



Difficulties encountered by undergraduate students when conversing in English in an oral practice class

Abdulla Emhemed Andem ,

English Language – Applied linguistics with TESOL

Assistant Lecturer – Master degree

University of AL-JAFARAH – Faculty of Languages – Department of English

Abstract:

Speaking is generally seen as a key indicator of language proficiency. A person who can speak a language fluently is often considered proficient in that language. In Libya, English is taught as a foreign language from primary school through university. Despite this, Libyan students, particularly at the university level, struggle to speak English fluently. Even after graduation, some students have minimal English-speaking skills.

This study aimed to investigate the challenges faced by undergraduate students in speaking English in an oral practice class and to identify potential causes. It used a qualitative approach, gathering data through semi-structured interviews and quantitative method through questionnaires closed – ended questions with 25 university students, 10 of whom were interviewed in depth. The analysis focused on two main categories: difficulties and causes, further divided into subcategories: personal, social, environmental, and linguistic issues. Factors contributing to speaking difficulties included teaching methods, course content, reliance on the mother tongue, inadequate schooling, and classroom culture. The study recommended creating a supportive environment, increasing learner autonomy, revising teaching practices, and incorporating more speaking activities.

Keywords: Speaking skill, Difficulties, Causes, Oral communication skills. Class dynamics

الصعوبات التي يواجهها طلاب المرحلة الجامعية عند التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية في مقرر التدريبات الشفهية

أ. عبد الله امحمد عبد الله اندم

كلية اللغات، جامعة الجفارة

المستخلص:

يُعتبر التحدث بشكل عام مؤشراً رئيسياً على إتقان اللغة. فالشخص الذي يمكنه التحدث بلغة ما بطلاقة غالباً ما يُنظر إليه على أنه مُتقن لتلك اللغة. في ليبيا مثلاً، يتم تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية بدءاً من المرحلة الابتدائية وحتى الجامعية. ومع ذلك، يواجه الطلاب الليبيون، وخاصة على مستوى الجامعي، صعوبات في التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية بطلاقة. وحتى بعد التخرج، يمتلك بعض الطلاب مهارات محدودة جداً في التحدث بالإنجليزية.

حيث هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى معرفة التحديات التي يواجهها طلاب المرحلة الجامعية في التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية في فصول الممارسة الشفهية، وتحديد الأسباب المحتملة وراء هذه التحديات. استخدمت الدراسة منهجاً نوعياً من خلال جمع البيانات عن طريق مقابلات شبه منظمة، ومنهجاً كمياً عبر استبيانات تحتوي على أسئلة مغلقة مع 25 طالباً جامعياً، تمت مقابلة 10 منهم بشكل متعمق. ركز التحليل على فئتين رئيسيتين: الصعوبات والأسباب، مع تقسيمها إلى فئات فرعية تشمل القضايا الشخصية والاجتماعية والبيئية واللغوية. وشملت العوامل المساهمة في صعوبات التحدث أساليب التدريس، ومحتوى المناهج، والاعتماد على اللغة الأم، وضعف التأهيل المدرسي، وثقافة الفصل الدراسي. أوصت الدراسة بإنشاء بيئة داعمة، وزيادة استقلالية المتعلمين، ومراجعة ممارسات التدريس، وإدراج المزيد من أنشطة التحدث.



Introduction:

In Libya, English is taught as a foreign language at both school and university levels, serving as either a subject or a medium of instruction. As a global lingua franca, English plays a vital role in international business, science, technology, and education (Crystal, 2003). Oral proficiency, often considered the most important yet most challenging language skill, is a key focus for English learners worldwide (Ur, 2002). Despite its significance, many university students, including those in Libya, struggle to achieve fluency in spoken English.

Historically, English was introduced to Libya during the British and French administration post-World War II, though its presence remained limited. After independence in 1951, Arabic became the official language, but English retained its role as a foreign language due to its instrumental value in accessing global knowledge. Since the post-Gaddafi era there has been a renewed emphasis on English education, driven by globalization and Libya's aspiration for international engagement. However, Libyan students still face significant challenges in developing oral communication skills, such as limited exposure to authentic English, reliance on traditional teaching methods, large class sizes, and cultural factors affecting classroom interaction (Brown, 2007).

This study investigates the specific difficulties in speaking skills faced by Libyan undergraduate students at Al-Jafarah University, Faculty of Languages, Department of English. By exploring these challenges, the research aims to provide insights for improving pedagogical practices and curriculum development. It will also examine the causes of these difficulties and their impact on students' language learning experiences, ultimately contributing to strategies that enhance oral communicative competence in English within the Libyan context.

