



From Hesitation to Fluency: Unraveling Speaking Barriers in EFL Context

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Received: 14 Aug 2024; Received in revised form: 11 Sep 2024; Accepted: 17 Sep 2024; Available online: 24 Sep 2024

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Abstract— This study investigates Libyan EFL students' perceptions of their speaking skills, identifies barriers to their development of this skill, and explores the underlying causes of these barriers. A Likert-scale questionnaire was employed to collect quantitative data from 41 English-major students at the Department of English, University of Zawia, Libya. The findings indicate that while students acknowledge the significance of speaking skills for academic and professional success, they encounter challenges related to linguistic aspects, including vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. Psychological barriers, such as fear of criticism and shyness, also hinder their willingness to participate in speaking activities. Furthermore, the study highlights that insufficient practice opportunities and traditional, teacher-centered instructional methods are major contributors to students' difficulties in speaking. The study suggests that enhancing students speaking skills can be achieved by increasing engagement in interactive speaking activities, shifting from teacher-centered to more interactive teaching methods, and creating environment that encourage speaking practice both inside and outside the classroom.



Keywords— Accuracy, Comprehensibility, Fluency, Speaking Practice, Speaking skill.

I. INTRODUCTION

Speaking is a pivotal skill in language acquisition and learning, facilitating not only articulation of thoughts, emotions, and information (transactional functions) but also the establishment and maintenance of social relationships (interactional functions) (Brown & Yule, 1983). Mastery of this skill is crucial for EFL/ESL students, as it significantly impacts their academic success, personal development, and future career opportunities. Proficiency in speaking is often regarded as a key indicator of overall language competence (Richards & Renandya, 2002; Richards, 2008). Therefore, enhancing speaking abilities is central objective in language education.

Despite its importance, speaking is frequently cited as one of the most challenging skill for EFL/ESL students to master (Ur, 1996; Celce-Murcia, 2007; Zhang, 2009). To become proficient speakers, students need to develop

various subskills of speaking, including accuracy, fluency, and comprehensibility (Heaton, 1989). Additionally, they must cultivate positive attitudes towards the target language, self-confidence and motivation to succeed (Brown, 2001). This underscores the complexity of mastering speaking, which demands substantial effort and collaboration from both teachers and students.

In Libyan English classrooms, EFL students majoring in English often encounter difficulties in achieving accurate and fluent spoken English despite extensive study of English language. This challenge may be attributed to predominance of teacher-centered approaches that limit students' opportunities for active speaking practice (Orafi & Borg, 2009). This study, therefore, aims to investigate Libyan EFL students' perceptions of their speaking skill and identify the challenges they face as well as exploring the underlying causes of these challenges. Gaining insights

into these issues would provide information on students' needs for improving their speaking abilities. The findings are expected to offer recommendations that address these challenges, thereby enhancing students' speaking skill. This research study would also contribute to the broader understanding of EFL speaking difficulties, particularly within the context of Libyan universities.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Definition to Speaking

Speaking is a crucial productive skill that enables effective communication. It involves not only the articulation of spoken words but also the interactive process of constructing and conveying meaning (Mc Donough & Shaw, 1993; Burns & Joyce, 1997; Florez, 1999). It is “the process of building and sharing meaning through verbal and non-verbal symbols, in a variety of contexts” (Chaney & Burk, 1998: p13). This skill encompasses production of fluent verbal expressions which necessitates understanding both linguistic elements and intended messages (Harmer, 2007). These definitions indicate that speaking is a complex, multifaceted process that requires the speakers to effectively construct and convey meaningful utterances.

2.2. Speaking and Second Language Acquisition Theories

Several theories of second language acquisition, including input, output, and interaction, provide insights into the development of speaking skill. These theories attempt to explain how individuals acquire a second language and suggest some methods and strategies for improving speaking proficiency. Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982) posits that language acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to comprehensible input (i.e. utterances just beyond their current level of proficiency but still understandable). This exposure allows students to internalize new linguistic elements, such as vocabulary and grammar, which becomes part of their competence. This enhances their speaking abilities.

