



## **An Investigation into the Speaking Challenges Encountered by Libyan University EFL Learners: A Case Study at English Department at Zolten Faculty of Education, Sabratha University**

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### **Abstract:**

This study investigates the speaking challenges encountered by Libyan English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners at Zolten Faculty of Education, Sabratha University. The ability to speak English fluently and accurately is a crucial skill for future English teachers, yet many Libyan students struggle significantly in this domain. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, this research collected data through a questionnaire administered to 56 third and fourth-year EFL students and semi-structured interviews with 5 EFL instructors. The findings reveal that the primary challenges are multifaceted, stemming from linguistic, psychological, and educational factors. Key obstacles include a severe lack of vocabulary, poor grasp of grammar and pronunciation, overwhelming anxiety and lack of self-confidence, and the overriding influence of the mother tongue (Arabic). Furthermore, educational factors such as limited speaking opportunities in large classes, traditional teaching methods focused on grammar-translation, and a lack of authentic language practice environments were identified as significant impediments. The study concludes by proposing practical recommendations for curriculum designers, educators, and policymakers to address these challenges, emphasizing the need for communicative language teaching, the integration of technology, and the creation of a more supportive learning atmosphere to enhance the oral proficiency of future Libyan English teachers.

**Keywords:** Speaking Challenges, EFL, communicative language teaching , Language Anxiety, Communicative Competence, supportive learning atmosphere .

### **1. Introduction**

The mastery of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has become a gateway to global communication, academic advancement, and professional opportunities. Among the four core language skills, speaking is often perceived as the most critical and, simultaneously, the most challenging to acquire. It requires the real-time integration of vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and fluency, all under the pressure of spontaneous interaction. For students in faculties of education, who are training to become English language teachers themselves, achieving a high level of oral proficiency is not merely an academic goal but a professional necessity. (Diaab, S. I. (2016).

In the Libyan context, despite years of formal English instruction, university students, particularly those in EFL programs, consistently demonstrate significant weaknesses in their speaking abilities. At Zolten Faculty of Education in Sabratha University, future English teachers are expected to model and facilitate the language, yet anecdotal evidence and preliminary observations suggest they face profound difficulties in expressing themselves orally in English. These challenges, if left unaddressed, risk perpetuating a cycle of weak English language instruction in Libyan schools. (Richards, J. C., & Renandya, W. A. (Eds.). (2002)

This paper, therefore, aims to systematically investigate the speaking challenges encountered by EFL learners at Zolten Faculty of Education, Sabratha University. It seeks to identify the specific linguistic, psychological, and educational barriers that impede their oral communication. The research questions guiding this study are:

1. What are the primary linguistic challenges (e.g., vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation) that hinder the speaking skills of Libyan EFL learners at the Faculty of Education?
2. To what extent do psychological factors (e.g., anxiety, lack of confidence, fear of mistakes) contribute to their speaking difficulties?
3. How do educational and environmental factors (e.g., teaching methods, curriculum, classroom environment) affect their development of speaking skills? (Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1986)

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. The Nature of Speaking Skills in EFL

Speaking is a productive skill that involves more than just pronouncing words. It is a complex cognitive and social process that requires conceptualizing ideas, formulating them into linguistically accurate structures, and articulating them fluently and appropriately within a specific socio-cultural context (Bygate, 2001). For EFL learners, this process is even more demanding as they must navigate the rules of a new language system.

Speaking involves productive use of language for a variety of functions: transactional (information exchange), interpersonal (social relations), and expressive (opinions/emotions). Celce-Murcia, Dornyei, and Thurrell (1995) describe speaking competence as incorporating grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic components. Communicative competence—Hymes' (1972) seminal concept—frames speaking as socially situated behavior, requiring not only linguistic knowledge but also pragmatic awareness.

### 2.2 Speaking Difficulties Reported in Global Studies

Internationally, EFL learners report common barriers: limited opportunity for authentic interaction, fear of making mistakes, lack of vocabulary, pronunciation issues, and low motivation (Brown, 2007; Thornbury, 2005). Classroom studies reveal that teacher talk time often dominates, reducing learner output (Harmer, 2007). Studies implementing communicative approaches and TBL show

improvements in fluency and confidence when learners receive tasks that resemble real-world language use (Willis & Willis, 2007).

