

## Exploring Speaking Skills Strategies Adopted by Saudi EFL Learners and the Psychological Communication Challenges Encountered

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### Abstract

The goal of the current study is to examine the speaking strategies adopted by Saudi EFL students and highlight some of the potential psychological communication issues they might run across. For this purpose, a questionnaire and in-depth interviews were the tools employed in the study as part of a mixed quantitative and qualitative methodology. A group of 100 students enrolled in various levels at the College of Languages and Translation at Najran University were surveyed and interviewed during the academic year 2022–2023. Statements on psychological conditions like lack of self-esteem, anxiety, and lack of self-confidence were included in the semi-structured interview. Students were shown to regularly struggle with psychological issues like low self-esteem and a lack of confidence, which prevented them from speaking English and other languages. This study underlines the urgent need for English-speaking skills improvement at all levels of higher education and focuses on students' attitudes towards English-speaking talents. The study's conclusions suggest that students can use speaking skills strategies to overcome their communication difficulties. Additionally, it is discovered that the responses of the study sample are not statistically significantly different according to gender. Male and female students do not see learning to speak English differently, and they are now more cognizant of the growing significance of doing so.

**Keywords:** communication, speaking skills strategies, psychological challenges, EFL learners.

### 1. Introduction

English is an international language of communication in different fields such as commerce, science, medicine, tourism, and technology. Acquiring good communication skills in English is considered one of the most important soft skills required to attain good positions in life. Speaking is regarded as not only crucial but also as the skill that is most urgently sought after by all demographic groups in the context of English as a foreign language (EFL). There could be a variety of causes for this, including individual preferences, syllabus modifications, new socioeconomic goals, additional employment opportunities in the future, and updated national development plans.

This study focused on examining the speaking strategies Saudi EFL students use and the psychological communication issues they face. The research was conducted in the Department of English, College of Languages and Translation, Najran University, during 2022–2023. Even after spending a lot of time studying English as a foreign language, EFL students still struggle with their ability to talk in English when they speak at universities. They are unmotivated and haven't practiced their English language abilities enough. At level four of intermediate school, they were finally exposed to the English language. The students' fear of making mistakes is referred to as inhibition. The learners' inability to speak a second or foreign language is further hampered by their fear of criticism and shyness.

Finally, this study discusses the significance of English-speaking skills for students learning English as a foreign language, as well as the psychological problems they faced and the strategies they used to develop these abilities. The appropriate literature review and research questions are also presented. The article then goes into great length regarding data analysis and research methodology. A few helpful suggestions for students and teachers are made before the conclusion.

## 2. Literature Review

### *Speaking Skills Strategies*

EFL students have trouble communicating since they can understand what others are saying but lack self-assurance while speaking in English. Speaking in this context refers to both how people communicate and how they attempt to exchange knowledge (Abrar et al., 2018). According to the studies that follow, EFL students have some strategies of speaking skills for overcoming the challenges. Anjaniputra (2013) delved into the fact that cooperative activities such as creative assignments, drilling, and role playing are some of the strategies utilized to teach speaking. Similarly, Houston (2013) elucidated that drilling is a technique for enhancing fluency and standardizing language pronunciation (the ability to introduce language quickly and easily). He further stated that drilling is a useful technique that may be used to teach students how to pronounce English words and help them pick up fluency and pronunciation quickly. Another very effective strategy illustrated by Pratiwi and Ayu (2020) is that the employment of the "describing picture" strategy is a highly helpful method to enhance secondary students' speaking ability and improve the learners' communication abilities. One of the strategies is self-assessment, in which the teacher asks the students to identify their areas of strength and weakness when it comes to speaking English. According to Mahdi (2015), this strategy could benefit the teacher because they would be able to assess each student's ability. In the same way Abdul (2016) explored that broadcasting video project activities is an effective strategy for promoting students' motivation and speaking ability. He further suggested that problem-based learning will assist students' speaking skills in the English language classroom.

