



Barriers to English-Speaking Proficiency among Saudi EFL Learners: Perspectives from Students and Instructors

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This study explores the multifaceted challenges faced by Saudi EFL students at Majmaah University in developing English-speaking skills. Participants included 68 students and 31 instructors who responded to questionnaires, while 15 students and 18 instructors were interviewed. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study identified cognitive-linguistic, affective-psychological, and environmental-instructional barriers to speaking proficiency. The reliability and validity of the instruments were confirmed through a pilot study to ensure the accuracy and credibility of the findings. Results revealed that difficulties with grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, together with anxiety, low confidence, and teacher-centred approaches, hinder oral fluency. Recommendations include adopting communicative teaching practices, reducing class sizes, integrating authentic speaking opportunities, and providing teacher training. The study contributes practical and pedagogical insights relevant to both national and international efforts to enhance English language teaching in higher education. This study adds a combined analysis of student and instructor perspectives in one Saudi university, which is missing in previous research. It also shows how cognitive, affective, and environmental barriers interact in the local context.

Keywords: English speaking challenges, EFL learners, Saudi university students, communicative language teaching, language instruction barriers

INTRODUCTION

In today's increasingly globalised world, proficiency in English has become a key requirement for academic, professional, and social interactions. English has become the most widely used language for communication, education, business, and global diplomacy. Among the four language skills, listening, speaking, reading, and writing, speaking is widely regarded as the most challenging for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, particularly in non-native contexts (Santhanasamy & Yunus, 2022 ; Normawati et al., 2023). Speaking involves constructing meaning through both verbal

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and non-verbal communication. According to Brown (2004), speaking is an interactive process that requires fluency, accuracy, and spontaneous production. It includes producing, receiving, and processing information orally. Speaking helps learners express ideas, emotions, and engage in social interaction. Accordingly, speaking lies at the core of second language acquisition. It is essential for effective communication and language development. Speaking enables learners to express their thoughts, engage in discussions, participate in classroom interactions, and demonstrate their understanding of the language (Malik et al., 2021)

Despite its significance, EFL learners often struggle to express themselves fluently and accurately due to a range of linguistic, psychological, and contextual factors. In addition, students perceive speaking as the most difficult skill to develop due to its demand for real-time processing and confidence (Nazara, 2011). In spite of these challenges, mastering speaking skills is significant not only for communication but also for academic and professional success (Weda et al., 2021).

Rabab'ah (2003) noted that Arab students face significant challenges in learning English due to restricted opportunities for natural interaction in the target language within Arab countries. Speaking challenges refer to the difficulties learners encounter while learning or using a foreign language, which hinder effective communication. These challenges are associated with cognitive and linguistic, affective and psychological, and environmental and sociocultural factors.

At Majmaah University, students enrolled in English language programs face persistent difficulties in achieving oral fluency. Factors such as limited vocabulary, fear of making mistakes, lack of exposure to real-life English, and traditional teaching methods contribute to these challenges. While the existence of such challenges is well-documented globally, there is a shortage of integrated, dual-perspective studies within the Saudi higher education context that simultaneously examine the cognitive, affective, and environmental barriers and, crucially, their interrelationships. A clear understanding of how these factors interact from student and instructor perspectives is still lacking at Majmaah University. This study aims to fill this gap by conducting a comprehensive, mixed-methods investigation at Majmaah University. Previous studies in Saudi Arabia examined student challenges or instructor views separately. They did not combine both groups in one design. They did not analyse how the three barrier types influence each other in one model. This study fills this gap by offering one integrated comparison and by analysing the interaction among cognitive, affective, and environmental barriers in one institutional setting.

This study contributes to the literature by providing an integrated, context-specific analysis of speaking challenges that highlights the interaction among cognitive, affective, and environmental factors from both student and instructor perspectives.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the challenges Saudi that EFL students face in developing speaking skills from instructors' perspectives?

2. What are the challenges Saudi that EFL students face in the development of speaking skills from students' perspectives?

By investigating both perspectives, the research aims to provide practical recommendations for improving and enhancing English-speaking instruction in the Saudi EFL context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews relevant theories and previous studies as one of the ways of contextualizing the challenges in EFL Speaking that address the challenges as one moves towards oral proficiency. These theories were selected not only to categorize challenges but, more importantly, to analyse their interactions and to directly inform the investigation of both student and instructor perspectives.

Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in key theories of language learning

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) The study is based on key theories of language acquisition. SLA theory includes second language acquisition theories and emphasizes the role of comprehension input and interaction. The interaction hypothesis emphasizes how interaction in conversation and feedback for language learning; the output hypothesis states and improve that language production and strengthens language skills (Krüger, 2023). This theory directly supports the examination of linguistic barriers such as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation difficulties reported by students and instructors. It helps explain why a lack of practice opportunity—a key environmental factor—severely limits the cognitive process necessary for developing speaking skill.

Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen) proposes that the SL process is affected by affective factors. These factors include motivation, self-esteem, and apprehension which affect the learner's ability to absorb input and language. Wang (2020) noted that a low affective filter characterized by high motivation, self-esteem and low apprehension could result in a high degree of language acquisition. This hypothesis is crucial for analysing the affective and psychological barriers (e.g., anxiety, low confidence) reported by students and observed by instructors. It helps explain how emotional factors can interact with cognitive processes to hinder speaking proficiency.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) promotes authentic communication towards the use of language. It focuses on assisting students in acquiring fluency via interaction, not memorization of the rules of grammar. CLT places emphasis on the development of communicative competence, allowing students to utilize language effectively in everyday situations (Qinghong, 2009). CLT provides a pedagogical framework for evaluating the environmental and instructional barriers, such as teacher-centred approaches and a lack of communicative practice, which are highlighted in both research questions. It also provides recommendations for improving speaking instruction.

Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky) stresses the importance of social interaction and scaffolding in learning. Vygotsky argues that cognitive functions first occur on a social

level before becoming internalized. In the context of language learning, social interaction and collaboration with more knowledgeable peers or instructors, who provide scaffolding, help learners acquire linguistic strategies (Vygotsky, 1997). This theory is used to analyze the environmental and sociocultural barriers, including classroom dynamics and peer interactions, from both students' and instructors' viewpoints. It explains how the learning environment and social context can either support or hinder the development of speaking skills.

Together, these theories explain how linguistic difficulty increases anxiety, how anxiety reduces participation, and how limited interaction in the classroom keeps these problems active. These connections guided the analysis of the student and instructor data.

Previous Studies on EFL Speaking Challenges

Linguistic and Cognitive Factors

EFL learners face several linguistic and cognitive barriers that hinder their English-speaking proficiency. Common linguistic difficulties include incorrect grammar use, limited vocabulary, weak sentence construction, and poor pronunciation skills (Alsalami, 2022; Al-Ma'shy, 2011; Al-Khresheh & Al-Ruwaili, 2020; Normawati et al., 2023). These challenges often stem from limited exposure to authentic English and lack of consistent practice.

Cognitively, learners struggle with vocabulary retention and memory-related issues. Psychological challenges such as anxiety, low confidence, and lack of motivation also affect performance, especially in online learning environments (Aljurbua, 2021; Mahdi, 2024; Al-Samiri, 2021). Vocabulary gaps, grammar mistakes, and pronunciation problems are persistent issues (Akhter, 2020; Rabab'ah, 2003).

Research, particularly Elsayyad's (2015) study, focused on Arabic-speaking learners and demonstrated that working memory capacity predicts reading comprehension in both Arabic (L1) and English (L2). Even after controlling for word reading and vocabulary, stronger working memory was linked to better performance. Learners with limited working memory tend to produce simpler sentences and experience more pauses and interruptions during speech.

Linguistically, a lack of vocabulary hinders sentence construction and reduces learner confidence. Weak grammar use leads to frequent errors that disrupt communication. To compensate, learners often rely on repetition or self-correction. Phonological processing—particularly the phonological loop component of working memory—is essential for managing sounds and stress patterns. Deficits in this area often result in unclear pronunciation and incorrect stress application. These cognitive and linguistic variables are in interaction. Low working memory makes higher demands on cognitive processing, with resultant more speech hesitations and higher anxiety, thereby further degrading memory performance. With these difficulties, students can fall back on their mother tongue and avoid the use of English lest they err.

Affective and Psychological Factors:

Affective and psychological inhibitions are major contributory factors to the decrease in Saudi EFL learners' speaking confidence. "Saudi EFL students find speaking to be the most anxiety-provoking skill" (Ali et al., 2019). Hamad (2013) identified serious challenges faced by Saudi female college students in southern Saudi Arabia, including fear of public speaking, English-speaking shyness, overuse of Arabic in class, and insufficient practice of speaking because classrooms are overcrowded and the curriculum is not oral speaking based.

Also, Hamouda (2013) carried out research on first-year students at Qassim University and found widespread avoidance of using English. Contributing factors included low level of proficiency, fear of mistakes, negative evaluation, shyness, and lack of confidence. Such affective barriers were likely to cause learners to avoid speaking tasks altogether.

These studies identify the additive effect of affective stressors such as anxiety, fear, and low self-esteem and classroom pressures that are all strong deterrents to the acquisition of English-speaking skills. Anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and low confidence are extensively cited to be the main constraints on speaking ability (Dincer & Yeşilyurt, 2013; Juhana, 2018; Weda et al., 2021).

Environmental and Sociocultural Factors:

Environmental and sociocultural factors play a crucial role in shaping EFL learners' speaking development, particularly in contexts where English is taught as a foreign language. Classroom conditions, instructional practices, cultural expectations, and institutional support can either facilitate or hinder learners' opportunities to practice and develop oral communication skills. In the Saudi EFL context, several studies have highlighted how these external factors interact with learner motivation and anxiety, ultimately influencing speaking proficiency (Mahdi, 2024; Malik et al., 2021).