Objectives of the Study:

This study aims to identify the primary difficulties faced by undergraduate students when speaking English in oral class settings, as well as the potential causes of these difficulties (e.g., linguistic, psychological, pedagogical, and cultural). Furthermore, it will explore whether these difficulties have any impact on students' oral communication performance and overall learning

experience. Finally, after taking these factors into account, the study will provide practical recommendations for pedagogical practices and curriculum development to address these challenges effectively.

Research Questions:

What are the most prevalent difficulties experienced by Libyan undergraduate students when engaging in oral communication activities in English language classes?

What contextual factors (e.g., teaching methods, classroom environment, course content, and cultural norms) contribute to the emergence and persistence of oral communication difficulties among Libyan undergraduate students?

How do oral communication difficulties affect the long-term language learning outcomes and academic performance of Libyan undergraduate students?

Literature Review:

Developing oral proficiency in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) presents numerous challenges for learners globally. Several studies have explored these difficulties, revealing recurring themes. Alam and Ashrafuzzaman (2018), investigating the challenges of developing speaking skills through classroom interaction with EFL learners, identified nervousness, fear, inattention, and grammatical errors as key obstacles. Similarly, Heriansyah (2012) found that limited vocabulary and fear of making mistakes were major impediments to oral development. These findings align with Sokip's (2020) research on overcoming foreign language learning challenges, which also highlighted students' anxiety over making errors as a significant factor affecting speaking skills. This anxiety, as Anandari (2015) explored in the context of Indonesian EFL learners, stems from fear, shyness, and general discomfort with speech production. Anandari's study further suggested that self-reflection strategies could play a crucial role in mitigating this anxiety.

While these studies offer valuable insights into the general challenges faced by EFL learners, it's crucial to consider the specific context of Libyan undergraduate students. Although limited research specifically addresses this



population, existing literature provides a useful framework. For instance, Al-Roud (2016) examined challenges faced by university-level students, identifying social, psychological, instructor-related, and linguistic domains as key areas of difficulty. This study expanded the scope beyond the classroom by emphasizing the influence of community and family environment on students' speaking abilities. This is particularly relevant in the Libyan context, where societal attitudes towards English language learning and opportunities for authentic language use outside the classroom may vary. Nakhalah (2016) further reinforced the importance of psychological factors, identifying fear of mistakes, shyness, anxiety, and lack of confidence as major obstacles to oral communication.

These studies, while conducted in diverse contexts, share common threads relevant to the present research. The consistent emphasis on psychological factors like anxiety and fear of making mistakes suggests that these are pervasive challenges for EFL learners, potentially including Libyan undergraduates. Linguistic challenges, such as limited vocabulary and grammatical errors, also emerge as significant factors. However, it is important to acknowledge that the Libyan educational system, with its own specific pedagogical approaches, cultural norms, and resources, may present unique challenges. There is a scarcity of research specifically focusing on the oral communication difficulties of Libyan undergraduate students at the university level, particularly at Al-Jafarah University. This gap in the literature highlights the need for the present study, which aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of the specific difficulties encountered by this population and to offer targeted recommendations for improving oral English instruction in this context.

English Language Learning Difficulties:

English language learning, particularly in non-native English-speaking contexts like Libya, presents significant challenges. Despite its prominent role in school and university curricula, and even as a medium of instruction in some institutions, many students struggle with English (Akbari, 2015; Phyak, 2016). Common reasons for underperformance include complex grammatical structures and negative learner attitudes, with many perceiving English as inherently difficult (Ahmed, 2015). Numerous factors contribute

to these difficulties, encompassing linguistic elements (grammar, vocabulary), discrepancies between the learners' first language (L1) and English (L2), motivation, teaching methodologies, and learner attitudes (Thu'aimah, 1989, cited in Sokip, 2020). Thu'aimah also highlighted socio-cultural factors and adopted learning strategies as influential.

Beyond individual learner characteristics, social and cultural factors also play a crucial role. Dimayati and Mudjiono (2010, cited in Sokip, 2020) identified low motivation, lack of concentration and confidence, teacher attitudes, and limited learning resources as influential factors. Sokip (2020) further emphasized the interconnectedness of language learning with educational aspects like teacher roles, curriculum, teaching methods, materials, and institutional infrastructure. The teacher's role as a facilitator, rather than an authoritarian figure, is crucial for promoting active learning and providing opportunities for practice.

This highlights the combined influence of individual and external factors on language acquisition. This is particularly relevant in Libya, where access to resources, teacher training, and societal attitudes toward English may vary regionally.

When focusing specifically on speaking skills, a core component of language proficiency, Nunan (1991) argues that successful language learning is often measured by the ability to engage in English conversations. Effective speaking requires knowledge of language mechanics (pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary), language functions (requests, greetings), and socio-cultural norms (turn-taking, speech rate) (Burnkart, 1998, cited in Heriansyah, 2012). Ur (1991) identified key obstacles to speaking proficiency, including inhibition (fear of mistakes and criticism), lack of content to discuss, uneven participation in class, and reliance on the mother tongue. Brown (2001) added further complexities, such as the use of phrasal forms, contractions, colloquial language, speech rate, and suprasegmental features (stress, rhythm, intonation). These factors can be particularly challenging for Libyan learners, as their native Arabic exhibits significantly different phonetic and prosodic features.

