



An Analysis of English Speaking Difficulties in First-Semester Students

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Abstract. This study investigates the various speaking difficulties faced by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, with a particular focus on Management and Accounting students. Despite having several years of formal English education, many students still struggle to communicate effectively and confidently in spoken English. This situation highlights a significant gap between classroom instruction and students' actual communicative competence. The study aims to identify the root causes of these challenges and examine how linguistic and psychological factors interact to hinder students' oral performance. These psychological factors are often reinforced by the lack of adequate speaking practice both inside and outside the classroom, resulting in limited exposure to authentic language use. The findings indicate that students' speaking difficulties are not solely rooted in linguistic deficiencies, but are strongly influenced by affective factors and insufficient communicative interaction. Therefore, the study recommends that speaking instruction integrate more interactive and student-centered activities, such as group discussions, role-plays, and task-based speaking tasks, in order to create a more supportive and engaging learning environment. Additionally, teachers are encouraged to provide positive feedback and foster an atmosphere that allows students to feel comfortable taking risks when using English.

Keywords: Affective Factors; English Speaking; Pronunciation; Psychological Factors; Vocabulary

1. INTRODUCTION

English, as a global language, plays a significant role in academic, professional, and social contexts. In Indonesia, English is taught as a foreign language (EFL) at every level of education (Asysyifa et al., 2019). However, many students, even at the university level, continue to face serious challenges in developing communicative competence, especially in speaking. This is particularly evident among students at Al Azhar University, where English majors often struggle to express themselves fluently and confidently in spoken English despite years of formal instruction.

Speaking is considered one of the most complex language skills because it involves not only linguistic knowledge such as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation but also the ability to process and produce language in real time. According to Brown (2001), speaking requires a high degree of automaticity and fluency under time constraints, which makes it more demanding than receptive skills like listening or reading. Moreover, learners must also cope with psychological factors such as anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and low self-confidence (Horwitz et al., 1986).

Several studies have shown that EFL learners frequently experience speaking-related difficulties due to both internal and external factors. Internally, students may suffer from limited vocabulary, incorrect pronunciation, and poor grammatical knowledge (Hymes, 1972). Externally, they may lack exposure to authentic English environments, insufficient classroom

speaking time, and lack of encouragement from teachers or peers (Torky, 2006; Nunan, 1991). In addition, the dominance of the first language (L1) in social and academic settings makes it even harder for students to practice and develop their oral skills in English.

At Al Azhar University, these problems are not unique. Although the university offers various English-speaking courses and activities, many students still exhibit reluctance to speak in English, especially in public or formal settings. This study, therefore, aims to analyze the specific difficulties encountered by Al Azhar students in speaking English, to explore the underlying causes, and to provide practical recommendations for improving students' oral performance.

Speaking is widely recognized as one of the most challenging skills for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, particularly at the university level. Despite years of formal English education, many students continue to experience difficulties in oral communication, including limited vocabulary, pronunciation errors, hesitation, and lack of fluency. These challenges not only hinder academic performance but also reduce learners' willingness to communicate, thereby affecting overall language development.

One theoretical framework that provides insight into the psychological aspects of speaking difficulties is Stephen Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982). According to Krashen, affective factors such as motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety can raise the "affective filter" which acts as a metaphorical barrier preventing language input from being effectively processed and acquired. Even when learners are exposed to comprehensible input, a high affective filter may impede internalization due to emotional factors (Krashen, 1982).

This view is further supported by MacIntyre & Gregersen (2012), who identify language anxiety as a critical affective variable that negatively influences learners' verbal communication. Speaking anxiety involves worry, negative self-evaluation, and fear of judgment, which collectively diminish students' willingness to participate in oral activities.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, Long (1980) emphasizes the importance of face-to-face interaction and negotiation of meaning in second language development. This hypothesis argues that conversational interaction facilitates language acquisition by providing opportunities for modified input and output, as well as immediate feedback. In EFL contexts, insufficient speaking practice or limited classroom interaction reduces students' chances to negotiate meaning and refine their oral production. Empirical studies in the Indonesian context corroborate these theoretical frameworks. For instance, (Hanifa, 1990) identifies factors such as communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and performance pressure as

primary sources of speaking anxiety among EFL learners. Swain (1985) demonstrates that selective error correction and collaborative group work can reduce speaking anxiety and improve oral performance. Moreover, research by Sulistyowati (2023) shows that low self-confidence and fear of making mistakes negatively affect students' speaking motivation and fluency.