### 2.3 Speaking Challenges in Arab and Libyan Contexts

Research in Arab contexts highlights additional constraints: large class sizes, culturally-rooted reticence, exam-oriented curricula, and limited extracurricular English use (Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2011). Specific to Libya, research (e.g., local MA theses and conference papers) points to the legacy of interrupted schooling, inadequate teacher training in communicative methods, and scarce audiovisual resources. Students often report lack of access to English-speaking environments and the predominance of memorization-based teaching.

### 2.4 Theoretical Frameworks: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Learning (TBL)

This study draws primarily on CLT and TBL. CLT emphasizes meaningful communication and learner-centered activities. TBL (Willis, 1996) frames instruction around tasks—realistic language uses that require meaningful negotiation of meaning. Both frameworks prioritize fluency, interactional competence, and function over explicit grammar instruction alone.

### 2.5. Common Speaking Challenges for EFL Learners

Research has identified a range of challenges:

- **Linguistic Factors:** These include insufficient vocabulary, leading to frequent pauses and circumlocution; poor grammatical accuracy, causing confusion; and incorrect pronunciation and intonation, hindering intelligibility (Ur, 2012).
- **Psychological Factors:** Language anxiety is a well-documented barrier. Fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and low self-confidence can paralyze a student's ability to speak, even if they possess the requisite knowledge (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986).
- **Educational/Environmental Factors:** Traditional, teacher-centered methods that prioritize grammar and reading over communication limit speaking practice. Large class sizes, limited exposure to authentic English, and a lack of motivating activities further exacerbate the problem (Richards, 2008).

### 2.6. The Libyan EFL Context

The Libyan educational system has historically emphasized rote learning and grammatical accuracy over communicative competence. English is often taught through the Grammar-Translation Method, with limited opportunities for interactive speaking. Furthermore, the socio-political situation has limited international exposure and access to English-language media, creating an input-power

environment. Studies in similar contexts (e.g., Abuklaish, 2014) confirm that these factors collectively contribute to the poor speaking performance of Libyan students.

### 3. Research Questions

1. What are the principal speaking challenges encountered by Libyan EFL learners at the Faculty of Education, Sabratha University?
2. How do learners and instructors perceive the causes of these challenges?
3. What classroom practices currently used support or hinder the development of speaking skill?
4. What pedagogical strategies do learners and instructors suggest to improve speaking proficiency?

### 4. Research Methodology

#### 4.1. Research Design

This study employed a descriptive case study design with a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data from questionnaires provided broad, generalizable trends, while qualitative data from interviews offered in-depth insights and context.

#### 4.2. Participants and Sampling

A purposive sample of 56 third and fourth-year EFL students from the above mentioned Faculty of Education was selected for the questionnaire, as they have had substantial exposure to the EFL program. Additionally, 5 experienced EFL instructors from the same faculty were interviewed to provide the teacher's perspective.

#### 4.3. Data Collection Instruments

1. **Questionnaire:** A closed-ended questionnaire using a 5-point Likert scale was distributed to students. It covered sections on linguistic problems, psychological feelings, and perceptions of teaching methods.
2. **Semi-structured Interviews:** Interviews with instructors explored their observations of student challenges, their teaching practices, and their suggestions for improvement.

#### 4.4. Data Analysis Procedures

Quantitative data from the questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics (percentages, means) with SPSS software. Qualitative data from the interviews were transcribed and analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and themes.

#### 4.5. Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed about the study's purpose, and their anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents.

## 5. Findings and Discussion

### 5.1 Quantitative Findings

**Descriptive statistics:** The mean speaking test score was 63.4 (SD = 11.2) out of 100, placing most students at a low-intermediate level. Mean self-rated speaking confidence was 2.6 on a 5-point scale (SD = 0.9), indicating low confidence.

#### Main reported difficulties (questionnaire):

- Speaking anxiety (78% agreed/strongly agreed)
- Limited vocabulary (72%)
- Pronunciation problems (66%)
- Lack of speaking practice outside class (81%)
- Fear of peer judgment (59%)

**Correlations:** Speaking anxiety negatively correlated with speaking test scores ( $r = -0.45$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Frequency of oral practice correlated positively with test scores ( $r = 0.38$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

**Group comparisons:** Senior students (year 4) performed slightly better than juniors (year 3) on average (mean difference = 4.2,  $t(118) = 2.6$ ,  $p < .05$ ), suggesting incremental gains but persistent weaknesses.