Holbah (2023) looked at the challenges Saudi EFL students face when attempting to improve their communication skills. The study focused on environmental and instructional factors, emphasizing the role of teachers in addressing curriculum design, motivation, and classroom conditions. In order to create more engaging and meaningful learning environments, it is also recommended integrating environmental consciousness into language instruction. Although the study's primary focus was sustainability, it acknowledged the impact of classroom environments and instructional constraints on speaking development.

Arabai (2016) investigated the causes of Saudi learners' poor English proficiency in a more comprehensive study. Lack of motivation and anxiety were examples of internal barriers. Sociocultural pressures, the excessive use of Arabic, underqualified teachers, packed classrooms, and a lack of institutional support were examples of external challenges. These issues still exist even though national reforms are meant to enhance English instruction.

Both studies demonstrate how sociocultural norms, constrictive classroom settings, and teaching methods improve the oral proficiency of Saudi EFL students.

To conclude, the two studies demonstrate how poor teaching methods, classroom settings, and sociocultural factors affect Saudi EFL learners' ability for effective English communication.

Cultural norms, crowded classrooms, and a lack of speaking practice all hinder students' ability to communicate effectively (Salahuddin et al., 2013; Alrabai, 2016). These findings are repeated across studies in Saudi Arabia and show a continuous need for better learning environments and more effective teaching practices. The reviewed studies identify many barriers that affect EFL speaking, but they do not explain how these barriers interact in one model. They also do not combine student and instructor perspectives within one Saudi university. This gap supports the need for the current study and guides its mixed-method design. This review highlights the need for a methodological design that captures both perspectives and explains how the barriers reinforce one another.

METHOD

Research Design

The study employed a mixed-method design to collect quantitative as well as qualitative data. Dörnyei (2007) clarifies that combining qualitative and quantitative methods allows researchers to gain in-depth knowledge of complex issues through maximizing the strengths of each approach and establishing the most appropriate research paradigms. Specifically, a parallel mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) was adopted. This design was selected to concurrently collect and analyze both forms of data, allowing the quantitative and qualitative findings to be compared and integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. The present study explored the issues of English-speaking skill teaching and learning at Majmaah University through collecting the viewpoints of both lecturers and students.

Participants

A total of 68 students and 31 instructors from Majmaah University's English Language Department participated in the study, representing both genders, campuses, and experience levels. The student participants, aged between 18 and 26 years, were selected from the bachelor's level. Participants were selected using a convenience voluntary sampling strategy. Instructors were invited via email to all departmental faculty, and students were recruited from various English language courses across different academic levels (1 to 8) and campuses (Zulfi, the College of Education, and Howtah Sudir). The instructors included 8 males and 23 females, aged between 28 and 54 years, all with teaching experience. The participants came from all academic levels (1 to 8) and were enrolled across three campuses: Zulfi, the College of Education, and Howtah Sudir, the College of Science and Humanities.

Instruments

Two structured questionnaires and two semi-structured interview protocols were developed. The questionnaires and semi-structured interviews addressed cognitive, affective, and environmental factors using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree." The study initially developed two questionnaires—one for EFL students and one for instructors. Initially, each questionnaire included 24 items related to English-speaking challenges. After conducting a pilot study, items with weak reliability were removed to improve the internal consistency of the instruments. As a result, the final student questionnaire included 18 items, and the instructor questionnaire was reduced to 15 items. In addition to the questionnaires, participants were invited for follow-up interviews by providing their email addresses. To gain deeper insights, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with 18 English instructors and 15 students. The interviews were guided by key open-ended questions and allowed for probing to explore participants' perspectives more thoroughly. Each interview lasted 15–25 minutes and was recorded and transcribed for coding.

Data Collection and Analysis

The study addressed two main research questions focusing on both student and instructor perspectives. Data were collected via Forms for questionnaires and Meet was for interviews. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS (V.30) and JASP. Descriptive statistics—including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were calculated to summarize participants' responses. Qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process involved: (1) transcribing and familiarizing with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing and refining themes, and (5) defining and naming the final themes. The students' questionnaires were provided in both English and Arabic, with each question carefully translated to match participants' language preferences. to ensure accuracy and to meet participants' language preferences. The questionnaires were designed to investigate EFL students' challenges in developing their speaking skills. Once data collection was complete, the responses were compiled, coded, and analyzed to address the research questions.

Validity and Reliability

The tools were reviewed by EFL experts and piloted. Cronbach's Alpha and Pearson correlations confirmed internal consistency and reliability. To ensure the validity of the questionnaires, multiple steps were taken. The items were carefully developed to reflect the core aspects of speaking challenges, establishing construct validity. Content and face validity were established through expert review by four faculty members, who provided feedback on item clarity and alignment with the study objectives. Internal consistency was further assessed using Pearson correlation coefficients between individual items and their respective dimension scores, all items showed significant correlations, confirming they measured the intended constructs.

