

Overcoming Speaking Challenges: A Study on First-Year English Education Students at Maritim Raja Ali Haji University

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ABSTRACT

Speaking is widely acknowledged as one of the most challenging skills for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), particularly for first-year university students. This study investigates the internal and external factors contributing to speaking difficulties among first-year English Education students at Universitas Maritim Raja Ali Haji (UMRAH). Employing a quantitative descriptive research design, data were collected from 69 students through a structured questionnaire consisting of fifteen items measuring psychological, linguistic, and environmental factors affecting speaking performance. The analytical framework is grounded in Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis and the Communicative Competence model proposed by Canale and Swain. Descriptive statistical analysis using mean scores revealed that internal factors exert a stronger influence on students' speaking difficulties than external factors. Fear of making grammatical mistakes emerged as the most dominant internal barrier, followed by limited vocabulary and social pressure when speaking in front of peers. External factors, such as limited English use in classroom interactions and insufficient opportunities for speaking practice, were found to have a moderate impact, while lecturer-related demotivation was perceived as minimal. These findings suggest that students' speaking challenges are primarily rooted in psychological and linguistic constraints rather than instructional discouragement. The study underscores the importance of creating psychologically safe and supportive learning environments, as well as providing frequent, low-anxiety speaking opportunities to enhance students' confidence and oral proficiency in EFL classrooms.

Keywords: Affective factors, Anxiety, Classroom environment, Confidence, Speaking difficulty

INTRODUCTION

Speaking is a core component of English education programs, playing a pivotal role in students' academic success and their readiness for future professional communication. Ongoing academic discussions have increasingly underscored the enduring barriers learners face in acquiring English as a foreign language. Among the core language skills, listening, reading, writing, and speaking, oral communication is often regarded as the most demanding. Learners frequently experience stagnation in their ability to speak fluidly and spontaneously, despite sustained efforts in other areas. Even after several years of learning, many EFL students continue to face obstacles in speaking fluently. These difficulties are often caused by a mix of language-related issues, psychological barriers, and external conditions (Hidayat, 2021).

At Universitas Maritim Raja Ali Haji (UMRAH), first-year students enrolled in the 2024 English Education cohort are expected to engage actively in spoken English both within and beyond the classroom. However, a significant number of these students report difficulties in expressing themselves confidently in English. Challenges in speaking English frequently originate from internal psychological factors, including fear of public speaking, language-related anxiety, low self-confidence, and excessive concern about grammatical correctness.

External factors, including limited vocabulary, insufficient speaking practice, audience pressure, and an unsupportive learning environment, further contribute to students' reluctance to speak in English (Aathifah et al., 2023).

This study aims to investigate the underlying causes of speaking difficulties among first-year English education students at UMRAH. By analyzing data gathered through a structured questionnaire, the research explores a range of internal and external influences on students' speaking performance, including emotional responses, linguistic competence, and perceptions of the classroom environment. The use of a structured questionnaire, as supported by Ajiza et al. (2022), allows for systematic identification of anxiety triggers and communicative barriers among EFL learners.

The analytical framework draws upon two foundational concepts: Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis and the Communicative Competence model introduced by Canale and Swain (1980). The former highlights how emotional variables, such as anxiety, motivation, and confidence, can either support or hinder second language acquisition, while the latter emphasizes the multifaceted nature of effective communication beyond mere grammatical accuracy. These affective factors can act as barriers that prevent the brain from fully processing language input, thereby hindering acquisition (Subekti, 2021). Meanwhile, the Communicative Competence model offers a comprehensive approach to understanding learners' speaking abilities through four key components: grammatical, sociolinguistic, strategic, and discourse competence, all of which are essential for effective communication (Ningsih & Yuliasri, 2021).

Through this study, it is expected that more holistic and responsive approaches to teaching speaking skills in English language classrooms can be developed, tailored to the emotional, linguistic, and contextual realities faced by students.

METHOD

This study adopts a quantitative descriptive design, a method that systematically collects numerical data to describe characteristics of a particular population without asserting cause-and-effect relationships. According to Nawira et al., (2023), such designs are highly effective for identifying and summarizing patterns in language learning challenges such as speaking anxiety and performance issues among EFL students. The study revolves around two central variables. The independent variable encompasses psychological dimensions including anxiety and self-confidence, linguistic dimensions such as vocabulary scope and grammatical knowledge, and environmental dimensions encompassing classroom atmosphere and peer interaction, factors shown to influence speaking performance in recent research (Nawira et al., 2023). The dependent variable is defined as the degree of difficulty students encounter in speaking English, as indicated by their responses to the questionnaire (Qurnia & Marlina, 2020).

