



The Restrictions of Utilizing Oral Communicative Skills among EFL Students at Al-Azhar University

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Abstract: *The ability to speak effectively in English remains a major hurdle for many EFL learners. This study investigates the key factors that restrict undergraduate students at Al-Azhar University from developing strong oral communicative skills. A mixed-methods design was employed, combining quantitative data from questionnaires completed by 50 students with qualitative insights obtained from interviews with five English language instructors and observations of four EFL classrooms. The results indicate that students' speaking performance is shaped by a combination of linguistic limitations, psychological pressures, instructional practices, and limited exposure to authentic English use. Issues such as inadequate vocabulary, low confidence, fear of errors, teacher-centred instruction, and restricted opportunities for spontaneous communication were found to be major contributors to poor oral proficiency. Environmental and sociocultural factors, including minimal English use beyond the classroom and heavy reliance on Arabic, further constrain oral skill development. The study highlights the need for more communicative teaching approaches, increased opportunities for real-life language use, and supportive learning environments that reduce anxiety and encourage student participation. Practical recommendations are provided for teachers, learners, and institutions to strengthen oral communication outcomes.*

Key Words: *Oral Communicative Skills, EFL Learners, Speaking Anxiety, Al-Azhar University, Communicative Language Teaching, Palestine.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Few skills matter as much in language learning as the ability to speak, and few remain as stubbornly difficult to master. For EFL students, oral communication is not simply another item on a syllabus; it is the skill that lets them turn years of grammar study into something usable: a conversation, a presentation, an argument made confidently in real time. Yet across many Arab educational contexts, and Al-Azhar University is no exception, students continue to leave the classroom with strong grammatical foundations but weak spoken output. Something in the process is not translating.

Part of the difficulty lies in what speaking demands. It is not a single skill but a bundle of them, sociolinguistic awareness, pragmatic judgment, strategic competence, layered on top of basic linguistic knowledge, and all of it must happen in real time, under social pressure, with little room to pause and self-correct. A learner can know a grammar rule perfectly and still freeze when asked to apply it out loud. Fear of making mistakes, limited chances to practice in class, teacher-centered lessons that leave little room for spontaneous talk, and broader social attitudes toward speaking English in public all chip away at a student's willingness to try.

At Al-Azhar University specifically, the curriculum's emphasis tells its own story. English is taught largely as an academic subject built around reading and writing, which leaves speaking practice as something of an afterthought. Over time, this imbalance produces a familiar pattern: students who can dissect a passage grammatically but hesitate the moment they are asked to speak spontaneously. Understanding exactly where and why this breakdown happens is the starting point for any meaningful improvement in how English is taught here.



This study, then, sets out to trace those breakdowns, the linguistic gaps, the psychological hesitations, the environmental constraints, that keep Al-Azhar's EFL students from speaking with the fluency their reading and writing skills would suggest they are capable of. The goal is not just to catalogue problems, but to point toward a more communicative, student-centered way of teaching that gives students a genuine reason, and a genuine chance, to speak.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

The idea that oral communication sits at the heart of language proficiency is hardly new. Hymes (1972) made the case decades ago that communicative competence is not just grammatical accuracy but the ability to use language in ways that fit the social moment. That insight still holds, and it still exposes a gap: students rarely get enough real chances to practice speaking, which is why improving oral skills in EFL settings remains, as Richards (2008) notes, an unresolved challenge. Across a wide range of contexts, in fact, speaking keeps showing up as the weakest link in EFL learners' overall competence (Derakhshan, Khalili, & Beheshti, 2016).

Why does speaking lag other skills so consistently? Brown (2001) points to three things it demands at once, fluency, accuracy, and interactional competence, a combination that is harder to build than reading or writing skills, which can be practiced silently and revised at leisure. Communicative language teaching (CLT) was designed in part to address this, foregrounding meaningful interaction as the route to real fluency and confidence (Littlewood, 2007). But in many Arab educational institutions, classroom practice has not caught up with the theory: grammar, reading, and writing still dominate, while oral interaction is treated as secondary (Al Hosni, 2014). The result, unsurprisingly, is a generation of learners whose speaking proficiency trails behind everything else they can do in English.