In addition to psychological factors, linguistic barriers such as limited vocabulary and pronunciation problems contribute to hesitation and reluctance to speak. Students' inability to produce spontaneous speech often generates embarrassment or fear of ridicule, which further elevates the affective filter and decreases oral participation.

Based on these theoretical and empirical foundations, this study aims to explore the extent to which psychological factors, including anxiety and self-confidence, affect EFL students' speaking performance at Al Azhar University, Medan. It will also examine the role of limited speaking practice and classroom interaction in contributing to low fluency. Additionally, the study will investigate pedagogical strategies that can be implemented to lower the affective filter and enhance students' oral participation. This research is expected to provide both theoretical and practical insights into designing effective speaking instruction that addresses not only linguistic competence but also the affective needs of EFL learners (Arifin, 2017).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Speaking in the EFL Context

Speaking is a complex skill involving pronunciation, fluency, grammar, vocabulary, and discourse. According to (Brown, 2001), speaking in a foreign language is often considered the most difficult skill because it requires instant recall and performance. (Harmer, 2007) emphasized that EFL learners need regular speaking exposure and real-life communication to improve their oral fluency.

Common Speaking Difficulties

Previous research highlights several obstacles in EFL speaking, including pronunciation problems, such as unfamiliar sounds and intonation (Asysyifa et al., 2019). Additionally, vocabulary limitations often hinder word retrieval, while grammatical errors lead to awkward sentence structures. Anxiety and lack of confidence, especially in public speaking, further contribute to difficulties in speaking. Furthermore, interference from the mother tongue (L1), such as direct translation, can negatively impact fluency. Foreign Language Anxiety

(FLA) is a significant barrier, as noted by Horwitz et al. (1986), affecting students' willingness to speak and their fluency under pressure.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to analyze the difficulties encountered by students in speaking English. The subjects of this study were 10 first-semester students majoring in Economics and Accounting at the Faculty of Economics, Al Azhar University Medan, selected through purposive sampling based on the criteria of students who were enrolled in English courses and experienced difficulties in speaking. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation of speaking tasks or student presentation recordings. Observations were conducted to directly examine students' speaking activities in the classroom, while interviews were used to explore their experiences, perceptions, and psychological barriers in speaking English. The data were then analyzed using qualitative descriptive analysis, starting from data reduction and organization, followed by presentation of the findings in the form of narratives and direct quotations, and verified through triangulation of sources to ensure the validity of the information. Ethical considerations were also observed, including maintaining students' confidentiality and ensuring voluntary participation (Zulfikar, 2019).

Table 1. Research Methodology Overview

Aspect	Description
Research Type	Qualitative descriptive study aimed at analyzing students' difficulties in speaking English.
Research Subjects	10 first-semester students majoring in Economics and Accounting, Faculty of Economics, Al Azhar University Medan.
Sampling Technique	Purposive sampling, based on students enrolled in English courses who experience speaking difficulties.
Location and Time	Al Azhar University Medan; research conducted over a period of 2 months.
Data Collection Methods	Classroom observations to monitor students' speaking activities, Semi structured interviews to explore experiences and psychological barriers and Documentation of speaking tasks or student presentation recordings
Research Instruments	Semi-structured interview guide; researcher as the main instrument.
Data Analysis Techniques	Qualitative descriptive analysis: data reduction and organization, presentation of findings in narratives and direct quotations, verification through triangulation of sources.
Ethical Considerations	Maintaining students' confidentiality and ensuring voluntary participation.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Pronunciation Difficulties

Most participants struggled with pronouncing English sounds like /θ/, /ð/, /v/, and /r/. For example, "think" was pronounced as "tink", and "very" as "ferry". Lack of phonological awareness contributed to poor intelligibility.

"Sometimes I feel shy because I know my pronunciation is wrong but I don't know how to fix it." (Student A)

Limited Vocabulary and Fluency

Students reported difficulty expressing ideas due to a limited vocabulary, which resulted in pauses, fillers ("uhm", "you know"), and hesitation.

"I have ideas in my mind, but I can't find the words in English to say them." (Student D)

Grammar-Related Problems

Many avoided speaking for fear of making grammatical mistakes. This resulted in short, overly simple sentences.

"I just say simple sentence because I'm afraid I make grammar mistake." (Student F)

Anxiety and Lack of Confidence

Anxiety was the most frequently reported barrier. Students expressed fear of being laughed at or judged, especially in front of the class.