The population consists of all first-year students from the 2024 cohort in UMRAH's English Education Department. Data were gathered online using a structured questionnaire featuring fifteen carefully designed statements to measure students' experiences. This questionnaire incorporates two categories of speaking challenges. Internal factors include anxiety, insufficient self-confidence, limited vocabulary, and apprehension about making mistakes. External factors comprise an unsupportive classroom environment, lack of regular English exposure, and inadequate opportunities to practice speaking. This categorization builds on findings from recent studies that emphasize the combined influence of learners' emotional states and situational contexts on speaking anxiety and performance (Mardiah,

2022). Once responses were collected, the data underwent descriptive statistical analysis, with mean scores computed for each item to determine general trends and the relative weight of individual factors. Descriptive analyses, as noted by Mardiah (2022), summarize central tendencies and variability to highlight the most significant barriers to oral proficiency.

FINDINGS

To analyze students' responses to the questionnaire, this study utilized a five-point Likert scale, where each response category was assigned, a numerical value as follows:

Table 1. Likert Scale

NO	Scale Likert	Abbreviation	Point
1.	Strongly Disagree	SD	1
2.	Disagree	D	2
3.	Neutral	N	3
4.	Agree	A	4
5.	Strongly Agree	SA	5

All 69 respondents (N = 69) completed the questionnaire. To identify dominant tendencies, the average score for each item was calculated using a standard formula.

$$\text{Mean} = \frac{(f_{SD} \times 1) + (f_D \times 2) + (f_N \times 3) + (f_A \times 4) + (f_{SA} \times 5)}{N}$$

f_{SD} = frequency of responses for "Strongly Disagree"

f_D = frequency of responses for "Disagree"

f_N = frequency of responses for "Neutral"

f_A = frequency of responses for "Agree"

f_{SA} = frequency of responses for "Strongly Agree"

N = total number of respondents (69)

Analysis of questionnaire data revealed that first-year students in the English Education Program encountered speaking difficulties stemming from both internal and external factors, which were assessed through a 5-point Likert scale measurement. The mean scores for each item were calculated to identify the intensity of the issues experienced by students.

Internal Factors

Table 2. Internal Factors

NO	QUESTION	SD	D	N	A	SA	MEAN
1	Q1	2	16	75	116	25	3.39
2	Q2	2	10	87	108	30	3.43
3	Q3	2	20	81	92	35	3.33
4	Q5	2	8	54	136	55	3.70
5	Q6	3	16	99	80	25	3.23
6	Q8	3	18	93	84	25	3.23
7	Q10	5	32	63	92	20	3.07
8	Q11	2	14	81	108	30	3.41
9	Q12	4	18	108	76	5	3.06

10	Q13	2	12	99	96	20	3.32
AVERAGE							3.32

The internal factors consist of ten questions (Q1–Q3, Q5–Q6, Q8, Q10–Q13) that relate to emotional, psychological, and linguistic challenges such as anxiety, lack of confidence, grammatical concern, and limited vocabulary. As presented in Table 1, the highest mean score was found in Q5 ($M = 3.70$), indicating that fear of making grammatical mistakes is the most dominant internal difficulty. This is followed by Q2 ($M = 3.43$), which reflects students' tendency to run out of vocabulary, and Q12 ($M = 3.41$), which shows the influence of social pressure on speaking.

The lowest internal mean scores were observed in Q11 ($M = 3.07$) and Q13 ($M = 3.06$), referring to difficulty initiating a conversation and confusion in constructing spontaneous sentences, respectively. Despite being the lowest among internal factors, these scores are still within the moderate range, suggesting that such linguistic challenges are still relevant and experienced by many students.

The overall average of the internal factors is 3.32, which reflects a moderate-to-high level of speaking difficulty caused by internal issues. The results are consistent with those reported by Rahmadani and Etfita (2022), internal psychological factors, such as fear of being judged, lack of self-confidence, and heightened anxiety, emerged as the most influential in obstructing learner's ability to engage in spoken English with ease and assurance.