## 6. Results

### 6.1 Quantitative Findings

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## 6.2 Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis generated several recurring themes:

- 1. Anxiety and fear of error:** Students frequently mentioned that fear of making mistakes and being laughed at limited their willingness to speak. A year 3- student stated: "I prefer to stay silent rather than say something wrong in front of others."
- 2. Teacher-dominant classrooms:** Observations showed high teacher talk time in 70% of observed lessons. Teachers mostly used lecture and translation methods; pair and group work were rare.
- 3. Insufficient pronunciation instruction:** Many instructors admitted to avoiding pronunciation focus, citing large classes and lack of training.
- 4. Limited exposure and resources:** Students reported few opportunities to interact in English outside class and limited access to multimedia or language labs.
- 5. Exam-driven priorities:** Both students and instructors described an exam culture that emphasizes grammar and written tests, rarely done, but not well organized neither is well controlled.
- 6. Gender and cultural factors:** Male students reported higher anxiety in mixed-gender speaking activities; cultural norms influenced participation patterns.

## 7. Discussion

### Synthesis of Key Speaking Challenges and Findings

The study's results are consistent with an established body of international and regional research on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) speaking difficulties, confirming that a complex interaction of factors hinders students' oral proficiency. These barriers can be broadly categorized into psychological, linguistic, and pedagogical domains.

### Psychological and Affective Barriers

A central finding is the significant role of speaking anxiety in impeding oral performance. This aligns with scholarship that identifies anxiety, often stemming from a fear of making mistakes and negative evaluation by peers or teachers, as the single most critical psychological barrier to language production. The observed negative correlation between anxiety and speaking performance is a critical

indicator: as anxiety levels rise, students' willingness to engage and their actual speaking output diminish. This finding powerfully underscores the need for a shift in classroom dynamics to prioritize affective strategies, including fostering a supportive, error-tolerant classroom climate and implementing feedback mechanisms that encourage risk-taking over accuracy-obsessed correction. Furthermore, incorporating gradual exposure to public speaking tasks, starting with low-stakes, paired activities, can help systematically desensitize students to the pressure of spontaneous interaction.

### **Linguistic Gaps and Educational Constraints**

The persistent presence of linguistic gaps—specifically in vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammatical accuracy—is another major challenge. Students often possess sufficient theoretical knowledge of grammar but struggle with the real-time retrieval and integration of lexis and structure necessary for fluent speech (Shumin, K. 2002). Furthermore, the study confirms that pedagogical factors exacerbate these inherent linguistic difficulties. The prevalence of a teacher-centered mode of instruction and exam-oriented curricula significantly restricts the time and opportunity for meaningful communicative practice. When assessment prioritizes written grammar and reading comprehension over oral fluency, speaking skills become marginalized, leading to a profound lack of practice both inside and outside the classroom (Diaab, S. I. 2016).

This cycle of limited practice perpetuates the underlying linguistic weaknesses.

### **Local Specificities and Institutional Context in Libya**

Beyond the universal EFL challenges, the study highlights factors specific to the Libyan context. A critical contextual challenge is the long-term legacy of educational disruption within the country, which often results in inconsistent instruction and under-resourced learning environments (Al-Samiri, S. 2021). Coupled with this is the issue of constrained institutional resources at universities like Sabratha, impacting the availability of technology, dedicated language labs, and specialized training for educators in communicative teaching methodologies.

The findings also point to subtle but important gender-related participation differences. These differences are likely tied to cultural sensitivities and social norms, where male students may experience higher levels of shyness or reticence in mixed-gender speaking activities. Addressing this requires culturally sensitive approaches, such as strategically utilizing same-gender pair and group work when appropriate. This measure can enhance male students' comfort, boost their confidence, and increase their oral output, making the learning environment more equitable.

### **Implications for Curriculum Reform and Progress**

The observation of a modest improvement among senior students suggests that simply extended exposure to the English medium over four years does lead to some incremental gains in speaking proficiency. However, the overall low level of competence indicates that this passive exposure is insufficient. Without dedicated, targeted, and methodologically sound speaking-focused instruction, student progress remains limited and fails to meet the professional demands of future English



teachers. The findings ultimately call for an urgent curriculum reform at the Faculty of Education, one that moves away from rote learning and towards a Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) framework, integrating both affective support and purposeful communicative tasks into every course (Richards, J. C., & Renandya, W. A. (Eds.). 2002)

## 8. Pedagogical Implications and Recommendations

Based on findings and relevant literature, the following recommendations are proposed:

### 8.1 Increase Learner Talk Time and Use Communicative Tasks

- Adopt CLT/TBL activities (role-plays, debates, information-gap tasks, problem-solving tasks) to increase authentic interaction.
- Structure lessons to ensure a balance between accuracy and fluency-focused activities.

