



Exploring Psychological Barriers to Oral Fluency among Libyan
EFL Undergraduates from Students' Perspective
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تاريخ الاستلام: 2026/4/04 - تاريخ المراجعة: 2026/05/04 - تاريخ القبول: 2026/05/16 - تاريخ النشر: 2026/06/06

Abstract

This study explores the psychological barriers affecting the oral fluency of Libyan EFL undergraduates at the University of Zawia. Recognizing these factors such as anxiety, fear of making mistakes, shyness, and lack of self-confidence significantly influence the development of speaking skills. A mixed-methods research design was employed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem by combining quantitative and qualitative data. Data were collected from a randomly selected sample of 50 students using a two-part questionnaire consisting of five closed-ended questions to measure trends and three open-ended items to capture in-depth perspectives. Quantitative data were analysed by using SPSS, while qualitative responses underwent thematic analysis to integrate measurable trends with detailed participant experiences. The quantitative findings revealed that the vast majority of students (82.9%) experience intense anxiety when speaking English in public, with 80% reporting a deeply rooted fear of social judgment as a major barrier to oral participation. Moreover, 68.6% of respondents strongly agreed that fear of making mistakes significantly hinders their speaking engagement, while the qualitative findings further identified shyness, negative teacher feedback, lack of peer support, and difficulty maintaining eye contact as additional psychological obstacles. The study concludes that psychological and emotional factors play a far more critical role in oral language performance than purely linguistic competencies, as evidenced by the unanimous agreement among participants that a supportive classroom environment positively influences speaking fluency. Finally, the current research provided suitable solutions through some recommendations.

Keywords: psychological barriers, oral fluency, speaking anxiety, mixed-method research, Libyan EFL undergraduate, University of Zawia

ملخص الدراسة

تهدف هذه الدراسة لاكتشاف العوائق النفسية التي تؤثر على الطلاقة الشفوية لدى الطلاب الليبيين المتخصصين في اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية بالمرحلة الجامعية بجامعة الزاوية. ومع إدراك أن عوامل مثل القلق، والتحفيز، والثقة بالنفس تؤثر بشكل كبير وإيجابي على تطوير مهارات التحدث. وقد اعتمدت هذه الدراسة في جمعها للبيانات على تصميم البحث ذو المناهج المختلطة لتوفير فهم شامل لمشكلة البحث من خلال الجمع بين البيانات الكمية والنوعية. تم جمع البيانات من عينة عشوائية مكونة من 50 طالباً باستخدام استبيان مصمم من جزأين، "استبيان مختلط المناهج"، يتكون الجزء الأول من تسعة أسئلة مغلقة ومنظمة لتحديد الأنماط السلوكية، أما الجزء الثاني فيتكون من ثلاثة أسئلة مفتوحة لرصد الرؤى المتعمقة للمشاركين. تمت معالجة البيانات الكمية عبر برنامج (SPSS)، بينما خضعت الاستجابات النوعية للتحليل الموضوعي لدمج

النتائج القابلة للقياس مع التجارب التفصيلية لعينات الطلبة. كشفت النتائج الكمية أن الغالبية العظمى من الطلاب (82.9%) يعانون من قلق حاد عند التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية أمام الآخرين، إذ أفاد 80% منهم بأن الخوف الناتج من الحكم الاجتماعي يمثل عائقاً رئيسياً أمام المشاركة الشفهية. علاوة على ذلك، أكد 68.6% من المستجيبين بشدة أن خوفهم من ارتكاب الأخطاء يُعيق مشاركتهم في التحدث بشكل ملحوظ، في حين أن النتائج النوعية كشفت عن عوامل نفسية إضافية تشمل الخجل، والتعليقات السلبية من المعلمين، وضعف دعم أقرانهم، وصعوبة الحفاظ على التواصل البصري. ولخصت هذه الدراسة إلى أن العوامل النفسية والعاطفية تؤدي دوراً أكثر جوهرية في الأداء اللغوي الشفهي مقارنة بالكفاءات اللغوية البحتة، وهو ما يتجلى في الاتفاق الجماعي بين المشاركين على أن البيئة الصفية الداعمة تؤثر إيجاباً في الطلاقة اللغوية. وفي الختام، قد البحث الحالي حلاً ملائمة من خلال العديد من التوصيات.

