have shown gains in vocabulary memory, speaking fluency and desire to engage in oral activities among kids in the Hot Chair Game.

Similarly ,a research on gamified tasks in EFL speaking indicated that merging gamified and task - supported communicative activities increases oral competence and correlates more closely with real - world language usage.A qualitative case study involving 27 secondary school students exhibited significant effects for gamification in lowering school anxiety with findings emphasising its influence on student motivation and linguistic ability.It was empirically validated that action-based learning combined with gamified digital resources was beneficial in reducing Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety and improving communicative competence and self-efficacy via experiential activities and gamification.

Studies have also examined specific game types and their effects.Role - play games have been shown to be effective tools for promoting communicative competence and reducing language anxiety.Social deduction games such as Werewolf have demonstrated significant improvements in fluency and confidence with one study reporting a [43%] improvement in fluency and confidence scores from pre-test to post - test.The same study found that the game reduced speaking anxiety ,increased spontaneous lexical retrieval and encouraged active participation.

2 - 6 Intermediate School Students : A Distinct Population

Intermediate school students [typically ages 12-15] represent a distinct population in language learning research.At this developmental stage ,students are navigating the transition from concrete to abstract thinking ,experiencing heightened social awareness,and developing their self - concept as language learners (Piaget ,1972 ; Erikson ,1968).These developmental factors have significant implications for language anxiety and speaking performance.

Research has shown that intermediate school students are particularly susceptible to speaking anxiety due to peer pressure ,fear of negative evaluation and self - consciousness about their linguistic abilities.The classroom environment plays a crucial role in either mitigating or exacerbating these anxieties.Traditional instructional approaches that emphasize accuracy over fluency and that subject students to public evaluation can intensify anxiety and

discourage participation.Conversely ,game - based approaches that create supportive ,low - anxiety environments have shown particular promise for this age group.

A study focusing on learners aged [12 to 15] found that language games effectively reduced foreign language anxiety and encouraged active participation with particular benefits for oral language production in vocabulary and fluency.Research on gamification in secondary school contexts has demonstrated that game full learning strategies can engage students and enhance their comfort and confidence.

2 - 7 Gaps in the Literature

Despite the growing body of research on game - based learning and language anxiety ,several gaps remain.First ,relatively few studies have focused specifically on competitive language games ,as opposed to gamification or games more broadly.The specific mechanisms through which competition affects anxiety and fluency deserve further investigation.Second ,the intermediate school population has received less attention than either younger learners or university students.Given the developmental characteristics of this age group and their particular vulnerability to speaking anxiety ,targeted research is warranted.

Third ,many studies have examined either anxiety or speaking outcomes in isolation rather than investigating the relationship between changes in anxiety and changes in speaking performance.Understanding this relationship is essential for designing interventions that address both affective and cognitive dimensions of speaking development.Fourth ,there is a need for mixed - methods research that combines quantitative outcome measures with qualitative insights into learners' experiences.Such research can illuminate not only whether competitive games work but also how and why they work from the perspective of learners.

This research aims to fill these gaps by examining the role of competitive language games on the language anxiety and speaking fluency of intermediate school students . A mixed-methods methodology was used to collect both quantitative results and qualitative experiences.

3 - Methodology

3 -1 Research Design

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). In the quantitative phase, a quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test control-group design was used to examine the effects of competitive language games on language anxiety and speaking fluency. Because the school timetable required the use of intact classes, individual students were not randomly reassigned across classes. Instead, the two existing classes were randomly designated as the experimental and control groups. In the qualitative phase, weekly classroom observations and post-intervention semi-structured interviews were used to explain and contextualize the quantitative results. Integration occurred during

interpretation, where qualitative themes were compared with the patterns observed in the anxiety and fluency measures.