External Factors

Table 3. External Factors

NO	QUESTION	SD	D	N	A	SA	MEAN
1	Q4	2	8	75	128	30	3.52
2	Q7	4	26	108	56	10	2.96
3	Q9	6	58	87	16	5	2.49
4	Q14	4	20	123	52	5	2.96
5	Q15	3	24	111	64	5	3.00
AVERAGE							2.99

External factors are measured by five questions (Q4, Q7, Q9, Q14, Q15), which cover environmental and contextual barriers such as classroom language use, lack of speaking exposure, and insufficient opportunities to speak English. According to Table 2, the item with the highest mean score is Q4 ($M = 3.52$), indicating that many students prefer using Bahasa Indonesia in classroom discussions rather than English, primarily due to comfort. This preference reflects the lack of English immersion in their learning environment.

On the other hand, the lowest mean score among external factors is found in Q9 ($M = 2.49$), which relates to the feeling of being unmotivated by the environment or lecturers. This score suggests that external demotivation is not perceived as a major issue by most students. Next, other items in this group, such as Q7 ($M = 2.96$) and Q14 ($M = 2.96$), indicate that practice outside the classroom and opportunities during orientation are limited, contributing to reduced fluency development. The overall average score for external factors is 2.99, which is

lower than the internal average. The conclusions are supported by Marlina and Herdiana (2023), who observed that inadequate English exposure and the persistent use of the native language in instructional settings significantly impede learners' oral communication development.

DISCUSSION

Findings from the present study indicate that psychological and linguistic factors originating from within the learner have a stronger impact on speaking challenges. Psychological barriers, including the fear of negative evaluation, insecurity about grammatical precision, and diminished confidence, were found to significantly interfere with learners' oral performance in foreign language settings. Among the various concerns raised, the fear of making grammatical errors received the highest average score, underscoring its central role in shaping students' reluctance to speak, indicating that concerns over accuracy remain a major barrier. This reflects how students often prioritize correctness over fluency, which can lead to hesitation and silence during speaking tasks.

In addition to grammatical anxiety, vocabulary limitations and social pressure were also identified as significant internal barriers. Students often reported that they struggle to find the right words or feel intimidated when speaking with more fluent peers. These feelings may stem from low self-efficacy or lack of speaking practice in low-risk settings. The difficulty in initiating conversation or forming sentences spontaneously further illustrates that students are not yet confident in using English without preparation. These internal issues align with the Affective Filter Hypothesis, which suggests that anxiety and low motivation can hinder language acquisition and performance.

Although external factors had a lower overall mean score, some aspects were still noteworthy. The preference for using Bahasa Indonesia during classroom discussions shows that the classroom environment may not be fully immersive or supportive of consistent English use. Additionally, limited exposure to speaking opportunities, particularly during orientation or outside the classroom, can reduce students' chances to develop fluency in real communicative situations. However, the low score on the item regarding demotivation from lecturers suggests that the learning environment is not seen as discouraging. This supports the idea that the main obstacles to speaking come from within the students, rather than from the instructional context.

In summary, the findings indicate that improving students' speaking skills requires addressing both cognitive and emotional aspects of language learning. Teachers should design speaking activities that are not only linguistically meaningful but also psychologically safe. Opportunities to practice speaking through interactive, peer-based, and low-stress activities can help students build confidence gradually. As emphasized by Mubarok and Nurindah (2023), affective support and confidence-building strategies are essential for improving EFL learners' speaking performance.

CONCLUSION

The investigation brought to light a range of issues that hinder spoken language development among learners in their initial year of English studies, focusing on both internal and external contributing factors. The findings revealed that internal factors, particularly those

related to psychological and linguistic barriers, played a more dominant role in inhibiting students' English-speaking performance. Key obstacles identified include apprehension about grammatical mistakes, insufficient vocabulary, and discomfort when speaking in front of others, factors that collectively inhibit verbal expression and fluency. These results highlight the complex interaction between language proficiency and emotional readiness, which must be considered in designing effective speaking instruction. As Alazeer and Ahmed (2023) point out, affective factors such as fear of judgment and peer pressure can considerably lower students' willingness to speak.

While external influences, such as the scarcity of English interaction in classroom settings and limited opportunities for authentic conversational practice, were acknowledged, internal barriers consistently exerted a more profound impact on students' speaking performance, were observed, these were found to be less impactful when compared to personal factors. Internal challenges remain the more significant barriers to students' speaking development. Nonetheless, the preference for using Bahasa Indonesia during classroom discussions reflects a lack of immersion, which may hinder the development of fluency. Therefore, language educators should create psychologically safe learning spaces that allow students to speak without fear of error, and provide regular, meaningful opportunities for authentic oral communication. As recommended by Sidik et al., (2021), integrating English-speaking activities beyond the classroom can significantly improve learners' confidence and fluency over time.

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