Difficulties in Oral Communication and their Contributing Factors:

Richards and Renandya (2002) categorized the causes of speaking difficulties as age-related constraints, the aural medium (the importance of listening), socio-cultural factors, and affective factors. Early language acquisition is often associated with greater ease of learning (Krashen, Long, Scarcella, cited in Richards & Renandya, 2002), and Oyama (cited in Richards & Renandya, 2002) noted the difficulty adults face in achieving native-like proficiency when starting later. The interference of Arabic, the L1 of Libyan students, can also pose a significant challenge in pronunciation and grammar. The importance of listening comprehension for speaking development (Ur, 1991) is also relevant in Libya, where opportunities for authentic listening practice outside the classroom may be limited. Socio-cultural factors, such as cultural norms regarding communication and interaction, are equally important. Affective factors, including emotions, self-esteem, anxiety, and motivation (Brown, 1994; Khasinah, 2014; Oxford, 1990), also significantly influence speaking performance. These affective factors can be particularly pronounced in the Libyan context due to factors such as classroom dynamics, cultural expectations, and previous learning experiences. While extensive research has explored language learning and speaking difficulties globally, there is a need for more research specifically focusing on the experiences of Libyan university students. This study aims to address this gap by examining the specific speaking difficulties encountered by Libyan undergraduates, particularly at Al-Jafarah University, and investigating the potential causes of these challenges within the Libyan educational and cultural context. This investigation considers the experiences of adult learners, who, as self-directed learners bring unique perspectives and experiences to the learning process.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative as well as quantitative research design to investigate speaking difficulties among undergraduates at Al-Jafarah University's, Faculty of Languages, Department of English. The participants included 25 students from the 4th and 5th semesters, 10 of whom were selected for semi-structured interviews based on their responses to a

preliminary questionnaire. The interviews focused on exploring students' experiences, challenges, and perceptions of speaking English in oral practice class. Data collection involved two main tools:

1. **Questionnaires:** Administered to all 25 participants, the questionnaires included closed-ended questions with predefined answers and choices to allow flexibility in data production analysis about speaking difficulties and their perceived causes.
2. **Semi-structured interviews:** Conducted with 10 participants to gain deeper insights into their experiences and challenges.

The data were analyzed thematically, with responses categorized into recurring themes related to speaking difficulties, their causes, and potential solutions.

Main Findings

The gathered data from the questionnaires and semi- structured interviews were analysed and categorized into two main areas: Speaking problems encountered by students and the underlying causes of these difficulties. These broad categories were further divided into subcategories for a more detailed analysis. The analysis revealed several key difficulties and their underlying causes as listed below.

Speaking Problems

The questionnaire prompted students to describe the difficulties they face when speaking English in an English-speaking class. Analysis of the questionnaire responses, along with the researcher's semi-structured interviews, revealed a range of challenges. The most commonly reported problems included nervousness or anxiety when speaking, limited vocabulary, difficulty in applying grammatical rules in spoken communication, pronunciation issues, fear of making mistakes, a tendency to rely on Arabic (their mother tongue), and a lack of self-confidence. Nearly 15 out of 25 respondents indicated that they struggled with these difficulties. These findings align with common challenges faced by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners globally. Several researchers have identified anxiety, lack of vocabulary, and fear of making mistakes as key barriers to

oral proficiency. Sadighi and Dastak (2017), for instance, found these three factors to be primary drivers of foreign language speaking anxiety among Iranian EFL learners, directly impacting their oral performance. However, the specific manifestation of these challenges within the Libyan context provides unique insights into the cultural and educational factors influencing students' speaking abilities.

To better understand these issues, the identified speaking problems were grouped into four subcategories: personal, environmental, social, and linguistic. This categorization allows for a more nuanced analysis of the interplay between various factors contributing to students' speaking difficulties. For instance, the personal category includes anxiety and lack of self-confidence, which are often exacerbated by environmental factors such as classroom dynamics and teaching methods. Similarly, social factors, such as peer pressure and cultural norms, can amplify linguistic challenges like pronunciation and grammar application. This approach aligns with Dörnyei's (2005) framework, which emphasizes the importance of considering individual, contextual, and social factors in understanding language learning difficulties. Each category is analyzed separately in Table (1) below, providing a detailed picture of the challenges faced by Libyan undergraduates at Al-Jafarah University.

