

FACTORS AFFECTING ENGLISH SPEAKING PERFORMANCE AND LEARNING STRATEGIES: PERSPECTIVES FROM ENGLISH-MAJOR STUDENTS

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Abstract. This study analyzes the perceived factors influencing English-major students' English speaking performance and the strategies they adopted to overcome the challenges and improve their speaking skills. Designed as an explanatory sequential mixed-methods study, this research consisted of two phases. The quantitative phase involved 229 students from a private university, and the follow-up qualitative phase consisted of 10 semi-structured interviews with students from different academic years. Descriptive analysis indicated that students reported difficulties across linguistic, psychological, and environmental dimensions, with several linguistic factors emerging prominently in relation to their speaking performance. To address these difficulties, students reported different strategies related to language learning, emotional management, and speaking practice such as engaging in autonomous practice with digital tools, managing anxiety, and seeking opportunities to practice English. These findings contribute to a better understanding of how learners perceive speaking difficulties and how they respond to them in their learning context.

Keywords: English speaking performance; learning strategies; linguistic, psychological, environmental factors.

1. Introduction

Speaking English remains challenging for many university EFL students, who may experience anxiety, lack of confidence, and linguistic difficulties when speaking English (Okyar, 2023; Phisutthangkoon, 2024). Many students may struggle to find appropriate words to express their opinions while some might feel nervous and have few opportunities to practice in real contexts (Nation & Newton, 2009; Tercan & Dikilitas, 2015). Due to these factors, speaking English may become a stressful experience, especially when students are afraid of being evaluated or making mistakes (Horwitz et al., 1986). As such, speaking anxiety has been widely regarded as a barrier to effective oral communication (Rahmadani & Etfita, 2022).

In EFL settings, speaking performance is not only about producing language but is also associated with the ability to express ideas clearly and appropriately (Brown & Yule, 1983; Richards, 2008). To speak effectively, it is crucial for a speaker to use vocabulary and grammatical structures appropriately, as well as to have a certain level of fluency, intelligible pronunciation, and the ability to organize ideas in a logical way (Burns, 2012, p. 167; Richards, 2015). In educational environments, the development of speaking skills is often achieved through various communicative activities that require students to convey the intended meanings and to interact with their classmates (Burns & Joyce, 1997). Students may encounter a number of difficulties at the same time because second language learning is influenced by many factors and individual differences (Dörnyei, 2005; Ellis, 2008), and they may develop their own ways of coping with these difficulties during the learning process (Oxford, 2017).

Students' own experiences are important when considering these speaking difficulties. Students often describe their problems in terms of anxiety and perceived limitations in their language ability (Boudreau et al., 2018). The classroom context is another important dimension,

as teaching and learning conditions can affect students' speaking practice (Harmer, 2007). Viewing the issue from students' perspectives can help explain what they find difficult and what they actually do when they encounter these problems. Their learning strategies are thus relevant to understanding how they respond to difficulties in the learning process (Oxford, 2017).

In Vietnam, many studies have been carried out to investigate the problems encountered by English-major students when speaking English. Commonly reported problems are vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, which may hinder students' expression of their ideas, especially when they speak spontaneously (Le et al., 2025; Tran & Dang, 2019; Vo et al., 2018). Psychological problems have also been reported, with many students experiencing anxiety and low confidence (Fitriani et al., 2015; Tran, 2022), which is often aggravated by the fear of making mistakes and being negatively evaluated by peers or teachers during communication (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002).

Apart from individual difficulties, learning environment has also been considered as an essential factor. Students' opportunities to use English may be limited by classroom conditions and teaching methods (Huynh, 2020). Taken together, previous studies have identified a range of difficulties in learning to speak English: linguistic, psychological, and environmental. However, these factors have often been studied in isolation. Less emphasis has been placed on students' perspectives on the difficulties they face, the strategies they employ to deal with them, and whether their perceptions differ across academic years.