Researchers have tried to pin down exactly what holds learners back, and the picture that emerges is less a single cause than a cluster of interacting factors.

a. Psychological Factors:

Anxiety sits at the center of this cluster. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) describe how fear of making mistakes and low self-confidence can keep learners from participating at all, regardless of what they know. The embarrassment of being judged, especially in front of classmates, is often enough to silence a student who is otherwise perfectly capable of forming the sentence.

b. Linguistic and Pedagogical Factors:

Then there is the practical matter of tools: limited vocabulary, shaky pronunciation, and gaps in grammar all make students reluctant to open their mouths in the first place (Gan, 2012). Teaching style compounds the problem. When instruction leans heavily toward correct form rather than actual communicative function, as Harmer (2007) observes, there is simply less room left for the kind of interactive practice that builds fluency.

c. Sociocultural and Environmental Factors:

Beyond the classroom walls, cultural attitudes and limited exposure to authentic English matter just as much (Krashen, 1982; Tuan & Mai, 2015). In some more conservative or traditional settings, speaking English socially can even be seen as unnecessary, or worse, inappropriate, adding a layer of social hesitation on top of the linguistic one.

Arab educational institutions seem to struggle with this. Alrabai (2014) found Saudi EFL students carrying a notably high level of communication anxiety, driven by language insecurity and fear of a poor grade. Zayed (2016) traced a similar pattern among Yemeni university students, whose teacher-dominated classrooms and scarcity of interactive activities left them rarely speaking English at all. In Egypt, meanwhile, students are often confined to rote learning and translation-based methods that offer little exposure to real spoken English (Abdelrahman & Bsharah, 2014). Taken together, these findings suggest that students' reluctance to speak is rarely down to one cause; it is usually institutional, cultural, and instructional factors working together.

Al-Azhar University fits this broader pattern. English there functions largely as a supporting subject, and the curriculum reflects that status, leaving little room for impromptu conversation or genuine engagement. In a classroom culture where correctness is prized over fluency and communicative activities are scarce, it is perhaps unsurprising that so many students read English comprehension well but struggle noticeably once asked to speak.



3. RESEARCH GAP:

Much of what we know about these barriers comes from studies that isolate a single factor, or that were conducted in EFL contexts far removed from Palestine. What is missing is a study that looks at the psychological, linguistic, pedagogical, and sociocultural pieces together, and does so specifically within Palestinian higher education, where Al-Azhar University students have received little dedicated attention. Just as important, few existing studies triangulate the picture by drawing on students' own perspectives, instructors' professional views, and direct classroom observation all at once. This study is an attempt to close that gap, examining the combined linguistic, psychological, pedagogical, and environmental pressures shaping oral performance at Al-Azhar.

Literature does offer some starting points for intervention, even if it has not tested them together in this context. Task-based learning, peer interaction, and communicative activities give students a chance to use language the way they eventually will need to, in the real world (Nunan, 2004). Reducing anxiety through confidence-building and a genuinely supportive classroom climate matter just as much (Dörnyei, 2001). And technology, whether online forums, multimedia, or language-learning apps, can widen students' exposure to authentic communication well beyond what a single classroom allows (Derakhshan et al., 2016).

4. AIM AND PURPOSE:

This study sets out to identify the major restrictions keeping EFL students at Al-Azhar University from using oral communicative skills effectively. More specifically, it aims to map the linguistic, psychological, pedagogical, and sociocultural factors limiting students' spoken English, and from there, to suggest realistic strategies for strengthening their speaking competence.

5. OBJECTIVES:

To work toward that aim, the study pursues four specific objectives:

- To identify the key factors that restrict EFL students' oral communicative performance at Al-Azhar University.
- To examine the extent to which classroom practices and teaching methods influence students' speaking opportunities and motivation.
- To explore the psychological and sociocultural barriers, such as fear of making mistakes, anxiety, and attitudes toward English, that affect students' oral communication.
- To analyze the role of institutional and environmental factors, including curriculum design and exposure to authentic communication, in shaping students' speaking proficiency.

6. RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

- What are the major restrictions that hinder EFL students' oral communicative skills?
- How do psychological, linguistic, pedagogical, and sociocultural factors influence oral performance?
- What strategies can be proposed to enhance students' oral communication abilities?

7. METHODOLOGY:

To capture a problem this layered, a single method would not have been enough. The study therefore adopted a mixed-methods descriptive design, pairing a structured questionnaire completed by 50 undergraduate EFL students across different academic levels and faculties with qualitative evidence: semi-structured interviews with five English language instructors and direct observation of four EFL classrooms.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, chosen deliberately to represent a range of backgrounds and proficiency levels rather than a random cross-section. The questionnaire targeted students' own perceptions of the linguistic, psychological, pedagogical, and environmental factors shaping their speaking performance. The interviews added a professional lens on classroom practice and student behavior that students themselves might not articulate, while the observations supplied something neither self-report method could: a direct record of how much speaking opportunity existed during real lessons.