Table 1: Reported Difficulties in Speaking English

Identified Themes	Recurring Issues
Personal Challenges	Nervousness – Anxiety – Lack of confidence and Hesitation
Psychological & Social Challenges	Fear of committing mistakes fear of classmates' criticism Fear of Incorrect pronunciation
Linguistic Challenges	Difficulty selecting the correct vocabulary for effective communication Lack of fluency – Mother-tongue interference - Difficulty applying Correct grammatical structures in spoken form

Identified Themes	Recurring Issues
Environmental challenges	Ineffective pedagogical approaches limited classroom interaction Lack of institutional support and capabilities e.g. limited resources

Personal Challenges

Individual characteristics significantly impact students' oral English proficiency. Many participants reported experiencing nervousness and anxiety when speaking, which often manifested physically as trembling or mentally as mental blocks and difficulty recalling vocabulary or grammar. For example, during interviews, students were asked, *"How do you feel when you speak in front of the class?"* One student responded, *"I experience body shakes when I just think of speaking in front of the class."* Similarly, when asked, *"Do you lose hold of your memories and thoughts during classroom presentations?"* another student stated, *"My mind becomes empty when I speak before my classmates and teacher."* These experiences highlight the profound impact of anxiety on students' ability to express themselves effectively. Such reactions align with (Öztürk & Gürsoy, 2021) who claim that communication apprehension, is a key component of language anxiety which by then can paralyze students' ability to perform orally.

These challenges are particularly pronounced in Libya, where cultural norms surrounding public speaking and self-expression may intensify students' anxiety. In collectivist cultures, such as Libya's, a strong emphasis is placed on face-saving and avoiding public embarrassment (House et al., 2020). This cultural context can exacerbate students' fear of making mistakes or being judged, further discouraging them from participating in oral activities. Additionally, the physical and mental symptoms described by students—such as trembling and mental blocks—are consistent with MacIntyre and Gardner's (1994) findings, which demonstrate how language anxiety can manifest both cognitively and physiologically, creating significant barriers to effective communication.



Environmental Challenges

The classroom learning environment plays a crucial role in language acquisition. Many researchers have stressed the importance of classroom environment and its role in learning and teaching process (Heriansyah, 2012; Sokip, 2020). In this study, many participants frequently identified the lack of opportunities for English speaking practice within the classroom as a significant obstacle. A number of students expressed the same feelings of frustration with the absence of language learning lab, where some other students perceived lack of interest among their peers in engaging in English conversation, even when prompted to form study groups. This lack of a supportive and interactive learning environment, where students should feel comfortable practicing and receiving constructive feedback, forms a critical concern. In the Libyan context, where exposure to native English speakers and authentic language use outside the classroom might be limited, the classroom environment's role becomes even more crucial in providing opportunities for oral practice.

Social Challenges

The social dynamics within the classroom also present challenges to speaking development. The diverse backgrounds, motivations, and learning styles of students within a typical Libyan university classroom can create a complex social environment, as individual differences significantly influence classroom dynamics and either facilitate or hinder language learning (Dörnyei, 2005). Some participants reported experiencing negative reactions from classmates, such as mockery or laughter, when attempting to speak English, especially if their pronunciation was not perceived as perfect. This fear of negative evaluation and potential embarrassment discourages active participation in oral activities, a phenomenon well-documented by (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2021) who believed that "Fear of negative evaluation" is a major component of language anxiety. Furthermore, some students felt discouraged by immediate public corrections and interruptions from some tutors, which created feelings of shame and further inhibited their willingness to speak. This aligns with Tsui's (1996) findings that overly critical feedback in public settings can damage students' confidence and reduce their engagement in speaking activities.

Providing a supportive and inclusive environment for classrooms in Libyan universities is essential, where students are supposed to feel comfortable taking risks and practicing their English without fear of judgment. This approach aligns with the principles of affective filter reduction of (Arnold & Brown, 2019) in terms of creating a low-anxiety environment which is crucial for language acquisition. Similarly, this belief corresponds with Libyan cultural values of respect and avoiding public embarrassment, reflecting the importance of face-saving and respect in collectivist cultures like Libya (House et al., 2020).

Linguistic Challenges

Linguistic challenges are a major concern for many EFL learners, including those in Libya. Students often struggle to find the appropriate words to express their thoughts and ideas in English. As Hibatullah (2019) notes, "EFL learners often experience anxiety, lack of confidence, and difficulty in pronunciation when speaking English." A common strategy among Libyan EFL learners is to formulate their thoughts in Arabic and then attempt to translate them into English. This process can be challenging and often exposes gaps in vocabulary knowledge. As one student pointed out, *"Finding the right English words while speaking is difficult because Arabic comes to mind first."* This highlights the cognitive load involved in speaking a foreign language, requiring learners to manage both translation and continuous speech production. This aligns with models of speech production that emphasize the cognitive complexity of lexical retrieval and sentence construction in real-time, particularly under communicative pressure (Dell & Chang, 2018).