Reliability was also assessed using Cronbach's alpha, test-retest reliability, item-total analysis, and split-half coefficients. Both the student and instructor questionnaires

demonstrated acceptable to high internal consistency, with overall Cronbach's alpha values of 0.833 and 0.799, respectively. A test-retest procedure also indicated strong reliability ($r = 0.95$) for the student questionnaire. Inter-rater reliability for the qualitative data was measured using Cohen's Kappa. Instructor interviews showed excellent agreement ($\kappa = 0.904$), while student interviews showed moderate agreement ($\kappa = 0.469$), indicating that the coding was generally consistent. To enhance the credibility and comprehensiveness of the findings, data triangulation was employed. This involved comparing and contrasting the results from the quantitative questionnaires with the qualitative interview data. For example, quantitative trends such as high mean scores for anxiety were explored and validated using participants' detailed explanations and experiences shared in the interviews. This convergence of data sources strengthens the validity of the conclusions drawn. Overall, the instruments were found to be both valid and reliable for investigating speaking challenges in the EFL context.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section first presents the key research findings and then discusses them by contrasting the results with existing literature. The discussion highlights similarities, differences, and explains why variations occur, drawing on SLA and affective theories to provide deeper insight into speaking barriers at Majmaah University.

Cognitive and Linguistic Challenges

Overall, vocabulary problems ranked highest for both groups. Both students and instructors identified vocabulary limitations, grammar difficulties, and poor pronunciation as primary obstacles to speaking fluency. The quantitative data from students (Table 1) revealed that difficulty in using vocabulary spontaneously in conversation (Item 7) was the most strongly agreed-upon issue, with a mean score of ($M = 2.30$) (on a scale where 1=Strongly Agree, 5=Strongly Disagree). Challenges related to grammar and sentence structure (Items 1, 2, and 3) were also prominent, with mean scores ranging from ($M = 2.69$ to 2.98).

The instructors' perspectives, as shown in Table 2, corroborated these findings. The mean scores for the cognitive-linguistic dimension were notably lower (ranging from $M = 1.84$ to 2.10), indicating that instructors "Agreed" to "Strongly Agreed" that these factors pose significant challenges for students. This suggests instructors perceive these cognitive barriers as even more critical than students do.

Qualitative interviews provided deeper insight. Both instructors (77.7%) and students (80%) cited limited vocabulary as a major barrier. One student noted, "I often know what I want to say in Arabic, but I can't find the English words," highlighting the problem of word retrieval and reliance on translation. Instructors observed an "overuse of rehearsed expressions" and a lack of authentic language production, linking this to students' limited exposure to real-world English (61.1% of instructors). The prominence of vocabulary and grammar issues aligns with prior Saudi EFL research (Alsalmi, 2022; Al-Khreshah & Al-Ruwaili, 2020). Instructors perceived these challenges as more severe than students did, suggesting a metacognitive gap. This highlights the SLA focus on moving from declarative knowledge to procedural fluency.

Table 1
Students' Perceptions of Cognitive and Linguistic Barriers to English-Speaking Proficiency

Item No.	Dimension	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	Std. Dev.	Rank
1	Challenging to use correct grammar	10 (7.4%)	30 (22.1%)	52 (38.2%)	40 (29.4%)	4 (2.9%)	2.98	0.969	4
2	Struggle to find the right words	16 (11.8%)	40 (29.4%)	52 (38.2%)	22 (16.2%)	6 (4.4%)	2.72	1.010	2
3	Difficult to keep track of grammar rules while speaking	24 (17.6%)	34 (25.0%)	44 (32.4%)	28 (20.6%)	6 (4.4%)	2.69	1.120	1
4	Over-rely on memorized phrases	22 (16.2%)	8 (5.9%)	40 (29.4%)	44 (32.4%)	22 (16.2%)	3.26	1.270	7
5	Challenges with correct intonation	18 (13.2%)	22 (16.2%)	36 (26.5%)	46 (33.8%)	14 (10.3%)	3.11	1.200	6
6	Problems linking sentences	16 (11.8%)	34 (25.0%)	38 (27.9%)	38 (27.9%)	10 (7.4%)	2.94	1.144	3
7	Hesitate due to lack of vocabulary	40 (29.4%)	46 (33.8%)	24 (17.6%)	20 (14.7%)	6 (4.4%)	2.30	1.175	5
Overall Dimension Mean		Std. Deviation							
2.86		0.813							

Note: Scale: 1=Strongly Agree, 2=Agree, 3=Neutral, 4=Disagree, 5=Strongly Disagree.*

Table 2
Instructors' Perceptions of Cognitive and Linguistic Barriers to English-Speaking Proficiency

Item No.	Dimension	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	Std. Dev.	Rank
1	Students find it challenging to use correct grammar	7 (22.58%)	20 (64.51%)	3 (9.67%)	1 (3.23%)	0%	1.935	0.680	3
2	Students often struggle to find the right words.	9 (29.03%)	14 (45.11%)	7 (22.51%)	1 (3.23%)	0%	2.000	0.816	2
3	Students find it difficult to keep track of grammar rules	14 (45.16%)	12 (38.71%)	2 (6.4%)	2 (6.45%)	1 (3.23%)	1.839	1.036	4
4	Students rely too heavily on memorized phrases	4 (12.9%)	22 (70.96%)	3 (9.67%)	2 (6.4%)	0%	2.097	0.700	1
5	Students face challenges with correct intonation	10 (32.26%)	17 (54.83%)	1 (3.23%)	2 (6.45%)	1 (3.23%)	1.935	0.964	3
Overall Dimension Mean		Std. Deviation							
1.887		0.388							