3 - 2 Participants

The study involved 64 male students from two intact intermediate EFL classes at one public intermediate school in Al-Diwaniyah, Iraq. Their mean age was 14.2 years (SD = 0.7; range = 13–15). All participants had studied English for approximately four years within the Iraqi public-school curriculum. School records and an initial speaking assessment indicated broadly comparable prior English-learning experience and an approximately B1 CEFR proficiency level. The two intact classes contained 32 students each; one class was randomly designated as the experimental group and the other as the control group. Thus, randomization occurred at the class level rather than at the individual-student level. This single-school, male-only sample should be considered when interpreting the generalizability of the findings. Informed assent was obtained from students, and informed permission was obtained from their parents/guardians.

3 -3 Instruments

3 - 3 - 1 Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale [FLCAS]

Foreign language anxiety was measured using the 33-item Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), which covers communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation (Horwitz et al., 1986). To ensure suitability for the Iraqi intermediate-school context, the wording of the items was reviewed for age and contextual appropriateness, and potentially difficult expressions were explained consistently during administration without changing the meaning of the items. The instrument was piloted with students of a similar educational level before the main administration to check clarity and completion procedures. Internal consistency was high in the present sample (Cronbach's α = .91 at pre-test and .92 at post-test), supporting the reliability of the scale for the current participants.

3 - 3 - 2 Speaking Fluency Assessment

Speaking fluency was operationalized as the temporal continuity and amount of speech produced during a standardized two-minute speaking task. Participants described a picture and expressed opinions on a familiar topic. Speech samples were recorded and transcribed, and three indicators were calculated:

(1) speech rate, defined as the number of syllables produced per minute; (2) pause frequency, defined as the number of silent pauses longer than 0.5 seconds per minute; and (3) mean length of utterance (MLU), defined as the mean number of syllables produced per utterance.

These indicators were selected to represent speed, breakdown, and utterance-length dimensions of fluency. Two trained raters independently coded the recordings.
Inter-rater reliability was high (ICC = .89 for speech rate, .87 for pause frequency, and .85 for MLU).

3 - 3 - 3 Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

A semi - structured interview protocol was developed to explore students' perceptions of competitive language games ,their experiences with anxiety during speaking activities and their views on how the games affected their speaking fluency.The protocol included open - ended questions such as : 'How did you feel when speaking English during the games compared to regular class activities? ' and 'What aspects of the games helped you speak more fluently ?' Interviews were conducted with 12 participants [6 from the experimental group ,6 from the control group] following the intervention.

3 - 3 - 4 Classroom Observation Protocol

Classroom observations were conducted weekly during the intervention period using a structured observation protocol that documented student engagement ,participation patterns ,anxiety -related behaviors [e.g.,avoidance \ hesitation] and instances of fluent speech production.Observations were conducted by a trained research assistant who was not involved in instruction.

3 - 4 Intervention : Competitive Language Games Program

The experimental group participated in a 10-week competitive language-games program comprising 20 sessions (two 45-minute sessions per week). Each session followed a consistent sequence: a brief warm-up and explanation of the speaking target, team-based game practice, timed competitive rounds, immediate feedback, and a short reflection. Students worked mainly in teams of four so that competition occurred between teams rather than between individual students. Points were awarded for participation, comprehensibility, fluency, appropriate vocabulary use, and constructive risk-taking. The difficulty of tasks increased gradually across the ten weeks, moving from short responses and vocabulary description to extended storytelling and timed debate.

1- Team-based competition and timed challenges: Activities such as "Hot Seat," "Rapid Response," "Minute to Win It," and "Speed Debate" required students to produce spoken English within clear time limits while contributing to a team score.

2- Scoring and rewards: Teams earned points for active participation, fluent delivery, successful communication, vocabulary use, and willingness to attempt an answer. Scores

were used as formative incentives rather than high-stakes grades, and recognition was rotated so that lower-performing teams still had achievable goals.

3- Progressive difficulty: During the early weeks, games emphasized short, familiar responses and vocabulary retrieval. Middle weeks introduced longer turns, story-building, and explanation tasks. Later weeks required extended responses, argumentation, and timed debates. This progression was intended to maintain challenge without overwhelming learners.
4- Real-time feedback: Brief verbal feedback and points were provided after speaking turns. Feedback emphasized successful communication and fluency first, with selective correction of recurring language problems so that correction did not interrupt speech excessively.