Consequently, limited vocabulary is a frequently cited problem. Furthermore, grammatical deficiencies, particularly in the use of tenses and prepositions, also pose significant challenges. Pronunciation difficulties further compound these issues, with some students avoiding using words they know simply because they are unsure of the correct pronunciation. The interference of Arabic, the students' mother tongue, is a recurring theme, often delaying speech production as learners mentally translate. Difficulties with sentence construction, particularly maintaining subject-verb agreement, were also reported. These findings are consistent with studies by Ellis (2008), who



highlights that mother tongue interference and grammatical inaccuracies are common among EFL learners and can significantly hinder oral fluency. This analysis indicates that Libyan students face various linguistic obstacles that impede their oral fluency, in addition to non-linguistic factors that may also play a role.

In summary, the analysis of the collected data through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews revealed that Libyan undergraduates at Al-Jafarah University experience a combination of personal, social, and linguistic challenges that hinder their oral English proficiency. The questionnaire responses highlighted personal challenges such as a lack of confidence, hesitation, and anxiety when speaking. Similarly, during the semi-structured interviews, students frequently mentioned social challenges, including concerns about classroom dynamics, fear of criticism from peers, and apprehension about making mistakes. Both data sources also identified linguistic challenges, such as difficulties with vocabulary, initiating speech, connecting ideas smoothly, mother tongue interference, and pronunciation. The triangulation of questionnaire and interview data underscores how these interconnected issues create a complex set of obstacles that impede fluency and confidence in spoken English.

Factors Contributing to Speaking Difficulties

The second part of the data collection focused on exploring the underlying causes of these speaking problems. The analysis of responses revealed several recurring causal factors, such as, factors related to teachers and teaching methods, mother tongue influence, and previous schooling experiences being particularly prominent. These factors were categorized into five main groups: instructor/teaching practices, overuse of the mother tongue, inadequate prior schooling, course content, and classroom culture. These categories are further detailed below.

Table 2: Reasons behind speaking challenges

Identified Themes	Recurring Issues
Factors related to teachers and teaching methods	Traditional teaching techniques Insufficient motivation to speak English Excessive teacher talking time Inadequate English-speaking environment
Inadequate educational background	Students with inadequate educational background
Influence of course material	Courses emphasizing writing over speaking Absence of speaking activities in the curriculum
Classroom dynamics	Insufficient motivation among students Limited linguistic proficiency Teacher-dominated activities Unsupportive classroom environment
Influence of L1 Use	Overuse of mother tongue by students Language of instruction mostly Arabic

Factors that influence teacher and teaching styles

The teacher and their teaching approach in the classroom significantly influence students' learning. In this study, the majority of students identified the teacher's role in enhancing speaking fluency as the most crucial contributing factor. Based on questionnaire results, many students stated that teachers often dominate classroom activities, while students remain passive. This aligns with Harmer's (2001) view that reducing teacher talking time and increasing student participation enhances teaching and learning effectiveness. Teachers should act as facilitators rather than dominators.

The study revealed that many students felt their teachers did not provide enough opportunities to practice English. One student commented by saying, *"Our teachers practice their own English but don't offer us an opportunity to practice mine in class,"* highlighting a sense of neglect in university settings. Similarly, another student noted, *"Our teachers of English rarely and hardly create an English-speaking environment in class and thus we often use our native language outside of class."* These remarks suggest that teachers, as role



models, could inspire students to practice English more if they consistently used the language both inside and outside the classroom. Encouraging students to use English during class and in peer interactions is essential. Some students also pointed to a lack of motivation from both teachers and peers. They emphasized that motivation and encouragement are vital for language learning and that teachers should actively foster this in the classroom. Participants mentioned that peers often mock those who attempt to speak English, further discouraging practice. The study identified this lack of motivation as a key barrier to improving speaking skills.

Teaching styles were also found to play a significant role in learning efficiency. How teachers deliver content greatly affects students' learning strategies (Oxford, 1990). Participants reported that teachers' methods often neglect speaking skills, relying instead on traditional approaches that limit student engagement. During the interview one participant shared, "*I remember one of our teachers' lectures, she asked us to copy notes from her pre-prepared diary notebook, and then ended the class.*" From an adult learning perspective, maximizing student involvement and leveraging their experiences are critical for effective teaching (Knowles et al., 2005). The study found that many teachers still use outdated methods, failing to recognize the importance of student participation in enhancing educational outcomes.

In conclusion, the findings highlight the need for a transformation in teaching practices in Libyan classrooms. Prioritizing student engagement, providing more opportunities for English practice, and creating a supportive learning environment are essential for improving speaking fluency. Teachers must shift from being dominators in classrooms to facilitators who motivate and actively involve students, addressing the challenges identified and fostering more effective teaching and learning.