1. Introduction

Effective communication, particularly in spoken English, is a fundamental skill for language learners. Communication encompasses the exchange of information, ideas, emotions, and attitudes between individuals through both verbal and non-verbal channels (Hasanat et al. 2020). However, mastering these communicative components alone is insufficient for successful public speaking. For learners to communicate effectively in English, they must also exhibit self-confidence and the motivation to engage in public discourse. Many English learners continue to face challenges in speaking fluently, particularly in public settings. Several psychological factors such as, motivation, anxiety, and self-confidence play an integral role in the development of speaking skills (Elhadi 2015). These factors are interrelated and can have a significant impact on students' willingness and ability to speak in public. Therefore, this study aims to investigate how these psychological factors contribute to the challenges faced by English language learners in achieving fluency in public speaking.

2. Definitions and Components of Oral Fluency

Fluency is often considered one of the most challenging aspects to develop in speaking skills. It is defined as the ability to use language quickly and confidently, without excessive hesitation or unnatural pauses that hinder communication (Bailey, 2003; Byrne, 1986). Fluency plays an essential role in language acquisition. Grabe and Stoller (2011) argue that native speakers can read fluently with good comprehension but may struggle with grammar exercises, suggesting that fluency is not only about speed but also about comprehension and accuracy. Fluency is central to communicative language teaching, where the goal is for students to engage in real-life oral communication. As Richards et al. (2002, p. 204) describe, fluency involves natural speech features such as pausing, rhythm, intonation, stress, and rate of speaking. The type of activities used in instruction also impacts students' fluency development. Fluency is commonly understood as the capacity to produce speech effortlessly, striking a balance between accuracy, speed, and coherence (Skehan, 2009). These components play a distinct role in shaping a speaker's overall fluency. Accuracy refers to the correctness of language use, including grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. It ensures that communication is clear and comprehensible. Speed, or the rate of speech production, also significantly influences fluency. Derwing and Munro (2009) note that speaking too slowly may signal hesitation or lack of confidence, while speaking too rapidly can reduce clarity and intelligibility. Learners may learn to regulate their speech rate to maintain listener engagement and ensure effective communication. Coherence is the ability to organize ideas logically and maintain a consistent flow throughout speech. As Baker and Westrup (2003) explain, coherence allows speakers to guide their listeners through a conversation, linking ideas meaningfully and avoiding fragmentation. Without coherence, even grammatically accurate and well-paced speech can fail to convey intended meaning.

3. The Importance of Speaking Skills in Language Learning

Speaking skills are fundamental to language learning, particularly for English learners. They enable students to express themselves clearly and confidently, convey ideas, and engage in meaningful communication. As noted by Keshavarz and Salimi (2012), speaking ability is a critical component of English language proficiency, and Brown and Yuke (1983) emphasize

that speaking is the skill most often assessed in real-life situations. Despite its significance, the teaching of speaking skills has often been undervalued, with many teachers relying on rote memorization or repetitive drills, rather than fostering practical communication skills. A significant challenge for EFL learners is the lack of opportunities to practice English in their environment. Sari (2019) highlights that external factor, such as limited exposure to English outside the classroom, hinder students' progress. Additionally, Littlewood (2007) points out that anxiety and inhibition in foreign language classrooms are common, as students fear making mistakes or attracting negative attention. This fear often leads to low participation, with some students dominating discussions while others remain silent.

4. Internal and External Barriers to Speaking Fluently

Several psychological factors such as fear of mistakes, anxiety, shyness, lack of confidence, lack of motivation, teacher-student rapport, teacher feedback, peer dynamic and the role of eye contact are the factors that have been hindrance on students' speaking skill (Schwarz 2015). These factors are crucial in shaping how students acquire English, particularly in the speaking domain. Elhadi (2015) emphasizes that these psychological factors are interconnected and influence speaking performance. Research has consistently highlighted the role of psychological barriers in students' speaking difficulties.

4.1 Fear of Making Mistakes

The fear of making mistakes is a pervasive issue among English language learners, particularly when speaking. This fear is often rooted in the embarrassment associated with errors, which can lead to self-consciousness and insecurity. Heriansyah (2012) and Sultana and Jamin (2021) argue that one of the primary obstacles to effective English speaking is the apprehension of making mistakes. Students often fear negative feedback from peers or teachers, which exacerbates their reluctance to engage in speaking activities and limits opportunities for practice. Thus, the fear of making mistakes is a significant hindrance to students' progress in speaking English. This anxiety is compounded by the pressure to speak both fluently and accurately, as students often feel scrutinized by their teachers and peers.

