

Factors causing students' challenges in learning English speaking skills: A review of empirical works

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Abstract

Young language learners encounter, comprehend, use, and learn new languages primarily through speaking, which is the active use of language to convey meaning. The spoken form serves as the primary means of language acquisition in the classroom for young learners, rather than being just one part of language acquisition. Speaking issues, however, can pose significant obstacles to effective foreign language learning and communication. No matter how much they know about the English language, students learning English as a foreign language still struggle with speaking. Numerous studies have largely disregarded oral language use in the classroom, with teachers typically using it more frequently than students. However, even when used by teachers, oral language rarely serves as a platform for students to learn new information and explore concepts. Therefore, this article aims to first understand the true nature of these problems and the contexts in which they arise, in order to develop the necessary information to address oral communication issues in an English as a foreign language setting.

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1. Introduction

Speaking is the process of building and sharing monologue, dialogue, and conversational meanings by using verbal and non-verbal symbols in a variety of contexts (Houn & Em, 2022). Speaking is a beneficial language skills that enables speakers and listeners to interact orally for information transfer, connection building, and sharing. English is one such language that learners at all levels of communication need on a global scale. However, people constantly perceive the speaking abilities of English as a second language (ESL) students as complex and difficult, requiring a lot of work to maintain (Phann et al., 2023).

Once again, speaking is the process of turning thought into meaning using language in the form of monologues or dialogues (Karpovich et al., 2021). The nature of dialogue also makes speaking a process of negotiating meanings between or among interlocutors, using social and contextual knowledge to achieve transactional and/or interactional purposes. According to Tomasello (2010), human communication is a complex process. When people want to say something or transmit information, they need communication. When they want to inform

someone about something, speakers use communication. Speakers apply language according to their own goals. So, speakers should be both listeners and speakers at the same time for effective communication (Sor et al., 2022).

Moreover, speaking is a skills that both first- and second-language learners should focus on developing. Developing speaking abilities is the most crucial part of learning a second or foreign language, and one's ability to carry on a conversation in that language determines success (Nunan, 1995). Since people who learn a language are considered speakers of that language, speaking is one of the four language abilities that are most crucial to master (Ur, 1996). The primary goal of English language instruction is to equip students with the skills necessary to communicate clearly and effectively in English (Calderón et al., 2011).

However, it appears that language learners are unable to communicate fluently and accurately because they lack knowledge in this field. When we use words, speaking refers to more than just mouthing them. This allows us to communicate the message orally. Certain classes frequently overlook this ability. There are not enough opportunities for learners to speak English outside or within the classroom. Sadly, speech is not a significant component of the teaching tests. To learn to talk, students must practice a lot. Learning through repetition and listening can help students become more fluent speakers. Teachers can model various frameworks for their students to repeat. This can help them overcome their shyness. To improve their students' speaking abilities, teachers can employ brief questions and dialogues in the classroom (Bashir et al., 2011).

Moreover, speaking is one of the most challenging abilities that language learners need to master. People regard speaking as the most crucial of the four language abilities. Many students claim that despite years of instruction, they are still unable to speak and understand English properly (Houn & Em, 2022).

2. Types of talking

There have been many scholarly works that attempt to classify types of speech based on the function they perform in human interaction. Out of the many works we have read, Richard's (2008) classification appeared to be one to which we can relate the most. Based on his extensive experiences in teacher training and material development, he classified speaking into three different types: talk as interaction, talk as transaction, and talk as performance.

2.1. Talk as interaction

Talk as interaction denotes what we often mean by conversation and characterizes interaction that has a social purpose as its primary objective. People greet each other when they first meet, engage in small conversations, share recent experiences, and so on to be nice and create a comfortable environment for social interaction (Richards, 2008). In our daily lives as humans, communication is crucial. We use communication to convey ideas, exchange knowledge, and report on what is happening in our lives. Speaking is a skills with two main purposes: a transactional purpose for exchanging meaningful information and a social purpose for fostering relationships. Before learning to read and write, humans can communicate from birth. Humans use language for verbal communication much more frequently than for writing at any given time. The ability to speak is the most crucial because it is one of the skills required to continue a discussion. Speaking English is challenging because it requires proficiency in a wide range of skills, including pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. The following adapted tables

from [Richard \(2008\)](#) are key features of talk, such as interaction and the skills that are involved in the talk.

Table 1. Key features of talk as interaction

Features of talks as interaction	Skills involved in using talk as interaction
• Has primarily a social function • Reflects the speaker's identity • Reflects role relationship • Reflects a degree of politeness • May be formal or casual • Employs many generic words • Consists of jointly constructed text • Uses conversational register	• Opening and closing a conversation • Interrupting • Turn-talking • Joking • Making small talk • Responding or reacting to others

2.2. Talk as transaction

Unlike talk as interaction, which aims to build social relationships between speakers, talk as transaction focuses on the contents of the message. In other words, speakers ensure that the message is both intelligible and comprehensible.

