

## **Strategies in Coping with Problems Faced by University Students in Speaking Class Across Different Proficiency Levels**

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### **Abstract**

This study aimed to describe the problems faced by university students in English speaking classes across different proficiency levels at one of the universities in East Kalimantan and their strategies to overcome the problems. This research used a quantitative survey method. The data was collected using a questionnaire divided into two sections, speaking problems and strategies, shared using Google Forms. 85 of 100 students answered the questionnaire. The findings revealed that the most prevalent problems were affective-related (68.7%) and linguistic-related (62.0%). Specifically, 83.5% of students reported fear of making mistakes, 82.4% struggled with overuse of their mother tongue, and 75.3% faced insufficient grammar knowledge. Beginner students exhibited the highest frequency of issues, with 100% acknowledging fear of mistakes, while intermediate and advanced students also reported significant affective and linguistic challenges, albeit at slightly lower rates (e.g., 86% and 74% for fear of mistakes, respectively). Coping strategies varied by proficiency level: beginners relied heavily on passive methods like watching movies (75%), while intermediate students incorporated more interactive strategies, such as peer practice (37.9%). Advanced learners demonstrated balanced strategies, including regular speaking practice (52.2%) and peer interaction (60.9%). The study results underline the need for tailored pedagogical interventions to support students' emotional readiness and language competence, emphasizing the importance of strategic practice environments and personalized feedback.

**Keywords:** *Speaking problems, Proficiency levels, Strategies.*

### **1. Introduction**

English as one of the languages has an important role in this world (Genç & Bada, 2011). As one of the most spoken languages in many countries, English has a big influence on

the aspects of communication skills. It is one of the international languages in the world (Fang & Baker, 2018). Although Indonesia considers English as a foreign language (EFL), it is taught and learned through school since Indonesia is a non-English-speaking country. Despite studying the language for years, many students still face challenges in speaking fluently and confidently.

In the context of English language learning, speaking is considered one of the most challenging skills to master, especially for students in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings. Despite years of formal instruction, many students still struggle to communicate orally with confidence and fluency. This issue arises from a variety of interrelated problems that persist in speaking classes. Psychological barriers such as anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and low self-confidence are among the most frequently cited challenges. Juhana (2012) emphasized that these affective factors significantly hinder students from actively participating in speaking activities.

These difficulties are often influenced by various factors, including affective-related problems, socially-related problem, instructor problem, educational system and facility related problem, and linguistically related problem. Moreover, different levels of proficiency present different types of problems, and students may use various strategies to deal with these obstacles. Understanding these differences and commonalities is essential to improve the effectiveness of speaking classes and to support students in developing their communicative competence.

This study holds significant value within the field of English education, as it provides insights into the specific challenges students face in speaking classes. By identifying these challenges, educators can develop more effective teaching strategies and interventions that cater to the needs of students at varying proficiency levels. Ultimately, enhancing speaking proficiency contributes to the broader goal of improving overall language competence, thereby equipping students with the skills necessary for success in an increasingly globalized world. Therefore, the writer is interested in researching the problems faced by students and the strategies used by students to overcome these problems.

## 2. Literature Review

### A. The Concept of Speaking Skills

#### a. *Definition of Speaking*

Speaking is a crucial language skill that students must master to effectively communicate with others. According to Ur (1996), speaking is the most important skill, as it demonstrates the student's ability to produce the target language. Speaking involves two or more people, with both listeners and speakers reacting to the message. Mastering speaking is essential for English foreign learners, as it is the most widely accepted language globally. It improves knowledge and skills, makes it easier to get a job, and facilitates communication and interaction during travel. Speaking involves conveying thoughts and ideas in a logical sequence, mastering grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and pronunciation. By expressing topics and messages, speakers ensure that listeners can understand the information and ideas conveyed. Therefore, mastering speaking is essential for English foreign learners to improve their communication and global interactions.