The interaction Theory emphasizes the importance of interaction in language learning. Schmidt (2010) argues that “learners must attend to and notice linguistic features of input they are exposed to if those forms are to become intake for learning” (p.730). This process helps learners recognize acceptable and unacceptable forms of the target language, which positively impacts their speaking skills.

Swain's Output Theory (1985) highlights the role of language production in second language acquisition. According to Ellis (1994), producing language enables learners to identify and address linguistic deficiencies through feedback from teachers, peers, and other sources.

Swain (1993) further explains that language production allows learners to test their hypotheses about language use and receive feedback in the form of corrections and clarifications. This process contributes to the acquisition of new vocabulary, new grammatical rules and accurate pronunciation, thereby improving speaking proficiency.

2.3. Students Requirements for Enhancing Speaking Skill

To communicate effectively, EFL/ESL students must develop several critical components of speaking, including accuracy, fluency and comprehensibility (Heaton, 1989). Accuracy involves producing error-free speech, including grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation (Lennon, 1990). Fluency refers to the ability to speak at a natural pace without frequent pauses or hesitations that disrupt communication (Lennon, 1990). Fluent speakers use language naturally, minimizing fillers and pauses, and employing formulaic expressions (Housen & Kuiken, 2009). Comprehensibility pertains to the clarity of speech, ensuring that the speaker's message is intelligible and appropriately responsive to discussion topic (Heaton, 1989). Mastery of these elements is essential for evaluating students speaking proficiency and tracking their progress, as they enable students to convey meaningful and understandable messages effectively (Housen & Kuiken, 2009).

Furthermore, speaking proficiency encompasses five elements: vocabulary, grammar, fluency, pronunciation, and comprehension (Brown, 2007). Effective speakers must demonstrate accurate pronunciation, possess a sufficient vocabulary, understand grammatical structures, and have knowledge of the topics being discussed. This requires mastery of sound patterns, correct stress on words and sentences, appropriate lexical selection, logical organization of ideas, and confident fluid speech (Nunan, 2003).

Listening skills are also crucial for developing speaking proficiency (Doff, 1998). Effective speaking relies on understanding the conveyed information. This highlights the interdependence of listening and speaking skills, which means strong listening abilities support successful speaking by ensuring comprehension of information being communicated.

Motivation also significantly influences students' speaking skills. It helps them to overcome hesitation, shyness, and anxiety (Nunan, 1999). Besides, a supportive classroom environment is very important because it encourages students to speak confidently and reduce anxiety as well as employing strategies that accommodate their levels to enhance speaking confidence (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021). The use of effective speaking strategies is

also essential for improving proficiency. These strategies aid in comprehension, acquisition, and retention of second language (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Successful application of these strategies is necessary for achieving fluency and overall speaking proficiency.

In summary, improving speaking skills for EFL/ESL students involves mastering accuracy, fluency, and comprehensibility. The successful integration of these essential elements would enable students to attain proficiency in speaking and achieve success in their language learning.

2.4. Students' Speaking Challenges and their Underlying Causes

ESL/EFL students often face various challenges in developing speaking skill. These challenges can be categorized into linguistic, psychological, cultural, and environmental factors. Linguistic barriers include difficulties with grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary, which hinder intelligibility and accuracy in communication (Burnkart, 1998; Baker & Westrup, 2003; Bygate, 2005). These issues may arise from limited exposure to the target language, insufficient practice opportunities, and reliance on the native language (Harmer, 1991; Ur, 1996). Psychological barriers, such as inhibition, shyness, and anxiety, contribute to reluctance in participating in speaking activities (Arnold & Brown, 1999). Fear of making mistakes or receiving criticism (Norrish, 1983; Littlewood, 2007) and lack of motivation (Broussard & Garrison, 2004) also impact students' speaking performance. Negative attitudes towards the target language further exacerbate these difficulties (Gardner et al., 1985). Cultural factors involves differences between students' native cultural norms and those of the target language, affecting communication effectiveness (Lee, 2009). Environmental factors, such as large classroom sizes, inappropriate textbooks, excessive use of the native language in the classroom, and ineffective teaching methods, also impede speaking practice and motivation.

Numerous research studies have explored the challenges affecting students speaking skills in EFL/ ESL contexts. One of these studies is Swair's (2005) found that ESL students in Australia struggle with speaking due to insufficient prior exposure to English language conversation either inside and outside classroom and overemphasis on grammar in their previous education.

