



A Psycholinguistic Analysis of Students' Speaking Difficulties in English as a Foreign Language Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the psycholinguistic factors that contribute to students' speaking difficulties in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. As speaking is a productive skill that requires rapid mental processing, many learners struggle to produce fluent and accurate speech due to cognitive, affective, and linguistic constraints. This research aims to identify how elements such as working memory limitations, lexical retrieval challenges, anxiety, low self-confidence, and insufficient language exposure influence students' oral performance. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and speaking-task analyses involving EFL learners at the tertiary level. The findings reveal that students frequently face difficulties retrieving vocabulary, organizing ideas quickly, and maintaining fluency under time pressure. Psychological barriers such as fear of making mistakes, negative self-perception, and social anxiety also significantly hinder their willingness to speak. Moreover, limited practice opportunities and inadequate classroom interaction further reduce students' communicative competence. This study underscores the need for pedagogical strategies that address both cognitive and emotional aspects of language learning. Enhancing supportive environments, providing structured speaking tasks, and integrating psycholinguistically informed techniques can help learners improve fluency, accuracy, and overall speaking performance in EFL classrooms.

Keywords: Psycholinguistics, Speaking Difficulties, EFL Students, Anxiety, Fluency

INTRODUCTION

Speaking is widely recognized as one of the most challenging skills for learners of English as a Foreign Language because it requires the integration of cognitive processing, linguistic knowledge, and psychological readiness. Many students struggle to express their ideas fluently due to difficulties in retrieving appropriate vocabulary, organizing thoughts quickly, and maintaining accuracy under time pressure. These challenges are even more significant in classroom settings where learners feel evaluated by peers and teachers. Psycholinguistic factors such as working memory limitations,

processing speed, lexical access, and attentional control strongly influence learners' speaking performance. Furthermore, emotional barriers like anxiety and fear of negative judgment often reduce students' willingness to communicate and hinder their natural speech production. Understanding these interconnected factors is essential for developing effective pedagogical interventions that can support learners in improving their speaking proficiency in EFL contexts (Al-Khotaba & Alkhataba, 2019).

Psycholinguistic perspectives offer a deeper understanding of how mental processes shape spoken language performance, particularly in second or foreign language learning. Speaking requires rapid lexical retrieval and the activation of stored linguistic knowledge within milliseconds, placing heavy demands on learners' cognitive resources. Research highlights that differences in lexical access speed, vocabulary size, and phraseological competence significantly influence learners' fluency and coherence. When learners struggle to activate words or structures quickly, their speech becomes fragmented or hesitant, reducing communicative effectiveness. These difficulties are often compounded in classroom settings where performance pressure heightens cognitive load. Variations between spoken and written responses among learners further suggest differing levels of language automatization, supporting the view that speaking requires more immediate and dynamic processing. As a result, psycholinguistic factors must be considered integral to understanding learners' challenges in EFL speaking tasks (Kim & Liu, 2023).

Speaking anxiety is one of the major emotional obstacles that interfere with learners' oral performance in foreign language classrooms. Numerous studies show that anxiety disrupts students' ability to think clearly, recall vocabulary, and maintain fluency during speaking tasks. When anxiety levels increase, cognitive resources are redirected toward self-monitoring and worry rather than language processing, resulting in speech breakdowns or silence. Classroom conditions such as unfamiliar topics, complex tasks, or being required to speak in front of peers may intensify these feelings. Task complexity also plays an important role; more demanding speaking tasks require greater cognitive processing and therefore may trigger higher anxiety levels. The interplay between emotional and cognitive factors shows that successful speaking depends not only on linguistic competence but also on learners' psychological preparedness. Understanding these dynamics is essential for designing supportive speaking activities that reduce anxiety while enhancing performance (Mora & Bermejo, 2024).

In addition to emotional challenges, cognitive fluency significantly affects learners' ability to speak smoothly in a foreign language. Cognitive fluency refers to the efficiency of underlying mental processes such as lexical retrieval, syntactic encoding, and the coordination of speech planning with articulation. Learners with more automatic processing typically speak faster and with fewer pauses, while those relying on controlled processing often produce disfluent or interrupted speech. Research reveals that differences in automatic versus controlled lexical processing can strongly predict speech rate and fluency levels among EFL learners. When lexical retrieval is slow or effortful, learners struggle to maintain a natural rhythm of speech, leading to increased hesitation or self-repair behaviors. These psycholinguistic constraints highlight the need for language instruction that fosters automaticity through repeated practice and exposure. Improving cognitive fluency can therefore contribute substantially to overcoming speaking difficulties in the EFL classroom (Olkkonen & Snellings, 2024).

