



## CONQUERING STRESS AND ELEVATING SPEAKING SKILLS

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### Abstract:

This study explores the effects of stress and lack of confidence on the speaking of English by Libyan EFL students at the Faculty of Languages in Surman. Semi-structured interviews with fifteen students were carried out in the present study to identify some linguistic problems that enhance speaking anxiety, such as vocabulary limitation, grammatical problems, and poor idea organization. Stress was found to affect memory, concentration, and fluency, which caused hesitation, rapid speech, and lack of clarity. Strategies for improvement in speaking English mentioned by students included regular practice in a conducive environment, language learning tools, and reflection. The results support Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982), with its call to reduce anxiety and build confidence. Thus, the study affirms that psychological support, structured practice, and opportunities for interactive learning should go hand-in-hand to achieve success in performance in speaking English. The possible future direction of this research could be to investigate the long-term impacts of these strategies across different EFL contexts.

**Keywords:** stress, anxiety, confidence, EFL speaking skills

### 1. Introduction

Communication is one of the vital skills a person needs in today's global village, and the ability to converse in English plays a very important role in bridging cultural gaps. Many are trying to learn good English-speaking skills, which open doors to opportunities for higher studies, career enhancement, and different social interactions with people from diverse backgrounds. On the other hand, it is also true that speaking in English turns out to be very strenuous for most individuals because of stress and nervousness.

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Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) identified "foreign language anxiety" to highlight how stress can block the articulation confidence of a learner. Individuals often experience stress in high-stakes situations such as public speaking, job interviews, or even casual conversations. This stress may prevent them from participating in discussions or sharing ideas, ultimately affecting their personal and professional growth. Stress is known to impact the ability to articulate thoughts, a challenge commonly faced by learners of English (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Many learners experience stress due to fear of failure, rejection, evaluation, or difficulty in self-expression, leading to nervousness and difficulty recalling words or forming sentences.

Consequently, learners might avoid speaking entirely, which hampers their language proficiency. Stress can also impair comprehension, as it disrupts concentration and the processing of information during conversations. This often leads to misunderstandings, reinforcing low confidence and creating a vicious cycle of poor communication.

Confidence is another critical factor interlinked with stress. Woodrow (2006) noted that a lack of confidence often results in hesitant performance due to fear of evaluation, embarrassment about pronunciation, or apprehension about grammatical accuracy. Anxiety worsens the situation by interfering with concentration, making it harder for learners to overcome their fears (MacIntyre *et al.*, 1998). Without practice, learners remain apprehensive, which further limits their ability to speak fluently and confidently.

Many people learn English to communicate with others, improve career prospects, or travel. However, even with good knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, stress and anxiety can become significant obstacles to confident speaking. Identifying and addressing these issues is crucial. Stress management and confidence-building are essential steps in improving English-speaking skills and effective communication. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate Libyan EFL Fifth and Sixth-semester students' perception of the challenges they encounter in improving writing skills.

### **1.1 The Problem of the Study**

University students are often subjected to significant stress, which hampers the development of their English-speaking abilities. Sources of stress include academic pressure, societal expectations, and fear of making mistakes while speaking. These factors lead to reduced confidence, limited participation in language activities, and an inability to communicate effectively in English. These barriers not only affect academic performance but also limit future opportunities in a globalized world where English proficiency is essential. Despite the importance of these issues, research has yet to provide effective strategies for reducing stress and boosting confidence among university students. This study aims to fill that gap by investigating how stress and confidence levels affect speaking abilities. It also seeks to uncover the primary causes of anxiety and nervousness during speaking situations and propose strategies for improvement.

## **1.2 The Aims & Objectives of the Study**

The aims of this study are to explore the impact of stress and lack of confidence on English speaking abilities among learners and to identify the primary factors that contribute to anxiety and nervousness in speaking situations. The study's objectives include analyzing how stress affects the clarity and coherence of English language expression and investigating the role of confidence in either enhancing or hindering English speaking proficiency.