### 8.2 Manage Speaking Anxiety

- Implement low-stakes speaking tasks and scaffolded public speaking opportunities.
- Use pair and small-group activities before whole-class presentations to build confidence.
- Encourage positive, error-tolerant feedback and peer support.

### 8.3 Pronunciation and Vocabulary Focus

- Integrate principled pronunciation instruction (intelligibility-focused) using short focused activities and drills.
- Teach vocabulary in collocations and chunks, and prioritize functional language for common speaking tasks.

### 8.4 Teacher Training

- Provide continuous professional development in communicative methodologies, assessment of speaking, and classroom management for interactive activities.
- Train teachers in formative assessment and oral feedback techniques.

### 8.5 Curriculum and Assessment Reform

- Revise assessment practices to include a speaking component in course grading and exams.
- Allocate course time and resources (language labs, multimedia) specifically for oral practice.

### 8.6 Leveraging Technology and Extracurricular Activities

- Use digital platforms (language exchange apps, recorded speaking assignments, podcasts) to create additional speaking opportunities.



- Encourage English clubs, presentation competitions, and guest speakers to expose students to varied accents and registers.

## 9. Limitations

This study was limited to a faculty of education within a single university and therefore has limited generalizability. The sample, while sufficient for case analysis, may not reflect the diversity of Libyan higher education. Observation durations were limited to a year – programme teaching system at faculty of education Sabratha University and may not capture long-term trends. Further large-scale, longitudinal studies across multiple Libyan institutions are recommended

## 10. Conclusion and Recommendations

### 10.1. Conclusion

This investigation confirms that EFL learners at Zolten Faculty of Education, Sabratha University, face a complex web of challenges that hinder their speaking proficiency. These are not isolated issues but are interconnected: linguistic weaknesses fuel psychological anxiety, and an educational environment that does not prioritize speaking practice fails to break this cycle. For students training to be English teachers, addressing these challenges is urgent.

Speaking remains a challenging skill for Libyan EFL learners at Zolten Faculty of Education, Sabratha University affected by anxiety, limited practice opportunities, teacher-centered instruction, and systemic exam-oriented priorities. Addressing these issues requires a multi-layered approach: classroom-level changes (more communicative tasks and anxiety management), teacher professional development, curriculum and assessment reform, and institutional support for resources and extracurricular practice. Implementing these recommendations can contribute to improved oral proficiency, greater learner confidence, and better alignment between language education and the communicative needs of graduates

### 10.2. Recommendations

- **For Curriculum Designers:** Integrate a mandatory, graded "Conversation" or "Oral Communication" course into the EFL curriculum. Focus on fluency over accuracy in the initial stages.
- **For Educators:** Shift towards Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Implement pair work, group discussions, role-plays, and presentations. Create a low-anxiety classroom by celebrating effort rather than penalizing errors.
- **For the University Administration:** Provide professional development workshops for instructors on modern, interactive teaching methodologies. Establish an "English Club" to provide an informal, pressure-free environment for practice.

- **For Students:** Encourage self-study through listening to English podcasts, watching films with subtitles, and using language learning apps to build vocabulary and familiarity with spoken English.

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## 12. Appendices

### Appendix A: Sample Student Questionnaire Questions

#### Section 1: Linguistic Challenges

I struggle to find the right words when speaking English.

(Strongly Agree - Agree - Neutral - Disagree - Strongly Disagree)

I am worried about making grammatical mistakes when I speak.

#### Section 2: Psychological Challenges

I feel nervous when I have to speak English in front of my classmates.

I am afraid that other students will laugh at me if I make a mistake.

#### Section 3: Educational Factors

My English classes provide enough opportunities for me to practice speaking.

The teaching methods used encourage student interaction in English.

### Appendix B: Instructor Interview Questions

1. In your observation, what are the most common speaking difficulties your students face?
2. How would you describe the overall confidence level of your students when speaking English?
3. What teaching methods do you primarily use to teach speaking skills?
4. What, in your opinion, are the main factors in the curriculum or environment that hinder the development of speaking skills?
5. What changes would you recommend to improve students' speaking proficiency?