

EFL LEARNERS' SPEAKING DIFFICULTIES AND INSTRUCTIONAL RESPONSES: INSIGHTS FROM RECENT LITERATURE (2021-2025)

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to synthesise recent findings on EFL learners' speaking difficulties and the instructional responses proposed to address these challenges. Using a literature-based design, this study analysed empirical research articles published between 2021 and 2025 across various EFL contexts. The data were examined through thematic synthesis to identify recurring patterns of speaking difficulties and corresponding instructional responses. The findings indicate that speaking difficulties are shaped by the interaction of linguistic limitations, psychological barriers, and instructional or contextual constraints. Linguistic problems such as limited vocabulary, grammar uncertainty, and pronunciation difficulties restrict learners' ability to express ideas, while psychological factors, particularly anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and low confidence, emerge as the most dominant barriers affecting learners' willingness to speak. In addition, classroom conditions such as large class sizes, limited time, and insufficient speaking practice further constrain learners' speaking development. In response, recent studies highlight the importance of creating supportive learning environments, increasing interaction through communicative activities, and integrating technology-supported tools such as automatic speech recognition (ASR), artificial intelligence (AI), and mobile-assisted learning to enhance speaking practice. Overall, this study suggests that addressing speaking difficulties requires a comprehensive approach that combines pedagogical strategies and technology integration to support learners' speaking development.

Keywords: EFL speaking, speaking difficulties, instructional responses, literature synthesis, speaking instruction.

1) INTRODUCTION

Speaking is often seen as the most visible sign of language ability in EFL classrooms because it reflects learners' capacity to use English for real communication rather than simply knowing rules in isolation (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021). However, speaking remains one of the hardest skills for many EFL learners to develop, even after years of formal instruction (Omar, 2023). This challenge is widely reported across different contexts and age groups, including young learners and university students, which suggests that speaking problems are not limited to a single setting or educational level (Güneş & Sarıgöz, 2021; Vu, 2023).

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Research between 2021 and 2025 shows that learners' speaking difficulties are influenced by both linguistic and non-linguistic factors (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021; Saragih et al., 2024). In many studies, limited vocabulary, uncertainty in grammar use, and pronunciation problems repeatedly appear as barriers that restrict learners' fluency and clarity when speaking (Al Shaibani, 2023; Omar, 2023). These linguistic difficulties often become more noticeable in classrooms where English is used mainly as a subject rather than a daily language of interaction, leaving learners with insufficient exposure to meaningful spoken practice (Al-Hassaani & Qaid, 2021). As a result, learners may rely heavily on their first language or avoid participating in speaking activities altogether (Güneş & Sarigöz, 2021).

Similar findings are also reported in other contexts, where learners' speaking difficulties are associated not only with linguistic limitations such as grammar and pronunciation, but also with broader learning conditions, including limited exposure to English use and insufficient opportunities for speaking practice (Franscy & Ramli, 2022; Normawati et al., 2023).

At the same time, psychological factors are consistently reported as key reasons why learners struggle to speak in EFL contexts. Anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and fear of being judged by peers or teachers tend to reduce learners' willingness to communicate, even when they have enough ideas to express (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021; Omar, 2023). Evidence from different regions shows that these affective barriers can be more dominant than purely linguistic limitations because speaking requires learners to take risks publicly and manage the pressure of real-time interaction (Al-Hassaani & Al-Saalmi, 2022; Güneş & Sarigöz, 2021). For young learners, anxiety and lack of confidence may delay speaking development even when learners show interest and motivation to speak in class (Güneş & Sarigöz, 2021; Saragih et al., 2024). Case study findings indicate that learners' speaking difficulties are often influenced by a combination of internal and external factors, including classroom environment, teaching approaches, and learners' readiness to communicate (Apichat & Fatimah, 2022).