Note: Scale: 1=Strongly Agree, 2=Agree, 3=Neutral, 4=Disagree, 5=Strongly Disagree.*

Affective and Psychological Challenges

Anxiety and fear of mistakes were the strongest psychological barriers. Emotional barriers were among the most significant impediments to fluency in speaking. Student questionnaire data (Table 3) showed that anxiety, fear of mistakes, and performance pressure were prevalent, with mean scores ranging from (M = 2.60 to 2.85). This indicates that students, on average, leaned toward "Agreeing" that these affective factors hinder their speaking. The prevalence of anxiety strongly supports Ali et al. (2019), Hamouda (2013), Weda et al. (2021) and Malik et al. (2021), validating Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis. The data reveal a vicious cycle where anxiety inhibits practice, and lack of practice perpetuates anxiety.

Instructors were acutely aware of this dynamic. As shown in Table 4, the overall dimension mean was $M = 2.19$, signifying that instructors also "Agree" that psychological factors severely impact students' willingness to speak. The qualitative findings powerfully reinforced this: 100% of interviewed students reported experiencing fear and anxiety during speaking activities. Instructors frequently observed students' "reluctance to participate" and "fear of negative evaluation," which often led students to avoid speaking tasks entirely. This creates a vicious cycle where lack of practice further fuels anxiety and low self-confidence, a finding that strongly aligns with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis.

Table 3
Students' Perceptions of Affective and Psychological Barriers

Dimension	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	Std. Dev.	Rank
8 Feel nervous or anxious when speaking in class Psychological	24 (17.6%)	36 (26.5%)	50 (36.8%)	22 (16.2%)	4 (2.9%)	2.60	1.050	4
9 Fear of mistakes stops me from speaking.	22 (16.2%)	52 (38.2%)	26 (19.1%)	26 (19.1%)	10 (7.4%)	2.63	1.180	3
10 Fear of mistakes prevents full participation. Psychological	24 (17.6%)	32 (23.5%)	34 (25.0%)	32 (23.5%)	14 (10.3%)	2.85	1.260	1
11 Pressure to perform well makes me more nervous.	28 (20.6%)	32 (23.5%)	26 (19.1%)	36 (26.5%)	14 (10.3%)	2.82	1.310	2
Overall Dimension Mean	Std. Deviation							
2.73	0.965							

Note: Scale: 1=Strongly Agree, 2=Agree, 3=Neutral, 4=Disagree, 5=Strongly Disagree.*

Table 4
Instructors' Perceptions of Affective and Psychological Factors

Dimension	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	Std. Dev.	Rank
6 Students feel nervous or anxious when speaking	7 (22.58%)	18 (58.07%)	4 (12.90%)	1 (3.23%)	1 (3.23%)	2.065	0.892	1
7 Fear of mistakes stops students from speaking	8 (25.81%)	17 (45.84%)	3 (9.68%)	2 (6.45%)	1 (3.23%)	2.065	0.964	4
8 Students have a fear of negative evaluation	21 (67.74%)	8 (25.81%)	2 (6.45%)	0%	0%	1.387	0.615	3
9 Pressure to perform makes students more nervous	5 (16.13%)	20 (64.52%)	2 (6.45%)	2 (6.45%)	2 (6.45%)	2.226	1.023	2
Overall Dimension Mean	Std. Deviation							
2.194	0.390							

Note: Scale: 1=Strongly Agree, 2=Agree, 3=Neutral, 4=Disagree, 5=Strongly Disagree.*

Environmental and Sociocultural Challenges

Instructors rated environmental barriers as more severe than students, especially the lack of practice. The learning environment and sociocultural context were also identified as major barriers. Students reported that classroom dynamics and limited opportunities hindered their speaking practice (Overall Mean = 2.45). Instructors expressed even stronger concern (Overall Mean = 2.17), particularly emphasizing the "lack of practice inside and outside the classroom," which was mentioned by 88.8% of interviewed instructors.

As illustrated in Tables 5 and 6, both groups pointed to issues like overcrowded classrooms and peer judgment. Interviewed students (33.3%) specifically cited large class sizes as a factor that reduces individual speaking time and increases self-consciousness. The reliance on teacher-centered instruction, noted by 22.2% of instructors, further limits students' opportunities for interactive, communicative practice. Findings on lack of practice and teacher-centered instruction corroborate Alrabai's (2016) and Malik et al. (2021) analysis. Instructors emphasized systemic constraints, while students focused on immediate classroom dynamics. This misalignment with CLT principles and Vygotsky's emphasis on interaction exacerbates both cognitive and affective barriers.