## **1.3 Research Questions**

- 1) What specific linguistic challenges do EFL students face that contribute to their stress during speaking?
- 2) How does stress affect students' clarity and fluency in English during Speaking?

## **2. Literature Review**

Effective communication, particularly in English, is increasingly recognized as a key tool for global connectivity, education, and career advancement. However, many learners struggle to express themselves confidently due to anxiety and stress. Recent research has focused on the impact of stress on language learning and speaking proficiency, a critical area within applied linguistics, psychology, and education.

### **2.1 The Role of Stress in Language Learning**

Research has shown that stress significantly affects language learning. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) introduced the concept of "foreign language anxiety" to describe the stress and tension learners experience, which often leads to hesitation and limited participation in language activities. Negative emotions such as fear of mistakes, fear of negative evaluations, and self-consciousness about pronunciation and fluency are common stressors (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994).

Stress also impacts cognitive abilities like memory recall and decision-making, which are essential for language processing. Learners may struggle to find the right words, form proper sentences, or both, leading to ineffective communication. Stress is thus a major barrier to achieving fluency and accuracy in speech, key indicators of language proficiency.

### **2.2 Confidence and Speaking Ability**

Confidence plays a crucial role in language learning, especially in speaking. Confident learners are more likely to participate in speaking activities, even if their linguistic skills are less developed. Woodrow (2006) noted that self-assured learners engage more actively in communication and gradually improve their fluency and accuracy.

Conversely, low confidence can lead to an avoidance cycle. Learners afraid of being judged or criticized may avoid speaking, resulting in a lack of practice that reinforces their fears. This avoidance is particularly problematic in academic settings, where active participation and verbal expression are integral to learning.

### 2.3 Factors Contributing to Stress and Low Confidence

Exams, performance pressure, and social expectations are among the most stressful situations for students learning English (Tóth, 2011). Personality traits like introversion or sensitivity to criticism can exacerbate anxiety (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Classroom environments also play a role. Teachers who emphasize strict correctness over communicative competence may inadvertently increase stress, making students more self-conscious about their pronunciation and less willing to speak (Young, 1991). In contrast, supportive environments that treat mistakes as part of learning help build confidence and reduce stress (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2017).

### 2.4 Strategies to Lessen Stress and Build Confidence

Given the impact of stress and low confidence on English-speaking abilities, several strategies have been developed to address these challenges. Cognitive-behavioral techniques, such as positive self-talk and visualization, have been found to reduce anxiety and boost confidence (Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004).

Communicative activities like group discussions, presentations, and language exchange programs allow learners to practice speaking in low-risk environments, gradually building confidence. Incorporating stress-management training into language curricula can also be effective. For example, Oxford (1990) recommended teaching relaxation techniques and mental strategies to cope with stress, which can improve performance and increase confidence.

### 2.5 Conclusion

Research highlights the significant impact of stress and confidence on language learning, particularly in English-speaking proficiency. While these challenges can be daunting, they are not insurmountable. Effective teaching strategies and supportive learning environments can help learners overcome these barriers.

## 3. Material and Methods

### 3.1 Instruments of Data Collection

In this study, a qualitative approach was adopted to gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing English-speaking anxiety and confidence among university students. The study focused on identifying the challenges students face while speaking English and exploring strategies to overcome these difficulties.

The interview method was chosen to allow for in-depth exploration of students' experiences, perceptions, and feelings regarding the stress and lack of confidence that hinder their speaking abilities. According to Babbie (2010, p. 274), an interview is "*a data collection encounter in which one person (an interviewer) asks questions of another (a respondent)*." Semi-structured interviews were used to provide flexibility in questioning, enabling students to share personal experiences while also maintaining a guided structure for consistency in data collection.