Working memory capacity is another crucial psycholinguistic factor influencing how effectively learners produce speech. Speaking requires individuals to temporarily

store and manipulate information while simultaneously planning upcoming utterances. Learners with limited working memory resources often experience difficulty maintaining grammatical accuracy, producing longer utterances, or conveying complex ideas. Studies show that working memory capacity correlates with speaking accuracy and utterance length among EFL learners, demonstrating the cognitive load inherent in oral communication. When working memory is overloaded, learners tend to rely on simpler structures or produce shorter, less coherent responses. These constraints also affect learners' ability to monitor their speech in real time, resulting in errors or disfluencies. Understanding the role of working memory helps educators design speaking tasks that align with learners' cognitive capacities, such as using scaffolding techniques or breaking tasks into smaller steps to reduce processing demands (Rafiei & Faruji, 2019).

Overall, psycholinguistic and emotional factors collectively shape learners' speaking performance in the EFL classroom. Anxiety, cognitive fluency, lexical access, task complexity, and working memory limitations all interact to influence how students process and produce spoken language. These factors also help explain the wide variation in students' speaking performance, even among individuals with similar linguistic knowledge. Recognizing the multifaceted nature of speaking difficulties allows educators to implement holistic teaching approaches that address both cognitive and affective dimensions of learning. Strategies such as anxiety-reducing activities, automaticity-building exercises, structured speaking tasks, and personalized feedback can significantly improve learners' communicative confidence. By integrating psycholinguistic insights with practical classroom techniques, teachers can better support students in overcoming barriers to effective speaking. This perspective underscores the need for comprehensive instructional models grounded in both linguistic theory and psychological understanding (Syahrani & Nuraeni, 2024).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical basis of this study is grounded in psycholinguistic, linguistic, and affective frameworks that explain how learners process, produce, and regulate spoken language in real-time communication. Psycholinguistics highlights the mental mechanisms involved in conceptualization, formulation, and articulation, emphasizing how working memory, lexical retrieval speed, and cognitive load determine the fluency and coherence of speech. Linguistic theory contributes by outlining how limitations in vocabulary range, grammatical accuracy, pronunciation, and discourse organization restrict learners' ability to express ideas clearly and appropriately. Affective theory further explains how anxiety, low self-confidence, and fear of negative evaluation interfere with cognitive processing, often causing hesitation, avoidance, and reduced communicative performance. Together, these frameworks reveal that speaking difficulties in EFL contexts are not merely linguistic deficits but complex interactions between cognitive demands, emotional conditions, and linguistic competence. This integrated theoretical perspective provides a foundation for understanding students' speaking challenges holistically and guides the interpretation of the findings.

1. Psycholinguistics and Second Language Speaking Processes

Psycholinguistics provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how learners perceive, process, and produce language during real-time communication. In the context of second language (L2) speaking, the psycholinguistic process involves several stages, including conceptualization, formulation, and articulation. These stages

require rapid lexical retrieval, efficient syntactic planning, and continuous monitoring of spoken output. When learners face limitations in working memory or automaticity, their ability to organize ideas and transform them into coherent utterances becomes significantly impaired. This makes psycholinguistic theory highly relevant for analyzing students' speaking difficulties, particularly within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts where exposure and practice may be limited.

2. Lexical Retrieval and Working Memory in Speaking Performance

Lexical retrieval is a central component of speech production, as speakers must rapidly access and select appropriate words from memory to convey intended meanings. In L2 contexts, learners often struggle with retrieving vocabulary due to limited lexical storage, insufficient automaticity, or interference from their first language. Delays in lexical access may lead to hesitation, fillers, or prolonged pauses, all of which negatively affect fluency. Because speaking requires real-time processing, learners with slower lexical retrieval often experience difficulty maintaining smooth speech flow. This highlights why lexical retrieval is consistently identified as a major predictor of speaking performance.

3. Language Anxiety and Affective Barriers in Speaking

Language anxiety is widely recognized as one of the most influential affective variables affecting students' willingness and ability to speak in an L2. Anxiety causes physiological and cognitive reactions such as increased heart rate, fear of negative evaluation, and reduced concentration. When students experience high levels of anxiety, they often avoid speaking opportunities, hesitate excessively, or produce shorter and less complex utterances. These symptoms interfere with spontaneous language production, making it difficult for learners to demonstrate their true linguistic competence. EFL classrooms, which often emphasize accuracy and correctness, can unintentionally intensify students' anxiety levels.