Mother Tongue Factor

Most participants highlighted the absence of a suitable environment and the lack of peer interest in practicing English in the classroom. They noted that nearly all students use their mother tongue during class. One student reported, "Doctors as well speak Arabic with students outside the classroom and

sometimes during class." Similarly, another student shared, "Teachers don't give us a chance to speak and ask questions as they say we don't have time for all." This aligns with the findings of Richards and Rodgers (2014), who argue that "the classroom environment plays a critical role in language learning, and the overuse of the mother tongue can significantly impede students' opportunities to practice and develop target language skills" (p. 167). For learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the classroom often serves as the primary space for practicing English. Yet, an unfavorable environment can significantly hinder their ability to develop language proficiency. As Ellis (2008) emphasizes, "language acquisition is heavily dependent on the availability of meaningful interaction and practice opportunities in the target language" (p. 221). The lack of a supportive atmosphere makes it difficult for learners to achieve fluency in English. One student raised the concern, "If we speak in Arabic most of the time in class, where should we practice our English then?" This overreliance on the mother tongue was identified as a significant barrier to improving English speaking skills.

Inadequate education background

The data revealed that students attribute their weak English performance to inadequate schooling. One student acknowledged, "*We had a very poor foundation in English from school, and now it's challenging to improve at this stage.*" Reflecting on their experiences, many believe that early exposure to a supportive English-speaking environment could have significantly improved their fluency. As Lightbown and Spada (2013) emphasize, "the quality of early language instruction and exposure is a determining factor in long-term language proficiency" (p. 45). This suggests that the school environment plays a critical role in shaping English proficiency, and its absence is a significant reason for the lack of fluency among university-level students. Furthermore, the lack of foundational skills in English during formative years often leads to persistent challenges in higher education. As noted by Ellis (2008), "learners who miss out on early opportunities to engage meaningfully with a second language often struggle to catch up later, regardless of their motivation or effort" (p. 221). This highlights the long-



term impact of inadequate schooling on language development and underscores the need for stronger foundational support in early education.

Influence of course material

Based on the questionnaire responses, many students expressed dissatisfaction with the English course content, particularly its lack of emphasis on speaking activities. They explained that teachers often prioritize writing tasks, leaving little to no time for speaking practice. One student remarked, "If the course doesn't include speaking activities, how can we practice English, and how can our teachers teach us to speak? This is the university's fault for designing such a course, and there isn't even a language lab to use." This aligns with Nation's (2007) assertion that "a balanced language curriculum should integrate all four skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—to ensure comprehensive language development" (p. 89). Students emphasized the need for more speaking tasks in the curriculum to allow for greater practice and interaction.

Additionally, the absence of listening activities was highlighted as a significant gap. Another student noted, "There are no listening activities in the course. Without listening, how can we improve our speaking speed and fluency?". This concern is supported by (VanPatten & Williams, 2015) who believe that emphasizing the importance of comprehensible input, particularly through listening is fundamental for language acquisition and the development of speaking skills. On the light of that, one respondent succinctly summarized this idea by stating "In the natural process of learning the language, listening comes before speaking, without enough time to listening, students would struggle to develop their speaking skills." These responses underscore the critical need for a more balanced and interactive approach to English language instruction, one that prioritizes both listening and speaking to foster fluency and confidence among learners.

Classroom dynamic Factor

Classroom dynamics refer to the systems, traditions, teacher-student relationships, and activities conducted in class, all of which are believed to significantly influence learning. Kumaravadivelu (2006) emphasized that "classroom dynamics and learning are inseparable processes, as the

interactions and environment within the classroom directly shape learners' experiences and outcomes" (p. 54). In this study, students identified classroom dynamics as a critical factor affecting their speaking development. Some participants shared that their school experiences discouraged English speaking. One student recalled, "At school, we never spoke to our teachers in English or stood in front of the class. Our teachers were very strict and didn't allow us to speak, so we remained silent." This aligns with Richards and Lockhart's (1994) observation that "teacher-cantered classrooms, where students are passive recipients of knowledge, often hinder the development of communicative skills" (p. 112). In traditional Libyan classrooms, a "pin-drop silence" was often considered ideal, discouraging student participation. Participants also mentioned that group and peer discussions were rare, further limiting their opportunities to practice speaking. Thus, classroom culture plays a vital role in shaping students' speaking abilities.

From the above discussion, it is evident that several factors directly affect students' speaking proficiency in Libyan universities. These include the teacher's role and teaching methods, the classroom environment, the attitudes of teachers and students toward English, and the structure of the course content. As Brown (2007) notes, "effective language learning requires a supportive environment that encourages interaction, collaboration, and meaningful communication" (p. 178). The challenges students face in developing speaking fluency are largely rooted in these factors. Addressing these issues is essential for improving English language learning outcomes in Libya.

