

Exploring the Barriers to Speaking Fluency among EFL Students at Panjshir University

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Article History:

Received: 09. 5.2026

Accepted: 28. 5.2026

Online First: 22.6.2026

Citation:

Sediqi, M.S. et al.(2026).
Exploring the Barriers to
Speaking Fluency among EFL
Students at Panjshir University.
*Kdz Uni Int J Islam Stud and Soc
Sci*;3(2):232-239

e-ISSN: 3078-3895

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Abstract

EFL classes are designed to provide non-native speakers with the opportunity to learn and practice English language skills. Additionally, EFL classes aim to enhance students' vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation through different activities, including role-playing, group discussions, and language games. Speaking is another key area of focus in EFL classes. The students are motivated to speak in an encouraging atmosphere where they receive feedback provided by their peers and English teachers. However, EFL students in the English language and literature department are unable to speak English fluently inside and outside the classroom. This study aims to investigate the common barriers, reasons, and causes hindering students from achieving English fluency. There are several reasons for the fluency problems among EFL students at this university. A qualitative method is employed in the current research to identify barriers from the perspectives of lecturers and students. The data was analyzed through thematic analysis, in which the researcher tended to discover the main causes impeding students from speaking English fluently. In conclusion, the low English fluency of students at Panjshir University has several reasons. The reasons are a lack of chance to practice speaking, students' shyness about talking, and fear of making mistakes.

Keywords: EFL Students, Speaking barriers, Fluency.

Introduction

According to Zrekat and Al-Sohbani (2022), low English proficiency among learners is one of the two main factors: internal and external. They stated that the internal factors included a lack of confidence when using English, negative attitudes, and anxiety. Both internal and external variables might provide challenges when teaching EFL learners to speak English. Speaking English is often hindered by internal variables while training EFL students to speak the language. Native language, age, exposure, natural phonetic ability, linguistic ego and identity, motivation, and care for clear speech are the issues (Nuraini, 2016).

Whereas, the external factors, Zrekat and Al-Sohbani said, include the lack of opportunities to use the English language, whether in or outside the classroom. They added that the findings of their study revealed these factors hindering Arab Open

University learners from speaking fluently: (i) practical constraints, the huge number of students in classrooms, (ii) pedagogy and syllabus, missing discussion in classrooms, (iii) practice, lack of practicing speaking in and outside the classroom, (iv) linguistic insufficiency, and (v) effective factors related to anxiety, attitudes and motivation in particular students being shy and embarrassed and they are not encouraged to speak in English. Ur (1991) states the following issues learners encounter when learning to speak: mother tongue use, poor or unequal involvement, inhibition, and nothing to say.

University students did not deem their skills of oral proficiency adequate, and the lack of emphasis on teaching speaking and the pressure placed on them by high-stakes testing in their prior English language learning experiences adversely affected their oral proficiency (Kosar, 2020). Alshammari (2022) stated that although the majority of studies have been done on finding out why Saudi university students perform poorly in their English courses, the root causes remained a mystery. To gain more comprehensive thoughts, he conducted a study to investigate the underlying reasons for Saudi university learners performing poorly in English by including all major stakeholders. He found that there was a shared chain of factors related to objectives, learners, teachers, curricula, assessment, and practicality. He also discovered that there was a gap between the theories consultants used to set class objectives and the actual class.

Akatsuka (2019) states that the findings of his study with the Japanese students suggest that if university teachers ask HOTS (Higher-Order Thinking Questions) questions, students would become aware of critical thinking attitudes and acquire English-speaking skills. As emphasized by Chou (2021), in his quasi-experimental study of Taiwanese university learners, he found that the students who received an integrated pedagogical approach for 18 weeks adopted the rehearsal and social strategies more frequently than the control group. Therefore, the experimental group steadily improved their speaking ability throughout the semester.

Alfuhaid (2021) asserts that the integration of Duolingo in the learning process has a fundamental positive impact on enhancing participants' speaking proficiency, such as improving their overall language skills. According to Alshammari (2020), the Cambly online speaking platform among EFL learning environments improves students' oral performance, fluency, and confidence by giving them real-world opportunities to communicate with native speakers.