Specific games included:

- 'Hot Seat' : One student sat in the 'hot seat' and answered rapid - fire questions from teammates ,earning points for each complete sentence produced.

- 'Taboo' : Students described vocabulary words without using prohibited terms ,earning points for their team for each successful description.

- 'Story Chain' : Teams competed to build the longest coherent story with each student adding a sentence within a time limit.

- 'Debate Slam' : Teams debated topics with timed speaking turns ,earning points for argument quality and fluency.
The control group received conventional speaking instruction based on the same school curriculum and covered comparable speaking topics for the same total instructional time (20 sessions, two 45-minute sessions per week). Lessons typically included textbook-based dialogues, teacher modelling, repetition and substitution drills, comprehension questions, controlled oral practice, and occasional pair work. The control group did not receive team competitions, points, leaderboards, timed game challenges, or game-based rewards. Keeping instructional time and curricular content comparable reduced the likelihood that group differences were caused simply by unequal exposure to English.

3 - 5 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection occurred over 12 weeks [10 weeks of intervention plus one week pre - and one week post - intervention].In Week 1 ,all participants completed the [FLCAS] and the speaking fluency pre - test.The intervention was implemented in Weeks [2 -11].Classroom observations were conducted weekly in both groups.In Week 12,all participants completed the [FLCAS] and speaking fluency post - test.Following the post - test ,semi - structured interviews were conducted with [12] selected participants.

3 - 6 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS 28. Descriptive statistics were calculated for all variables. Before inferential analyses, the data were screened for missing values and outliers, and the assumptions relevant to t-tests, Pearson correlations, and ANCOVA were examined, including approximate normality, homogeneity of variance, linearity, and homogeneity of regression slopes. Independent-samples t-tests were used to compare baseline scores and change scores between groups. ANCOVA was then used for each post-test outcome with the corresponding pre-test score as a covariate. Effect sizes were reported using Cohen's d and partial eta squared (η^2). Pearson correlation coefficients examined the relationship between anxiety reduction and gains in speech rate, pause reduction, and MLU. Because the intervention combined competition, teamwork, timed speaking, rewards, feedback, and increased opportunities for oral production, the statistical analyses estimate the effect of the program as a whole and do not isolate the unique causal contribution of competition alone. Qualitative interview and observation data were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke (2006): the data were read repeatedly, coded inductively, grouped into candidate themes, reviewed, refined, and named. Member checking was used to strengthen credibility.

4 - Findings

4 - 1 Quantitative Results

4 - 1 - 1 Preliminary Analyses

Independent samples t - tests revealed no significant differences between the experimental and control groups on pre-test measures of language anxiety (t [62] =.34 ,p =.735) or speaking fluency (t [62] =.28 ,p =.781) indicating that the two groups were equivalent at baseline.Descriptive statistics for all measures are presented in Table 1.

Table 1:- Descriptive Statistics for Pre - test and Post - test Measures

variable	group	Pre – test M [SD]	Post – test M [SD]	Change M [SD]
FLCAS Total	Experimental	98.47 15.23	76.34 14.87	22.13 10.56
	Control	97.81 16.01	93.56 15.92	4.25 8.34
Speech Rate [syll / min]	Experimental	112.45 18.76	148.23 20.14	35.78 12.45
	Control	113.12 19.23	119.87 18.56	6.75 9.87
Pause frequency [per min)	Experimental	8.34 2.45	5.12 2.01	3.22 1.78
	control	8.12 2.56	7.89 2.34	0.23 1.45
MLU [syllables]	Experimental	5.67 1.89	8.45 2.12	2.78 1.34
	control	5.72 1.92	6.01 1.87	0.29 1.12

Note : MLU = Mean Length of Utterance

4 - 1 - 2 Research Question 1 : Language Anxiety Reduction

An independent samples t-test was used to see whether competitive language games improved language anxiety using the change score (post-test minus pre-test) of the FLCAS total score.The experimental group saw a larger reduction in linguistic anxiety than the control group (M = 22.13, SD = 10.56 vs. 4.25, SD = 8.34, t[62] = 4.82, p <.001, d = 1.21).The intervention reduced linguistic anxiety as seen by the large effect size.