For these reasons, this study investigates students' perceptions of the factors affecting their English speaking performance and their strategies to address these difficulties. The study addresses the following research questions: *(RQ1) What factors do students perceive as influencing their speaking performance? (RQ2) What self-reported strategies do students use to overcome the factors affecting their speaking performance? (RQ3) To what extent do students' perceptions of factors affecting speaking performance differ across academic years?*. The first and third questions are addressed through questionnaire data, while the second is addressed through semi-structured interview data.

2. Literature review

2.1. Factors affecting speaking performance in EFL contexts

Although learners may have knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, they might still hesitate when speaking in front of a class (Dao & Nguyen, 2024; Fauzi & Asi, 2023; Liu, 2007). Thus, speaking difficulties cannot be explained only by linguistic knowledge. Previous studies have classified these problems into linguistic, psychological and environmental factors (Phisutthangkoon, 2024; Tercan & Dikilitas, 2015) which are closely interconnected and work together in shaping students' speaking performance. For example, limited linguistic resources may make students feel more anxious, and few opportunities for practice can also affect their language development and confidence. Therefore, the present study employs this three-part framework to examine students' perceived speaking difficulties.

Speaking performance is understood as learners' ability to use linguistic resources effectively in real-time communication (Burns, 2012; Richards, 2008), distinguishing it from speaking proficiency as overall language competence and from oral performance as task-based speaking outcomes. In addition, learning strategies refer to the conscious actions and techniques that learners employ to support language development and speaking performance, involving cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions (Oxford, 2017).

2.1.1. Psychological factors

Psychological factors have been consistently associated with difficulties in speaking performance, although their relative importance may vary across learning contexts. Low self-confidence, fear of making mistakes, and anxiety, for example, have been identified as prominent barriers to speaking (Dong, 2022; Fitriani et al., 2015).

The emphasis placed on psychological factors, however, is not consistent across the literature. Some studies emphasize language proficiency and classroom conditions (Ellis, 2008; Harmer, 2007), while others highlight psychological aspects. Differences in emphasis may reflect variations in research contexts, where learners' experiences and classroom environments shape which factors become more salient. Overall, speaking difficulties are likely to be complex and context-dependent (Dörnyei, 2005; Ellis, 2008).

Students often report anxiety, fear of making mistakes, introversion, and low confidence (Horwitz et al., 1986; Pabro-Maquidato, 2021), especially in public speaking situations (Woodrow, 2006; Young, 1991). Concerns about evaluation and errors are also particularly evident among anxious language learners (Gрегersen & Horwitz, 2002, p. 567).

2.1.2. Linguistic factors

Linguistic factors can affect speaking performance in several related ways. Studies have found that Vietnamese English-major students have difficulty speaking because of limited vocabulary (Le et al., 2025; Tran & Dang, 2019). However, knowledge of vocabulary does not necessarily imply that learners are able to use words effectively in context (Laufer et al., 2004, p. 203). Pronunciation also plays a role in communication, as unclear speech can make it more difficult for others to understand (Derwing & Munro, 2015; Levis, 2018). Beyond these language resources, topical knowledge is also crucial, as students perform better when they are familiar with the subject (Huang et al., 2016).

These linguistic constraints are reflected in real-time speaking performance and are often connected with such learners' psychological influences as confidence and willingness to communicate (Boudreau et al., 2018; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994).

2.1.3. Environmental factors

Environmental factors also influence speaking performance. Students often have limited opportunities to practice outside the classroom (Hien & Suppasetseree, 2024; Robillos, 2023), especially in interactions with native speakers, and classroom instruction alone may not provide sufficient opportunities for meaningful speaking practice (Nation & Newton, 2009). Indeed, opportunities for language use depend on learners' own efforts and the environments where speaking practice takes place.

Classroom conditions may also influence learners' participation in speaking activities. Limited class time, lack of cooperation among peers, and classroom noise may limit opportunities for interaction and speaking practice (Harmer, 2007; Richards, 2008). Large class sizes may also lead to reduced student participation in speaking activities, because there are fewer chances to be actively involved and receive individual support (Ur, 1996). As a result, students tend to participate less in oral communication and have fewer chances to practice and improve their speaking skills. These environmental constraints could also affect learners' confidence and willingness to communicate, so environmental and psychological factors can be connected in speaking performance.