In addition, classroom and institutional conditions play an important role in shaping speaking outcomes. Several studies highlight that large class size, limited classroom time, and curriculum constraints reduce opportunities for learners to practice speaking in meaningful ways (Bhutto et al., 2023; Özmat & Senemoğlu, 2021). In many settings, speaking lessons are affected by assessment demands and textbook-driven practices, which sometimes encourage teachers to prioritise accuracy and coverage of content rather than sustained interaction (Özmat & Senemoğlu,

2021; Vu, 2023). When speaking opportunities are limited, learners often have fewer chances to build fluency, gain confidence, and develop the habit of using English spontaneously (Al-Hassaani & Qaid, 2021).

Alongside the growing evidence on difficulties, recent literature also provides various instructional responses aimed at improving learners' speaking performance. Researchers and practitioners have recommended creating supportive speaking environments, increasing classroom interaction through pair or group work, and integrating speaking practice into regular lessons rather than treating it as an occasional activity (Al-Hassaani & Al-Saalmi, 2022; Amoah & Yeboah, 2021). In more recent studies, instructional responses have also included technology-supported practice, such as the use of automatic speech recognition (ASR) and AI-based learning tools to strengthen pronunciation and speaking performance (Li et al., 2025; Qiao & Zhao, 2023; Sun, 2023). Other approaches, such as storytelling and mobile-assisted project-based learning, are also reported as practical options to encourage participation and support spoken development, particularly when learners need more engaging and meaningful speaking tasks (Benlaghrissi & Ouahidi, 2024; Ibrahim, 2022). Recent studies also highlight the effectiveness of innovative instructional approaches such as digital storytelling and flipped classroom instruction in enhancing learners' speaking performance and engagement (Arroba & Acosta, 2021; Hashemifardnia et al., 2021).

Despite the increasing number of studies on EFL speaking over the last five years, the findings remain scattered across contexts, learner groups, and instructional approaches, making it difficult for teachers and researchers to see a clear overall picture (Omar, 2023; Vu, 2023). Many studies focus on identifying the difficulties, while others focus on interventions or teaching strategies, but fewer attempts have been made to connect speaking difficulties directly with instructional responses in a structured synthesis (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021; Bhutto et al., 2023). Therefore, this article aims to synthesise findings from 25 empirical studies published between 2021 and 2025 in order to map recurring EFL learners' speaking difficulties and identify instructional responses proposed in recent literature to address these difficulties across diverse EFL contexts.

2) THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The present study draws on a multidimensional framework to examine EFL learners' speaking difficulties and the instructional responses proposed in recent research. This choice is

based on evidence showing that speaking problems are rarely caused by a single issue; instead, they tend to emerge through the interaction of learners' linguistic resources, psychological conditions, and classroom realities (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021; Güneş & Sarıgöz, 2021). Studies conducted across different EFL contexts consistently report that speaking difficulties appear at multiple levels, from limited vocabulary and pronunciation issues to anxiety, low confidence, and restricted opportunities for speaking practice (Al-Hassaani & Al-Saalmi, 2022; Omar, 2023). For this reason, the framework adopted in this review does not treat speaking difficulties as purely linguistic deficits but views them as a broader learning problem shaped by both individual and contextual influences (Özmat & Senemoğlu, 2021; Vu, 2023). In addition to these dimensions, recent studies also highlight the role of learners' strategic competence in managing speaking difficulties. Learners' ability to use communication strategies, such as paraphrasing, asking for clarification, and maintaining interaction, may influence how effectively they cope with linguistic limitations during speaking activities (Rayati et al., 2022).

From a linguistic point of view, many learners struggle to speak because they lack the language resources needed to construct meaning fluently and accurately. Limited vocabulary is repeatedly described as a major barrier that prevents learners from expressing ideas, selecting appropriate words, and sustaining communication during speaking activities (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021; Omar, 2023). Grammar-related difficulties are also reported as a constraint, particularly when learners hesitate to speak because they are unsure about sentence construction or accuracy (Saragih et al., 2024). Pronunciation is another widely observed challenge that reduces intelligibility and increases learners' reluctance to speak, especially when learners worry about producing incorrect sounds or being corrected in public (Al Shaibani, 2023). These linguistic issues appear across contexts and levels, suggesting that linguistic limitations remain a foundational source of speaking difficulty in EFL learning (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021). Similar findings are also reported in other contexts, where grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary are identified as dominant linguistic barriers affecting learners' speaking performance (Normawati et al., 2023).