The students' lack of vocabulary, reluctance or reluctant sensation of making mistakes, and fear were the internal elements that, surprise, dominated the challenges in their speaking performance (Manurung & Izar, 2019). Speaking English presented several difficulties for the participants, including poor pronunciation of English vocabulary, low self-esteem, difficulties with grammar in use, a lack of vocabulary, the environment, factors influencing course content, inadequate education, the instructor, various teaching factors, aspects of the classroom culture, interpersonal issues, mother tongue, and accent (Ghafar, Yaseen, & Amin, 2022). Similarly, Heriansyah (2012) identified limited vocabulary and fear of making mistakes as the primary obstacles to improving speaking abilities. Another study on overcoming the challenges of acquiring foreign language skills in the classroom by Sokip (2020) discovered that students' main motivation issues with speaking abilities are their frequent fear of making mistakes when speaking. Lack of vocabulary, poor pronunciation, nervousness, translation of everything, and insufficient exposure to the language all contribute to students' difficulties with self-expression (Rocio, 2022). Anita

et al. (2023) stated that the majority of learners still have difficulties when learning to speak English, including low confidence and fear of making mistakes. Furthermore, Amoah and Yeboah (2021), speaking difficulties among EFL learners are strongly associated with motivational issues, such as a restricted vocabulary, a fear of making mistakes, and poor self-confidence, which considerably lower learners' willingness to participate in oral communication and hinder the development of fluency.

EFL students at Panjshir University are unable to speak in English while they are trying to discuss in English. During my teaching at Panjshir University, the researcher noticed that EFL students struggle with speaking English. Since they are not able to communicate in English, they decide to discuss either in Dari or Pashto. However, the researcher could not find the main reasons for the weak speaking skills of students' communication. Therefore, the researcher conducted this study to find out the main reasons behind the weak speaking skills of EFL students at Panjshir University. The prime focus of this study is to investigate the speaking fluency problems among the students at Panjshir University. Thus, a mixed-methods research approach is used to achieve the goal.

The researchers noticed that the majority of the students in the English department are struggling to speak English. They cannot be fluent enough to express themselves to the teacher or their classmates. Due to weak speaking skills and low fluency, they are unable to participate in activities, ask questions of the teachers, or give presentations. Therefore, this study is conducted to identify the students' fluency barriers, reasons, and causes. This study will be effective and helpful for both EFL teachers and students as it explores the common causes that impede students in speaking English.

Material and Method

This present study is a qualitative research design to investigate the factors hindering speaking fluency among EFL students at Panjshir University. It was considered appropriate to use a qualitative approach because it would enable deeper insight into the participants' experiences, perceptions, and difficulties regarding speaking fluent English in their academic setting.

Research Design

The research design was a descriptive qualitative study aimed at identifying and explaining the prevalent issues and causal factors that lead to students' speaking fluency challenges. Such a design allowed the researchers to study the phenomenon through the lenses of the students and lecturers without statistical generalization.

Participants and Sampling

The study participants were English Language and Literature students at Panjshir University, who were EFL students. Participants were selected through purposive sampling; it was appropriate because in a position to capture rich and relevant information about speaking difficulties. To have diversity in terms of levels of expertise and learning experience, students of all four academic years were included in the sample.

Data Collection Instruments

Two primary instruments were utilized for data collection:

Classroom Observation

The researchers conducted systematic classroom observations over a period of sixteen weeks. This method allowed for direct examination of students' speaking performance,

participation, and interaction patterns in real classroom settings. Observations focused on identifying recurring speaking problems such as hesitation, misuse of vocabulary, grammatical errors, and reliance on the first language.

Semi-structure interview

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected students to explore the underlying causes of their speaking difficulties. This instrument provided flexibility for participants to express their views, experiences, and feelings regarding barriers to speaking fluency. The interviews focused on factors such as motivation, anxiety, prior learning experiences, and classroom environment.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The researchers systematically organized, coded, and categorized the data to identify recurring themes and patterns related to speaking fluency barriers. Through this process, key themes such as lack of practice opportunities, fear of making mistakes, low confidence, and limited vocabulary were identified and interpreted.