There are two different types of talk as transactions. The first type focuses on giving and receiving information (e.g., making an inquiry or asking someone for details about a project). The second type focuses on obtaining goods or services, such as checking into a hotel, ordering food in a restaurant, or consulting a doctor.

The above list, adopted from [Richard \(2008\)](#), is not exhaustive. Essentially, talk as a transaction covers such key speech or language functions that we use in our daily communication with others for transactional purposes.

Table 2. Key features of talk as transaction

Features of talks as transaction	Skills involved in using talk as a transaction
• Has a primarily information focus • Focuses on the message rather than the participants • May involve the completion of a transaction • Focuses on fluency rather than language accuracy	• Describing something • Asking for information • Enquiring • Seeking clarification • Explaining a need or purpose • Making a comparison • Offering suggestions • Giving advice • Explaining or giving reasons • Confirming information

2.3. Talk as performance

Talk as performance is related to public talk that transfers information before an audience, such as delivering a lecture, conducting a debate, or giving an open speech. It is usually in the form of a monologue rather than a dialogue. It mostly follows a recognizable format (e.g., opening/introduction, main contents/body, closing/conclusion).

Talk as performance usually involves the use of oratorical skills or presentation skills (e.g., participating in a debate, a storytelling competition, delivering a speech or a lecture, making a sale, or a formal presentation).

Table 3. Key features of talk performance

Features of talks as performance	Skills involved in using talk as a performance
▪ Focuses on both message and audience ▪ Form and accuracy are needed ▪ The language used is more likely the written one ▪ Predictable organization and sequencing ▪ Often a monologue	▪ Using proper format ▪ Using correct pronunciation and grammar ▪ Using appropriate vocabulary ▪ Maintaining audience engagement ▪ Creating an impression with the audience

3. Factors challenging students in speaking English

An essential component of human nature is language. People can engage, exchange information, and communicate with one another through learning a language. Language has a significant impact on how people relate to one another and their surroundings. According to one of the experts, language is frequently employed in conversations between individuals who do not speak the same first (or even second) language (Cook, 2016). It shows the importance of studying language to have a fulfilling life. English is one of the world languages that appear to be widely used for communication. ESL and English as a foreign language (EFL) are the two ways that English is used outside of its native nation. Cambodia is one of the nations that has adopted English as a foreign language. English is utilized in EFL countries for a variety of things, including commerce and education (Em, 2022).

Unfortunately, despite spending ten years studying English in formal junior high schools, senior high schools, and university settings, students still find it challenging to practice their language skills in everyday conversation. This is because even though they may receive high marks for their English proficiency on report cards, they do not yet speak the language fluently. It is a known fact that many English teachers are dissatisfied with their speaking lessons. Many factors affect students negatively in speaking English performance (Houn & Em, 2022). Here are the main factors that cause students' challenges in speaking English.

The first factor is fear of making mistakes. Students' hesitation to speak in English in class is often attributed to fear of making mistakes (Yi Htwe, 2007; Robby, 2010). Aftat (2008) added that the fear of making mistakes is related to concerns about rectification and unfavorable appraisal. Additionally, students' anxiety about being teased by their peers or the teacher has a significant impact. Students frequently quit taking part in speaking activities as a result. Therefore, teachers need to convince their students that making mistakes is not a wrong or bad thing because students can learn from their mistakes. Heriansyah (2012) and Sultana and Jamin (2021) argued in their studies that one of the problems in speaking English for EFL learners is

that they are afraid of making mistakes because they are afraid of getting nasty comments from other people and there is not enough opportunity to practice. Meanwhile, [Irmawati \(2016\)](#) claimed that factors inhibiting the ability to speak in English come from teachers and students. The teachers did not want to prepare before the learning process started in the class because of the lack of speaking tasks that the teachers gave the students. Meanwhile, for students, it is because they are afraid of making mistakes, and it will lead them to be scared to try or shy to try. The primary reason for fear of making mistakes is that students are afraid of looking foolish in front of other people and they are concerned about how others will see them ([Kurtus, 2001](#)). In addition, [Hieu \(2011\)](#) and [Zang \(2006\)](#) as cited in [He and Chen \(2010\)](#) explained that students feel afraid of the idea of making mistakes as they are worried that their friends will laugh at them and receive negative evaluations from their peers if they make mistakes in speaking English. Students' fear of making mistakes in speaking English has been a common issue, especially in EFL contexts. As argued by [Januariza and Hendriani \(2016\)](#), most EFL students are afraid to try and speak the foreign languages they are learning. In this context, as he added, students do not want to look foolish in front of the class. In some other cases, they also worry about how they will sound and fear sounding silly, and so on.