2.2. Research gaps

In both international and Vietnamese contexts, these three kinds of factors are often presented separately, and students typically experience them simultaneously. Therefore, looking at these dimensions together can help explain speaking difficulties more clearly. Previous research also often focuses on teaching methods while students' perspectives receive less attention. Classroom activities and strategies have been widely discussed (Richards, 2008; Thornbury, 2005), but less is known about how students understand and deal with their own difficulties. This shows the need to examine different dimensions of speaking difficulties from the learners' perspective.

Previous studies have also often focused on students at one academic level. Therefore, it is still unclear whether students experience similar speaking difficulties at different stages of university

study. Based on these gaps, the present study examines speaking difficulties from students' perspectives and differences across academic years.

3. Methodology

An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was employed. This means quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed separately and then compared and integrated during interpretation.

3.1. Participants

A total of 229 English-major students at Van Lang University in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, participated in the study. They were from different academic years and were recruited through convenience sampling. For the quantitative phase, the students completed an online questionnaire, and the data were collected over three weeks in March 2025.

Following the online survey, 10 students who agreed to be contacted were invited to take part in the semi-structured interviews and were coded S01–S10. The interviews focused on how they dealt with difficulties related to linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors. The ten participants represented all four academic years, with 2–3 students from each year. They were informed about the purpose of the study before the interviews, and participation was voluntary and pseudonymized.

3.2. Instruments and procedure

The questionnaire was adapted from Dong (2022), as its items addressed the linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors examined in the present study. The three areas aligned with the conceptual framework used to investigate factors affecting students' English-speaking performance. Dong's original questionnaire consisted of 27 items. However, to suit the context of the present study, some items were reworded for clarity, and two items were split into separate questions to examine the related aspects more clearly. In addition, six items of the original version were removed due to their irrelevance. Finally, the adapted questionnaire consisted of 23 closed-ended items, including 10 linguistic, seven psychological and six environmental items. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire was translated into Vietnamese and reviewed by two experienced English lecturers before being piloted with 30 students. The reliability of the questionnaire was tested using Cronbach's alpha and the values obtained were 0.82, 0.79 and 0.76 for linguistic, psychological and environmental factors respectively, indicating acceptable internal consistency. The questionnaire was then distributed online, and students who agreed to participate in the interviews provided their contact details at the end of the form.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten students to explore their learning strategies in greater depth. The interview questions were developed based on the main areas in the questionnaire and were piloted with two students before the official interviews. Following the pilot, several questions were simplified, while the order of the questions and some prompts were adjusted for clarity. Lasting approximately 30 minutes each, the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese via Google Meet or MS Teams. With the participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. After that, the transcripts were carefully checked by the participants for accuracy before being translated into English for analysis.

3.3. Data analysis

The questionnaire data were analyzed using SPSS 27 to calculate the means and standard deviations for the linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors. In addition, the mean scores across the four academic years were compared to identify similarities and differences in the speaking difficulties reported. This comparison was descriptive, and no inferential tests were conducted in the present study.

For the qualitative analysis, the interview transcripts were read carefully to identify recurring responses about how students dealt with difficulties related to the three factors. Their answers were grouped into categories including language learning, emotional management, and speaking practice. After that, the interview results were considered with the questionnaire findings, allowing the reported difficulties and students' ways of dealing with them to be understood together.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Linguistic factors

Students reported difficulties with several linguistic factors, but some appeared to affect their speaking more than others. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for these factors.