4.2 Anxiety

Anxiety is a significant barrier to language learning, especially for students who are shy or self-conscious. In the context of language acquisition, anxiety often manifests as a fear of speaking in public, making mistakes, or being judged by others. Such psychological barriers can severely hinder students' speaking performance, particularly in English as a foreign language (EFL) context. Javed et al. (2013) describe anxiety as a natural psychological response that is difficult to control, characterized by fear and tension. This emotional response is especially prominent when students are required to use a foreign language, leading to heightened stress and apprehension (Ortega, 2009). Teachers should create a safe, supportive classroom environment that encourages taking initiatives and reduces the fear of making mistakes in order to decrease these impacts. Establishing such a setting can assist students in controlling their fear and enhancing their speaking abilities.

4.3 Shyness

Shyness significantly impacts English students' speaking ability by lowering their communication skills, increasing foreign language anxiety, and reducing motivation to learn, as shown by Douglas et al. (2011), Horwitz et al. (1986), and Chiang and Dörnyei (2019). Baldwin and Caroline (2011) explain that shy students often experience fear and mental blankness when speaking publicly, while Bowen (2005) notes that passivity and quietness contribute to their reluctance to speak English. Therefore, teachers should support shy students to help them overcome these challenges and improve their language skills.

4.4 Lack of Self- confidence

A lack of confidence is a common barrier to effective communication in language learning, particularly when students are aware that their conversation partners fail to understand their

intended message or misinterpret it. Chen (2010) identifies students' inability to effectively speak English as the primary cause of this lack of confidence. Specifically, students often perceive their English-speaking abilities as inadequate, leading them to feel incapable of speaking fluently or accurately. This lack of encouragement can cause students to lose confidence in their own abilities, leading to demotivation and reluctance to engage in oral communication. Thus, the role of teacher support and encouragement is crucial in boosting students' self-confidence. Effective guidance and positive reinforcement can help students overcome feelings of inadequacy and encourage them to participate more actively in speaking activities, ultimately improving their language skills (Brown, 2001).

4.5 Teacher-Student Rapport

Teacher-student rapport is a mutual bond between teachers and students that inspires them to collaborate with each other in instructional-learning contexts (Lammers and Byrd, 2019). The establishment of a positive teacher-student rapport is crucial for fostering an environment conducive to effective language learning. An emotional and supportive rapport between teachers and students encourages a comfortable atmosphere that can significantly boost students' confidence in speaking English. According to Zua (2008), building an emotional rapport between the teacher and the students creates a trust-based zone where students feel safe and supported, reducing hesitation and fear of speaking in public. Furthermore, the teacher plays a vital role in shaping the learning environment by promoting motivation and focus. Creating an encouraging atmosphere not only motivates students but also strengthens their concentration during speaking tasks. Effat (2008) supports this view, suggesting that consistent encouragement and providing opportunities for students to ask questions contribute to overcoming speaking difficulties. This encouragement fosters a sense of security, which is vital for improving students' speaking skills.

4.6 Teachers' Feedback

A teacher's instructional style profoundly influences students' speaking ability, either by motivating them to engage in speaking activities or by inducing insecurity and hesitation. Chen and Tsai (2017) found that teachers, who adopt a student-centered approach, providing numerous opportunities for practice and interactive learning, significantly enhance students' speaking proficiency. Additionally, Liu and Huang (2018) demonstrated that the style in which corrective feedback is provided has a direct impact on students' speaking ability. Teachers who deliver feedback in a positive and supportive manner foster a more helpful environment for language development, encouraging students to practice without fear of judgment. Thus, both teacher-student rapport and feedback styles are integral to students' development of speaking skills. By creating a supportive, encouraging environment and adopting interactive, communicative teaching methods, teachers can significantly enhance students' confidence and fluency in speaking English.

4.6 Peer Dynamics

Peer dynamics in academic settings can significantly affect students' speaking fluency and overall engagement, with both positive and negative influences. Supportive peer relationships tend to boost motivation, confidence, and psychological well-being, helping students participate more actively (Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). Conversely, negative interactions can disrupt focus and impede communicative growth, limiting students' ability to develop effective speaking skills and fully engage in academic activities (Ryan, 2001). One notable negative influence arises from peer attitudes. When colleagues exhibit disengagement or express dissatisfaction with the learning environment, it can create a toxic atmosphere that undermines individual motivation and academic focus. In contrast to supportive behaviors that is characterized by empathy, encouragement, and constructive interaction, negative peer conduct may contribute to psychological stress and reduced performance (Burlison et al., 1994; Burlison & Mac George, 2002; Jones & Bodie, 2014).