Findings

The findings of the present study indicate that nearly all EFL students at Panjshir University have problems with speaking skills. The majority of learners are unable to talk about common topics in English, which implies a low level of communicative competence. In addition, many students cannot easily and fluently answer questions without hesitation and lack confidence in their speech. More importantly, most of the students avoid speaking in English in the classroom because they feel they cannot express themselves properly. This avoidance behavior further limits their opportunities to practice the language and results in their low speaking fluency.

Table 1.

Common Speaking Problems of EFL Learners at Panjshir University

No	Problem	Frequency
1	Misuse of vocabulary	62.2%
2	Low vocabulary knowledge	74.5%
3	Incorrect grammar and structure usage	78.5%
4	Wrong pronunciation of words and phrases	51.6%
5	Interference of L1	44.72
6	Lack of world knowledge	56%

According to Table 1, the majority of students are unable to construct precise and coherent sentences when speaking, with poor grammar and structure usage accounting for 78.5% of the most serious issues. This weakness limits their ability to express ideas clearly and leads to hesitation during communication. This problem is closely linked to learners' inadequate vocabulary knowledge (74.5%), which shows that they lack the lexical resources necessary to sustain their communication. Insufficient vocabulary makes it difficult for students to locate the correct words, which causes them to speak more slowly and with less fluency. Furthermore, misuse of terminology (62.2%) emphasizes that students frequently use words incorrectly even when they are familiar with them. For example, they may confuse word forms or meanings, which results in unclear or inaccurate communication. This shows that the problem is not only a lack of vocabulary but also a lack of proper

understanding of how to use words in context. Another important issue is a lack of world knowledge (56%), which affects students' ability to generate ideas during speaking. The majority of the learners do not have enough background knowledge or content to talk about, so they remain silent or produce very limited responses. This suggests that speaking fluency depends not only on language ability but also on the ability to think and organize ideas. Additionally, 51.6% of students pronounce words incorrectly, which is a major obstacle to understanding them. Incorrect pronunciation can lead to misunderstandings and reduce students' confidence, making them less willing to participate in speaking activities. Finally, the interference of the first language (L1) (44.72%) shows that the majority of the students rely on their native language when speaking English. They often translate mentally, which leads to errors in sentence structure and unnatural expressions. This slows down their speech and prevents smooth communication. Overall, the table demonstrates that speaking problems among these learners are interconnected. Weak grammar, limited vocabulary, pronunciation issues, and lack of ideas all work together to reduce fluency. These problems explain why many students are unable to speak confidently and effectively in English both inside and outside the classroom.

Table 2.**Common Causes of EFL Learners' Low Fluency at Panjshir University**

No	Problem	Frequency
1	Lack of English language learning experience before attending university	9/12
2	Lack of attention to the English language during school time	6/12
3	Lack of motivation for learning English	7/12
4	Use of instruction and teacher-centered methods by teachers at the university	8/12
5	Lack of standard language courses	5/12
6	Use of students' L1 in the class	9/12

The results in Table 2 show that a combination of pre-university inadequacies, instructional strategies, and contextual constraints significantly influences the low speaking fluency of EFL students at Panjshir University. The two most important characteristics are the frequent use of students' first language (L1) in the classroom (9/12) and the absence of previous English learning experience before university. These two issues imply that students continue to rely on their native language and enter higher education with inadequate linguistic foundations, which severely limits their exposure to meaningful English communication and slows down the development of fluency. Additionally, teaching methods significantly impact how well students communicate. The employment of teacher-centered methods was cited as a major impediment by a significant portion of participants (8/12). This suggests that teachers predominate in classroom settings, giving pupils few chances to participate actively in speaking exercises. Because of this, students do not receive enough practice to build their confidence and communication skills. Low fluency is also significantly influenced by characteristics related to educational background and motivation. The results indicate that pupils' enthusiasm and readiness for language acquisition are weakened by a lack of desire (7/12) and a lack of attention to English during school years (6/12). These elements are a reflection of a larger problem in