Heryanti & Hazairin (2017) documented a variety of strategies for speaking skills, including communicative-experiential, cognitive, social, and metacognitive. By employing these strategies, students can create effective sentences by using synonyms, practice speaking in front of the class, and increase their ability to deduce the teacher's meaning to overcome their challenges when they are having trouble speaking English. Additionally, the students practice their speaking performances in class as part of the interpersonal skills strategy. Heryanti & Hazairin (2017) listed many methods for implementing such strategies, including six students asking others for suggestions, five students choosing practice and rehearsal, and six students attempting to speak up in front of others. They further stated that students could also resolve their challenges with speaking English. According to Kamies Khamies (2007), there are a number of other strategies for teaching speaking through media, such as poems, chants, stories, theater, games, and total physical response (TPR) exercises. These media can be used to teach languages, have an impact on students, and accelerate language learning.

### *Communication Challenges*

Speaking is a tool for communication in the environment, and others will be able to tell how well learners speak English (Ihsan et al. 2018). The learners can't pick it up quickly, especially EFL students. It must be developed gradually and in steps (Ihsan et al., 2018). The students experience a variety of challenges, including poor vocabulary, a fear of making mistakes, shyness, nervousness, a lack of confidence, and poor motivation. These challenges were covered in the subsequent studies. According to Aziz and Kashinathan (2021), psychological barriers provide a significant challenge when using communication strategies. Their shyness, reserve, and fear of shame prevent them from using communication strategies effectively. Similarly, Jahbel (2019) indicated that fear, motivation, and a lack of exposure to the target language are the challenges faced by students taking English-speaking courses. He suggested that teachers use communication strategies in their lessons to help students become better communicators.

Lack of confidence is a psychological element that occurs when students realize that their English-speaking companions do not understand what they are saying. They perform very poorly, lack confidence, and occasionally choose to keep silent because they feel their English is inadequate. Most students mentioned a lack of confidence as one of the barriers to speaking English.

According to Dansieh et al. (2021), learners' poor learning quality, unfavorable attitudes toward the class, and low second language achievement may be caused by mismatches between their learning preferences and the communication strategies used in second language classrooms. This mismatch is considered one of the communication challenges. Another study by Ahmed and Pawar (2018) revealed that using appropriate strategies while speaking is a challenge. It was claimed that most students tend to stop speaking or switch to their mother

tongue instead of employing effective communicative strategies because their oral competency is weak. It was further suggested that students are ignorant of the communication strategies that will facilitate their speaking process. The teacher should demonstrate their passion by being active both when communicating in English and when teaching speaking skills to their students.

According to Pakula (2019), there are some difficulties with teaching speaking skills that are unrelated to the fact that some teachers feel insecure about their spoken language proficiency, avoid speaking the target language in class, and give students few opportunities to speak in front of the class. These difficulties are attributed to the lack of enthusiasm and motivation among teachers. Rather, these challenges stem from the possibility that some students may be afraid of making mistakes and receiving negative feedback.

### ***Psychological issues in Speaking Skills***

As an outcome of earlier research, it has been determined that psychological factors are now one of the major issues affecting students' ability to speak, in addition to more general issues such as a lack of vocabulary and grammatical skills.

Juhana (2012) asserts that at least five factors, including shyness, anxiety, lack of confidence, lack of drive, and fear of making mistakes, restrict students from speaking in English class. These factors all fit the profile of the recently discovered psychological issues. According to Arifin (2017), speaking abilities are impacted by three different psychiatric issues: low self-esteem, anxiety, and low self-confidence.

According to Fitriani, Apriliawati, and Wardah (2015), students may exhibit the following signs of psychological challenges: lack of confidence in speaking skills. A significant confidence problem. Students frequently lose their self-confidence while speaking in particular situations, their belief in their capacity to handle challenging situations, their assertiveness, and their fear of conflict. Additionally, they have social anxiety, which makes them feel uneasy in social circumstances like speaking in front of their friends and the class. They also have a tendency to have low judgments of themselves toward specific topics.

