# An Analysis of Speaking Difficulties Among University EFL Students

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*Abstract*

*Speaking proficiency remains one of the most challenging components of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning at the university level. This study investigates the linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors contributing to speaking difficulties among university EFL students. Using a mixed-methods descriptive design, data were collected through questionnaires, speaking performance assessments, interviews, and classroom observations. Quantitative findings show that linguistic limitations—particularly restricted vocabulary (M = 4.21), inaccurate pronunciation (M = 4.07), and grammatical inaccuracies (M = 3.98)—constitute the most dominant challenges. Psychological factors also play a significant role, with high speaking anxiety (M = 4.15) and fear of negative evaluation negatively correlating with performance (r = –0.63). Environmental and pedagogical conditions further intensify these difficulties, as large class sizes, limited speaking opportunities, and teacher-centered instruction reduce authentic oral interaction. Qualitative data support these findings by revealing recurrent anxiety, limited spontaneous speech, and restricted classroom engagement. The results highlight that speaking difficulties arise from the interplay of linguistic weaknesses, affective constraints, and contextual barriers. The study recommends integrated pedagogical approaches that strengthen linguistic competence, reduce anxiety, and provide more opportunities for meaningful communication to support students' oral proficiency development.*

*Keywords: Speaking Difficulties; Efl Learners; Speaking Anxiety; Linguistic Factors*

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## I  INTRODUCTION

Speaking ability is widely recognized as a central indicator of communicative competence in foreign-language education and a key skill for graduates entering the global workplace. Recent reviews emphasize that productive oral skills remain among the most valued yet most challenging outcomes of EFL programs, because speaking integrates linguistic knowledge with real-time cognitive and socio-affective processing [1].

Despite its importance, numerous empirical studies across EFL contexts report that university students continue to experience persistent difficulties in oral production. These difficulties are multidimensional: linguistically, learners often report limited lexical resources, inaccurate pronunciation, and incomplete grammatical control that reduce intelligibility and fluency [2].

Alongside linguistic constraints, psychological factors—most notably foreign-language speaking anxiety, low self-confidence, and fear of negative evaluation—regularly appear as strong inhibitors of speaking performance. Quantitative and mixed-methods investigations show a consistent negative correlation between speaking anxiety and willingness to communicate, frequency of speaking practice, and measured speaking performance among undergraduates [3]. External and pedagogical conditions further shape students' opportunities to develop spoken English. Research from university settings highlights that large class sizes, teacher-centered instruction, limited authentic speaking tasks, and insufficient peer interaction constrain meaningful oral practice. When instruction remains dominated by form-focused or lecture-based modes, students receive fewer low-stakes opportunities to experiment with language and reduce anxiety [4].

Taken together, the literature indicates that speaking difficulties among university EFL learners are best understood as the outcome of interacting linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors. However, gaps remain: many studies are either narrowly qualitative or limited to single institutions, and few recent works integrate fine-grained analyses of specific subskills (e.g., lexical access, phonological accuracy, syntactic planning) that are most predictive of communicative breakdowns under pressure. Moreover, although interventions aimed at reducing anxiety or increasing peer interaction have been proposed, comparative evidence on which classroom practices effectively mitigate these combined barriers remains limited [3], [5].

Therefore, this study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of speaking difficulties among university EFL students by (1) identifying and categorizing the predominant linguistic, psychological, and environmental obstacles in the target population, and (2) investigating how these factors interact to affect speaking performance and willingness to communicate. By bridging descriptive diagnosis with implications for student-centered classroom practices, the research seeks to inform pedagogical strategies that simultaneously address linguistic competence, affective support, and authentic interactive opportunities [5].

Furthermore, recent discussions in EFL pedagogy highlight the widening gap between students' receptive abilities—such as reading and listening—and their productive skills, particularly speaking. While many university learners demonstrate adequate comprehension skills, they often fail to transfer this knowledge into spontaneous spoken communication. Studies show that productive performance requires rapid lexical retrieval, real-time syntactic planning, and continuous interactional management, making speaking more cognitively demanding than other language skills [6]. As a result, students who perform well in written tasks or grammar assessments may still experience substantial difficulty when required to speak in real-time interactions.