### **3.1.1 Semi-Structured Interview**

A qualitative data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews, aiming to explore students' experiences with speaking-related stress and their strategies for managing it. The interview questions were designed to uncover key linguistic difficulties, preparation habits, and the role of confidence in English-speaking activities. This type of interview provides flexibility, allowing the interviewer to explore responses in depth by asking follow-up questions (Smith *et al.*, 2019).

The interview guide (see Appendix C) consisted of eight open-ended questions. Individual interviews were conducted with fifteen participants to gather detailed insights into their experiences. The interviews were recorded to ensure accurate transcription and to facilitate deeper analysis of the responses.

### **3.2 Sampling Method**

The volunteer sampling technique was used to select participants for this study. This non-probability sampling method involves recruiting individuals who are both willing and qualified to participate (Murairwa, 2015, p. 186). The choice of this method was driven by its suitability for obtaining a sample of students eager to share their experiences with stress and speaking challenges in English.

### **3.3 Participants of the Study**

The participants were selected from EFL students enrolled at the Faculty of Languages in Surman. A total of fifteen students participated in the study, providing a broad and diverse sample to explore how stress impacts English-speaking performance. This selection helped capture a wide range of perspectives on language-related anxiety, confidence, and the strategies used to overcome these challenges.

### **3.4 Ethical Consideration**

The aims of the study were clearly explained at the beginning of each interview. The interviews were conducted at a mutually agreed-upon location within the participants' faculty. A total of fifteen students participated, including eleven females and four males. Each interview lasted between 2 and 11 minutes and took place in a quiet, private setting to ensure the participants' comfort and confidentiality. All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent to allow for accurate transcription and analysis.

### **3.5 Data Collection Procedures**

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with fifteen EFL students from the Faculty of Languages in Surman. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, guided by eight open-ended questions, with additional sub-questions emerging during the conversations. The aim of this study is to explore the impact of stress and lack of confidence on English-speaking abilities among learners and to identify the primary factors that contribute to anxiety and nervousness in speaking situations. The interviews were recorded with the participants' consent to facilitate accurate transcription and simplify the data analysis process.

### 3.6 Data Analysis Procedures

The qualitative data were analyzed manually using content analysis, a systematic approach for identifying patterns and themes (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 18). The researcher examined interview transcripts to explore how stress and confidence influence English-speaking abilities, focusing on anxiety triggers, linguistic challenges, and confidence-building strategies. Following Creswell's (2014) guidelines, coding and thematic analysis ensured a reliable, in-depth interpretation of participants' experiences and perceptions, providing insights into the interplay between stress, confidence, and speaking proficiency.

## 4. Data Analysis

### 4.1 Qualitative Data Analysis

In an effort to understand the difficulties Libyan EFL students encounter in their speaking development during faculty of Surman semi-structured interviews were utilized. These interviews also aimed to uncover practical strategies for improving their speaking abilities. The collected qualitative data was meticulously analysed using a content analysis technique, emphasizing the identification of recurring themes and insights to pinpoint the specific challenges hindering students' progress in mastering speaking skills.

We are going to cover the main problem and the causes that may affect students while speaking.

#### 4.1.1 The Difficulties EFL Students Face in Speaking English

According to the students' responses at different levels, several challenges were identified regarding the improvement of their speaking skills. We divided them into three groups; each group had an individual struggle.

Student group A explained, *"We as EFL students have problems speaking in front of an audience. With social phobia, we cannot find the right words to describe ourselves and the situation what we are in because of fear"*. While group B students pointed out that there is a big struggle in organizing ideas and we could not pronounce words in English correctly. Additionally, group C students noted that *"There are many difficulties in speaking, and one of the most common problems was word-for-word translation. Thinking in Arabic and literally translating to English."* They also stated that they face issues with grammar, especially tenses. These responses highlight various difficulties that are faced by EFL students.

#### 4.1.2 Stress as a Contributing Factor to Speaking Difficulties

Based on the students' responses at different levels, several difficulties were identified regarding the improvement against stress. We divided them into three groups, each with an individual struggle.