#### b. *The importance of speaking in language learning*

English consists of four skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Speaking is a crucial skill, as the average person produces tens of thousands of words daily. It is so natural and integral that it is often forgotten until learning it in a foreign language. Speaking is a productive skill, as it requires learners to produce something. It is essential for students to apply the language effectively, as it is an interactive activity that occurs under real-time constraints. Speaking skills enable individuals to produce sentences for real communication, enabling them to communicate effectively for specific objectives.

### B. Proficiency Levels in language learning

#### a. *Proficiency Levels*

Proficiency level is “descriptions of what individuals can do with language in terms of speaking, writing, listening, and reading in real-world situations in a spontaneous and non-rehearsed context” (Swender, et al., 2012, p. 3). Proficiency level that the writer means in this study is speaking proficiency level of English Department students in academic year 2024/2025 who have completed all speaking courses.

#### b. *Characteristics of beginner, intermediate, and advanced learners*

##### 1) *Beginner Learners*

Beginner learners, who are just starting to learn English, often have limited vocabulary and grammatical knowledge. They rely on memorized phrases and struggle to construct sentences independently. Brown (2001) states that they are in the pre-production stage, focusing on understanding simple input and

responding with short, rehearsed utterances. They require comprehensible input and visual support to understand more and benefit from repetitive exposure to basic language structures.

2) *Intermediate Learners*

Harmer (2007) states that learners at this stage can confidently speak on familiar topics, but still need time to respond and conversations are not fluent. Richards (2008) states that learners can manage informal discussions but not yet use the appropriate language style for formal or academic contexts. They can convey ideas, tell stories, and interact in less complex social contexts, but often make mistakes in sentence structure, vocabulary choice, and pronunciation. They are in a transition phase from basic communication to more fluent functional communication, requiring practice and feedback to perfect their skills.

3) *Advanced Learners*

Advanced speakers are fluent and spontaneous, using language effectively and flexibly. They have a good command of spoken English, with a rich vocabulary and the ability to use complex grammatical structures. They adapt their speaking style depending on context and understand implicit meanings. Their proficiency is close to native-like, especially in academic or professional settings. They can argue, express critical opinions, and defend arguments logically. Their listening and responding skills are strong, enabling effective two-way communication.

**C. Problems and Strategies in speaking faced by students**

a. *Affective-Related Problems*

Emotional barriers like anxiety, low self-confidence, and fear of negative evaluation hinder effective oral communication in EFL settings. These issues, especially among students adjusting to academic demands or uncertain language abilities, can be reduced by creating a safe environment.

b. *Socially-Related Problems*

EFL students face a challenge due to limited opportunities to practice speaking outside the classroom, which hinders their fluency and confidence. Encouraging activities like discussion groups, debates, and peer conversations can help enhance speaking skills in a more social setting, thereby improving their practical application of classroom knowledge.

c. *Instructor-Related Problems*

EFL speaking classes face challenges due to inadequate teaching methods and team-teaching. Students believe repetitive drills and memorization limit speaking development. Multiple instructors can enhance understanding of pronunciation, accent, vocabulary, and grammar. Kayi (2006) suggests interactive activities like

discussions, role plays, and storytelling to engage students and improve speaking proficiency.

**d. *Educational System and Facility-Related Problems***

EFL settings often lack modern facilities for speaking practice, with outdated audio-visual equipment and inadequate resources. This hinders students' opportunities to practice in a realistic context, limiting their skills. Institutions should provide well-equipped language labs with computers, software, and internet access to enhance students' speaking abilities in a practical, real-world environment.

**e. *Linguistically-Related Problems***

Linguistic competence, such as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, is a significant obstacle for EFL learners in developing speaking skills. Fear of making mistakes and being judged can also hinder their confidence. To overcome this, instructors should design engaging activities and create a supportive classroom environment that encourages risk-taking and language use, reducing anxiety and promoting fluency and confidence in real-time communication.