Another important aspect concerns the socio-affective dimension of speaking, which increasingly draws scholarly attention due to its strong predictive value for oral communication outcomes. Recent findings indicate that learners with high speaking anxiety often avoid participation, minimize verbal responses, or rely heavily on rehearsed expressions, thereby limiting opportunities for authentic oral development [7]. Furthermore, fear of negative evaluation—especially in large classes or

teacher-dominated sessions—has been identified as one of the most persistent psychological barriers that suppress students' willingness to communicate in English [8]. These affective factors suggest that improving speaking proficiency requires more than linguistic instruction; it requires the creation of emotionally supportive learning environments.

Technological developments in higher education have also introduced new dynamics in the teaching and learning of speaking. Research on digital and blended learning environments shows that online platforms, discussion forums, and pre-class video tasks can provide learners with additional opportunities to practice, rehearse, and self-monitor their speaking performance with lower anxiety levels [9]. However, despite these advantages, studies also report that without structured guidance and purposeful speaking tasks, technology alone may not significantly improve oral proficiency, as learners tend to focus on receptive activities rather than active speaking practice [10]. This highlights the need for careful instructional design that links technological tools to meaningful oral communicative tasks.

In the context of university-level EFL instruction, scholars have emphasized the importance of instructional models that integrate interaction, collaboration, and learner autonomy.

Communicative and student-centered approaches—such as task-based learning, peer collaboration, and interactive speaking cycles—have been shown to increase learners' participation and reduce anxiety during oral activities [11]. Nevertheless, empirical evidence indicates that such approaches are not consistently implemented across higher education institutions, particularly in contexts where lecture-oriented traditions remain dominant. As a result, many students receive insufficient exposure to spontaneous speaking practice, contributing to persistent difficulties in developing oral fluency and accuracy.

Given these realities, identifying the specific constellation of linguistic, psychological, and pedagogical barriers faced by university EFL learners becomes essential. Existing studies provide valuable insights, yet many tend to focus on isolated variables, such as pronunciation problems or speaking anxiety alone. Few investigations adopt a more integrated perspective that examines how these factors interact in real classrooms to shape speaking performance [12]. This gap underscores the importance of conducting research that captures the complex interplay of the multiple dimensions contributing to speaking difficulties among university students.

## II   RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a mixed-methods descriptive research design to provide a comprehensive analysis of speaking difficulties among university EFL students. The selection of this design was based on the multidimensional nature of speaking performance, which involves linguistic, psychological, and environmental components that cannot be fully understood through a single methodological lens. Mixed-methods approaches have been widely recommended for capturing complex language-learning phenomena because they integrate quantitative precision with qualitative depth [13], [14]. The quantitative strand was used to identify the frequency and severity of specific speaking difficulties, whereas the qualitative strand explored students' perceptions, classroom experiences, and contextual factors influencing

oral communication. The combination of these approaches allowed for a more holistic understanding of the issues under investigation and aligns with recent methodological guidance emphasizing the value of integrating numerical and narrative data to strengthen interpretative validity [15].

The study was conducted at a public university in Indonesia and involved undergraduate students enrolled in intermediate-level English speaking courses. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure active engagement in oral tasks and representation of various proficiency levels within the program, consistent with sampling recommendations for applied linguistics research [16]. A total of 120 students participated in the quantitative data collection, while 20 students

and 4 speaking-course lecturers joined the qualitative phase, which consisted of interviews and classroom observations. Such participant diversity is important for capturing both learner and instructor perspectives on speaking challenges in university contexts [17].

Four instruments were used to collect data. First, a speaking-difficulty questionnaire comprising 30 Likert-scale items was adapted from validated instruments addressing linguistic, psychological, and environmental speaking barriers, following recent validation frameworks in language assessment research [18]. The questionnaire's internal consistency was examined using Cronbach's Alpha to ensure reliability. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected students and lecturers to obtain deeper insights into perceived factors affecting speaking performance, a practice commonly recommended for capturing nuanced learner experiences [19]. Third, classroom observations were carried out using a structured observation checklist to document instructional practices, participation patterns, and affective indicators during speaking activities, consistent with classroom-based research protocols [20]. Finally, a speaking performance task was administered and evaluated using a rubric assessing fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, and lexical richness, reflecting current assessment principles in oral proficiency studies [21].