- Group A *"Impact on memory and recall"*. Stress significantly impacts memory and recall, making it harder to think clearly and retain information. For instance, individuals often find themselves forgetting what they want to say due to the

overwhelming nature of stress. This mental strain can cause ideas to slip away, leaving them unable to articulate their thoughts effectively. Many students report that stress is a common barrier during speaking, leading to forgotten words and difficulties in expressing and combining sentences.

- Group B: “Effects on communication and expression.” Stress significantly hinders communication and expression, as many individuals experience difficulties articulating their thoughts during high-pressure situations. For instance, some may forget key points, leading to inaccuracies in their lectures. Nervousness can cause others to forget words or speak too quickly, which diminishes their confidence and results in hesitation when trying to explain their ideas clearly. Additionally, the stress experienced during presentations often makes it challenging to express concepts coherently, with individuals struggling to find the right words or forgetting important points altogether. Ultimately, this mental strain complicates the organization of thoughts and disrupts fluency in speech.
- Group C “Influence on confidence and fluency.” Stress can significantly impact an individual's confidence and fluency in communication. While some may maintain a sense of composure and believe that they can continue speaking without issue, others find that stress undermines their self-assurance. For instance, one person noted feeling confident enough to avoid stress, while another admitted that stress causes them to overthink and lose focus, ultimately affecting their clarity of speech. Additionally, some individuals may experience stammering or difficulty speaking clearly when under pressure, which can vary in intensity. Overall, stress makes it challenging to think clearly and articulate thoughts effectively, leading to a noticeable decline in both confidence and fluency.

#### **4.1.3 Strategies Suggested by EFL Students for Improving Speaking Skills**

The strategies to improve writing skills, as John Dewey stated in his work published in the early 20th century, there are always variations in the ways individuals learn, with each learner having unique preferences and strategies. Some learners grasp information better through listening (auditory learning), while others respond more effectively to visual stimuli (visual learning). Additionally, some individuals prefer hands-on interaction with materials (kinaesthetic or tactile learning). This diversity in learning styles highlights the importance of considering individual needs in the educational process to ensure the best outcomes for each student.

According to our sample strategies of group A&B emphasize that the most common problem is the fear of talking in a foreign language with other speakers so the strategy that is recommended in this situation is preparation, be calm, take a deep breath, and try to talk in front of mirror, family, friends and classmates. Making self-conversations. Imagine you are a broadcaster. During your daily work, take a deep breath and speak.

Group C mentioned that the biggest struggle is the way of thinking “comprehension,” so strategies will be using educational apps like Duolingo, reading stories, books, magazines, and newspapers. In addition, in enhancing speaking, some

strategies could provide support and development, like listening to music, watching movies, and trying to talk like native speakers by repeating words and sentences while using hand and body gestures. Worth mentioning, the main reason is psychological factor. According to linguist Stephen Krashen in his theory of language acquisition (1982), language practice becomes more effective when psychological factors such as fear and anxiety are reduced. Krashen argues that the “Affective Filter” can block a learner’s ability to use the language, even if they possess the necessary linguistic knowledge. He emphasizes that consistent exposure to the language and practising it in a supportive and safe environment enhances language skills. This allows learners to make mistakes without fear, boosting their confidence and encouraging fluent speaking.

#### **4.2 Summary of the Major Findings**

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the challenges faced by Libyan EFL students and the strategies they believe can improve their speaking skills. Based on the findings, students face challenges in improving their writing, and this could be attributed to many reasons, including pronunciation, grammatical mistakes, challenges in organization of ideas, and a lack of vocabulary. However, students proposed some useful strategies to overcome these challenges, like brainstorming ideas, watching movies, listening to music, practice the language with others, using apps, memorizing different vocabularies while speaking, and thinking in English.

According to linguist David Nunan, speaking difficulties in a second or foreign language often stem from factors such as limited vocabulary, anxiety during speaking, and pronunciation challenges. Nunan explains that these issues are closely linked to a lack of opportunities to practice the language in natural contexts.