**D. Previous studies**

1. Souriyavongsa et al. (2013) Research reveals low English proficiency among student-teachers at National University of Laos, attributed to untrained teachers, lack of background knowledge, low confidence, unsuitable curriculum, and lack of native speaker practice.
2. Islam, Ahmad, and Islam (2022) The study found that first-year English-major undergraduate students in Dhaka, Bangladesh, struggle with speaking English due to fear of mistakes, vocabulary lack, low confidence, and limited exposure to English.
3. Islam and Stapa (2021) The study evaluates 21 Dhaka University students' spoken English proficiency, identifying factors contributing to low proficiency, and suggests solutions such as task-based learning, technology, and teacher training programs.
4. Nguyen and Tong (2024) The study found that English majors at the University of Phan Thiet face significant challenges in acquiring public speaking skills, including fear of judgment, low confidence, and limited vocabulary.
5. Chand (2021) The study at Far Western University in Nepal found that speaking difficulties among undergraduate students are primarily personal, social, linguistic, and environmental, attributed to factors like teacher-centered teaching, overuse of mother tongue, poor foundational schooling, and classroom culture.

### 3. Methods

This study uses a quantitative research approach to examine the problems faced by English speaking university students in the sixth semester at one of the universities in East Kalimantan. The research employs a descriptive quantitative design, which provides a structured and objective description of the problems and strategies they use to overcome them. The population includes students from three classes, Class A, Class B, and Class C, who have completed all speaking courses during the 2024/2025 academic year. The sample was selected using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method, to target students who have completed all speaking courses and can be categorized into beginner, intermediate, and advanced proficiency levels based on their Speaking grades. The study aims to provide a clear and factual overview of students' speaking experiences according to their proficiency levels.

*Table 1. The scoring criteria*

No.	Grades	Scores	Levels
1.	A	> 80	Advanced
2.	B	70-79,9	Intermediate
3.	C	60-69,9	Beginner
4.	D	50-59,9	
5.	F	< 49,9	

This study examines the challenges faced by sixth-semester English Department university students at one of the universities in East Kalimantan in improving their speaking proficiency. Data is collected through a structured questionnaire and dropdown questions. The study will analyze the frequency of speaking problems reported by students at different proficiency levels and the frequency of coping strategies used. The findings will be presented in tables and pie charts to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and solutions identified by the students.

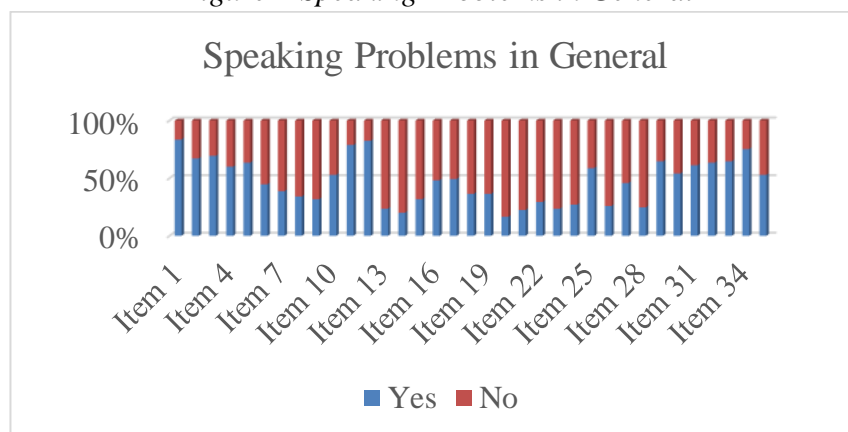
### 4. Result

The research presents and interprets findings from a questionnaire consisting of 40 items to study speaking class problems and 5 strategies used by participants. The study involved 100 English department university students in the sixth semester, divided into three classes: Class

A, Class B, and Class C. The questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms, allowing participants to fill it at their convenience. Out of the 100 participants, 85 responses were collected by the researcher.