Table 5
Environmental and Sociocultural Barriers (Instructor Perceptions)

Dimension	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	Std. Dev.	Rank
10 Classroom environment hinders speaking	5 (16.13%)	18 (58.07%)	4 (12.90%)	4 (12.90%)	0%	2.226	0.884	4
11 Cultural differences affect willingness to speak	5 (16.13%)	15 (48.39%)	5 (16.13%)	4 (12.90%)	2 (6.45%)	2.452	1.121	3
12 Peer judgment is a significant factor	3 (9.68%)	13 (41.94%)	7 (22.58%)	8 (25.81%)	0%	2.645	0.985	2
13 Students have limited exposure to authentic English	10 (32.26%)	16 (51.61%)	3 (9.68%)	1 (3.23%)	1 (3.23%)	1.935	0.929	6
14 Overcrowded classrooms are a problem	4 (12.90%)	14 (45.16%)	3 (9.68%)	7 (22.58%)	3 (9.68%)	2.710	1.243	1
15 Curriculum lacks sufficient speaking activities	6 (19.35%)	20 (64.52%)	3 (9.68%)	2 (6.45%)	0%	2.032	0.752	5
Overall Dimension Mean	Std. Dev.					2.173	0.521	

Note: Scale: 1=Strongly Agree, 2=Agree, 3=Neutral, 4=Disagree, 5=Strongly Disagree.*

Table 6
Environmental and Sociocultural Barriers (Students' Perceptions)

Dimension	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	Std. Dev.	Rank
12 Classroom environment makes it hard to speak	12 (8.8%)	50 (36.8%)	38 (27.9%)	24 (17.6%)	12 (8.8%)	2.80	1.109	2
13 Cultural differences affect willingness to speak	18 (13.2%)	34 (25.0%)	52 (38.2%)	30 (22.1%)	2 (1.5%)	2.73	1.001	3
14 Classroom activities impact speaking ability	42 (30.9%)	38 (27.9%)	38 (27.9%)	12 (8.8%)	6 (4.4%)	2.27	1.130	5
15 Cultural backgrounds influence practice	38 (27.9%)	38 (27.9%)	46 (33.8%)	8 (5.9%)	6 (4.4%)	2.30	1.080	4
16 Peer interactions help build confidence	38 (27.9%)	46 (33.8%)	40 (29.4%)	8 (5.9%)	4 (2.9%)	2.22	1.019	6
17 Opportunities outside class improve proficiency	66 (48.5%)	38 (27.9%)	30 (22.1%)	2 (1.5%)	0 (0.0%)	1.76	0.848	7
18 Limited exposure to spoken English in class	8 (5.9%)	26 (19.1%)	66 (48.5%)	24 (17.6%)	12 (8.8%)	3.04	0.983	1

Note: Scale: 1=Strongly Agree, 2=Agree, 3=Neutral, 4=Disagree, 5=Strongly Disagree. Item 17 is positively worded; a lower mean indicates agreement. *

Qualitative Analysis of the Interview

The semi-structured interviews with instructors and students highlighted several overlapping challenges in developing speaking skills. (see tables 7 & 8)

Cognitive and Linguistic Factors: Both instructors and students emphasized limited vocabulary (77.7% instructors; 80% students), pronunciation difficulties (72.2%; 60%), and grammatical issues (55.5%; 53.3%) as major barriers. Students additionally reported code-switching to Arabic (26.6%) and difficulties in sentence linking and fluency. Instructors highlighted issues such as exposure to authentic English (61.1%) and phonological errors (11.1%). Similar findings identifying these linguistic difficulties among EFL learners were reported by Normawati et al. (2023)

Affective and Psychological Factors: Findings indicate that fear, anxiety, and hesitation were common among students (100%) and also recognized by instructors (44.4%). Low self-confidence was reported by both groups, though more strongly by students (26.6%) compared to instructors (38.8%). This result supports Nguyen (2023), who suggested the use of specific techniques to overcome psychological barriers that affect students' speaking performance

Environmental and Sociocultural Factors: Challenges included lack of practice inside and outside the classroom (88.8% instructors; 20% students), peer judgment (50%), and large class sizes (33.3% students; 5.5% instructors). Instructors also noted poor supportive environments (27.7%), cultural differences, and overcrowded classrooms as contributing factors.

Instructional or Teaching-Related Factors: Both groups highlighted teacher-centered approaches (22.2% instructors) and lack of encouragement or feedback (13.3% students; 11.1% instructors). Overemphasis on grammar rather than communication was also observed. Notably, 13.3% of students reported receiving no corrective feedback, reflecting a gap between instructional practices and learner needs.

The qualitative analysis reveals a convergence between instructors' and students' perspectives, particularly regarding vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and anxiety. However, instructors stressed environmental and exposure-related issues, while students highlighted psychological barriers and insufficient feedback. These findings underscore the need for more communicative, supportive, and feedback-rich classroom practices to enhance speaking skills. This result is consistent with Malik et al. (2021).