Distractions also pose a significant challenge. Frequent interruptions, excessive noise, or off-task behavior among peers can impair concentration and diminish productivity. Such disruptions are particularly detrimental in language learning contexts, where sustained attention and verbal practice are essential for developing fluency. As Burlinson et al. (1996) and Metts et al. (1994) suggest, while peer relationships can offer valuable practical support, their effectiveness depends on the quality of interaction and mutual respect within the learning space. Thus, although peer presence in academic settings can enhance learning through collaboration and emotional support, it is crucial to recognize and mitigate negative peer behaviors that may obstruct academic and communicative progress.

4.7 The Role of Eye Contact and Self-Focused Attention in Public Speaking Anxiety

Eye contact is a critical component of effective public speaking, as it shapes audience perceptions of the speaker's confidence, engagement, and credibility. However, for many individuals, particularly those experiencing social anxiety, maintaining eye contact can provoke discomfort and heightened self-consciousness, thereby impeding fluent communication. Research has shown that self-focused attention plays a central role in this dynamic. Mansell and Clark (1999), Melling and Alden (2000), and Wells and Papageorgiou (2001) found that individuals who concentrate excessively on their internal states during social interactions tend to develop negative self-appraisals and exhibit poorer performance evaluations. This inward focus amplifies anxiety symptoms, making them more visible to others and reinforcing fears of negative judgment.

Avoidance of eye gaze, as noted by Atkins (1988) and Tatchell, van den Berg, and Lerman (1983), may inadvertently confirm these fears by signaling disengagement or insecurity, which can elicit critical responses from the audience. Hirsch et al. (2003) further demonstrated that self-focused attention in socially anxious individuals correlates with lower performance ratings by observers, suggesting that the psychological discomfort associated with eye contact has tangible communicative consequences.

5. Statement of the problem

Based on teaching experience and by prior studies indicate that many Libyan EFL undergraduates at the University of Zawia struggle to achieve oral fluency, despite having a sufficient linguistic background. While traditional instruction focuses heavily on grammar and vocabulary, a critical gap remains that students frequently face severe communication breakdown when speaking English in public. This issue is primarily driven by deeply rooted psychological barriers such as intense speaking anxiety, shyness, and fear of social judgment. Therefore, there is a clear need to investigate these obstacles to understand how they hinder students' oral performance, as failing to address them limits students' academic success.

6. Aim of the study

The study aims to define the psychological factors that affect EFL students' speaking fluently.

7. Research Question

1- What are the psychological factors affecting English students to have issues with speaking fluently in public?

8. Research Design

The mixed methods approach has been chosen as the research design for this study to effectively combine the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative research. According to Creswell (2014), mixed methods research involves collecting, analyzing, and integrating both quantitative and qualitative data within a single study to provide a more complete understanding of the research problem. Similarly, Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010) define it as a systematic procedure for collecting and analyzing data that draws on the complementary strengths of both approaches. This design is particularly useful when using a two-part questionnaire, where the first part consists of structured, closed-ended questions that generate

quantifiable data, and the second part includes open-ended questions that allow participants to express their perspectives in depth. By combining these methods in one tool, researchers can not only measure trends and patterns but also explore the underlying reasons and experiences behind the data, leading to richer and more nuanced insights.

9. Methodology

Mixed methods research combines both qualitative and quantitative approaches within a single research study. Cohen and Manion (1994: 233) considered triangulation as “the use of two or more methods of data collection in the study of some aspect of human behaviour”. It involves collecting and analyzing qualitative and quantitative data to understand a phenomenon better and answer the research questions. This research employed a mixed-methods approach to investigate the psychological factors that affects EFL students' speaking fluently. Furthermore, this study employed a two-part questionnaire to answer the research question. The two instruments were designed to be more appropriate for the study in terms of reliability and validity. The data obtained from the first part of the questionnaire were analysed by SPSS software program, whereas the data gained from the second part was analysed by Thematic Analysis Method. Moreover, regarding to the sample which used in this study; all the participants were EFL Libyan students from different academic semesters in English department at University of Zawia where English is being taught as a foreign language. 50 participants were randomly selected to fill the questionnaire ensuring that the data collection was both diverse and representative. In this study, the data collection instrument applied to gather data in this study is a two-part questionnaire that integrates both quantitative and qualitative approaches within a single tool. The questionnaire was designed to explore the specific barriers and negative influences that hinder students' ability to speak English fluently. Williams (2003) asserts that questionnaires are effective in collecting information on the attitudes, opinions, and behaviors of individuals. The first part of the questionnaire consists of 5 close-ended questions with fixed response options, which allow for straightforward quantitative analysis and comparison across respondents to generate quantifiable data for measuring trends and pattern. The second part includes 3 open-ended questions that provide participants the opportunity to express their thoughts and experiences in their own words, offering deeper qualitative insights. Dawson (2019) describes a questionnaire design that combines both structured and open-ended items within a single instrument to capture a broad range of data as a mixed method questionnaire where the first section sets a fixed framework (the structured part) and also allow for flexibility in the second section (the open-ended part). The purpose of the dual- design allows for a more complete and nuanced understanding of the research problem by combining the statistical strengths of quantitative analysis with the rich insights of qualitative exploration. This combination enables researchers to benefit from the clarity and efficiency of structured questions while also exploring complex, nuanced responses through open-ended items, resulting in a richer and more comprehensive dataset (ibid).