### 1. General Overview of Speaking Problems

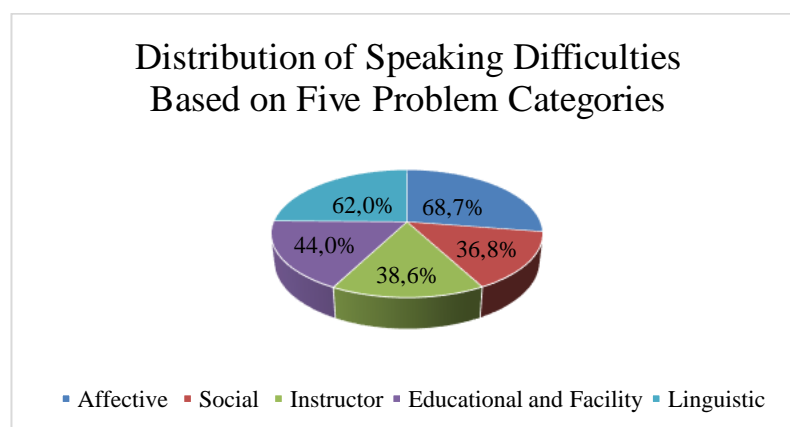
*Figure 1 Speaking Problems in General*



The study compares 35 speaking problem items based on the percentage of students who answered "Yes" to each statement. The most common issue is fear of making mistakes, with 83.5% of respondents acknowledging this difficulty. Other common barriers include excessive use of the mother tongue in the classroom, 82.4%, and 78.8% of students requesting more than one instructor teaching speaking. Linguistic challenges are also prominent, with 75.3% of students confirming their lack of grammar knowledge, and 64.7% reporting thinking in Indonesian when speaking English. The least reported issue is the lack of group work or pair work, with only 16.5% of students agreeing. Instructors should encourage group work or pair work, but students do not consider this an obstacle in speaking class. The most significant barriers to the development of English-speaking skills among students are affective (psychological) and linguistic. The study concludes that fear of making mistakes, frequent use of the mother tongue, and limited grammar and vocabulary knowledge are the most significant barriers to English-speaking skills development.

## 2. Speaking Problems Based on Categories

**Figure 2.** *Five Problem Categories Distribution*



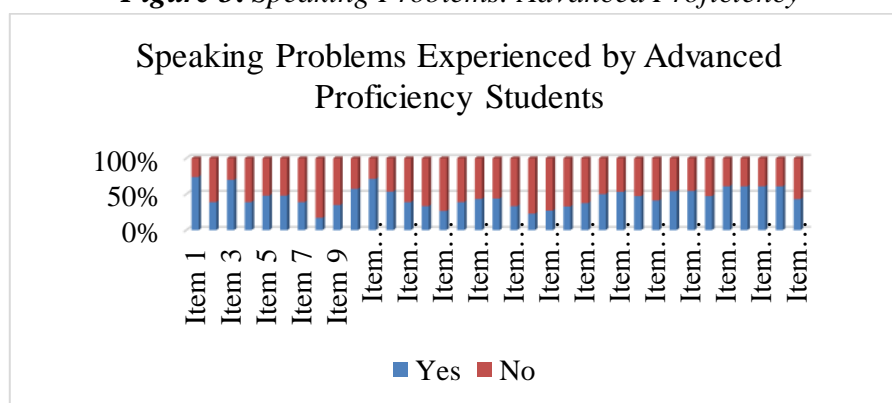
The study identifies five main types of speaking problems faced by students: affective-related, socially-related, instructor-related, educational and facility-related, and linguistically-related. Affective-related problems are the most common, with 68.7% of students experiencing emotional barriers such as fear of making mistakes, shyness, anxiety, and low self-confidence. Language-related problems are second highest, with 62.0% experiencing issues like lack of vocabulary, weak grammar, poor pronunciation, and thinking in their first language. Educational and facility-related problems are reported by 44.0%, while instructor-related problems are chosen by 38.6%. Social problems, such as limited speaking practice or lack of support, are reported by 36.8%.