The second factor is shyness. Many students experience shyness on an emotional level when they are asked to speak in English classes. This suggests that students' learning activities in the classroom, particularly in the speaking class, may be hampered by shyness. To support the students in giving their best speaking performances in class, it is crucial to pay attention to this aspect ([Houn & Em, 2022](#)). In line with this, [Baldwin \(2011\)](#) adduced that one of the more prevalent phobias that students have is speaking in front of people, and that feeling shy causes their minds to go blank or makes them worry that they will forget what to say. According to [Robby \(2010\)](#), some shy students are simply very quiet people by nature. Since most of them find speaking English in front of their peers and teachers to be extremely scary, the students in this situation tend to be hesitant and lack confidence. Additionally, [Liu and Jackson \(2008\)](#) noted that the majority of English language learners experience shyness when speaking the language because they worry about making mistakes. Additionally, they fear ridicule from their peers. This fact, that students' shyness reflects how they view their abilities, is also supported by the study's findings.

Another challenge that learners face in speaking the English language is mother tongue interference. Students who have shown an interest in studying English have been identified, according to [Mohtar et al. \(2015\)](#). However, the environment outside of the classroom did not encourage the use of English. The students conversed in their native tongues while playing outside. It is believed that more participatory exercises in the classroom will aid students' English-language intercommunication. [Suliman's \(2014\)](#) indicated that learners continue to produce speech in their mother tongue. The students' incapacity to converse in English, among other things, serves as proof of the impact of the student's mother tongue. Additionally, it was found that students used mother tongue translation techniques in addition to their spoken language to comprehend specific instructions. The respondents in this study appear to find speaking to be the most challenging skills, and they all concur that English is crucial, particularly as a means of communication. Additionally, this study discovered that prolonged exposure to English does not entitle or ensure students to be proficient language users. Since the students are from communities where English is not the first language, the environment is one of the reasons leading to their lack of proficiency ([Ban et al., 2023](#)).

The fourth cause is anxiety. According to [Horwitz et al. \(1991\)](#), reported in [Nascente \(2001\)](#), anxiety is a state of tension, apprehension, and nervousness related to the condition of learning

a foreign language. Additionally, [Houn and Em \(2022\)](#) claimed that among other affective aspects, anxiety stands out as one of the major roadblocks to successful language learning. In other words, anxiety affects how well students learn languages. As a result, it is important to take this learning aspect into account when paying attention. As noted in [Sylvia and Tiono \(2004\)](#) and [Horwitz \(1991\)](#), anxiety has a significant impact on students' learning. Students' performance may be impacted by their fear of speaking a certain language. It may also affect the caliber of spoken language production and give the impression that someone is less fluent. According to this explanation, teachers should try to establish a learning environment that allows students more comfortable circumstances while engaging in their learning activities ([Em & Nun, 2022](#)).

Lack of confidence is another factor that hinders students in their speaking performance. For English language learners, speaking in English can be tough, especially if they do not have a good command of the language. A lack of confidence in the English language is the main problem for learners. It is generally accepted that students lose confidence when they discover that their conversation partners do not understand them or when they are unable to comprehend other speakers. They then would rather remain silent while others speak in this instance, demonstrating the students' lack of confidence in their ability to communicate. In response, [Nunan \(1999\)](#) claimed that students who lack confidence in their ability to communicate in English inevitably experience communication anxiety. This demonstrates that increasing students' self-confidence is a key area of teachers' attention. This implies that to develop the student's confidence, the instructors must likewise learn from both theoretical and practical sources. [He and Chen \(2010\)](#) claimed that students' poor English-speaking skills are the primary reason for their lack of confidence. In this situation, many students continue to believe that their English is poor and that they are unable to speak English adequately. The absence of encouragement from the teacher is the other factor contributing to students' lack of confidence. Many educators do not view it as crucial in this situation to have students demonstrate their proficiency in English. Students find the learning to be demotivating rather than stimulating as a result ([Brown, 2001](#)).