Amoah and Yeboah, (2012) also used observation, interview and questionnaire to investigate EFL Chinese university students difficulties in speaking. They identified psychological factors, such as "anxiety, fear of mistakes, unwillingness, and fear of negative evaluation" as significant barriers for these students (p.56). They

recommend creating supportive classroom environment to reduce anxiety and improve confidence. They also recommend utilizing strategies, such as oral presentations and classroom debates, for enhancing students' speaking confidence.

Another study is Gan's (2012) which found that English-majored Hong Kong university students prioritized grammar over vocabulary and had limited opportunities to practice speaking both inside and outside the classroom. Similarly, Wei and Zhang (2013), using a questionnaire, found that EFL Chinese university students struggle with pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar, and often rely too heavily on their native language instead of English. The researchers attribute these difficulties to the students lack of effective speaking strategies.

Diaab (2016) conducted one of the few studies in the Libyan EFL context with 125 university students through a questionnaire and an interview. She noted that linguistic and psychological barriers along with limited English exposure hindered students' speaking skills. She also found that Libyan EFL teachers prioritize accuracy over fluency. To address these issues, Diaab recommends revising teaching approaches and encouraging students' engagement and participation in speaking activities to enhance their communicative competence.

Abrar et al. (2018) conducted a valuable phenomenological study with Indonesian EFL student teachers. They found that these students faced challenges related language barriers, including limited vocabulary, incorrect word choice, pronunciation issues, and inadequate grammar; psychological factors such as anxiety, negative attitudes, and lack of motivation; unsupportive learning environment, characterized by ineffective teaching methods, lack of peer encouragement, and uninteresting speaking topics.

Similarly, Soomro and Farooq (2018) collected data from 184 EFL university students in Saudi Arabia by using questionnaire. They found that classroom environment did not support speaking skill improvement. They recommend that teachers should use strategies that contribute in the advancement of the students speaking skill.

Overall, students' speaking challenges fall into four main categories: linguistic, psychological, cultural, and environmental. Linguistic obstacles encompass difficulties with grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Psychological obstacles involve anxiety, fear of making mistakes and criticism, and lack of confidence in speaking English. Sociocultural obstacles include differences in cultural norms and values that may influence students' ability to communicate effectively. Environmental barriers, such as large classrooms, prevent students to

practice speaking English in real-life situations. Addressing these issues, teachers need to prioritize involving their students in speaking activities (Nunan, 1995). This would enable students to “integrate separate structures into creative system for expressing meaning” (Littlewood, 1984: p.92). These activities would also help students to boost their confidence and reduce anxiety as they speak (Amoah and Yeboah, 2012). Teachers also are required to give students chances “to say what they think or feel and to experiment in a supportive atmosphere using language they have heard or seen without feeling threatened” (Willis, 1996: p.7). Thus, the major roles of teachers are integrating structured speaking activities, creating a supportive environment, and employing effective teaching strategies.

While numerous research studies have explored these factors, there are few studies conducted in the Libyan university context to understand these issues from the students' perspectives. This study, therefore, aims to fill this gap by examining Libyan EFL university students' perceptions of speaking skill and investigating the factors

hindering the growth of their speaking proficiency. The findings are expected to offer valuable insights and recommendations to enhance students' speaking proficiency and contribute to the broader EFL education literature.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants

The study was conducted at Department of English, Faculty of Arts, University of Zawia, Libya. The sample comprised 41 EFL students (9 males and 32 females) enrolled in a BA program in English. Participants were selected purposefully to represent a range of academic level, including 10 students in the third semester, 8 in the fourth semester, 10 in the fifth semester, 7 in the sixth semester, and 6 in the seventh semester. Their ages ranged from 21 to 24 years. All of the participants are native Arabic speakers and had completed six years of general English education in secondary schools before their enrollment in the Department of English.