### 3. Speaking Problems by Proficiency Level

#### A. Advanced Proficiency

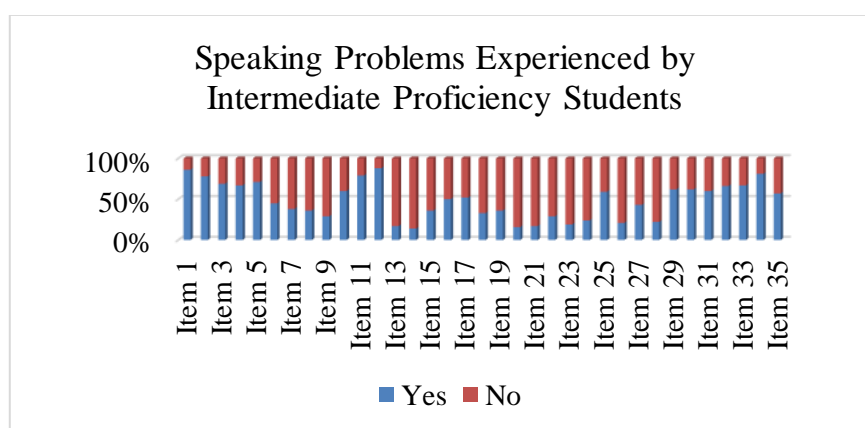
**Figure 3. Speaking Problems: Advanced Proficiency**



The study reveals that advanced proficiency students face several challenges in speaking English, despite being more fluent and confident. The most common issue is fear of making mistakes, with 74% of students admitting to this fear. Another significant issue is the desire for varied speech models and input, with 74% expressing a desire for more than one instructor. Shyness also hinders effective communication, with 70% agreeing. L1 interference remains present even at higher proficiency levels. The least reported problems are the belief that English speaking skills are relevant in one's country, with only 17% agreeing. The study suggests that advanced students are more resilient to correction or do not view it as discouraging. The findings suggest that even proficient speakers need continued support in managing performance pressure and classroom dynamics.

## B. Intermediate Proficiency

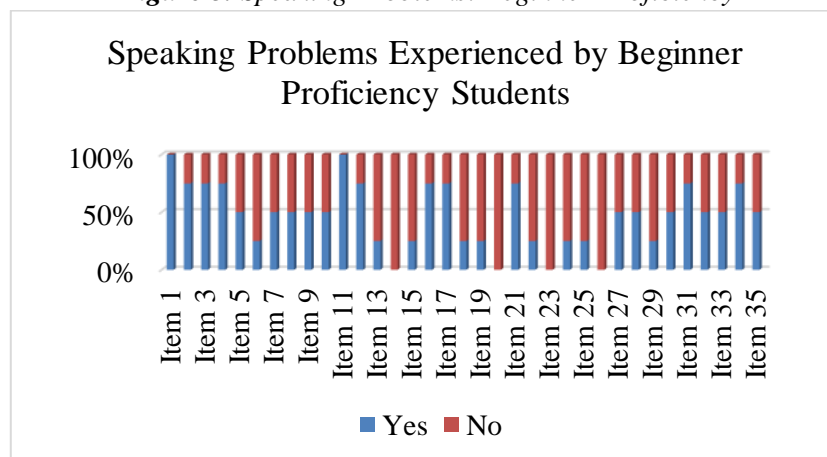
**Figure 4.** *Speaking Problems: Intermediate Proficiency*



Intermediate English students report a mix of affective and linguistic difficulties, with fear of mistakes, overuse of the mother tongue, and grammar issues being the most prominent. These students have moderate proficiency but are still in the process of building fluency and confidence. The most frequently reported problem is excessive use of the mother tongue in the classroom, with 88% of students confirming this. Other issues include language habits and teaching approaches, with 79% stating that more than one instructor would be beneficial. Affective problems, such as self-confidence and shyness, remain the main obstacles at this level. Linguistic accuracy is also a challenge. The lowest percentages of students are concerned about instructors not encouraging speaking, with 14% agreeing and 17% stating that their pronunciation is not good enough. Group work or pair work is also not widely perceived as problematic.