Table 1. Linguistic factors

Item	Description	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	My vocabulary is not rich enough to express my ideas or arguments in words.	3.68	1.06
2	I can express my thoughts in words when I have knowledge and vocabulary about the topic mentioned.	4.21	0.79
3	My pronunciation is not good enough, which makes it difficult for me to speak or present.	3.32	1.15
4	I do not have enough knowledge of grammar, which makes it difficult for me to express my thoughts accurately.	3.35	1.11
5	I have enough knowledge of grammar, but I cannot apply it to form complete sentences.	3.36	1.07
6	I have difficulty applying grammar and arranging vocabulary into complete sentences.	3.61	1.12
7	I cannot choose the right words to express my ideas.	2.87	1.08
8	I do not have enough knowledge of phrases and collocations.	3.56	0.94
9	I cannot stress the correct words when pronouncing.	3.53	0.96
10	My intonation while speaking is not correct.	3.35	1.16

Generally, linguistic factors were reported at a moderate level although some difficulties were more prominent than others. In particular, vocabulary limitation ($M = 3.68$) and difficulty applying grammar and vocabulary in sentence construction ($M = 3.61$) emerged as relatively important challenges. As such, students' speaking difficulties may involve their linguistic knowledge as well as their ability to apply that knowledge when constructing spoken language.

Students also perceived sufficient vocabulary and topic knowledge as particularly supportive of their speaking performance ($M = 4.21$). Difficulties with collocations ($M = 3.56$) and intonation ($M = 3.35$) were also reported, whereas choosing the right words ($M = 2.87$) was perceived as less problematic. In general, students did not perceive all linguistic difficulties in the same way, with vocabulary knowledge and the use of linguistic resources appearing more crucial in their perceptions of speaking performance.

The interview data also reflect these patterns. Students reported that they often lack vocabulary, especially when dealing with unfamiliar topics, and find it hard to apply grammar in real-time communication:

"My vocabulary is not enough, especially for new or difficult topics. But if I know the topic, it's easier to speak. I don't like studying grammar because it's boring. That's why I often make grammatical mistakes." [S01]

"When I don't like or understand the topic, I don't know what to say. I often repeat the words and find it hard to select the appropriate ones. Therefore, listeners may find it difficult to understand what I have said." [S02]

The results support previous studies in the Vietnamese context that identify vocabulary and grammar as important challenges in speaking (Le et al., 2025; Tran & Dang, 2019). They also illustrate the distinction between vocabulary knowledge and the ability to use lexical resources effectively in context discussed by Laufer et al. (2004). More specifically, students' reported difficulties appear to involve not only limited linguistic knowledge but also applying vocabulary and grammar during speaking, particularly when dealing with unfamiliar topics.

4.2. Psychological factors

Psychological factors were reported at a moderate level, with fear of making mistakes and lack of confidence showing relatively higher mean scores (see Table 2).

Table 2. Psychological factors

Item	Description	Mean	Std. Deviation
11	I cannot speak and present well in class because I lack confidence.	3.48	1.07
12	I am afraid of making mistakes when speaking English.	3.72	1.17
13	I feel shy when speaking English in front of other students.	3.35	1.25
14	I lack the motivation to speak English.	2.87	1.12
15	I am afraid that my classmates and teachers will not understand what I am trying to convey.	3.46	1.10
16	I feel pressured when I have to present in front of the class.	3.29	1.08
17	I am afraid of being criticized by others when speaking or presenting.	2.58	1.22

The main psychological problems reported by students were fear of making mistakes ($M = 3.72$) and lack of confidence ($M = 3.48$). Students also worried that others might not understand them ($M = 3.46$) and felt pressure when speaking in class ($M = 3.29$). In comparison, lack of motivation ($M = 2.87$) seemed to be less of a problem. The interview responses also showed that students often became nervous when they were not confident about their English.

Two students explained: *"I get nervous when I present something in front of a crowd, especially when I cannot find suitable words to express my opinion, or I'm not familiar with the topic."* [S04]

"Lack of confidence has a big impact on my speaking. When I'm not confident, I can't express myself well. I'm afraid of making mistakes and being judged, but I know mistakes can help me learn." [S08]

These responses suggest that psychological and linguistic difficulties may be connected. Students could become nervous when they could not find the right words or when they were afraid of making mistakes. These problems have been commonly reported as problems in speaking (e.g., Vo et al., 2018). Anxiety may also affect learners' ability to find appropriate words when speaking, as it can interfere with the retrieval of second-language items from memory (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994, p. 298). This may explain why some students in this study found it difficult to find suitable words when they felt nervous.