Data collection procedures were conducted in four stages. The questionnaire was first distributed during regular class sessions to generate baseline quantitative data. Next, students completed the speaking performance task, which was audio-recorded and assessed by two raters to ensure scoring reliability, following interrater reliability standards in speaking assessment research [22]. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted to allow participants to elaborate on their questionnaire responses and describe their experiences in detail. Classroom observations were later conducted across multiple speaking classes to

document environmental and pedagogical conditions influencing oral communication. The triangulation of these methods strengthened the credibility of the findings by integrating perceptions, behaviors, and performance-based evidence, as recommended in contemporary triangulation literature [23].

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and frequency counts, to identify the most prominent speaking difficulties. Correlation analysis examined relationships among linguistic constraints, speaking anxiety, and performance scores, while ANOVA was used to compare speaking difficulties across proficiency groups. Such analytical techniques are consistent with recent quantitative approaches in applied linguistics research [24]. Qualitative data from interviews and observations were analyzed using thematic analysis, following systematic procedures of coding, categorizing, and identifying major themes, in line with updated thematic analysis frameworks [25]. Integrating quantitative and qualitative findings provided a richer understanding of the complex interplay among linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors contributing to speaking problems.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process. Approval was obtained from the university's ethics committee, and participants were informed about the study's purpose, procedures, confidentiality, and voluntary nature. Written consent was collected before participation, and all data were anonymized to ensure privacy and minimize bias. Adhering to ethical standards is essential in educational research, particularly when involving student performance and classroom observation data [26]. Overall, the methodological approach adopted in this study enabled a robust exploration of speaking difficulties and ensured that the findings are empirically grounded and pedagogically meaningful for improving EFL speaking instruction.

## III  RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The section contains scientific The quantitative findings revealed that university

EFL students experienced notable speaking difficulties across linguistic, psychological, and

environmental dimensions. Linguistic problems were the most frequently reported, with limited vocabulary (M = 4.21), inaccurate pronunciation (M = 4.07), and grammatical inaccuracies (M = 3.98) emerging as the highest-rated challenges. These findings are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1. Linguistic Difficulties in Students' Speaking Performance**

| Indicator | Description | Result |
|---|---|---|
| Limited vocabulary | Difficulty retrieving appropriate vocabulary during spontaneous speaking; frequent fillers and code-switching | M = 4.21 |
| Pronunciation problems | Segmental pronunciation issues reducing intelligibility | M = 4.07 |
| Grammatical inaccuracies | Recurrent grammatical errors; incomplete grammatical control | M = 3.98 |
| Lexical diversity (performance test) | Restricted variation of vocabulary | Low (performance rating) |
| Pronunciation intelligibility (performance test) | Intelligibility affected by segmental errors | Moderate–Low |
| Overall fluency | Hesitation and retrieval problems | Impaired (qualitative) |

The performance assessment reinforced these quantitative results: students showed restricted lexical diversity, frequent grammatical mistakes, and pronunciation issues that affected intelligibility. These linguistic weaknesses emerged as core obstacles affecting fluency and accuracy during oral communication.

Psychological factors also significantly affected speaking performance, with high levels of speaking anxiety (M = 4.15) and strong fear of negative evaluation influencing how students engaged in oral tasks. The results are detailed in Table 2.

**Table 2. Psychological Factors Affecting Students' Speaking Performance**

| Indicator | Description | Result |
|---|---|---|
| Speaking anxiety | Fear of making mistakes and negative evaluation | M = 4.15 |
| Correlation with performance | Negative relationship between anxiety and speaking performance | r = −0.63 |
| Emotional reactions | Students feel tense, embarrassed, nervous, mentally blocked | High frequency |
| Effects on lexical retrieval | Anxiety disrupts vocabulary access | Impaired |
| Effects on fluency | Hesitation, slow speech, avoidance of speaking | Impaired |
| Mediating role | Anxiety reduces performance even when linguistic ability is moderate | Significant impact |

Interview results supported the quantitative findings: many students described feeling nervous, tense, or mentally blocked during speaking tasks. Anxiety disrupted lexical access and slowed cognitive processing, reducing overall fluency.