### C. Beginner Proficiency

*Figure 5. Speaking Problems: Beginner Proficiency*



The study examines the speaking difficulties faced by beginner English learners, who are in the early stages of learning spoken English. The most common issue is fear of making mistakes, with 100% of students expressing this fear. Additionally, 75% of students agree that they need more support and varied input during speaking classes. Other issues include emotional concerns like shyness and anxiety, as well as linguistic issues like using the mother tongue and lack of grammar knowledge. However, some items, such as instructors not encouraging speaking or group work, received low responses, suggesting that students do not perceive obstacles in speaking classes. Classroom dynamics and instructional methods also had low responses. In conclusion, beginner students face the highest levels of difficulty, with nearly all struggling with fear, overuse of the mother tongue, and limited language ability.

#### 4. Coping Strategies Based on Students' Proficiency Level

##### A. Beginner Level

La bel	BEGINNER									
	Affective		Socially		Instructor		Education and Facility		Linguistic	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
1	1	25,0%	0	0,0%	1	25,0%	1	25,0%	1	25,0%

2	3	75,0%	1	25,0%	0	0,0%	0	0,0%	3	75,0%
3	0	0,0%	1	25,0%	1	25,0%	1	25,0%	0	0,0%
4	0	0,0%	2	50,0%	2	50,0%	2	50,0%	0	0,0%
5	0	0,0%	0	0,0%	0	0,0%	0	0,0%	0	0,0%

The study reveals that beginner students primarily use linguistic strategies, such as watching movies and repeating dialogues for pronunciation, to develop their speaking skills. However, they are limited in their awareness of linguistic resources and emotional strategies. In the affective domain, they rely on imitating English speakers and practicing speaking regularly. However, they lack long-term motivation or collaborative activities. Socially, they use language exchange apps with native speakers, but participation in group discussions or real-life speaking contexts remains low. Instructor-related strategies are more reliant on supplementary resources like apps and online courses, with a 50% response rate. Students often feel uncertain about how to interact and apply strategies beyond their comfort zone. In terms of education and facility, they primarily use digital media and personal devices for self-study, with 50% and 25% respectively. This suggests that they prefer individual learning environments due to limited speaking confidence or available institutional support. More structured support or interactive opportunities might be needed at this stage.

#### B. Intermediate Level

	INTERMEDIATE									
Label	Affective		Socially		Instructor		Education and Facility		Linguistic	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
1	28	48,3%	1	1,7%	17	29,3%	18	31,0%	10	17,2%
2	21	36,2%	22	37,9%	14	24,1%	6	10,3%	39	67,2%
3	4	6,9%	10	17,2%	13	22,4%	6	10,3%	7	12,1%
4	5	8,6%	22	37,9%	14	24,1%	28	48,3%	2	3,4%
5	0	0,0%	3	5,2%	0	0,0%	0	0,0%	0	0,0%

Intermediate level students are increasingly using linguistic strategies, particularly through watching movies and using grammar and vocabulary apps. They are also practicing speaking regularly and imitating English speakers, indicating a growing awareness of the importance of fluency. However, fewer students use strategies like small group presentations or goal-based motivation. Socially-related strategies, such as practicing with classmates outside of class and using language exchange apps, are improving, suggesting a shift towards interactive and communicative learning. However, the majority still rely on one-to-one interactions. Instructor-related strategies include self-studying using native models, looking for alternative speaking models, and using supplementary resources. While there is growing independence, support in refining speaking output is still necessary. Digital media remains the top strategy, followed by self-studying using personal devices. Overall, intermediate students' learning environments are mostly self-created, with room for improvement in institutional or group-based support systems.