10. Data Analysis Tools

To analyse a structured questionnaire with open-ended questions, a two-part approach is followed. Quantitative analysis for closed questions and qualitative analysis for open-ended questions. The SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) analysis method was used to analyse the first part of the questionnaire responses (structured section), enabling a systematic and objective interpretation of the data. Whereas, thematic analysis is used to analyse the second part (open section). Combining both analyses offers a comprehensive view, integrating measurable trends with rich, detailed participant perspectives.

10.1 Quantitative data Analysis

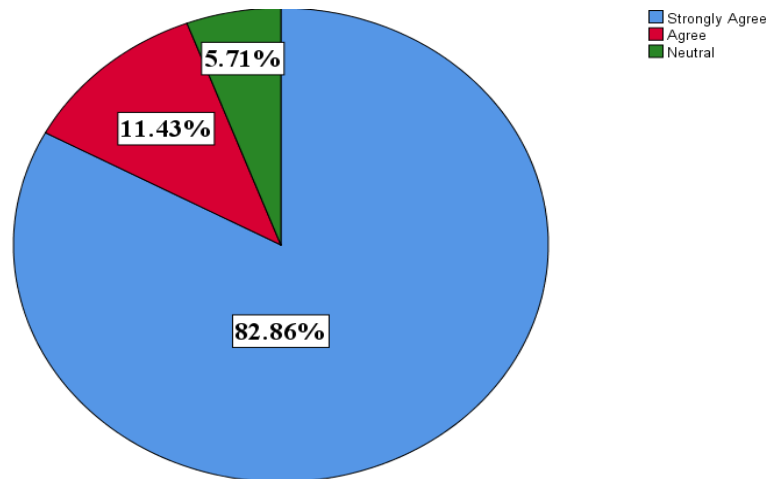


Figure (1) felling nervous when speaking English in front of other

The questionnaire reveals that a significant majority of respondents (82.9%) strongly agree that they feel nervous when speaking English in front of others, indicating a widespread and intense emotional barrier likely rooted in fear of judgment or lack of confidence. Whereas 11.4% agree, suggesting moderate discomfort, and only 5.7% remain neutral, showing that very few are unaffected by this issue.

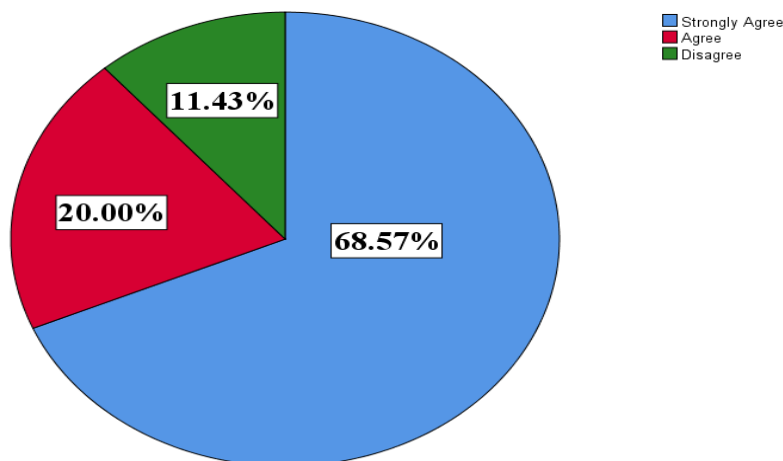


Figure (2) worrying about making mistakes when speaking English

The questionnaire results show a strong agreement with 68.6% of respondents that a great majority feel the fear of speaking and make mistakes. Besides, 20% indicating that fear of making errors is a major source of anxiety for EFL speakers. On the other hand, only 11.4% disagreed.