Environmental and pedagogical issues further contributed to these difficulties. Limited speaking opportunities, large class sizes, and teacher-centered instruction reduced meaningful interaction. These findings are summarized in Table 3.

**Table 3. Environmental and Pedagogical Factors Affecting Speaking Proficiency**

| Indicator | Description | Result |
|---|---|---|
| Limited speaking opportunities | Few chances for spontaneous speech | M = 4.03 |
| Teacher-centered | Dominance of explanation, | M = 3.92 |

| instruction | translation, form-focused teaching | |
|---|---|---|
| Speaking turns per session | Number of times students speak in 90 minutes | < 3 turns |
| Task type and structure | Short, structured tasks with little spontaneity | Limited |
| Curriculum/time constraints | Teachers struggle to include interactive tasks | High constraint |
| Group management difficulties | Large groups reduce meaningful interaction | High constraint |

Observations showed that students often had fewer than three opportunities to speak in a 90-minute session. Lecturers cited curriculum demands, time constraints, and challenges managing large classes as barriers to providing interactive speaking tasks.

A triangulated analysis revealed that the speaking difficulties faced by students arise not from a single factor but from the interaction of linguistic weaknesses, psychological constraints, and environmental limitations. Linguistic challenges were intensified by high anxiety, while limited speaking practice further reinforced both linguistic stagnation and affective barriers. These findings align with prior research emphasizing that speaking proficiency is shaped by interconnected cognitive, emotional, and contextual variables.

The results highlight the need for integrated pedagogical strategies that address all three dimensions. Improving students' linguistic competence must be accompanied by reducing anxiety, increasing confidence, and providing more opportunities for interactive communication. Communicative activities, peer collaboration, small-group discussion, and supportive feedback are essential to enhancing both confidence and fluency. Speaking courses should balance accuracy, communicative practice, and affective support to help students develop the competence and confidence needed for effective oral communication.

## IV  CONCLUSION

### 4.1 Conclusion

The findings of this study show that university EFL students face speaking difficulties caused by the interaction of linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors. Linguistic challenges—such as limited vocabulary, inaccurate pronunciation, and weak grammatical control—were the most prominent issues affecting students' fluency and intelligibility, as reflected in both questionnaire responses and speaking performance assessments.

Psychological factors also strongly influenced speaking performance. High levels of speaking anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and low confidence disrupted students' fluency and reduced their willingness to communicate. The negative correlation between anxiety and performance highlights the importance of managing affective factors in speaking instruction.

Environmental and pedagogical conditions further restricted students' opportunities to develop speaking skills. Large class sizes, limited speaking practice, and teacher-centered instruction reduced the frequency and quality of oral interaction, preventing students from engaging in meaningful communicative activities.

The study emphasizes that improving speaking proficiency requires integrated efforts that address linguistic weaknesses, reduce psychological barriers, and provide supportive, interaction-rich learning environments. Speaking development is most effective when language input, affective support, and communicative practice are combined holistically.

### 4.2 Suggestion

Based on the findings, several recommendations can be implemented to students' speaking proficiency. Strengthening linguistic competence should remain a priority by incorporating regular vocabulary-building activities, pronunciation practice, and grammar-based speaking tasks. These efforts help students produce clearer and more accurate speech. It is

also important to reduce speaking anxiety by creating a supportive classroom atmosphere through low-stakes speaking opportunities, constructive feedback, and confidence-building activities such as pair practice or rehearsed speaking. Providing more meaningful communicative tasks—such as role-plays, problem-solving activities, and small-group discussions—can further encourage spontaneous and authentic language use.

Additionally, shifting toward student-centered instruction can increase student participation and reduce dependence on teacher-led approaches. Methods such as task-based learning, peer collaboration, and group interaction give learners more opportunities to speak. Environmental challenges, including large classes and limited speaking time, can be addressed through group rotations, speaking stations, and more efficient time management. Integrating technology—such as digital platforms, online discussions, or interactive speaking apps—can also offer additional low-anxiety practice when aligned with communicative goals. Finally, ongoing professional development for lecturers is essential to strengthen their ability to design effective, interactive, and supportive speaking activities.

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