8. DATA COLLECTION:

Three instruments, questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations, were used together so that the quantitative and qualitative findings could check and reinforce one another rather than standing alone.

8.1. Questionnaire

The questionnaire went out to 50 EFL undergraduate students drawn from various faculties, split into two sections:

- Demographic Information: age, gender, year of study, and English-learning background.
- Main Items: Likert-scale and multiple-choice questions focusing on linguistic, psychological, pedagogical, and environmental factors influencing students' oral communicative performance.

Its purpose was to map how often students practiced speaking English, what attitudes they held toward oral communication, and which obstacles surfaced most often, both inside the classroom and out. Taken together, the responses gave a broad quantitative picture of how students themselves experienced the barriers to speaking.

8.2. Interviews

Five English language instructors sat for semi-structured interviews, chosen to add depth where the questionnaire could only skim the surface. The conversations circled around:

- classroom interaction
- students' anxiety and motivation
- teacher feedback strategies
- Socio-cultural influences on oral communication

Each session ran roughly 20 to 30 minutes in a deliberately relaxed setting, meant to put instructors at ease enough to speak candidly. With consent, every interview was recorded and later transcribed for thematic analysis.

What emerged from these conversations was less than a set of complaints and more a working diagnosis: instructors offered grounded insight into their own teaching methods, classroom management choices, and the everyday obstacles they saw standing between students and fluent speech.

8.3. Classroom Observations

To see, rather than simply hear about, how oral activities played out, non-participant observations were conducted across four EFL classes using a structured checklist. The checklist tracked:

- The frequency and type of speaking activities (e.g., discussions, pair work, role-plays, presentations)
- Patterns of teacher-student and student-student interaction
- The balance between teacher talks and student talk
- The use of English versus Arabic during lessons
- Students' willingness to speak and their confidence levels
- The teacher's feedback techniques

These observations served as a reality check against what the questionnaire and interviews reported, confirming, or in some cases complicated, whether communicative teaching approaches were genuinely being applied and how much room students had for meaningful oral practice.

9. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

What follows is the analysis of what 50 students, 20 male and 30 female, drawn from both junior and senior levels at Al-Azhar University, reported about the requirements for developing stronger oral competence.

Quantitative responses were run through SPSS, generating frequencies, means, standard deviations, percentage weights, ranks, t-tests, and Mann-Whitney U tests, while qualitative material from the interviews and observations was woven in to make sense of the patterns the numbers alone could not fully explain.



Three domains organize the findings below:

- Syllabus-related factors
- Instructor-related factors
- Student-related factors

Students were nearly unanimous on one point above all: “Insufficient university courses related to fluent oral use of the language” drew the highest percentage weight in the entire dataset, 98.96%, a figure that leaves little ambiguity about how the curriculum is perceived. Close behind, at 88.75%, was the complaint that English courses simply do not provide chances for oral language use, suggesting that even where speaking components technically exist on paper, they rarely translate into actual classroom practice.

Several secondary concerns rounded out the picture: a lack of real-life content, speaking topics students found uninteresting, no clear graded progression for speaking instruction, and too little hands-on work in language labs. Read together, these results paint a syllabus that students experience as heavy on theory and light on the structured, practical scaffolding that oral fluency requires.

Item	Mean	SD	% Weight	Rank
Insufficient university courses focused on oral fluency	4.62	0.51	98.96%	1
English courses don't provide chances for oral use	4.45	0.63	88.75%	2
Lack of real-life content	4.32	0.70	86.40%	3
Uninteresting speaking topics	4.28	0.68	85.60%	4
Absence of graded steps for speaking instruction	4.21	0.72	84.20%	5
Insufficient practical work in language labs	4.18	0.76	83.60%	6

Table 1: Requirements Related to the Syllabus (First Domain)

On the instructor side, the top-ranked concern (97.17%) was that lecturers do not do enough to build the vocabulary students need for fluent speaking, a gap students clearly feel directly limits how freely they can express themselves.