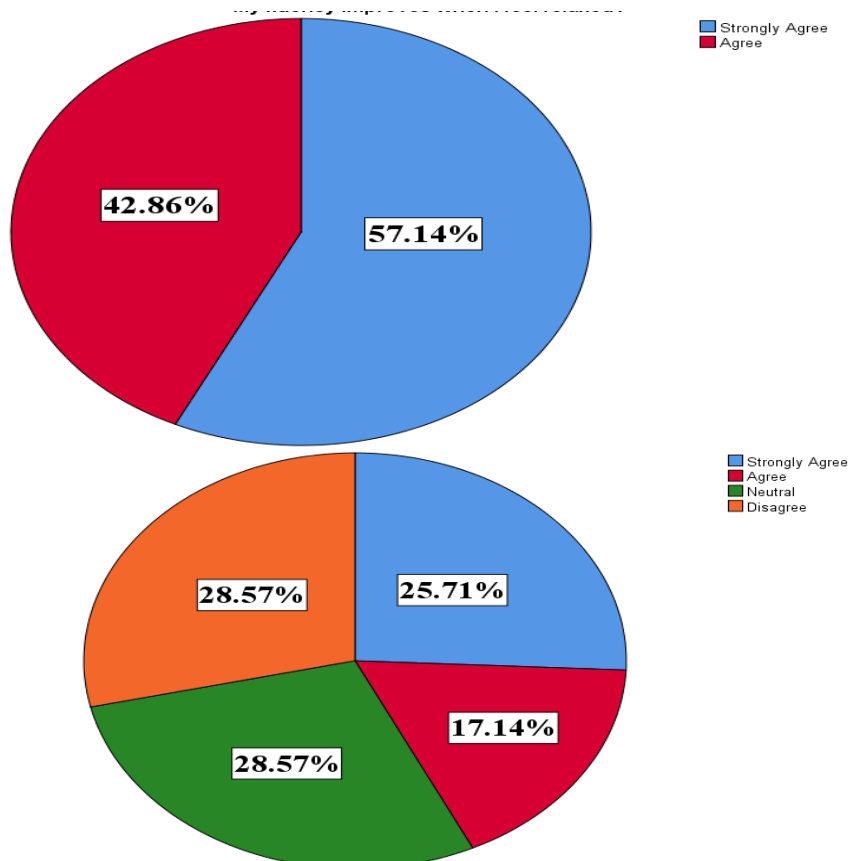


Figure (3) Feeling confident to speaking English in class when I have a positive relationship with my teacher

The questionnaire results show mixed levels of confidence among participants to speak English in class when they have a positive relation with their teacher: that 25.7% strongly agreed and were sure about their self-confidence and 17.1% showed an agreement indicating that less confidence. Meanwhile, with the exact percentage, students were neutral with 28.6% to the issue, and another 28.6% disagreed, suggesting that a significant portion either lacks confidence or remains uncertain.

Figure (4) feeling more motivated to speak and participate when I have supportive classmates

The questionnaire results show unanimous agreement that peer support positively influences classroom interaction, with 57.1% strongly agreeing and 42.9% agreeing that they feel more motivated to speak and participate when they have supportive classmates.

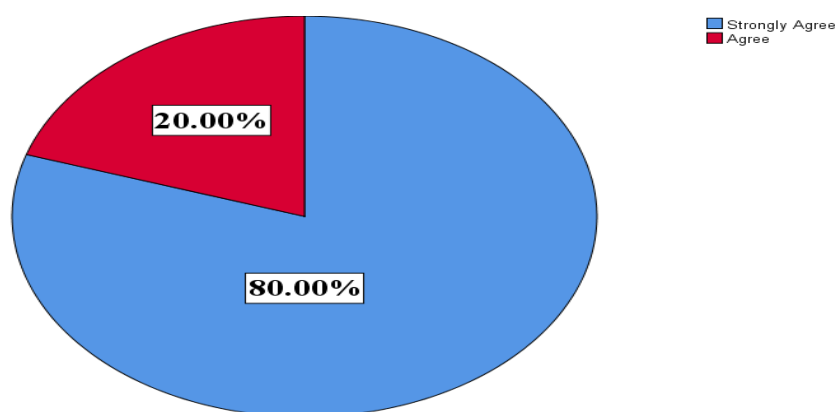


Figure (5) feeling shy when I have to speak in front of a large group of people

The questionnaire results show that a vast majority of respondents experience shyness when speaking in front of a large group of people. with 80% in strong agreement and 20% They hesitated.