Table 1: Information about the Student Participants

Number of Student	Gender	Level of Education	Native Language
41	Male = 9 Female = 32	3 rd semester = 10 4 th semester = 8 5 th semester = 10 6 th semester = 7 7 th semester = 6	Arabic

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire constructed on the basis of literature review. The questionnaire, comprising 29 items, utilized a Likert scale to examine students' perceptions of speaking in English and the challenges they face in improving this skills as well as the causes of these challenges. It was organized into six sections. The first section was devoted to examine the students perception of speaking skill. The second, third and fourth sections focused on the challenges students encounter to improve their speaking skill. The fifth section investigates the causes of the students challenges in improving speaking. The last section aims to gather personal information about the participants. Prior to administer the questionnaire, it was piloted with three EFL students from the department. Based on their feedback, adjustments were made to the wording, length, and organization of some items. The questionnaire was administered using a pencil-and-paper method, which is familiar to participants and gives them adequate time to

consider their responses (Muijs, 2004). Data analysis involved descriptive statistics to summarise the responses. These summaries are presented in the form of frequencies and percentages and displayed into tables.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results from the questionnaire are organized under four main themes: students' perceptions of speaking, students' difficulties in speaking, factors impeding improvement in speaking skill and the underlying causes of these difficulties. The subsequent sections are devoted to present and discuss these themes.

4.1. Students' Perception of Speaking

The questionnaire results reveal that a substantial majority of the students view speaking as a critical skill for their academic and professional success. 84% consider speaking essential for their graduate studies, 85% regard it as crucial for their future careers, and 81% see speaking as a fundamental skill for daily communication and interaction

(see Table 2). The findings underscore the importance of speaking for EFL/ESL students (Richards & Rendaya, 2002; Richard, 2008). The strong acknowledgement of speaking significance suggests that students are likely to be inspired and motivated to exert considerable effort towards improving this skill. This positive attitude would serve as catalyst, motivating and encouraging students to strive for excellence and development of speaking proficiency.

Surprisingly, the perception of speaking as a challenging skill was less pronounced among the

participants. Only 46% of the students find speaking not particularly difficult, while 40% view it as challenging, and 15% are neutral on this issue. These results are unexpected and differ from the findings of numerous previous studies and scholar's perspectives, which generally identified speaking as highly challenging skill for EFL/ESL students (e.g. Ur, 1996; Celce-Murcia, 2007). This discrepancy may be attributed to the higher proficiency levels of university students majoring in English, who may perceive speaking as less difficult compared to students at lower proficiency level.

Table 2: Students' Perceptions of Speaking Skill

Questionnaire Items	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.Speaking skill is important for my current graduate studies.	N=21 51%	N=13 32%	N=0 0%	N=2 5%	N=5 12%
2.Speaking skill is important for my future career.	N=25 61%	N=10 24%	N=3 7%	N=3 7%	N=0 0%
3.Speaking skill is the core of daily life communication.	N=13 32%	N=20 49%	N=4 10%	N=4 10%	N=0 0%
4.Speaking skill is difficult to master.	N=8 20%	N=8 20%	N=6 15%	N=17 41%	N=2 5%

4.2. Students' Difficulties in Speaking

The results indicate several significant challenges that students face in speaking (see Table3). The majority of the students (80%) report difficulties in finding appropriate words, phrases, and idiomatic expressions, and these impede their ability to express themselves clearly and effectively. Additionally, over half of students (61%) experience challenges with grammar and sentence structure, highlighting concerns with grammatical accuracy and sentence coherence. Nearly half of the students (46%) also struggle with the pronunciation of certain English sounds and words, affecting their overall clarity in speaking. These findings align with the common linguistic difficulties identified in EFL research studies, such as inadequate grammar, insufficient vocabulary and

inaccurate pronunciation (e.g. Bygate, 2008; Abrar et al., 2008; Zhang, 2013).

Moreover, 56% of the students feel that their accent, which deviate from native pronunciation, impedes their intelligibility and may undermine their confidence and willingness to speak, furthermore; 61% report a lack of fluency in English. These results demonstrate that the students difficulties are related to key components of speaking: accuracy, fluency and comprehensibility (Heaton, 1989. Despite these challenges, the students do not report significant problems in understanding others. This suggest that while their expressive skills may be limited, their receptive skills (i.e. comprehension of spoken English) are relatively strong.