The fifth factor is a lack of motivation. The success of students' learning is attributed to their motivation, according to [Em and Khampirat \(2024\)](#) and [Seifert \(2004\)](#). [Nunan \(1999\)](#) emphasized that the importance of motivation in learning is vital to take note of because it can influence students' reluctance to communicate in English. In this regard, motivation is an important factor in determining how ready students are for communication. [Zua \(2008\)](#) went on to say that inner energy is what motivates people. No matter what type of incentive the students have, accordingly, it will increase their interest in their studies ([Em, 2023](#)). Numerous studies have shown that children who are highly motivated to succeed may persevere in their studies and get higher test scores than students who are less driven to succeed, demonstrating the critical need for teachers to increase their students' passion for learning. [Nunan \(1999\)](#) elaborated on the causes of the students' lack of motivation, including uninspired teaching, boredom, a lack of perceived relevance of the materials, and ignorance of the instructional program's aims. According to him, these four are frequently the source of students' inspiration. For instance, boring instruction deters students from wanting to study. In this setting, boring instruction frequently lowers students' motivation because they feel bored. This demonstrates how important it is to pay attention to those four criteria ([Em et al., 2022](#); [Keo et al., 2022](#)). In answer to the motivational issue, [Babu \(2010\)](#) contended that students' reluctance to speak English in class is a result of their lack of passion for learning. He claimed that the root cause of the issue is that teachers do not encourage their students to communicate in English.

The seventh cause is the linguistics factor, the main cause of low English-speaking performance. Interaction requires multiple stages before speaking. Speaking requires a variety of abilities, including hearing, vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, to achieve its goals. According to [Yenkimaleki and van Heuven \(2023\)](#), communication between the speaker and the listener during speaking requires a few processes. Speaking ability is composed of many different elements. This group comprises pronunciation, grammatical usage, vocabulary, and speaking fluidity. Since few students speak English in class, EFL students need greater practice speaking the language. Additionally, it concerns how the students use their English according to the circumstance and setting so that the listener may easily comprehend what is being said ([Gilbert, 2008](#)). When speaking with other individuals, one should pay attention to their grammatical usage. The condition and context of the sentence make up a grammatical utterance, which allows the listener to comprehend the speaker's message. According to [Purpura \(2004\)](#), grammar consists of principles that help speakers construct sentences accurately. Additionally, grammar is employed to instruct students on how to construct effective sentences. Students should have a lot of lists of vocabulary when speaking because, without a lot of vocabulary lists, a speaker will not be able to use interactive communication. In short, it can be said that the power of mastering words or having vocabulary knowledge is one of the keys to success in speaking ([Hiebert & Kamil, 2005](#)).

Lack of practice is also a cause that hinders students from speaking English with confidence. This includes a lack of input and repetition. As generally known, practicing regularly can improve students' knowledge. The more they practice, the more they improve their knowledge. However, most of the students admitted that they lack in practice. It seems that lacking in English has impacted students' difficulties in speaking. Lack of practice also relates to less input obtained by the students. The lack of vocabulary that the students face in speaking can be a manifestation of a lack of input. Since they have no input related to the vocabulary, it is hard for them to speak the language ([Heng et al., 2023](#)). According to [Tantiwich and Sinwongsuwat \(2021\)](#), a lack of practice also causes poor pronunciation and ungrammatical sentence construction. Lack of input and repetition in listening and speaking the words in constructing the phrases and sentences has yielded difficulties in speaking English.

According to [Raja and Selvi \(2011\)](#), the three main causes of speaking challenges are the environment, attitudes, and teachers' abilities. They added that students might find it difficult to comprehend the material if the classroom environment was not favorable to learning and did not focus on the needs or abilities of the students. For improved learning, teachers should instill a good attitude toward the English language in their students' brains or work to motivate them. They also emphasized that a teacher's proficiency is a key component in learning challenges; if the teacher is unable to adequately communicate the material or base instruction on students' prior knowledge, students may experience difficulties learning the language ([Em & Mao, 2022](#)). Thus, they discovered that the classroom environment and teachers' instructional practices are the primary obstacles to English language learning.

4. Conclusion

The article shows that there are some main factors encountered in speaking English, namely difficulties resulting from linguistic factors, such as (a) a lack of vocabulary, (b) poor pronunciation, and (c) a lack of grammar knowledge, and those resulting from psychological factors, such as (a) anxiety, (b) shyness, (c) motivation, (d) mother tongue use, (e) self-confidence and (f) fear of making mistakes. The article also reveals that the factors are caused by two reasons: L1 interference or mother tongue use and a lack of practice.

As generally known, the older someone the harder for him/her to acquire a (second/foreign) language the same as he/she acquires his/her mother tongue (Em & Mao, 2022). We assume that linguistic factors are the main problem because, at their ages, the students find it hard to accept English linguistics features because they do not acquire English naturally like children. They learn English in the classroom as a foreign language as an outcome their English acquisition cannot be considered a native language. Besides that, the limitation of time in acquiring inputs is also one of the causes. Since the students only use, either speak or write, English in the classroom, they have limited time to immerse in the situation and conditions where they can use English every time. Psychological factors, on the other hand, are not big problems because it does not relate specifically to language acquisition. The students can learn to build and control their confidence, fear of making mistakes, anxiety, and other psychological factors through other subjects in the classroom not only in speaking class. That is why when they are in English-speaking class; psychological factors do not become big problems that hamper them in speaking English.

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