Linguistic constraints, however, do not fully explain why many learners remain silent or hesitant in speaking lessons. A substantial number of studies highlight psychological factors, such as speaking anxiety, fear of making mistakes, fear of negative evaluation, and low confidence, as major barriers to oral participation (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021; Omar, 2023). In several contexts, learners report that they avoid speaking not because they have nothing to say, but because they

feel anxious about being judged by teachers or peers (Al-Hassaani & Al-Saalmi, 2022; Al-Hassaani & Qaid, 2021). This affective pressure can be particularly strong in classrooms where speaking is associated with accuracy-focused correction or a lack of supportive feedback, which may further reduce students' willingness to take risks in speaking tasks (Güneş & Sarıgöz, 2021). Therefore, psychological factors in this framework are treated as conditions that shape whether learners can effectively use their linguistic knowledge in real-time communication (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021). Evidence from case-based studies further suggests that psychological barriers are often influenced by classroom conditions and teaching approaches, indicating that affective factors are closely linked to instructional environments rather than purely individual traits (Apichat & Fatimah, 2022).

Speaking development is also strongly influenced by classroom and institutional conditions. Research points to large classes, limited instructional time, insufficient speaking practice, and unsuitable materials as recurring constraints that limit learners' progress in oral communication (Bhutto et al., 2023; Özmat & Senemoğlu, 2021). For example, teaching speaking in large classes is frequently associated with difficulties in classroom management, limited monitoring of students' oral output, and challenges in providing effective feedback, all of which reduce the quality of speaking practice (Bhutto et al., 2023). Similarly, limited communicative practice in coursebooks and insufficient classroom resources have been linked to weak speaking and listening development (Özmat & Senemoğlu, 2021). In higher education contexts, classroom constraints are sometimes strengthened by institutional assessment systems and course policies, which may discourage teachers from prioritising interactive speaking activities (Vu, 2023). As a result, speaking difficulties are conceptualised in this framework not only as learner problems but also as outcomes shaped by learning environments and instructional structures (Vu, 2023).

An important extension of the instructional-contextual dimension concerns the role of teachers' beliefs, practices, and institutional demands. Teachers may recognise the value of communicative and student-centred speaking activities, yet still experience barriers when attempting to implement such approaches due to class size, textbook constraints, and assessment policies (Vu, 2023). These conditions can lead to a gap between teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices, which may eventually affect learners' motivation and speaking engagement (Al-Hassaani & Al-Saalmi, 2022; Vu, 2023). In this review, teacher and institutional factors are therefore understood as influences that shape speaking instruction, mediate learners' speaking opportunities, and determine which instructional responses are feasible in real classrooms (Vu,

2023). These interconnected dimensions indicate that speaking difficulties should be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon, where linguistic, psychological, instructional, and strategic factors interact dynamically to shape learners' speaking performance.

Figure 1. Multidimensional framework of EFL speaking difficulties

Adapted from recent studies on EFL speaking difficulties (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021; Güneş & Sarıgöz, 2021; Omar, 2023; Rayati et al., 2022).