Table 3: Students' Difficulties in Speaking

Questionnaire Items	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5.I struggle to find the right words, phrases and idiomatic expressions when speaking.	N=17 41%	N=16 39%	N=6 15%	N=1 2%	N=1 3%
6.I struggle with grammar and sentence structures when speaking.	N=9 22%	N=16 39%	N=7 17%	N=9 22%	N=0 0%

7.I have difficulties pronouncing some English sounds and words.	N=9 22%	N=14 34%	N=7 17%	N=11 27%	N=0 0%
8.I feel that my accent affects how others understand me when speaking.	N=5 12%	N=18 44%	N=6 15%	N=9 22%	N=1 3%
9.I struggle with fluency in speaking.	N=10 24%	N=15 37%	5 12%	N=10 24%	N=1 3%
10.I find a hardship understanding others speaking.	N=2 5%	N=13 32%	N=13 32%	N=10 24%	N=3 7%

4.3. Factors Impeding Students from Speaking

The questionnaire explored various factors that inhibit students from speaking actively and effectively. The findings demonstrate that most of the students (66%) fear of being criticized by others while speaking; 59% feel shy when speaking in front of others; the same percentage (59%) express hesitation to speak English in social settings; and 56% fear being subjected to sarcasm for making errors while speaking. These psychological barriers (i.e. fear of criticism, shyness, hesitation, and fear of sarcasm) align with findings from previous research on EFL/ESL contexts (e.g. Arnold & Brown, 1999; Brown, 2001). Such factors significantly discourage students

engaging in speaking activities and contribute to their reluctance to practice speaking.

Furthermore, 39% of the students lack confidence in their speaking abilities, and similar percentage (39%) experience nervousness and anxiety when speaking. These findings are consistent with existing literature that identified anxiety, negative attitudes, fear of mistakes and lack of confidence as significant obstacles to effective speaking practice (e.g. Amoah and Yeboah, 2012; Diaab, 2016; Abrar, 2018). These psychological factors not only hamper students speaking skill development but also affect their overall language development, including listening, reading and writing.

Table 4: Factors Preventing Students from Speaking

Questionnaire Items	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
11.I feel lack of self-esteem and confidence when speaking.	7 17%	9 22%	9 22%	12 29%	4 10%
12.I feel nervous and anxious when speaking.	7 17%	9 22%	9 22%	12 29%	4 10%
13.I feel shy when speaking in front of my teacher and classmates.	13 32%	11 27%	8 20%	6 15%	3 7%
14.I usually hesitate to speak in front of others.	13 32%	11 27%	8 20%	6 15%	3 7%
15.I fear of criticism from teacher and peers when speaking.	12 29%	11 27%	9 22%	8 20%	1 2%
16.I fear of being objected to sarcasm when mispronouncing words.	10 24%	13 32%	11 27%	5 12%	2 5%

4.4. Causes of Students' Difficulties in Speaking

The results of the questionnaire identify several fundamental causes of students' difficulties in speaking. The most predominant cause reported by the students is the insufficient opportunities for speaking practice. This lack of practice impede the development of speaking skill.

Additionally, the majority of the students (87%) refer to the absence of workshops and seminars specifically designed to improving speaking skill. 78% also indicate that there is a lack of speaking clubs that offer adequate opportunities for speaking practice. 74% also report that their peers do not encourage them to practice English, and

this diminishes motivation and limits informal speaking practice. Some of the students (61%) attribute their speaking difficulties to the resources shortage for practicing and improving their speaking skill. Less than a half of the students (44%) state that the unhelpful textbooks and insufficient time devoted to English classes are causes of their speaking challenges. 37% criticize the ineffective teaching methods employed by teachers, which provide minimal speaking practice opportunities.

These findings are consistent with previous research studies in EFL/ESL contexts, which underscore the importance of practice opportunities for developing speaking skill (e.g. Swair, 2005; Gan, 2012). The results suggest students learning context neglects the key principles of Output Theory (Swain, 1985) and Interaction Theory (Schmidt, 2010) which emphasize the necessity of practice and interaction for language acquisition and learning. This learning context also appears to overlook

the Input theory (Krashen, 1982), which stresses the need for comprehensible input to advance linguistic competence.