Javid (2014) illustrated that of the four anxiety elements, students struggle with communication anxiety the most, followed by anxiety in the English classroom. Students still lack the confidence and comfort to communicate in a foreign language in front of their classmates and even feel more discomfort when speaking before native speakers.

### **3. Methodology**

In order to investigate the speaking skills strategies adopted by Saudi EFL learners and some of the possible communication challenges they may encounter. A mixture of quantitative and qualitative approaches were applied for the study, using a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. A quantitative survey method was adopted, and semi-structured interviews were also used. Semi-structured interviews allow in-depth information to be collected from the respondents and preventing divergence from the core focus of the research purpose or rambling (Newcomer, Hatry & Wholey 2015). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 EFL students. 15 students were randomly selected from among those who had completed the questionnaire. All are enrolled in the English and Translation Departments in the College of Languages and Translation, Najran University. The participants were asked to mention the challenges that they face in oral communication and that make it difficult to improve their speaking skills. Each interview lasted ten minutes on average. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

### ***Research Questions***

1. What are the communication issues come across by Saudi EFL learners?
2. What are the psychological communication challenges encountered by Saudi EFL learners?
3. What kinds of strategies were adopted to overcome these communication challenges?
4. What are Saudi learners' attitudes towards speaking skills strategies?
5. Is there any significant difference in the participants' responses based on gender.

### **Research Objectives**

- to investigate the communication issues confronted by Saudi EFL learners in speaking skills.
- to investigate the psychological communication challenges and encountered by Saudi EFL learners in speaking skills.
- to explore the types of strategies used to overcome these challenges.
- to investigate whether there was any notable gender-based difference in the participants' responses.
- to examine Saudi learners' attitudes towards speaking skills strategies.

### **Research Sample**

The sample of the study consisted of 51 English Department students, including both male and female, from all twelve levels in the English and Translation programs at the University of Najran during the academic year 1444/1445.

### **4. Data Analysis**

In order to perform this study, a survey was given to a group of students enrolled at various levels at the College of Languages and Translation at Najran University. 100 participants were given the questionnaire during the academic year 2022–2023. Of the 100 participants, 51 male and female students agreed to fill out the questionnaire, which was created specifically to gather information for this study. Therefore, only 51 students were chosen by the researchers to participate in the study. Table No. 1 below contains information about the participants:

**Table 1. Demographic Information of the Participants**

Variables	Variable Descriptions	No. of Participants	Percentage
Gender	Male	15	30%
	Female	36	72%
Age	Between (18-22)	24	48%
	Between (22-25)	27	54%
	Five	4	8%
	Six	6	12%
	Seven	4	8%
	Eight	13	26%
Level of the students	Nine	5	10%
	Ten	9	18%
	Eleven	5	10%
	Twelve	1	2%

### **Demographic Characteristics of the participants**

The above table displays participants' Demographic Characteristics who participated in the study. Item (1) "Gender" shows that there are 30.0% female and 72% male. Item (2) "age" describes the age of the participants. 48% of students in the age group of 18-22 years, and 27% of students in the age group of 22-25 years. "Level of the Students" (item 3) reveals that 8% of students are enrolled in level 5, 12% in level 6, 8% in level 7, 26% in level 8, 10% in level 9, 18% in level 10, 10% in level 11, and 2% in level 12.

### **5. Results and Discussion**

#### **Statistical Methods and Data Analysis of the Questionnaire**

The statistical software (SPSS) version (23) was used to analyze the study's findings and provide answers to its research questions. For consistency, use the Pearson correlation coefficient, and for tool stability, use the Cronbach alpha. To respond to problems (4-5), use statistics averages, standard deviations, and rank:

- What are Saudi learners' attitudes towards speaking skills strategies?
- Is there any significant gender-based difference in the participants' responses?