"When I speak English, I feel nervous. I don't want my friends laugh at me." (Student J)

Minimal Speaking Environment

Outside the classroom, students had almost no opportunity to practice English. English was rarely spoken outside of formal instruction, even among English majors.

"After class, we never speak English. It's only in classroom, not in daily conversation." (Student K).

Table 2. Student Difficulties in EFL Speaking

Difficulties	Number of Students
Pronunciation Difficulties	7
Limited Vocabulary and Fluency	8
Grammar-Related Problems	5
Anxiety and Lack of Confidence	6
Minimal Speaking Environment	4

The results of this study reveal that students at Al Azhar University Medan experience several difficulties in speaking English. Pronunciation difficulties are common, making it challenging for students to be understood and reducing their confidence during communication. In addition, many students face limited vocabulary and fluency, which hinders their ability to express ideas clearly and causes frequent pauses or hesitations. Grammar-related problems are

also evident, as students often produce incorrect sentence structures, verb tenses, or word orders, which can disrupt the clarity of their messages. Furthermore, anxiety and lack of confidence significantly affect students' willingness to speak, as fear of making mistakes or being judged discourages active participation. Finally, the minimal speaking environment limits students' opportunities to practice English outside the classroom, reducing their familiarity with real-life communication and overall speaking proficiency. These findings suggest that both linguistic factors (pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar) and psychological/environmental factors (confidence, practice opportunities) play a crucial role in shaping students' difficulties in speaking English.

Table 3. Challenges Faced by Students in Speaking Skills: A Comparison Between Management and Accounting Students

Difficulty	Management (5 Students)	Accounting (5 Students)	Total (10 Students)
Limited Vocabulary	4	4	8
Poor Pronunciation	3	4	7
Grammar Errors	2	3	5
Lack of Fluency	3	3	6
Fear of Making Mistakes	2	4	6
Low Self-Confidence	3	3	6
Minimal Speaking Practice	3	2	5

This study has explored the various difficulties faced by students at the Al Azhar University in developing their English-speaking skills. Based on classroom observations and interviews, it is evident that students encounter both linguistic and psychological barriers in speaking English. The most frequently reported problems include limited vocabulary, poor pronunciation, grammatical errors, lack of fluency, fear of making mistakes, and low self-confidence. These challenges are further exacerbated by a lack of speaking practice both inside and outside the classroom. One of the most significant findings is that anxiety and fear of negative evaluation play a major role in inhibiting students' willingness to speak. Despite having knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary, many students remain silent or reluctant to participate in speaking activities due to embarrassment or fear of failure. In addition, the absence of an English-speaking environment within the university community limits students' exposure to real communicative use of the language.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the findings suggest that improving students' speaking competence requires more than just teaching grammar and vocabulary. It involves creating a supportive, low-anxiety classroom atmosphere, providing frequent opportunities for authentic speaking practice, and incorporating activities that build students' confidence gradually.

To address these difficulties, Al Azhar University should consider implementing student-centered speaking activities such as role plays, group discussions, and presentations. Furthermore, the establishment of English conversation clubs, peer mentoring programs, and the use of digital speaking tools can help create a more engaging and less intimidating environment for students to practice speaking. In conclusion, by acknowledging the multifaceted nature of speaking difficulties and adopting appropriate instructional strategies, educators can play a crucial role in helping students overcome their barriers and become more confident English speakers.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the interviews, the students reported experiencing extreme fear whenever their English teacher asked them to speak in English. This anxiety stemmed from the thought of having to perform in front of the class and the possibility of making mistakes, such as mispronunciations or grammatical errors. The fear of being judged for their mistakes, combined with the pressure to perform well publicly, made them feel highly anxious and worried. Such heightened anxiety could inhibit their willingness to speak and prevent them from fully participating in class activities.

This study has shown that students at Al Azhar University face multiple challenges in developing their English-speaking skills. Both linguistic and psychological factors contribute to these difficulties. Linguistic barriers, such as limited vocabulary, poor pronunciation, grammar errors, and lack of fluency, hinder students' ability to communicate effectively. Meanwhile, psychological factors, including fear of making mistakes and low self-confidence, further discourage active participation in speaking activities. Additionally, the lack of sufficient speaking practice both inside and outside the classroom exacerbates these problems. The findings suggest that improving students' English-speaking skills requires not only targeted language instruction focusing on vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar but also strategies to enhance confidence and provide more opportunities for meaningful speaking practice. Overall, a comprehensive approach addressing both linguistic and psychological aspects is essential to support students in becoming more competent and confident English speakers.

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