Overall, the main obstacles impeding speaking development are insufficient practice, lack of supportive resources, inadequate textbooks and ineffective teaching methods. The absence of these significant elements in the students learning environment call for more comprehensive and supportive strategies that offer opportunities for the students to practice their speaking. Such strategies would enhance students motivation, build their confidence, expand their vocabulary, improve their pronunciation and accent, refine grammar and sentence structure, and bolster listening comprehension. Ultimately, consistent speaking practice is essential for achieving accuracy, fluency and comprehensibility in English, which are the crucial components of speaking proficiency.

Table 4: Causes of Students' Difficulties in Speaking

Questionnaire Items	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
17.I lack opportunity to practice speaking inside the classroom.	N=13 32%	N=14 34%	N=5 12%	N=8 20%	N=1 2%
18.I lack the linguistic environment to practice speaking outside the classroom.	N=18 44%	N=11 27%	N=4 10%	N=5 12%	N=3 7%
19.The teacher uses traditional teaching methods, which give a little opportunity for students to practice speaking (teacher-centered approach).	N=11 27%	N=4 10%	N=12 29%	N=9 22%	N=5 12%
20.The textbooks do not support and encourage students to practice speaking.	N=7 17%	N=11 27%	N=9 22%	N=13 32%	N=1 2%
21.The time devoted to the speaking classes is not enough.	N=7 17%	N=13 32%	N=6 15%	N=12 29%	N=3 7%
22.There is a lack of resources to practice and improve speaking skill.	N=15 37%	N=14 34%	N=9 22%	N=2 5%	N=1 2%
23.There is a lack of workshops and seminars focusing on improving students' speaking skill.	N=15 37%	N=17 41%	N=3 7%	N=3 7%	N=3 7%
24.There is a lack of speaking clubs that provide an adequate opportunity practicing speaking.	N=14 34%	N=18 44%	N=3 7%	N=5 12%	N=1 2%
25.My peers do not motivate or encourage me to practice speaking.	N=15 37%	N=15 37%	N=5 12%	N=4 10%	N=2 5%

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study investigated Libyan EFL university students' perception of speaking, identified the challenges they face,

and explored the underlying causes of these difficulties. Based on the data collected from 41 participants, several key findings emerged. The students acknowledge the significance of speaking skill for academic success,

personal growth and future career prospects. Despite this acknowledgment, students face considerable challenges in speaking, such as vocabulary limited, grammatical inaccuracies and pronunciation difficulties. In addition, fear of criticism, shyness, and anxiety are factors hindering students' willingness to engage in speaking activities. Also, insufficient opportunities for speaking practice, both inside and outside the classroom, are identified as the main cause of these difficulties.

Based on these results, some recommendations are offered to the teachers and educational institutions. Teachers should integrate more speaking activities, such as debates, group discussion, and role-playing exercises. This approach will provide students with frequent and varied speaking practice. They also need to shift from applying traditional, teacher-centered methods to interactive teaching methods and to employ techniques that promote student participation and active speaking practice. In addition, teachers are required to foster a supportive environment that builds students confidence and reduces anxiety. This can be achieved through pair and group work activities which help to alleviate fear and boost self-esteem. They also need to encourage students to engage in language exchange programs to practice English with native or more proficient speakers outside of class. This helps students to gain confidence and improve their speaking fluency. On the other hand, educational institutions should establish speaking clubs and seminars dedicated to improving speaking skill. They also need to review and update textbooks to include more speaking-focused content and to ensure access to supplementary material, such as language labs and online platforms. By implementing these recommendations, teachers and institutions can create more supportive and effective learning environment assisting students to improve their speaking proficiency and overall language competence. These changes would contribute to students' academic and professional success.

Although this study gives valuable insights addressing EFL students difficulties in speaking, it has two main limitations. First, the small sample size, confined to student from the Department of English, Faculty of Arts at University of Zawia, limits the generalizability of the findings. Second, the use of single data collection instrument (i.e. questionnaire) does not allow the students to discuss their speaking difficulties in detail. Thus, future research should involve larger and more diverse samples from several universities and employ multiple data collection tools, such as interview and focus group. Such studies would help to gain comprehensive understanding of students' experiences and challenges in speaking.

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