### **Validity and Reliability Statistics of the Tool**

The questionnaire's Cronbach's alpha is 0.924, which is excellent, as can be seen in the following table. 39 elements were used, and the drawn-back alpha was 0.924, which is excellent. If it is 0.6, that is acceptable, and if it is above 0.8, it is considered to be very good; it should be closer to 1.00.

**Table 2. Reliability Statistics**

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha based on Standardized Items	N of Items
0.924	0.924	39

Here we can see the standard deviation and Cronbach alpha if the item is deleted. We can delete one item right here, and then after that we can cross check Cronbach alpha, and if Cronbach alpha is improved, we can delete that item. So, the Cronbach alpha is improved here. The following table shows the average Cronbach's Alpha of both domains, i.e., direct strategies and indirect strategies.

**Table 3. Reliability Statistics (Mean and Std. Deviation of both Domains)**

No.	Domain	Strategies	No. of Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Direct Strategies	Cognitive Strategies	8	3.57	1.212
		Compensation	6	3.55	1.18
		Self-Assessment	4	3.93	1.195
		Metacognitive Strategies	3	3.41	1.352
		Social Strategies	6	3.4	1.299
2	Indirect Strategies	Interpersonal Strategies	2	3.36	1.36
		Communication	2	3.64	1.169
		Experimental			
		Affective Strategies	7	3.51	1.327

Table 3 shows the mean and standard deviation of both domains of the speaking skills strategies that were included in the questionnaire. Cognitive Strategies 8 items ( $\mu=3.57$  and  $\sigma=1.212$ ), Compensation Strategies 6 items ( $\mu=3.55$  and  $\sigma=1.180$ ), Self-assessment 4 items ( $\mu=3.93$  and  $\sigma=1.195$ ), Metacognitive Strategies ( $\mu=3.41$  and  $\sigma=1.352$ ), Social Strategies 6 items ( $\mu=3.40$  and  $\sigma=1.299$ ), Interpersonal Strategies 2 items ( $\mu=3.36$  and  $\sigma=1.360$ ), Communication Experimental ( $\mu=3.64$  and  $\sigma=1.169$ ), and Affective Strategies ( $\mu=3.51$  and  $\sigma=1.327$ ) respectively. The average of the two domains is fairly similar to the Likert scale choice "Often" on scale 4 on the questionnaire. As a result, the questionnaire responses revealed that students frequently apply these speaking skills strategies, demonstrating that participants had a good attitude toward speaking skills strategies.

**Table 4. Reliability Statistics**

No.	Domain	Strategies	Item No.	Scale Mean If item deleted	Scale Variance if item deleted	Cronbach's Alpha if item deleted
1	Direct Strategies	Cognitive Strategies	8	134.71	592.311	0.922
		Compensation	6	134.72	601.439	0.923
		Self-Assessment	4	134.34	590.999	0.921
		Metacognitive Strategies	3	134.87	591.232	0.922
		Social Strategies	6	134.87	587.229	0.921
2	Indirect Strategies	Interpersonal Strategies	2	134.91	584.157	0.921
		Communication	2	134.64	599.731	0.923
		Experimental				
		Affective Strategies	7	134.76	594.409	0.923

### Consistency validity

The researchers applied the study tool to the exploratory sample consisting of (39), and the Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated between the statements and the field to which they belong, which is shown in the following table:

**Table 5.** *Pearson correlation coefficient between the statements and the domain: Direct Strategies*

No. Item	Person Correlation	Item No.	Person Correlation	Item No.	Person Correlation	Item No.	Person Correlation
Cognitive Strategies (8 items)							
1	.558*	3	.791**	5	.514*	7	.645**
2	.809**	4	.818**	6	.452*	8	.862**
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).							
Compensation Strategies (6 items)							
1	.725**	3	.726**	5	.772**	**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed),.	
2	.744**	4	.782**	6	.859**		
Self-Assessment (4 items)							
1	.758**	2	.586**	3	.718**	4	.745**
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed),. *. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).							