4.3. Environmental factors

Environmental factors were perceived as moderate constraints on students' speaking performance, with some aspects of the learning environment presenting greater challenges than others (see Table 3).

Students reported limited opportunities to practice speaking outside the classroom ($M = 3.67$), and class time was insufficient for meaningful practice ($M = 3.45$). Learning environment was also reported to limit opportunities for regular English use ($M = 3.10$). To be more specific, some students shared that:

"It's hard to practice English outside the class. I only talk to foreigners on Discord platforms while gaming, but it's simple sentences only." [S07]

“Extra classes are expensive, so I don’t have many chances to practice English after school.” [S06]

Table 3. Environmental factors

Item	Description	Mean	Std. Deviation
18	I have difficulty finding opportunities to practice speaking outside the classroom.	3.67	1.07
19	My learning environment does not allow us to speak English regularly.	3.10	1.18
20	The class time is insufficient for me to practice and use English.	3.45	1.03
21	My classmates do not show a cooperative spirit in speaking skills lessons.	3.15	1.05
22	The class is too noisy, making it difficult for me to concentrate.	3.08	1.07
23	My class is too crowded.	3.08	1.20

While having opportunities to use English outside the classroom can support language learning (Hien & Suppasetseree, 2024; Nation & Newton, 2009), students’ responses indicate that the students did not have many opportunities to use English outside of the classroom, and it might be difficult to practice speaking because of the cost and the lack of access to places where they could communicate in English. However, the interviews in this study suggest that having these opportunities may also depend on students’ actual conditions, such as what they can afford and whether they have access to an English-speaking environment.

Other environmental challenges included limited cooperation among classmates during speaking activities ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 1.05$), noisy classroom conditions ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.07$), and large class sizes ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.20$). Overall, the environmental constraints can come from both inside and outside the classroom.

4.4. Students’ strategies

Students reported a number of strategies to overcome their difficulties with speaking, such as improving their language, managing their emotions, seeking opportunities for practice, and using technology. These strategies involved cognitive, emotional, and social aspects of language learning (Oxford, 2017).

Vocabulary was mentioned quite often in the interviews. Students tried to learn more words and also paid attention to how they could be used in context. S04, for example, talked about learning vocabulary and grammar “together with the context of use,” while S05 learned new words by reading English books and remembering “the context of new words.” Similarly, S09 kept “a vocabulary notebook” and wrote down new words together with their contexts. This seems to be closely related to the difficulties reported earlier, especially the problem of knowing vocabulary and grammar but not always being able to use them when speaking. Learning words in context was therefore one way students tried to make what they learned more useful in actual communication. Reading English books, watching English videos, and learning about different topics were also mentioned as ways to build vocabulary and obtain more ideas to talk about.

In addition, students used various strategies to manage their anxiety and become more confident. For example, some of them prepared well for presentations, thought positively, and accepted mistakes as part of the learning process. For instance, S02 said “face your own fear, don’t be afraid of making mistakes,” and S04 talked about having a “positive mindset.” Meanwhile, S10 indicated that confidence developed gradually with more practice and experience. As confidence increased, speaking perfectly seemed to become less important while communicating ideas became more important. Moreover, practice did not only take place in class. S06 believed that it was helpful to use “Duolingo, ELSA, or online chat websites to talk to native speakers,” and S01 joined “club activities” or “English competitions organized by the school” to improve speaking performance. Other options included “using AI tools like ChatGPT to simulate conversation” (S09), as well as internships and workplaces where English was used (S10).

In general, students talked more about things they could do on their own than about activities depending on other people. Language practice and emotional management appeared more often than strategies that involved interaction with others. The attention given to anxiety and confidence is also related to emotion self-regulation in language learning (Oxford, 2017, pp. 213–214). This pattern may reflect the fact that those who were worried about mistakes or lacked confidence often relied on strategies that they could manage themselves. Strategies involving interaction with others, however, depended on other people or suitable opportunities being available.