Discussion and analysis of main findings

This study identified several key challenges faced by undergraduates at Al-Jafarah University in developing English speaking skills, including nervousness, lack of confidence, insufficient practice, fear of making mistakes, limited vocabulary, and difficulty using grammatical patterns. These issues hinder learners' progress and at the same time align with findings from previous research. For instance, Ur (1991) highlighted low participation, mother tongue use, and inhibition as major barriers to speaking, which corresponds with this study's emphasis on the overuse of the mother tongue. Brown (2001) similarly identified lack of confidence, limited vocabulary, and grammatical inaccuracies as common problems for EFL learners, exacerbated



by insufficient classroom interaction opportunities. Richards and Renandya (2002) further noted that fear of making mistakes discourages fluency development, a finding supported by this study, where many participants reported discomfort speaking in class due to fear of ridicule.

Heriansyah (2012) and Alam and Ashrafuzzaman (2018b) also found comparable challenges, such as lack of vocabulary, low confidence, and fear of mistakes, in their respective studies. Sokip (2020) added that anxiety and low motivation further compound these difficulties, which aligns with the current findings. However, Bashir et al. (2011) presented contrasting results, showing that using English as the Medium of Instruction (EMI) and fostering classroom interaction significantly improved learners' proficiency.

The study also explored the causes of speaking difficulties, categorizing them into teaching/teacher-related, environmental, and course content-related factors. Participants highlighted the teacher's role, classroom environment, and course content as primary contributors to speaking deficiencies. Heriansyah (2012) identified 22 causes, including linguistic and non-linguistic factors, while Sokip (2020) and Akbari (2016) emphasized poor schooling and inadequate focus on speaking activities in curricula as key issues.

Overall, speaking is widely regarded as the most critical language skill, requiring ample practice opportunities both inside and outside the classroom (Brown, 2001; Richards & Renandya, 2002). Teachers must create supportive environments that encourage interaction and active listening, as these are essential for developing speaking skills (Harmer, 2001; Sokip, 2020; Ur, 1991). Course design should balance all language skills while prioritizing speaking to foster fluency.

In conclusion, this study highlights teaching methods, classroom culture, students' educational backgrounds, and overuse of the mother tongue as primary factors affecting speaking development. Unlike previous studies that focused on linguistic and personal challenges, this research identifies additional causes, offering a broader perspective on speaking difficulties in the Libyan context.

Conclusion and recommendations:

Speaking is widely regarded as one of the most challenging skills to master for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, and this is particularly true in the Libyan context. Based on the findings of this study, Libyan undergraduate students face four major categories of difficulties when speaking English: personal, linguistic, social, and environmental challenges. These include issues such as lack of confidence, limited vocabulary, anxiety, fear of making mistakes, hesitation, and the absence of a supportive environment for practicing English. Additionally, the lack of motivation from teachers and peers further exacerbates these challenges, making it difficult for students to develop fluency in spoken English.

The study also identified several underlying causes of these speaking difficulties, which were categorized into four main themes: teacher/teaching factors, environmental factors, course content factors, and classroom culture factors. Key issues include the dominance of teacher-centered teaching methods, the overuse of the mother tongue (Arabic) in the classroom, inadequate prior schooling, and the lack of emphasis on speaking activities in the curriculum.

To address these challenges, the study **recommends** several strategies. First, creating a supportive English-speaking environment in the classroom is essential. This can be achieved by encouraging students to use English during class discussions and peer interactions, while also providing constructive feedback to reduce anxiety and fear of making mistakes. Second, revising the existing English course content to include more speaking and listening activities is crucial. A balanced curriculum that integrates all four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) will help students develop comprehensive language proficiency. Third, transforming teaching practices is necessary. Teachers should shift from being dominators to facilitators, encouraging student participation and autonomy in the learning process. Finally, improving teacher training to incorporate modern, student-centered teaching methods will help create a more interactive and engaging classroom environment.



In conclusion, this study highlights the complex interplay of personal, linguistic, social, and environmental factors that contribute to the speaking difficulties faced by Libyan undergraduate students. By addressing these issues through targeted interventions, such as modifying teaching practices, revising course content, and fostering a supportive learning environment, it is possible to enhance students' oral communication skills and overall English language proficiency. These findings not only contribute to the understanding of EFL learning challenges in Libya but also offer practical recommendations for improving English language education in similar contexts.

References:

Ahmed, S. (2015). *Attitudes towards English language learning among EFL learners at UMSKAL. Journal of Education and Practice*, 6(18), 6-18. Retrieved from <http://www.iiste.org>

Akbari, Z. (2015). Current challenges in teaching/learning English for EFL learners: The case of junior high school and high school. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 199, 394-401. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.07.524>

Akbari, Z. (2016). The study of EFL students' perceptions of their problems, needs, and concerns over learning English: The case of MA paramedical students. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 232, 24-34. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2016.10.006>

Alam, M. A., & Ashrafuzzaman, M. (2018). Challenges of developing speaking skill through classroom interaction of EFL learners. *Prime University Journal*, 12(1), 45-67.