Table 7
Key Themes and Challenges Identified in Semi-Structured Interviews with English Instructors

Category	Theme	F	%
Cognitive And Linguistic Factors	Difficulty retrieving and limited vocabulary.	14	77.7%
	Direct translation	2	11.11%
	Inadequate pronunciation skills	13	72.2%
	Grammatical issues	10	55.5%
	Fear of making mistakes and hesitation	8	44.4%
	Sentence structure	8	44.4%
	Cognitive overload	1	5.5%
	Exposure to authentic English	11	61.11%
Affective And Psychological Factors	Phonology errors	2	11.11%
	Low self-confidence	7	38.8%
	Anxiety	6	33.3%
	Fear of making mistakes and hesitation	8	44.4%
Environmental Factors	Lack of motivation	3	16.6%
	Peer judgment	9	50%
	Poor implementation of speaking task	6	33.3%
	Lack of practice inside and outside classroom	16	88.8%
	Poor supportive environment	5	27.7%
	Different background Culture	2	11.11%
	Overcrowded classrooms	1	5.5%
Instructional Or Teaching-Related Factors	Reluctance and undesired to improve	2	11.11%
	Teacher-centered instruction	4	22.2%
	Overemphasis on grammar vs. communication	2	11.11%

Table 8
Key Themes and Challenges Identified in Semi-Structured Interviews with EFL Students

Category	Theme	F	%
cognitive and linguistic factors	Lack of Vocabulary	12	80%
	Pronunciation Difficulties	9	60%
	Grammatical Errors	8	53.3%
	Code-Switching to Arabic	4	26.6%
	Difficulty Linking Sentences	2	13.3%
	Fluency Challenges	1	6.6%
affective and psychological factors	Fear and Anxiety During Speaking	15	100%
	Lack of Confidence	4	26.6%
Sociocultural and Environmental Factors	Fear of Negative Evaluation	2	13.3%
	Large Class Sizes	5	33.3%
	Limited Speaking Practice Opportunities	3	20%
	Poor Implementation of Teaching	1	6.6%
	Classroom Environment	3	20%
instructional or teaching-related factors	Negative or judgmental	2	13.3%
	Lack of encouragement or engagement during speaking activities	1	6.6%
	Teacher Feedback	2	13.3%
	Rigid teaching style	1	6.6%

Comparison of Perspectives and Qualitative Insights

The qualitative interviews (Tables 7 & 8) revealed a strong convergence between instructor and student views on core linguistic issues like vocabulary and pronunciation. However, a key difference in emphasis emerged: students primarily focused on internal, affective barriers like anxiety and lack of confidence, while instructors more frequently highlighted external, structural constraints such as lack of practice opportunities, large class sizes, and curriculum limitations.

This divergence is insightful; it suggests that students experience the problem as a personal struggle, whereas instructors view it through a systemic lens. Despite this difference in focus, both groups acknowledged that speaking skill development is hindered by a complex interplay of internal learner factors and external instructional or contextual barriers. This shared understanding reinforces the need for comprehensive interventions that address both psychological support for students and pedagogical reform at the institutional level.

Students focused on internal barriers such as fear and low confidence. Instructors focused on external barriers such as class size, curriculum limits, and lack of speaking opportunities. This difference shows that students experience the problem as personal, while instructors view it as structural. This mismatch explains why speaking challenges continue even when instructors identify the barriers. These differences reveal why many classroom interventions fail to address the root causes of speaking difficulties.

CONCLUSION

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to investigate the barriers to English-speaking proficiency from the dual perspectives of Saudi students and instructors at Majmaah University. The findings confirm that the challenges are multi-dimensional and deeply interconnected, forming a self-reinforcing cycle that stifles oral fluency development.

From the students' perspective, the primary challenges are intensely personal and psychological. An overwhelming 100% of interviewed students reported debilitating fear and anxiety, which, combined with a pervasive lack of confidence, creates a significant affective filter that inhibits participation. This psychological barrier is compounded by very tangible cognitive struggles, most notably severe vocabulary limitations (a challenge for 80% of students) that cause hesitation and disrupt fluency, alongside persistent difficulties with grammar and pronunciation.

From the instructors' perspective, the challenges are viewed through a more systemic lens. While acknowledging students' psychological and linguistic difficulties, instructors predominantly emphasized external, structural barriers. They highlighted a critical lack of practice opportunities inside and outside the classroom (88.8%), overcrowded classes that limit individual speaking time, and teacher-centered instructional approaches that fail to promote communicative competence.