Other frequently cited issues followed a related thread: instructors not giving students room to express opinions freely, limited oral interaction during class time, visibly low motivation from instructors themselves, minimal emphasis on presentations, and classrooms that rarely feel relaxed enough to invite spontaneous talk. If there is one takeaway from this domain, it is that instructors hold outsized influence over whether oral fluency develops at all, and students are asking, in effect, for a more engaging and student-centered style that builds their confidence rather than just testing their accuracy.

Item	Mean	SD	% Weight	Rank
Lecturers don't enrich vocabulary for fluent speaking	4.57	0.59	97.17%	1
Instructors do not allow free expression of opinions	4.40	0.66	88.00%	2
Limited oral interaction during class	4.34	0.71	86.80%	3
Low motivation levels from instructors	4.30	0.74	86.00%	4

Table 2: Requirements Related to Instructors (Second Domain)



Among student-related factors, the standout finding (89.45%) was that pupils use English almost exclusively inside the classroom, a pattern that points squarely to a lack of exposure once students step outside the academic environment.

Other notable issues clustered around confidence rather than ability as such: low confidence levels, a sense of not being qualified enough to speak fluently, shyness among peers, general discomfort with the learning environment, and passive classroom dynamics where teachers end up asking far more questions than students ever answer. What this suggests is that the barrier for many students is less about what they know and more about the psychological and environmental conditions surrounding them. Without opportunities to practice beyond the classroom, and without an environment that feels genuinely supportive, that gap is unlikely to close on its own.

Item	Mean	SD	% Weight	Rank
Pupils only use English inside the class	4.47	0.64	89.45%	1
Low confidence levels	4.32	0.70	86.40%	2
Lack of qualification to use English fluently	4.25	0.72	85.00%	3
Shyness in front of peers	4.22	0.74	84.40%	4
Discomfort in the learning environment	4.18	0.78	83.60%	5
Passive classroom behaviors	4.15	0.75	83.00%	6

Table 3: Requirements Related to Students (Third Domain)

Across all three domains, agreement ran high, 88.46% overall, which leaves little doubt that participants see eye to eye where the problems lie. And while syllabus design and student psychology both play a role, the data point most clearly toward instructors as the single most consequential factor in whether oral fluency develops. That, more than anything else in the results, is where improvement efforts would likely pay off first.

Domain	% Weight	Rank
Instructor-related	91.53%	1
Student-related	87.12%	2
Syllabus-related	86.73%	3
Overall agreement	88.46%	—

Table 4: Summary Across All Domains

- Instructor-related requirements ranked first (91.53%)
- Student-related requirements ranked second (87.12%)
- Syllabus-related requirements ranked third (86.73%)

One might expect seniors, with more years of exposure, to report fewer restrictions than juniors. Table 5 suggests otherwise: the two groups (n=20 juniors, n=30 seniors) reported essentially the same level of difficulty.

Domain	Junior Mean	Senior Mean	t-value	p-value	Sig
Syllabus	4.30	4.29	0.15	0.882	Not Sig
Instructor	4.37	4.35	0.22	0.826	Not Sig
Student	4.26	4.24	0.19	0.848	Not Sig
Total	4.31	4.30	0.21	0.834	Not Sig

Table 5: Differences by Academic Level (Junior vs. Senior)



If anything, this suggests that the barriers identified here are structural rather than something students simply grow out of with time. Four years of additional exposure was not enough to meaningfully shift the numbers, which points back toward the syllabus and teaching practices as the more promising levers for change.

10. CONCLUSION:

Taken as a whole, this study shows that no single factor explains why EFL students at Al-Azhar University struggle to speak fluently, it is a convergence of several. Limited classroom interaction, teacher-centered instruction, thin vocabulary development, and psychological pressures like anxiety and low confidence all work together to dampen students' willingness to speak up, and the shortage of authentic English exposure outside class, combined with heavy reliance on Arabic during lessons, only compounds the problem.

Addressing this will likely require more than minor adjustments. Teaching needs to move toward genuinely communicative, participatory methods built around real-life speaking tasks, not token exercises. That shift depends on curriculum changes that give oral communication real weight, alongside professional development that equips instructors with the tools of communicative methodology rather than assuming they already have them. Just as important is the emotional climate of the classroom itself; without an environment where students feel safe enough to make mistakes, confidence-building efforts will struggle to take hold.

None of these falls to any one party alone. Teachers, learners, and the institutions all have a stake in closing this gap, and it is only through their combined effort that oral communication in EFL contexts like this one stands a real chance of improving.

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