earlier educational phases, where English is insufficiently prioritized, creating gaps that continue into higher education. Moreover, systemic constraints in the educational setting are highlighted by structural issues such as the absence of standard language courses (5/12). Students have less access to high-quality education and practice opportunities outside of regular classrooms when there are no creative and well-designed language programs. Finally, the results show that a combination of educational background, instructional strategies, learner motivation, and institutional limitations contributes to students' poor speaking fluency rather than a single issue. This interdependence implies that enhancing speaking fluency necessitates all-encompassing treatments, such as bolstering pre-university English instruction, encouraging student-centered teaching methods, lowering reliance on L1, and increasing access to standard language learning materials.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that EFL students at Panjshir University face a wide range of interconnected obstacles to speaking fluency, such as a lack of vocabulary, poor grammar, mispronunciation, L1 interference, inadequate world knowledge, low motivation, and the predominance of teacher-centered instruction. The current research, which consistently emphasizes that speaking challenges in EFL contexts are molded by a combination of linguistic, psychological, and instructional factors rather than a single reason, provides significant support for these conclusions. The prevalence of vocabulary and grammar-related issues, in particular, supports the findings of Heriansyah (2012), Ghafar, Yaseen, and Amin (2022), and Rocio (2022), who highlight how learners' capacity to communicate effectively and fluently is severely hampered by a lack of lexical and structural knowledge. Similarly, the pronunciation issues found in this study are consistent with earlier studies that show phonological errors to be a significant cause of communication breakdown among EFL learners. Anita et al. (2023), Sokip (2020), and Manurung and Izar (2019) contend that anxiety and low self-confidence are important obstacles that lower students' willingness to speak and impede the development of fluency. The psychological dimensions found in this study, particularly fear of making mistakes, low confidence, and reluctance to participate, also strongly correlate with these findings. Additionally, the results of Zrekat and Al-Sohbani (2022) and Ur (1991), who emphasize that inadequate communicative practice and unequal participation opportunities significantly limit learners' speaking performance, are supported by the influence of teacher-centered instruction and limited classroom interaction; Kosar (2020) and Alshammari (2022) also highlight the long-term impact of weak prior learning experiences on students' oral proficiency at the university level. The current study, however, adds to the body of literature by showing that, in the context of Afghan EFL, these characteristics are significantly interrelated rather than independent. For example, insufficient exposure to English in the classroom reinforces L1 interference, and low motivation and limited world knowledge further hinder students' ability to generate ideas and engage in meaningful conversations. Furthermore, by limiting speaking chances and encouraging passive learning practices, the predominance of traditional teaching methods exacerbates these issues. Therefore, rather than being the result of discrete individual shortcomings, speaking fluency issues at Panjshir University should be regarded as the

result of a complex system of linguistic limits, psychological impediments, and institutional restraints.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study examined the obstacles to speaking fluency among EFL students at Panjshir University and showed that students encounter numerous, interrelated difficulties while trying to improve their oral communication abilities. The results revealed that most students find it hard to talk about simple issues, they cannot express themselves clearly in English, and they often don't engage in class discussion due to their lack of confidence and the inability to express their opinions. According to the findings, one of the biggest barriers is language. Students' ability to speak clearly and effectively is hampered by high levels of poor grammatical usage, lack of vocabulary, vocabulary misuse, and pronunciation mistakes. Additionally, students' capacity to produce ideas and maintain communication is further limited by the interference of their first language and their lack of global knowledge. Moreover, the study also emphasizes the significant impact of instructional practices and educational background; many students arrive at university with little prior exposure to English, and teacher-centered approaches restrict opportunities for speaking practice and active participation; frequent use of the first language in the classroom further lowers students' engagement with English; low motivation and the absence of standard language courses also contribute to the persistence of these issues. Finally, the results show that students' poor speaking competency at Panjshir University is caused by a variety of linguistic, pedagogical, and contextual difficulties that compound one another rather than a single factor.

Acknowledgment

The authors also thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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