4.5. Descriptive comparison across academic years

For descriptive comparison purposes, selected items representing the linguistic, psychological, and environmental dimensions were examined across academic years. The comparison focused on factors that were considered particularly relevant to students' speaking performance based on the questionnaire results.

Table 4. Mean scores of selected factors by academic year

Factor	Year 1 (n=71)	Year 2 (n=41)	Year 3 (n=33)	Year 4 (n=84)
Vocabulary limitation	3.40	3.20	3.35	3.36
Pronunciation difficulty	3.20	3.08	3.10	2.88
Grammar-related difficulty	3.24	3.07	3.30	3.03
Fear of making mistakes	3.11	2.95	3.15	3.14
Pressure when speaking	3.10	2.90	3.20	3.20
Limited class time	3.59	3.15	3.75	3.41
Speaking opportunities	3.61	2.90	3.85	3.15

First-year students reported a higher mean score for pronunciation difficulty ($M = 3.20$) than the other groups, but the scores were quite close across academic years. For vocabulary limitation, Year 1 had the highest mean score ($M = 3.40$), followed closely by Year 4 ($M = 3.36$) and Year 3 ($M = 3.35$). This shows only small differences among the groups. Grammar-related difficulty was also quite similar across academic years, although Year 3 had a slightly higher mean score ($M = 3.30$). Psychological difficulties were reported by students in all four years. Year 2 had a lower mean score for fear of making mistakes ($M = 2.95$), while students in Years 3 and 4 reported a higher mean score for pressure when speaking ($M = 3.20$).

The results as a whole suggest that no clear monotonic pattern was apparent across the four academic years. It could mean these speaking problems do not simply disappear as students gain more experience at university. Later-year students still reported problems with vocabulary, grammar and pressure when speaking. One possible explanation might be that greater knowledge of language does not necessarily mean that students can use it easily when speaking. They still have to remember vocabulary, use grammar and express their ideas simultaneously. This is related to the distinction between knowing vocabulary and being able to use it productively discussed by Laufer et al. (2004, p. 203).

Some differences in mean scores between year groups were found, especially with regard to environmental factors. For instance, the scores on limited class time ($M = 3.75$) and speaking opportunities ($M = 3.85$) were higher for Year 3 students than those for Year 2 ($M = 3.15$ and $M = 2.90$, respectively). These differences could imply that students in different years had somewhat different learning experiences. However, the data in this study cannot explain exactly why these differences occurred. More importantly, the differences did not form a clear pattern across the four years. Since the comparison was descriptive and no inferential tests were conducted, these differences should be interpreted with caution and should not be taken as evidence of statistically significant differences between the year groups.

5. Conclusions

This study examined English-major students' speaking difficulties and what they did when facing these difficulties. Participants reported multiple types of difficulties. Linguistic ones appeared together with concerns about confidence, anxiety, and opportunities for practice. Some linguistic problems were particularly noticeable when students had to use what they knew while speaking. The strategies reported by students were closely related to these difficulties. Vocabulary and grammar were practiced in context, while anxiety and confidence were managed in different ways. Students also looked for opportunities to use English outside the classroom, and for some, technology and AI tools were part of their speaking practice.

These results have some implications for classroom practice. Knowing vocabulary, for example, may not be sufficient when students find it difficult to use what they know in actual speaking, and more opportunities for meaningful communication can help them put this knowledge into practice. Similarly, concerns about making mistakes could reduce students' confidence and lead to hesitation even when they have ideas to express; therefore, teachers should support students' participation by creating speaking opportunities without placing excessive emphasis on accuracy. Outside the classroom, for further practice, using language-learning applications and AI tools can provide additional opportunities for self-study, especially when students have few chances to use English elsewhere.

However, there are some limitations to this study. All questionnaire data came from students at one university, and only ten students were interviewed. Their experiences may differ from those of students in other contexts. Another limitation is related to the type of data collected, as most of the results were based on students' self-reported difficulties and strategies and did not directly examine their actual speaking performance. Future research could include classroom observations and speaking tests to provide a better understanding of these difficulties. Also, it may be useful to track students' progress through their different stages of study to examine whether their reported difficulties and the strategies they use change over time.

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