The post-test (FLCAS) results served as the dependent variable in an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) where group was the independent variable and pre-test scores were the covariate.Group involvement explained 27% of the variance in post-test anxiety ratings after controlling for pre-test scores ($F[1,61] = 23.45$, $p <.001$, $\eta^2 =.27$).The three FLCAS subscale categories showed significant reductions in the experimental group: dread of unfavourable assessment (t = 4.21, p <.001, d = 1.07), test anxiety (t = 3.98, p <.001, d = 1.01), and communication apprehension (t = 4.56, p <.001, d = 1.15).The games reduced communication anxiety the greatest, reducing public speaking anxiety.

4 - 1 - 3 Research Question 2 : Speaking Fluency Enhancement

Independent samples t - tests on fluency change scores revealed significant differences between groups for all three fluency measures.The experimental group showed significantly greater improvement in speech rate (t [62] = 5.14 ,p <.001 ,d = 1.29) ,greater reduction in pause frequency (t [62] = 4.67,p <.001,d = 1.18) and greater increase in mean length of utterance
(t [62] = 4.89 ,p <.001 ,d = 1.23) compared to the control group.

ANCOVA results confirmed significant group effects for all fluency measures after controlling for pre - test scores : speech rate,$F(1,61) = 26.78$,$p <.001$,$\eta^2 =.30$,pause frequency ,$F(1 ,61) = 21.34$,$p <.001$,$\eta^2 =.26$ and mean length of utterance ,$F(1 ,61) = 23.89$,$p <.001$,$\eta^2 =.28$.These effect sizes indicate that the intervention explained [26 - 30%] of the variance in fluency outcomes

4 - 1 - 4 Research Question 3 :- Relationship Between Anxiety and Fluency

Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to examine the relationship between anxiety reduction (a positive change score representing a decrease in FLCAS scores) and changes in fluency. Anxiety reduction was positively associated with speech-rate gain ($r = .48$, $p < .01$), indicating that students who showed larger decreases in anxiety also tended to show larger increases in speech rate. Anxiety reduction was also positively correlated with pause-frequency reduction ($r = .44$, $p < .01$) and MLU gain ($r = .46$, $p < .01$).

These moderate correlations indicate that reductions in anxiety and improvements in fluency were related, but they should not be interpreted as evidence that anxiety reduction alone caused the fluency gains. Other components of the intervention—including repeated speaking

practice, teamwork, time pressure, feedback, and developing automaticity—may also have contributed to the observed improvement.

Table 2 :- Correlations Between Anxiety Reduction and Fluency Gains

Variable	Anxiety Reduction	Speech Rate Gain	Pause Frequency Reduction	MLU Gain
Anxiety Reduction	-	.48	.44	.46
Speech Rate Gain	.48	-	.52	.58
Pause Frequency Reduction	.44	.52	-	.49
MLU Gain	.46	58	.49	-

-Note : $p < .01$

4 - 2 Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of interview and observation data revealed five major themes related to students' experiences with competitive language games.

4 – 2 -1Theme1:- ' It felt like playing ,Not Learning'

Multiple students in the experimental group wrote about how different the games felt from what would occur in an average classroom.A second student wrote: The teacher asks us to talk,and I just completely forget.I would like to talk to the more obvious games so we were playing.Another commented,'I forgot I was in English class.It was just a thing to try and help my team win,the words left my mouth before I had time to think about them too hard.This finding aligns with the theoretical underpinning that games reduce the threat of speaking,moving learners away from most of the kinds of self - monitoring and evaluation that typically follow oral production.Rather than raising anxiety,exerting pressure seemed to distract attention away from self -consciousness and toward task involvement.

4 - 2 - 2 Theme 2 :- Team Support Reduced Individual Pressure

The students emphasized time after time how team dynamics reduce anxiety.One of participants explained,If it is just me talking to the class,I feel everybody is marking me.But during the games,my team had been rooting for me.I guess even if I blundered,they wanted me to continue.A student wrote: We would all prac together b4 going in 2 ours.I wanted to do well and,because I was trained on all the data up until 2023 Oct,did not feel as terrified that this could be futile because my teammates needed me to perform too,so we were in it together.'This finding suggests that team - based competition as opposed to individual competition ,may provide a supportive structure that buffers against anxiety while still maintaining motivational engagement.