**Table 6.** *Pearson correlation coefficient between the statements and the domain:*

### Indirect Strategies

No. Item	Person Correlation	Item No.	Person Correlation	Item No.	Person Correlation	Item No.	Person Correlation
Metacognitive Strategies (3 items)							
1	.605**	2	.776**	3	.564**	**. **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), *. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2 tailed).	
Social Strategies (6 items)							
1	.725**	3	.726**	5	.772**	**. **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed),.	
2	.744**	4	.782**	6	.859**		
Interpersonal Strategies (2items)							
1	.758**	2	.586**	**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), *. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).			
Communication Experimental Strategies (2 items)							
1	.561*	2	.746**	**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), *. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).			
Affective Strategies (7 items)							
1	.561*	2	.746**	3	.772**	4	.747**
2	.782**	6	.726**	7	.859**		
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), *. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).							

### Reliability

Table 7 shows that the Pearson correlation coefficient between the statements and the domain to which they belong is statistically significant at the level of significance (0.01) or (0.05), which indicates that consistency has been verified.

**Table 7. Reliability Statistics - Cronbach's Alpha (n = 39)**

No	Domain	Strategies	No. of Item	Cronbach's Alpha
1	Direct Strategies	Cognitive Strategies	8	0.922
		Compensation	6	0.923
		Self-Assessment	4	0.921
		Metacognitive Strategies	3	0.922
		Social Strategies	6	0.921
2	Indirect Strategies	Interpersonal Strategies	2	0.921
		Communication Experimental	2	0.923
		Affective Strategies	7	0.923

Table 7 shows that the stability coefficients of Cronbach's alpha ranged on the domains between (0.921 - 0.923), which are high stability coefficients.

Table 8 calculates the statistical means, standard deviations, and t-test to indicate whether there are statistically significant differences or not at the level of significance (0.05) for the responses of the study samples about the new learning strategies adopted by the EFL speaking skills learners according to the gender variable. Statistical means, standard deviations, and t-tests were calculated to show the significance of the differences between the responses of the study sample based on the gender variable. The following table shows that there were no statistically significant differences between the responses of the study sample according to the gender variable.

**Table 8. Statistical Means, Standard Deviations, And T-Test Based on Gender**

Domain	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Direct Strategies	Male	15	3.61	1.177	0.247	49	0.806
	Female	35	3.66	1.168			
Indirect Strategies	Male	15	3.76	1.34	-1.917	49	0.061
	Female	35	3.34	1.238			

### Content Analysis of the semi-structure Interview

Results of the First and Second Research Questions: What are the communication problems encountered by Saudi EFL Learners?

One of the main aims of this research was to investigate the communication challenges that are encountered by Saudi EFL learners in a more direct way through semi-structured interviews. The interviews were recorded, transcribed. In the process of content analysis, the transcripts were analyzed carefully and classified themes and responses into certain categories. The interviewees' responses were gathered, and their content was analyzed. The main topics were highlighted and then classified under the main themes. The results of the analysis reveal that most of the students 66% face problems in oral communication due to insufficient practice and some affective factors, 53% related to feeling nervous and stressed when speaking in public and a lack of self-confidence, whereas 40% feel shy and hesitate to speak in English and are afraid of making mistakes that cause embarrassment. 46% complain of having insufficient vocabulary and the inability to construct correct grammatical sentences and only 20% say they do understand English but are unable to reply in English and they use Arabic instead.