4. Cognitive Fluency and Automaticity in L2 Speech Production

Cognitive fluency refers to the mental efficiency with which learners process linguistic information during speaking. It is not merely about speaking quickly but about accessing vocabulary, constructing sentences, and organizing ideas with minimal mental effort. Learners with high cognitive fluency demonstrate smooth and coherent speech because their cognitive system efficiently handles linguistic demands. Conversely, learners with limited cognitive fluency struggle with frequent pauses, self-corrections, and disfluencies, reflecting underlying difficulties in processing speed or automaticity. Cognitive fluency thus serves as a foundational construct for understanding variations in learners' speaking performance.

METHODOLOGY

This Research Method uses a qualitative-descriptive approach supported by an extensive literature review to analyze the implementation of circular economy policies in environmentally friendly urban development. This method focuses on identifying patterns, concepts, and policy directions related to circular initiatives in Indonesian cities. The research systematically reviews academic journals, policy briefs, governmental publications, and international frameworks such as UN-Habitat and OECD guidelines on circular urban systems. Through document analysis, the study evaluates how circular principles—such as waste reduction, material recovery, eco-

design, and low-carbon strategies – are integrated into planning processes. The method also examines institutional arrangements, stakeholder involvement, and governance mechanisms that influence policy adoption. By synthesizing theoretical and empirical findings, the research aims to construct a comprehensive understanding of the opportunities and limitations associated with implementing circular economy concepts in urban planning.

This Research Method further incorporates comparative analysis to evaluate differences in circular economy adoption across various Indonesian cities and benchmark them against successful international cases. The comparison highlights policy effectiveness, institutional readiness, technological innovation, and community engagement as important indicators of circular transition. Data were collected from peer-reviewed publications, urban sustainability reports, governmental regulations, and academic case studies published between 2019 and 2025. These sources were analyzed using thematic coding to categorize key concepts such as regulatory frameworks, waste-management models, and green infrastructure development. The method enables the identification of recurring challenges, including limited financial support, fragmented policy enforcement, and low levels of public awareness. Overall, the approach provides a structured foundation for understanding how circular economy strategies are applied in practice and how they can strengthen environmentally friendly city planning.

RESEARCH RESULT

The findings indicate that students' speaking difficulties are primarily influenced by psycholinguistic constraints such as limited working memory capacity, slow lexical retrieval, and high monitoring pressure, which collectively disrupt the smooth processing of spoken language. Many students experience hesitation and fragmented speech because their cognitive system struggles to process vocabulary, grammar, and ideas simultaneously. These psycholinguistic factors are further intensified by linguistic weaknesses, including restricted vocabulary, inaccurate grammar, unclear pronunciation, and poor discourse organization. When learners lack automaticity in these linguistic components, they must rely on controlled processing, which increases cognitive load and reduces fluency. The analysis also reveals that pragmatic competence remains underdeveloped, causing learners to choose inappropriate expressions or inconsistent discourse markers during oral interactions.

In addition to cognitive and linguistic factors, affective variables such as speaking anxiety, low confidence, and fear of peer judgment play a significant role in shaping oral performance. Students who perceive speaking tasks as threatening tend to produce shorter, less complex utterances and often avoid participating in discussions. Classroom conditions amplify or reduce these barriers: supportive teacher feedback, meaningful speaking opportunities, manageable task difficulty, and positive peer dynamics encourage engagement, whereas rigid correction styles or competitive environments suppress participation. These findings emphasize that speaking performance emerges from the combined influence of mental processing, linguistic readiness, emotional states, and instructional context. Addressing only one dimension is insufficient; effective improvement requires integrating cognitive support, language development, and affective strategies.