To address these difficulties, Nunan suggests strategies such as:

- a) Interactive Learning: Providing opportunities for speaking through group activities or dialogues.
- b) Mimicking Native Speakers: Focusing on correct pronunciation through intensive listening and imitation.
- c) Building Confidence: Creating a supportive environment that reduces anxiety and encourages free expression.

According to Nunan (1999), *“improving speaking skills requires a combination of regular practice, psychological support, and engaging in real communicative situations”*.

#### **5. Discussion and Conclusion**

This study explored the influence of stress and lack of confidence on the English-speaking abilities of Libyan EFL students and identified strategies to enhance fluency and clarity. The findings shed light on the linguistic, psychological, and cognitive factors that contribute to speaking difficulties, emphasizing the interconnected nature of these challenges and offering practical approaches to overcome them.

This study aimed to answer these two research questions:



- 1) What specific linguistic challenges do EFL students face that contribute to their stress during speaking?
- 2) How does stress affect students' clarity and fluency in English during speaking?

### **5.1 Linguistic Challenges Contributing to Stress**

The research confirmed that linguistic difficulties are a primary source of stress among students. Participants cited limited vocabulary, grammatical mistakes, and poor sentence organization as significant obstacles. These findings align with Ellis's (1994) argument that a lack of vocabulary knowledge impedes language performance and contributes to anxiety. Similarly, Hyland (2003) noted that grammatical errors negatively affect communication clarity. Cognitive challenges, such as organizing ideas and structuring responses, were also highlighted by students. This mirrors the model proposed by Flower and Hayes (1981), which identifies writing and speaking as complex cognitive processes requiring careful planning and thought organization. Student responses demonstrated a clear connection between cognitive overload and speaking anxiety, confirming that difficulty in managing thoughts under pressure exacerbates communication struggles.

### **5.2 Stress and Its Effects on Fluency**

Stress significantly impacts students' fluency by impairing memory, focus, and self-confidence. Participants frequently described forgetting words and losing their train of thought when speaking due to nervousness, which confirms Macintyre and Gardner's (1994) findings on anxiety's disruptive effect on second-language processing. Stress not only hinders the ability to recall vocabulary but also affects sentence construction and the ability to think clearly. This supports the Affective Filter Hypothesis by Krashen (1982), which states that emotional barriers can block language acquisition. Additionally, students reported that stress leads to hesitations, rapid speech, or complete speech breakdowns, further demonstrating how anxiety disrupts the flow and coherence of spoken language. These observations highlight the need for strategies that mitigate stress to enable more effective speaking performance.

### **5.3 Suggested Strategies**

The strategies recommended by students to overcome speaking difficulties reflect sound pedagogical principles. Many students emphasized the importance of regular practice in a supportive environment, including speaking with peers, family, or in front of mirrors, to build confidence. This aligns with Krashen's (1982) assertion that language practice in low-stress environments promotes fluency. Additional strategies, such as using language-learning apps, listening to music, and watching English-language media, are consistent with Nunan's (1999) interactive learning approach, which stresses the role of active engagement and imitation of native speakers in improving pronunciation and fluency.

Moreover, students proposed techniques such as deep-breathing exercises and preparation before speaking, which are commonly recommended for managing public speaking anxiety (Horwitz *et al.*, 1986). Encouraging students to take small, incremental

steps toward public speaking, combined with psychological support, can help reduce the fear of making mistakes. Collaborative learning activities, such as group discussions and role-playing, offer additional opportunities to enhance communication skills while fostering a sense of community and reducing performance pressure.

In summary, the findings underscore the need for a comprehensive approach to language learning that addresses both linguistic competence and psychological well-being. Implementing structured practice, fostering a supportive learning environment, and promoting confidence-building activities are essential for helping students overcome anxiety and improve their English-speaking abilities. Future research could further explore the long-term impact of these strategies and evaluate the effectiveness of integrating technology-based tools into language instruction.