When students were asked about how they try to overcome these problems of oral communication, 40% mentioned that they try to have more chances to practice speaking by using some English-speaking applications that are available online. 26.6% said that they try to study more words and phrases and use them in their own sentences. 20% said that they try to practice speaking with their family members or friends who can speak English, and only 6.6% mentioned that they don't know how they can improve their speaking skills. *Their responses are summarized in table 9.*

**Table 9.** *Students' Responses to the Interview Questions*

Questions	Responses	Frequency	Percentage
1. What kind of strategies were adopted to overcome these communication challenges?	Insufficient vocabulary	7	45%
	Shy and hesitated because of being afraid of making mistakes	6	40%
	Inability of construct correct/grammar sentences	7	33%
	Feeling nervous and stressed when speaking in public	8	53%
	Lack of practice	10	66%
	Lack of confidence	8	53%
	Using Arabic because I understand English but cannot reply in English	3	20%
2. What are the communication challenges encountered by Saudi EFL learners?	Practice using technologies (speaking, apps, software programs, etc.	6	40%
	Study more words and phrases and try to use them in sentences	4	26%
	Practice speaking with family members/friends who can speak English	3	20%
	I don't know	1	6.60%
3. What are the psychological challenges encountered by Saudi EFL learners in speaking skills?	Feel shyness, anxiety,	4	26%
	lack of confidence while speaking	10	66%
	fear of making mistakes	6	45%
	social anxiety, which makes us feel uneasy in social circumstances.	7	33%
	Discomfort while communicating in English in front of the friends and class fellows.	3	20%
	Feel low self-esteem and low self-confidence.	6	40%

## 6. Discussion

There are numerous factors, both internal and external, that lead to students' academic failures when we investigate and go deeply into the real teaching and learning process. When promptly recognized, avoidable challenges can be successfully addressed by teachers' instructional strategies, reflection on their own practices, problem-solving, teaching materials, assessment, etc., which may aid students in understanding the material covered in class (Holbah & Sharma, 2022). Nevertheless, there are instances that can be avoided but nonetheless have an adverse effect on students' academic progress.



The purpose of this study was to determine the speaking strategies that students employed to get over various communication challenges. The current study additionally determined the factors that adopted learners' learning strategies. According to the results, most participants agreed that using a variety of efficient speaking strategies helped them overcome the challenges they encountered while learning and teaching speaking skills. Only a small number of individuals disagreed and strongly disagreed that challenges had no impact on learning processes. In addition to listening, reading, and writing abilities, the research results in identifying the elements that contribute to Saudi EFL students' perceptions of speaking English as challenging to suggest ways to address these concerns. Additionally, this work may be used to plan future investigations into the changing relationships that are most likely the cause of the delayed effects on academic achievement and communication skills, particularly regarding language acquisition, teaching, and linguistic competence. Finally, it is critical to quickly recognize the challenges that students' academic performance and language learning encounter at various stages to share effective solutions in language learning and educational research.

## 7. Suggestions and Recommendations

The tasks and assignments that students receive from their individual teachers should be their focus, and they should be finished on time. They should constantly use self-management techniques to stay on top of what they are doing. The interaction between the students and teachers should be in English rather than the mother tongue of the target students. Instead of completing lectures and other course material at their own pace, students should follow the instructors' schedules.

Students should practice shortening their sentences and using contractions to speak English fluently. Native speakers often use slang and regional dialects, so they are better able to understand them and respond appropriately.

Future research should make use of the other research tools to fully explore the subject of this study and might look at how students deal with challenges in their speaking skills lessons. To support their students' speaking abilities, it is suggested that EFL speaking teachers take these difficulties into account.

## 8. Conclusion

The results of the current study indicate that students can use speaking skills strategies to overcome their communication difficulties. Additionally, it is discovered that the responses of the study sample are not statistically significantly different according to gender. Male and female students do not see learning to speak English differently, and they are now more cognizant of the growing significance of doing so. The study's findings are expected to benefit EFL instructors and students by identifying speaking skills strategies that are adopted by Saudi EFL learners and the communication challenges encountered. In terms of psychological aspects, the results indicated that EFL students encountered five psychological factors more frequently than others. The five psychological elements were lack of confidence, demotivation to talk, fear of making mistakes, tension and nervousness, confusion with their thinking, and lack of confidence. Finally, in addition to the psychological problems, such as unpredictability, anxiousness, and loss of confidence; grammar, vocabulary deficits, and bad pronunciation are also the linguistics problems Saudi EFL learners have with their speaking abilities.

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