DISCUSSION

Table 1. Psycholinguistic Factors Affecting Speaking Performance

No	Factor	Description	Manifestation in Students
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1	Working Memory Load	Limited capacity for linguistic information	Frequent pauses, difficulty organizing ideas
2	Lexical Retrieval	Challenges retrieving words quickly	Hesitation, fillers, simplified vocabulary
3	Formulation Speed	Slow syntactic and conceptual planning	Broken sentences, reduced fluency
4	Monitoring Pressure	Excessive self-monitoring during speaking	Overcorrection, loss of confidence
5	Cognitive Overload	Excess information processed at once	Speech breakdowns, disrupted fluency

The findings in Table 1 highlight several psycholinguistic mechanisms that directly influence learners' spoken performance in EFL classrooms. Working memory limitations appear as a central constraint, particularly when students attempt to retrieve vocabulary, construct sentences, and express ideas simultaneously. As the speaking process demands rapid and continuous mental operations, learners with limited working memory often struggle to maintain coherence and fluency. Another crucial factor is lexical retrieval difficulty, which manifests through hesitations, fillers, and repetitive word choices. This difficulty occurs because students' lexical storage is not yet fully automated, requiring them to exert conscious effort when selecting appropriate vocabulary during speech. Formulation speed also plays a significant role, as students who require more time to conceptualize and structure ideas produce fragmented sentences and experience interruptions in fluency. Excessive monitoring further intensifies cognitive burden, causing students to focus more on potential mistakes than on communication itself. Altogether, these psycholinguistic factors illustrate how mental processing significantly shapes learners' oral output.

The manifestation of these psycholinguistic factors demonstrates that students' speaking difficulties extend beyond linguistic knowledge and are deeply rooted in internal cognitive processes. Excessive monitoring, for example, indicates that learners prioritize accuracy over fluency, leading to self-interruption and reduced confidence, particularly in high-pressure classroom situations. Cognitive overload further intensifies challenges, as learners simultaneously manage content, vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. When the brain receives excessive linguistic input, it becomes difficult to manage real-time speech production, resulting in breakdowns such as long pauses or incomplete sentences. These findings imply that effective speaking instruction must acknowledge the cognitive complexity of language production and avoid attributing difficulties solely to lack of ability or practice. Instead, interventions should aim to reduce cognitive load, such as by providing structured planning time, supporting incremental vocabulary development, and creating low-anxiety speaking environments. Through understanding these psycholinguistic constraints, instructors can design activities that align with how learners cognitively process spoken language.

Tabel 2. Affective Barriers Influencing Speaking Performance

No	Affective Aspect	Description	Classroom Impact
1	Speaking Anxiety	Fear of negative evaluation	Avoidance of participation
2	Low Self-Confidence	Doubt about speaking ability	Reduced willingness to speak
3	Social Pressure	Fear of peer judgment	Overthinking before speaking

4	Emotional Tension	Nervousness during tasks	Short, simplified responses
5	Negative Self-Belief	Perceived incompetence	Persistent reluctance to speak

Table 2 presents affective factors that shape students' speaking behavior, emphasizing how emotional barriers inhibit classroom performance. Speaking anxiety emerges as the most dominant affective barrier, characterized by fear of mistakes, fear of being judged, and overall discomfort during speaking tasks. This anxiety leads students to avoid opportunities to speak, even when they possess adequate linguistic knowledge. Low self-confidence reinforces this pattern, as learners internalize doubts regarding their ability to communicate effectively. Consequently, they hesitate, produce minimal responses, or choose to remain silent during group or whole-class discussions. Another significant barrier is social pressure, which heightens students' self-awareness and causes them to overthink before producing speech. When students feel observed or evaluated, their cognitive and emotional tension escalates, limiting their ability to produce spontaneous and accurate language.

These affective barriers contribute to a cycle where emotional tension leads to reduced speaking practice, and reduced practice further reinforces anxiety and negative self-beliefs. Emotional tension, for example, often prevents students from accessing vocabulary or recalling previously learned structures, resulting in oversimplified speech. Negative self-belief causes them to interpret small errors as evidence of incompetence, which lowers their motivation to engage in future speaking activities. The classroom impact becomes significant when these affective constraints persist, leading to long-term disengagement and limited oral communication development. The findings suggest that speaking difficulties cannot be separated from students' emotional conditions, as affective states heavily influence cognitive processing. Therefore, creating supportive classroom climates, offering positive reinforcement, and implementing low-stress speaking tasks are essential strategies for mitigating affective barriers. By addressing these emotional dimensions, educators can help students develop confidence, resilience, and greater willingness to participate in oral communication.