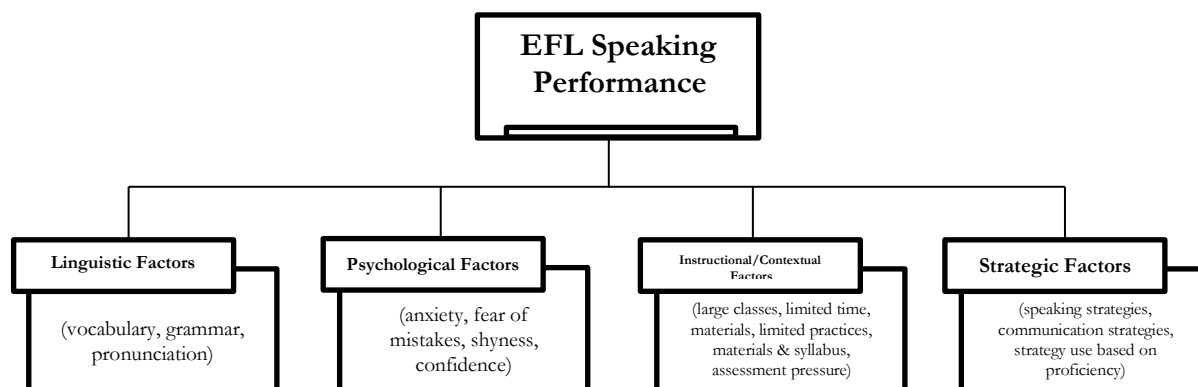


Figure 1 summarises the central assumption of this theoretical framework: EFL speaking difficulties are shaped by the interaction of linguistic resources, psychological readiness, and instructional-contextual conditions (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021; Özmat & Senemoğlu, 2021). This perspective is consistent with empirical findings that show learners' speaking problems are rarely explained by vocabulary or pronunciation issues alone, because fear of mistakes, anxiety, and limited speaking practice may restrict learners' actual performance in class (Al-Hassaani & Al-Saalmi, 2022; Omar, 2023). By positioning speaking performance as the result of interacting dimensions, this framework provides a clear basis for reviewing literature across varied contexts and learner groups (Güneş & Sarıgöz, 2021).

While the first part of the framework explains how speaking difficulties are formed, recent studies also highlight the importance of instructional responses as practical efforts to reduce barriers and support speaking development. Several studies recommend increasing meaningful speaking opportunities through classroom interaction, pair/group work, and supportive learning environments that reduce anxiety and encourage participation (Al-Hassaani & Qaid, 2021; Amoah & Yeboah, 2021). Studies in different contexts also stress that speaking improvement requires adequate time allocation and teaching practices that prioritise communication rather than purely accuracy-focused activities (Al-Hassaani & Al-Saalmi, 2022; Vu, 2023).

Recent literature published within the 2021–2025 range further suggests that instructional responses increasingly include technology-mediated approaches. For example, studies report that automatic speech recognition (ASR) can support pronunciation development and speaking performance, particularly when learners receive repeated practice opportunities and immediate feedback (Li et al., 2025; Sun, 2023). AI-based language learning has also been associated with improvements in speaking skills and self-regulation in EFL contexts, indicating that learners' speaking development may benefit from structured technology-supported practice (Qiao & Zhao, 2023). In addition, mobile-assisted project-based learning has been reported as a meaningful instructional option for supporting speaking development through collaborative and task-oriented speaking activities (Benlaghrissi & Ouahidi, 2024). Such findings reflect a shift in instructional responses, where technology is not treated as a replacement for teaching but as a tool that may expand learners' speaking exposure and practice time (Dinh & Phuong, 2024).

Figure 2. Linking EFL speaking difficulties and instructional responses

Synthesised from recent literature on instructional responses (Arroba & Acosta, 2021; Hashemifardnia et al., 2021; Li et al., 2025; Qiao & Zhao, 2023; Sun, 2023).