Al-Roud, A. A. (2016). Problems of English speaking skill that university students encounter from their perspectives. *Journal of Education, Society and Behavioural Science*, X(X), 1-9.

Anandari, C. L. (2015). Indonesian EFL students' anxiety in speech production: Possible causes and remedy. *TEFLIN Journal*, 26(1), 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.15639/teflinjournal.v26i1/1-16>

Arnold, J., & Brown, H. D. (2019). *Affect in language learning*. Cambridge University Press.

Bashir, M., Azeem, M., & Dogar, A. H. (2011). Factors affecting students' English-speaking skills. *British Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 2(1), 34-50.

Brown, H. D. (1994). *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy*. Prentice Hall Regents.

Brown, H. D. (2001). *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy* (2nd ed.). Longman.

Brown, H. D. (2007). *Principles of language learning and teaching* (5th ed.). Pearson Longman.

Crystal, D. (1997). *English as a global language*. Cambridge University Press.

Crystal, D. (2003). *English as a global language* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Dell, G. S., & Chang, F. (2018). Language production. In M. S. Gazzaniga & R. B. Ivry (Eds.), *The new cognitive neurosciences* (5th ed., pp. 915-932). MIT Press.

Dörnyei, Z. (2005). *The psychology of the language learner: Individual differences in second language acquisition*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Ellis, R. (2008). *The study of second language acquisition* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

Gregersen, T., & Horwitz, E. K. (Eds.). (2021). *Language anxiety: New insights*. Routledge.

Harmer, J. (2001). *How to teach English: An introduction to the practice of English language teaching*. Longman.

Heriansyah, H. (2012). Speaking problems faced by the English department students of Syiah Kuala University. *Lingua Didaktika*, 6(1), 37-44.

Hibatullah, O. F. (2019). The challenges of international EFL students to learn English in a non-English speaking country. *Journal of Foreign Language Teaching and Learning*, 4(2), 1-15.
<https://doi.org/10.18196/ftl.4240>



House, J., Haugh, M., & Palumbo, A. (Eds.). (2020). *Intercultural communication: Competencies, approaches, ethics*. Routledge.

Khasinah, S. (2014). Factors influencing second language acquisition. *Englisia*, 1(2), 256-269.

Knowles, M. S., Holton, E. F., & Swanson, R. A. (2005). *The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development* (6th ed.). Elsevier.

Kumaravadivelu, B. (2006). *Understanding language teaching: From method to postmethod*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

MacIntyre, P. D., & Gardner, R. C. (1994). The subtle effects of language anxiety on cognitive processing in the second language. *Language Learning*, 44(2), 283–305.

Nakhalah, A. M. M. A. (2016). Problems and difficulties of speaking that encounter English language students at Al Quds Open University. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention*, 5(12), 96-101.

Nation, I. S. P. (2007). *Teaching ESL/EFL reading and writing*. Routledge.

Nunan, D. (1991). *Language teaching methodology: A textbook for teachers*. Prentice Hall.

Oxford, R. L. (1990). *Language learning strategies: What every teacher should know*. Heinle & Heinle.

Öztürk, M., & Gürsoy, D. (2021). Exploring the relationship between foreign language speaking anxiety and willingness to communicate: The mediating role of communication apprehension. *System*, 96, 102741.

Phyak, P. (2016). *For our Cho: Tlung: Decolonizing language ideologies and (re)imagining multilingual education policies and practices in Nepal* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Hawaii at Manoa].

Richards, J. C., & Lockhart, C. (1994). *Reflective teaching in second language classrooms*. Cambridge University Press.

Richards, J. C., & Renandya, W. A. (Eds.). (2002). *Methodology in language teaching: An anthology of current practice*. Cambridge University Press.

Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (2014). *Approaches and methods in language teaching* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Sadighi, F., & Dastpak, M. (2017). The most frequent sources of foreign language speaking anxiety among Iranian EFL learners. *Cogent Education*, 4(1), 1403699.

Sokip. (2020). Overcoming the problem of learning foreign language skills in the classroom. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, 8(2), 723-729. <https://doi.org/10.13189/ujer.2020.080246>

Tsui, A. B. M. (1996). Reticence and anxiety in second language learning. In K. M. Bailey & D. Nunan (Eds.), *Voices from the language classroom* (pp. 145–167). Cambridge University Press.

Ur, P. (1991). *A course in language teaching: Practice and theory*. Cambridge University Press.

Ur, P. (2002). *A course in language teaching: Practice and theory*. Cambridge University Press.