10.2 Qualitative data Analysis

The biggest psychological barriers affecting speaking English fluency

New factors were raised in the first question when the students had the opportunity to express their thoughts. A great majority of them agreed that accuracy is the biggest psychological barrier that prevent them from speaking in public. A great deal also agreed that finding the appropriate vocabulary to continue a conversation was a great concern. For example, more than five students refer to the problem that they keep explaining instead of finding the appropriate vocabularies. Moreover, receiving negative feedback from their teachers or peers hinder their speaking performance. Furthermore, the anxiety and making eye were one of the biggest psychological barriers that affect their willingness to speak.

Feeling less confident when speaking English

The finding gained from open-ended questionnaire showed that students are afraid of being judged by their teachers or classmates whenever they speak. One of the students stated that "one of the problems that I face is that making mistakes lessen my speaking confident ". the data also showed that receiving direct negative feedback when speaking, stops their oral performance.

The psychological factors that hinder students' oral participation during class

The data obtained revealed that students' shyness was the major factor that affect their oral participation negatively during class. According to the students' responses, the bond between them and their teachers inspires them to collaborate with each other and overcome any other obstacles may demotivate their participation. Regarding this, it was found that great number of students' answers referred to motivation as one of the factors affecting their oral participation in class either positively or negatively.

11. Discussion

The findings of this study, based on responses from both closed-ended and open-ended questionnaire, showed a common pattern of psychological barriers that significantly hinder EFL learners' oral English performance. Together, the quantitative and qualitative data merge on several integrated themes: anxiety and nervousness when speaking English, fear of making mistakes and pursuit of accuracy, self-confidence as a determinant of oral communication , shyness as a barrier to classroom oral participation, the influence of teacher-student rapport on speaking confidence, the role of teacher feedback in shaping speaking performance, peer support as motivational forces and eye contact as a source of speaking anxiety. This integrated discussion addresses each of these themes in light of relevant literature.

11.1 Anxiety and Nervousness When Speaking English

The closed-ended data revealed that 82.9% of respondents strongly agreed that they feel nervous when speaking English in front of others, making this the most prominent finding of the study. This was further confirmed and elaborated in the open-ended responses, where students described anxiety as one of the biggest psychological barriers affecting their confidence to speak. This convergence of quantitative and qualitative evidence points Anxiety as a deeply embedded and widespread phenomenon in this learner population. Javed et al. (2013) describe anxiety as a natural psychological response that is difficult to control. In particular, they demonstrated that anxiety directly interferes with cognitive processing and oral production which hinder fluency. The near-universal anxiety reported by participants in this study suggests that it is a central feature of the EFL oral performance context that must be addressed at both the pedagogical and institutional levels.

11.2 Fear of Making Mistakes and the Pursuit of Accuracy

A closely related theme that emerged powerfully across both sections of the questionnaire was the fear of making mistakes. The closed-ended results showed that 68.6% strongly agreed and 20% agreed that they worry about making errors when speaking English, with only 11.4% disagreeing. The open-ended responses added critical depth to this finding: students identified the obsession with accuracy as the single biggest psychological barrier to public speaking, with several reporting that they resort to lengthy paraphrasing because they cannot retrieve the precise vocabulary needed. One student explicitly stated that "making mistakes lessens my speaking confidence," illustrating how the fear of error directly erodes self-efficacy. This finding aligns with Heriansyah (2012) and Sultana and Jamin (2021), who argue that one of the primary obstacles to effective English speaking is the apprehension of making mistakes. As they note, students often fear negative feedback from peers or teachers, which exacerbates their reluctance to engage in speaking activities and consequently limits opportunities for practice. This anxiety is further compounded by the pressure to perform both fluently and accurately, as students frequently feel scrutinized by those around them. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that the fear of making mistakes is not a peripheral issue but a significant hindrance to students' progress in spoken English, one that demands deliberate attention to the emotional climate of the language classroom.

11.3 Self-Confidence as a Determinant of Oral Communication

The closed-ended results showed mixed confidence levels, with only 42.8% agreeing that a positive teacher relationship boosts their speaking confidence, while 28.6% disagreed. The open-ended data further revealed that fear of judgment and direct negative feedback caused students to withdraw from oral participation entirely. Chen (2010) attributes this pattern to students' perception of their English abilities as inadequate, leading to demotivation and reluctance to communicate. This highlights the critical role of teacher encouragement and positive reinforcement in rebuilding students' self-confidence and promoting active oral engagement.

11.4 Shyness as a Barrier to Classroom Oral Participation

Both sections of the questionnaire consistently identified shyness as a major barrier to oral participation, with 80% of respondents strongly agreeing that they feel shy when speaking in front of large groups, and open-ended responses confirming shyness as the primary factor hindering classroom participation. Douglas et al. (2011) found a significant negative correlation between shyness and oral proficiency, demonstrating that shy students perform at lower levels than their more extroverted peers. These findings suggest that reducing audience size through pair work and small-group activities may help gradually alleviate shyness and create safer speaking opportunities.