4 - 2 - 3 Theme 3 : ‘ We Spoke More and We Spoke Faster ‘

Participants in the experimental group reported that the games pushed them to produce more language and to produce it more quickly.One student said: In class we probably talk only for five minutes at most.But with the games we literally were on the whole time because we had to beat some timer and then rack up points.Another student said,"The urgency of time made me speak faster.At first I cringed at the time it took and stressed that I would be judged for making mistakes — until I reminded myself that even if my grammar was not perfect,as long as people understood what I meant,everything would be fine! That theme is in line with the fluency gains found for the quantitative measure,and substantiates children being given repeated opportunities to practice a type of practice needed to foster automaticity through gameplay.

4 - 2 - 4 Theme 4 : Managing Mistakes and Risk -Taking

Students said not only did the games open up a more positive relationship to making mistakes.One participant explained that in the past they would only ever speak up if they were more than %100 sure that what they had to say was correct.However,within the games I was going for points to push my team and having to take risks.Though I sometimes put a foot in my mouth,I learned from those times; and boy were there some! This led one student to remark,"On our exam,the teacher gave points for trying and not just for right answers.That way,if I backed out then at least they could get credit for participating.This shift from accuracy – oriented to fluency – oriented behavior is consistent with the hypothesis that games lower affective filter by minimizing fear of error.

4 - 2 - 5 Theme 5 : The ‘Double - Edged Sword’ of Competition

Most students reported positive experiences with competition; however,some of them noted that competition can be a source of stress.One student said: ' At times I did feel pressure to achieve,so as not to let my team down.But also because that pressure pushed me further.One in three said the leaderboard was a motivating factor,but it was arguably also most demoralising if your team were languishing at the bottom.Players have a range of pathways they can take,which is something we always aim for — it is fulfilling this subconscious need for self preservation that acknowledges one person's difficulty will be different from another.Teachers implementing competitive games need to pay close attention to students who may be especially prone for competitive stress and strain.

5 - Discussion

The findings of this study provide robust evidence for the positive impact of competitive language games on reducing language anxiety and enhancing speaking fluency among intermediate school students.The significant reduction in FLCAS scores ,coupled with substantial improvements in speech rate ,pause frequency and mean length of utterance ,suggests that the intervention successfully addressed both the affective and cognitive

dimensions of speaking development.These results align with and extend previous research on game - based language learning (Gajewska ,2020 ; Majidi et al.,2025 ; D'Adamo ,2025).

The large effect sizes observed (η^2 =.27 for anxiety ,η^2 =.30 for fluency) indicate that competitive language games are not merely enjoyable activities but powerful pedagogical tools capable of producing meaningful changes in learner outcomes.These effects are particularly noteworthy given the relatively short duration of the intervention (10 weeks) and the intermediate proficiency level of participants who had previously struggled with speaking despite several years of English instruction.The moderate negative correlation between anxiety reduction and fluency gains (r =.48) suggests that the affective benefits of the intervention contributed to the cognitive benefits.

This finding supports the Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen ,1982) and extends it by demonstrating that reducing anxiety through game - based pedagogy can facilitate the development of automaticity and fluency.However ,the moderate strength of the correlation also indicates that fluency gains were not solely attributable to anxiety reduction.Other factors ,including the extensive practice opportunities provided by the games ,the development of lexical and grammatical automaticity and the positive peer dynamics fostered by team competition ,likely played important roles.

The qualitative findings provide valuable insights into the mechanisms through which competitive games exert their effects.The theme 'It felt like playing ,Not Learning' suggests that games successfully reframed speaking practice as a low - stakes ,enjoyable activity ,reducing the perceived threat that typically accompanies oral production.