The study contributes to the field by providing an integrated, context-specific analysis that validates and extends existing theoretical models. It demonstrates how Krashen's

Affective Filter Hypothesis, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, and principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) collectively explain the dynamic interplay between cognitive, affective, and environmental barriers in the Saudi EFL context. This integrated model offers a valuable framework for diagnosing and addressing speaking challenges in similar learning environments. This integrated model can guide instructors and policy makers in designing targeted interventions to improve speaking outcomes.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The implications of this study's findings are presented in two key domains: pedagogical and institutional. Pedagogically, the findings necessitate a dual-focused approach. First, to enhance students' speaking skills, a shift toward Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is essential. This involves moving beyond grammar-translation and teacher-centered approaches, curriculum designers and instructors should incorporate authentic, meaning-focused activities such as role-plays, simulations, and project-based learning, thereby increasing meaningful output. Second, to mitigate the pervasive affective barriers, the implementation of explicit anxiety-reduction strategies is critical. This requires instructors to foster a supportive classroom climate that normalizes mistakes as part of the learning process, provides constructive, low-stakes feedback, and designs tasks that gradually build confidence to lower the learners' affective filter. Institutionally, the findings point to necessary structural changes. The University administration should prioritize creating smaller speaking and listening classes, as this is a fundamental prerequisite for providing the individual practice and personalized feedback highlighted by participants. Concurrently, investing in targeted professional development for instructors is vital to equip them with the skills to implement these communicative and psychologically supportive practices effectively.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research was conducted at a single university, which may affect the generalizability of the findings to other Saudi or international EFL contexts. Second, the data are largely self-reported (questionnaires and interviews), capturing perceptions rather than objective measures of proficiency or classroom interaction. Third, the study employed a cross-sectional design, providing a snapshot of challenges at one point in time rather than tracking their evolution. Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable, context-rich insights and a validated framework for understanding the interconnected barriers to speaking proficiency. Future studies should include classroom observations to validate self-reported challenges.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should design and test specific interventions based on these findings, such as the impact of a structured peer-tutoring program on speaking anxiety or the effectiveness of a flipped classroom model in increasing student talk time. Other studies can measure the long-term impact of the various challenges identified and explore the influence of broader sociocultural attitudes towards English communication in the Saudi context. Future work could also employ longitudinal or experimental designs to establish

causal relationships between the barrier types (cognitive, affective, environmental) and to measure the efficacy of the pedagogical interventions recommended in this study. Furthermore, research is needed to investigate the specific strategies that most effectively lower the affective filter for Saudi EFL learners in classroom settings, moving beyond identifying anxiety to testing practical solutions.

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APPENDIX A
Instructors' Questionnaire

Items	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
First dimension: Cognitive and linguistics factors (5 Items)					
1. I believe cognitive overload (e.g., struggling to process multiple language elements simultaneously) affects my students' speaking abilities.					
2. My students rely on memorizing phrases instead of coming up with their phrases.					
3. My students face challenges with using correct intonation while speaking.					
4. My students face problems linking sentences while they speak.					
5. I believe that students' fear of making grammatical mistakes hinders their ability to speak English fluently.					
Second dimension: Affective and psychological factors (4 Items)					
6. My students often feel anxious or nervous when speaking English in class.					
7. The fear of making mistakes impact my students' willingness to participate in speaking activities.					
8. I motivate and encourage my students to speak English in the classroom and anywhere.					
9. My students fear receiving criticism or being ashamed when speaking in class.					
Third dimension: environmental and sociological factors (6 Items)					
10. I often notice that the classroom environment (e.g., peer pressure, classroom setup) affect students' speaking performance.					
11. I believe that cultural differences such as varying conversational norms or expectation about public speaking) affect my students' willingness to speak English.					
12. My students often participate in English-speaking activities outside of the classroom (e.g., clubs, social events).					
13. I believe that students' cultural backgrounds influence their engagement and participation in English-speaking tasks.					
14. My students have limited exposure to spoken English in class.					
15. I believe that students receive adequate support for developing their English skills.					

APPENDIX B

Students' Questionnaire

Items	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
First dimension: Cognitive and linguistics factors (7 Items)					
1.I find it challenging to use correct grammar when speaking English.					
2.I often struggle to find the right words when speaking English.					
3.I find it difficult to keep track of all the grammar rules while trying to speak English?					
4.I rely too heavily on memorized phrases rather than producing original speech in conversation.					
5.I face challenges with using correct intonation while speaking.					
6.I face problems linking sentences while speaking.					
7.I often hesitate or pause during conversations due to a lack of vocabulary.					
Second dimension: Affective and psychological factors(4 Items)					
8.I often feel nervous or anxious when you have to speak English in class?					
9. The fear of making mistakes stops me from speaking English in class					
10.I find that fear of making mistakes prevents you from participating fully in English speaking activities.					
11. The pressure to perform well in English speaking activities makes me feel more nervous.					
Third dimension: environmental and sociological factors(7 Items)					
12.I often feel that the classroom environment makes it hard for you to speak English?					
13.I believe cultural differences such as varying conversational norms or expectation about public speaking affect my willingness to speak English.					
14.I believe that the classroom environment(such as group discussion, role play) significantly impacts my ability to improve my EFL speaking skills.					
15.I think that my cultural backgrounds influence my willingness to practice speaking in English.					
16.I agree that peer interactions in the classroom help students become more confident in speaking English.					
17.I believe that providing opportunities for speaking English outside the classroom improves students' speaking proficiency.					
18. I have limited exposure to spoken English in class.					