11.5 The Influence of Teacher-Student Rapport on Speaking Confidence

While the closed-ended data showed mixed results regarding the influence of teacher relationships on speaking confidence, the open-ended responses clearly indicated that a strong teacher-student bond inspired students to participate more willingly and overcome other speaking obstacles. Zua (2008) argues that emotional rapport between teacher and students creates a trust-based environment that reduces hesitation and fear of speaking, while Effat (2008) emphasizes that consistent encouragement helps students overcome speaking difficulties. The present findings confirm that positive teacher-student rapport is a foundational element of effective EFL oral instruction.

11.6 The Role of Teacher Feedback in Shaping Speaking Performance

The open-ended responses revealed that receiving direct negative feedback while speaking caused students to stop participating altogether, highlighting the damaging impact of poorly delivered criticism on oral confidence. Liu and Huang (2018) demonstrated that supportively framed corrective feedback fosters a more encouraging environment for language development, while Chen and Tsai (2017) found that student-centered approaches significantly enhance speaking proficiency. These findings confirm that feedback style is a powerful affective force that can either unlock or suppress students' oral potential.

11.7 Peer Support as Motivational Forces

The closed-ended data showed unanimous agreement (100% of respondents) that supportive classmates increase motivation to speak and participate, while the open-ended responses identified negative peer feedback as a significant deterrent to oral engagement. This is consistent with Burleson et al. (1994) and Jones and Bodie (2014), who found that supportive peer behaviors promote motivation and psychological well-being, while negative peer conduct generates stress and reduces performance. These findings confirm that a positive peer classroom climate is essential for EFL oral development and must be actively cultivated by educators.

11.8 Eye Contact as a Source of Speaking Anxiety

The open-ended responses identified difficulty maintaining eye contact as a notable psychological barrier to public speaking, extending beyond the linguistic challenges captured in the closed-ended section. Mansell and Clark (1999) and Wells and Papageorgiou (2001) found that excessive self-focused attention during social interactions amplifies anxiety symptoms and reinforces fear of negative judgment, while Hirsch et al. (2003) demonstrated that this inward focus correlates with lower performance ratings by observers. These findings suggest that EFL instruction should incorporate strategies that help learners manage self-focused attention and build physical confidence in public speaking contexts.

12. Conclusion

The study concludes that psychological barriers, particularly intense anxiety and a profound fear of social judgment, are the primary obstacles hindering oral fluency among Libyan EFL undergraduates. With **82.9%** of participants reporting nervousness when speaking publicly and over **70%** experiencing regular emotional stress, it is clear that the struggle for fluency is fundamentally an emotional and mental challenge rather than a purely technical one. Notably, **65.7%** of students believe that psychological readiness is more critical for fluency than mastering grammar or vocabulary, and **45.7%** identify negative feedback as their most significant barrier. Ultimately, the findings suggest that because emotional comfort and relaxation are perceived as essential for performance, educators must prioritize the creation of safe, non-judgmental learning environments that offer positive reinforcement and frequent opportunities for spontaneous, low-pressure speaking practice. Overall, the integrated findings reveal that psychological barriers to English speaking are multiple, interrelated, and deeply embedded in the social and emotional fabric of the classroom. Language anxiety, fear of mistakes, lack of confidence, shyness, weak teacher rapport, insensitive feedback, negative

peer dynamics, and self-focused attention all interact to suppress oral performance. Addressing these barriers requires a pedagogically responsive, emotionally supportive, and relationally rich classroom environment that empowers EFL learners to speak with greater confidence and fluency.

13. Recommendations

To address these challenges, several recommendations emerge:

1. Create emotional and safe classrooms to encourage a nonjudgmental atmosphere where mistakes are treated as learning opportunities and allow flexible speaking formats (e.g., seated discussions, small groups) to reduce performance anxiety.
2. Promote positive feedback culture to train educators to provide constructive and affirming responses and recognize effort and progress, not just accuracy.
3. Increase speaking opportunities to integrate more spontaneous speaking tasks and peer-led activities and encourage English use beyond formal presentations to normalize everyday communication.
4. Support individual differences to acknowledge factors like gender, personality, and classroom positioning that affect confidence and offer personalized encouragement and varied participation formats.
5. Bridge in-class and out-of-class practice to leverage students' comfort with English outside the classroom by connecting real-life usage to academic tasks and use voice-to-text tools or informal speaking journals to build fluency gradually.

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