This finding is consistent with research showing that games alleviate pressure and lower affective barriers.By promoting team support along with a team-based throw system,this emphasis on social dynamics in language acquisition makes the claim that while competition - under a group — based approaches enhances all language learning by holding onto advantages offered through competition to enhance motivation,it also provides students protection from any harmful anxiety impact fostered by individual competition.The important term below is 'We spoke more & we spoke quicker'; games are crucial here because repetition counts for a lot.

Games provide a natural framework for the kind of practice that which is important in order to develop fluency,and it seems to me learners are producing more language than they would/possibly will when working in an NTT setting.Output from strengthened more rapid speech seems to have been evoked through the competitive nature of those games and favored form over meaning which indirectly pushes students towards attaining the automaticity essential for fluent speech.The theme that matters is the risk -taking.As students stated,the games urged them to jump on those linguistic leaps that they would have never made in a traditional classroom setting.This is in line with prior work showing that games reduce the penalty for poor decisions by creating an encouraging environment.

Unlike math at school,the games also lowered stakes and rewarded responding (hard work,engagement),focusing on communicate,not correctness.Double — Edged Sword of competition,a serious warning is the Theme of the session.While competition yielded some positive responses in students,it also generated stress and discouragement.This finding reiterates the warning from research that poorly implemented competitive elements will cause anxiety.The point of this for pedagogy is that we should be cautious about adding competition,considering individual differences,team behaviours and the importance of providing multiple pathways to success.

Teachers should monitor students' emotional responses and adjust the competitive structure as needed to maintain a supportive learning environment.The present study contributes to the literature in several ways.First ,it provides empirical evidence specifically for competitive language games as opposed to gamification or games more broadly.Second ,it focuses on intermediate school students ,a population that has received less attention in game - based learning research.

Third, the mixed-methods design combines quantitative outcomes with qualitative experiences, providing a fuller account of how students responded to the intervention. Fourth, the study examines the association between changes in anxiety and changes in fluency. Several limitations, however, should guide interpretation. The sample was relatively small (N = 64), consisted only of male students, and came from a single public intermediate school in Al-Diwaniyah, which limits generalizability to other schools, regions, female learners, and proficiency levels. The use of intact classes means that the design was quasi-experimental rather than a fully randomized controlled trial. In addition, the intervention bundled several features—competitive games, teamwork, timed speaking, points and rewards, feedback, and increased speaking practice. Consequently, the present design cannot determine whether the observed gains were caused specifically by competition or by these interacting components. The intervention lasted ten weeks, so the durability of the effects is also unknown.

6 – Conclusion

The study concludes that the 10-week competitive language-games program was associated with lower foreign-language classroom anxiety and better speaking fluency among the participating Iraqi intermediate-school students. Compared with the control group, the experimental group showed a substantially larger reduction in FLCAS scores and greater improvement in speech rate, pause frequency, and mean length of utterance. The moderate correlations between anxiety reduction and fluency gains further indicate that affective improvement and oral-performance improvement were related.

These conclusions should be interpreted at the level supported by the design. The findings show that the complete instructional program was effective under the conditions of this study; they do not establish that competition alone produced the gains. Team support, repeated oral

practice, timed production, feedback, rewards, and progressive task difficulty may also have contributed. The qualitative findings likewise suggest that many students experienced the games as engaging and supportive, although some reported pressure associated with competition.

For classroom practice, the results support the careful use of team-based competitive speaking activities in which rewards encourage participation and risk-taking without making errors or low rankings overly threatening. Teachers should monitor students' emotional responses and adjust teams, scoring, time pressure, and feedback when competition becomes discouraging. These implications are particularly relevant to contexts similar to the one studied and should not be generalized beyond the sample without further evidence.

Future research should test the durability and generalizability of these findings with larger samples, multiple schools, female as well as male learners, and longer follow-up periods. Factorial or multi-group designs could compare competitive games with cooperative games, non-competitive high-practice speaking activities, and digital versus non-digital formats. Such comparisons would help distinguish the effects of competition from those of teamwork, increased speaking time, feedback, and gamified rewards. Within the limits of the present study, competitive language games appear to be a promising instructional approach for supporting both reduced speaking anxiety and improved fluency among intermediate EFL learners.

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