### C. Advanced Level

ADVANCED										
Lab el	Affective		Socially		Instructor		Education and Facility		Linguistic	
	Freque ncy	%	Freque ncy	%	Freq uency	%	Frequ ency	%	Freque ncy	%
1	12	52.2%	1	4.3%	4	17.4%	10	43,5 %	10	43.5 %
2	7	30.4%	14	60,9%	7	30,4%	1	4,3 %	11	47,8 %
3	2	8.7%	0	0.0%	6	26.1%	1	4,3 %	2	8,7 %
4	1	4.3%	7	30.4%	6	26.1%	11	47,8 %	0	0.0 %
5	1	4.3%	1	4.3%	0	0.0%	0	0,0 %	0	0.0 %

Advanced students use coping strategies to maintain fluency and confidence in language skills. They use linguistic strategies like watching movies and repeating dialogues, grammar/vocabulary apps, and keeping idioms in a notebook. In the affective domain, they practice speaking regularly, while socially-related strategies include practicing with classmates outside of class and using language exchange apps. Instructor-related strategies include seeking alternative speaking models, using supplementary resources, and self-studying with native speaker models. Collaboration, such as peer speaking practice, is more common. In the education and facility category, the main choices are maximizing digital media use and self-studying using personal devices. However, participation in external training and self-created speaking environments remains low. Some potentially effective strategies are underused, and advanced learners may still benefit from broader environments for professional-level practice.

## **5. Discussion**

### **A. Problems Faced by The Students**

The study found that students face various difficulties in speaking English, with the most prominent being affective and linguistic-related issues. These issues are categorized into five main areas: affective, social, instructor-related, educational/facility, and linguistic. The affective domain, including fear of making mistakes, anxiety, and lack of self-confidence, is the most prevalent, with 83.5% of students reporting this fear. This highlights the role of anxiety and fear of judgment in limiting speaking performance, especially in classroom settings. Even advanced-level students (74%) experienced this fear, indicating that psychological barriers persist despite language ability.

Linguistic-related problems were the second most reported issue (62%), involving insufficient grammar knowledge and the tendency to think in the mother tongue while speaking. This weakness can lead to hesitations, inaccuracies, and reduced confidence. Grammar limitations were reported by 75% of beginner and 81% of intermediate students, aligning with previous studies.

Social, instructor-related, and facility-related factors were reported to a lesser extent, but not identified as the primary sources of difficulty. This supports Afshar and Asakereh's (2016) finding that internal factors, such as emotional and cognitive readiness, have a more substantial impact on speaking performance than external classroom elements.

### B. The Most Common Problem Faced by Students

The study found that fear of making mistakes, excessive use of the mother tongue, and insufficient grammar knowledge were the most common problems faced by students. These issues are consistent with Juhana (2012), Afshar and Asakereh's (2016) model, and Chand (2021), which emphasizes the role of affective factors in speaking challenges. The fear of being judged or corrected can significantly reduce students' willingness to speak, even among those with higher proficiency levels. The excessive use of the mother tongue during class is also a common issue, with 82.4% of students reporting excessive use of the mother tongue. This problem is present even among advanced learners, indicating that overcoming L1 reliance is not just about proficiency but also about classroom practice and student mindset. Grammar knowledge is also a significant issue, with 75.3% of students agreeing that it is insufficient. These findings highlight the importance of addressing emotional factors and language competence limitations in students' speaking development.

### C. Students' Coping Strategies Across Proficiency Levels

The study reveals that students at all proficiency levels use different coping strategies to manage speaking-related problems. Beginner learners use passive strategies like watching movies and repeating dialogues, while intermediate learners practice speaking regularly, use grammar/vocabulary apps, and engage in peer conversations. Intermediate students are transitioning and need opportunities for real communication, while advanced learners demonstrate balanced and independent strategies. They practice speaking regularly, use various resources, and actively participate in peer interaction. Advanced learners use social and instructor-related strategies, indicating greater self-awareness and autonomy. The study emphasizes the importance of tailoring speaking development strategies to students' proficiency levels and psychological readiness, as emotional regulation and access to appropriate resources are crucial for overcoming speaking difficulties and enhancing oral communication skills.

## 6. Conclusion

The study reveals that English speaking students face two main issues: affective-related anxiety and linguistic challenges. These problems are prevalent across all proficiency levels, with beginner students more affected. Students employ varying coping strategies, with

beginners using passive methods, intermediate students incorporating interactive methods, and advanced students utilizing a balanced range. The findings support the Afshar and Asakereh model, emphasizing internal and external factors in speaking difficulties.

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