#### **5.4 Limitations**

This study focused on the English-speaking anxiety and confidence issues faced by EFL students at the Faculty of Languages in Surman. The research employed a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews with a sample of fifteen students. While this sample provided valuable insights, the findings cannot be generalized to all EFL learners due to the limited number of participants and the use of a non-probability volunteer sampling technique. Additionally, since participants were selected from a single institution, the diversity of experiences and challenges might not fully represent students from other faculties or regions. Future studies could broaden the sample size and include students from different educational settings to capture more varied perspectives on English-speaking anxiety and confidence.

#### **5.5 Conclusion**

This study has offered an in-depth exploration of the challenges faced by Libyan EFL students in speaking English, focusing on the impact of stress and lack of confidence. Through semi-structured interviews, the research identified key linguistic challenges, including grammar difficulties, limited vocabulary, and issues with fluency. Psychological factors, particularly anxiety and fear of making mistakes, were also significant barriers to effective speaking. The findings are consistent with Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, which emphasizes the role of emotional factors in language acquisition, and Nunan's (1999) assertion that limited practice opportunities contribute to speaking difficulties.

Participants suggested practical strategies to enhance their speaking skills, including regular practice with peers, using language apps, and engaging in self-talk exercises to boost confidence. Techniques such as deep breathing, preparation, and listening to native speakers were also highlighted as effective methods for reducing anxiety. These strategies align with recommendations from Ellis (1994), who stresses the importance of interactive and confidence-building activities in developing language proficiency.

Ultimately, this research underscores the need for supportive learning environments and structured speaking opportunities to improve fluency and reduce

anxiety. Future research could expand on these findings by investigating the long-term effectiveness of specific anxiety-reduction techniques and confidence-building programs tailored to EFL students.

This research has provided a comprehensive examination of the challenges faced by Libyan EFL students in the fifth and sixth semesters in improving their writing skills and has explored effective strategies for addressing these difficulties. The study identified key obstacles, including translation issues, difficulties in information organization, challenges with descriptive and narrative writing, and the common experience of feeling mentally blocked. These findings underscore the complex nature of writing as a skill that requires not only linguistic proficiency but also cognitive and organizational capabilities.

In response to these challenges, the research highlights several practical strategies suggested by students themselves, such as journaling and free writing, which foster fluency and idea generation. Additionally, strategies like reading and exposure to English content, brainstorming techniques, and collaborative practice have been shown to enhance vocabulary, sentence structure understanding, and overall writing proficiency. These methods, when implemented consistently, can provide significant support in overcoming the barriers to effective writing.

## **5.6 Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this research, several recommendations can be made to improve the speaking abilities of EFL students. First, students should immerse themselves in the English language by engaging with various media, such as movies, music, and literature, which can help enhance their vocabulary and understanding. Additionally, participating in group activities like language clubs or conversation sessions can provide a low-pressure environment for practicing speaking. Setting aside time each day for speaking practice, whether through self-dialogue or conversations with peers, can also help build their confidence over time.

For teachers, it is important to develop strategies that offer psychological support. This includes creating a classroom culture where mistakes are seen as part of the learning process and where students feel encouraged to take risks with their language use. Teachers should also provide regular opportunities for speaking practice in class, ensuring that students have a safe space to express themselves. Furthermore, introducing relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing exercises, can help students manage their anxiety before speaking tasks.

Curriculum developers should focus on designing materials that address both linguistic and psychological challenges. This means creating activities that not only improve speaking skills but also help build students' confidence. Incorporating technology into the curriculum, such as language learning apps and online resources, can offer additional practice outside the classroom.

Finally, future research should involve larger and more diverse groups of students to make the findings applicable to various educational settings. Longitudinal studies could also be valuable in assessing the long-term effects of the recommended strategies

on students' speaking abilities and confidence levels. By following these recommendations, educators and stakeholders can create a more supportive environment for EFL students, leading to improved speaking skills and reduced anxiety in their language learning journey.

### Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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