Tabel 3. Linguistic Challenges Encountered by EFL Learners

No	Linguistic Area	Description	Common Difficulties
1	Vocabulary Range	Limited word variety	Repetition, vague expressions
2	Grammar Accuracy	Errors in structure formation	Tense confusion, incomplete sentences
3	Pronunciation	Difficulty producing accurate sounds	Mispronunciation, unclear articulation
4	Discourse Organization	Structuring coherent ideas	Jumping between topics
5	Pragmatic Use	Context-appropriate language	Inappropriate tone or expressions

Table 3 identifies key linguistic barriers that restrict EFL learners' speaking proficiency, showing that linguistic limitations often interact with cognitive and affective factors. A restricted vocabulary range prevents learners from expressing ideas precisely, forcing them to rely on repetitive or vague expressions. Grammar accuracy also poses a significant challenge, particularly when learners struggle with tense usage, sentence structure, or agreement, leading to fragmented or incomplete sentences. Pronunciation challenges further contribute by affecting the clarity of speech, making communication

less comprehensible to peers and instructors. These linguistic weaknesses commonly result in reduced confidence and hesitation, as students become overly concerned about making errors. Discourse organization difficulties also emerge when students cannot logically connect ideas, which disrupts message coherence and leads to confusion in conversations.

Pragmatic use of language also presents a significant challenge, as students must choose contextually appropriate expressions, tones, and levels of formality depending on the communicative situation. Failure to do so often results in misunderstandings or unnatural speech patterns. These linguistic constraints collectively influence how effectively learners can participate in academic and social interactions within the classroom. Importantly, linguistic difficulties often intensify when students feel anxious or cognitively overwhelmed, illustrating the interplay between linguistic, affective, and psycholinguistic factors. These findings indicate that successful speaking instruction must go beyond grammar drills and vocabulary memorization. Instead, language learning activities should integrate discourse-level practice, context-rich communication tasks, and pronunciation support that fosters intelligibility rather than perfection. Addressing linguistic challenges holistically enables learners to produce more accurate, fluent, and contextually appropriate spoken language.

Tabel 4. Classroom Conditions Affecting Students' Speaking Engagement

No	Classroom Condition	Description	Impact on Speaking
1	Teacher Feedback Style	Manner of correction and guidance	Encourages or discourages risk-taking
2	Interaction Opportunities	Availability of speaking tasks	Determines fluency development
3	Task Difficulty	Level of complexity	Influences speaking confidence
4	Learning Environment	Atmosphere of the classroom	Affects anxiety levels
5	Peer Dynamics	Relationships among students	Influences participation patterns

Table 4 illustrates how classroom conditions contribute significantly to students' speaking performance by influencing their engagement, motivation, and emotional comfort. Teacher feedback style is particularly influential; supportive and constructive feedback encourages students to take risks and participate actively, while overly critical or frequent correction may heighten anxiety and discourage speaking attempts. Interaction opportunities determine how frequently students practice oral communication; classrooms with limited communicative activities prevent learners from developing fluency and confidence. Task difficulty also affects engagement, as tasks that are too complex may overwhelm students, whereas overly simple tasks may fail to promote meaningful language production. A conducive learning environment—calm, inclusive, and free from excessive pressure—helps reduce anxiety and fosters willingness to speak.

Peer dynamics further shape participation patterns, as supportive peer relationships can create a sense of safety that encourages students to engage more freely in speaking tasks. Conversely, competitive or judgmental peer environments may lead to withdrawal, hesitation, and reluctance to perform. The interplay among these

classroom conditions suggests that speaking performance is not solely a product of individual ability but also of the broader instructional context. When classroom structures promote collaboration, reduce pressure, and offer opportunities for authentic communication, students exhibit higher levels of fluency, accuracy, and confidence. These findings underscore the importance of designing classroom practices that align with students' cognitive and emotional needs. By adjusting classroom conditions intentionally, educators can create an environment that enhances both language development and positive learning experiences.

CONCLUSION

This Conclusion students' speaking difficulties in EFL classrooms arise from the interaction of psycholinguistic demands, linguistic limitations, and affective barriers, all of which influence real-time language production. Learners struggle with working memory load, lexical retrieval, and monitoring pressure, while linguistic issues such as limited vocabulary, grammatical inaccuracy, and weak pronunciation further constrain communication. Emotional factors—especially anxiety and low confidence—intensify these challenges and reduce students' willingness to participate. Classroom conditions also shape performance, demonstrating that supportive environments enhance engagement, whereas high-pressure settings hinder fluency. Therefore, improving speaking competence requires an integrated approach that strengthens cognitive processing, develops linguistic accuracy, reduces affective barriers, and fosters positive learning environments.

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