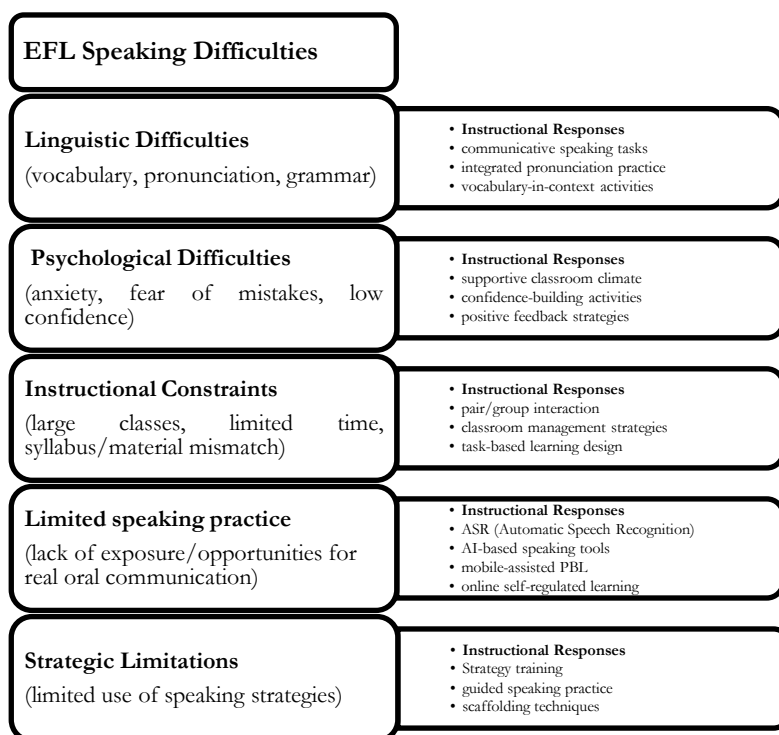


Figure 2 presents the analytical direction of this review by connecting categories of speaking difficulties with the instructional responses proposed in recent studies. Linguistic issues such as pronunciation and vocabulary problems are often addressed through integrated speaking tasks and systematic pronunciation practice embedded in communication activities (Al Shaibani, 2023; Omar, 2023). Psychological barriers are typically approached through supportive classroom environments, confidence-building strategies, and feedback practices that reduce fear of making mistakes (Al-Hassaani & Qaid, 2021; Amoah & Yeboah, 2021). Instructional constraints such as large classes and limited time require strategies that improve participation opportunities through interaction design and classroom management (Bhutto et al., 2023). Finally, technology-mediated responses such as ASR, AI-based learning, mobile-assisted projects, and online self-regulation strategies reflect recent instructional directions aimed at expanding practice opportunities and supporting speaking development beyond traditional classroom limits (Dinh & Phuong, 2024; Li et al., 2025; Qiao & Zhao, 2023; Sun, 2023).

Overall, this theoretical framework offers a structured lens for synthesising studies published between 2021 and 2025 by identifying recurring speaking difficulties and mapping corresponding instructional responses across contexts. By applying this framework, the present study aims to provide a clear synthesis of what EFL learners struggle with in speaking and how recent literature suggests addressing these challenges through classroom-based and technology-supported instructional practices (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021; Vu, 2023).

3) METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a literature-based research design focusing on recent empirical evidence on EFL learners' speaking difficulties and instructional responses published between 2021 and 2025. The study was conducted as a thematic literature synthesis, where peer-reviewed journal articles served as the primary data sources for analysis (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021; Vu, 2023). A literature-based design was selected because speaking difficulties are widely reported across contexts, yet the findings are often dispersed, making a systematic synthesis necessary to identify recurring patterns and meaningful pedagogical implications (Bhutto et al., 2023; Omar, 2023).

Data Sources and Data Set

The data of this study consisted of 22 research articles ($n = 22$) published between 2021 and 2025, which specifically addressed EFL learners' speaking difficulties and/or instructional responses aimed at improving learners' speaking performance. The included articles represent diverse EFL contexts, including studies involving young learners, secondary school students, university learners, and teacher perspectives, as reported in the selected literature (Al-Hassaani & Al-Saalmi, 2022; Güneş & Sarıgöz, 2021; Saragih et al., 2024). The dataset also covers a range of instructional approaches, including classroom-based strategies and technology-mediated interventions such as AI-based learning and automatic speech recognition (ASR) tools (Li et al., 2025; Qiao & Zhao, 2023; Sun, 2023).

Inclusion Criteria

To ensure that the selected studies aligned with the focus and scope of this review, articles were included based on the following criteria:

1	Publication year	The article was published between 2021 and 2025, consistent with the timeframe stated in the title of this review.
2	Topic relevance	The study explicitly discussed EFL speaking difficulties, such as linguistic, psychological, or instructional barriers, and/or proposed or examined instructional responses to improve speaking.
3	EFL context	The participants were learners or teachers in EFL settings, including school or university contexts.
4	Empirical evidence	The participants were learners or teachers in EFL settings, including school or university contexts.
5	Full-text accessibility	The article presented findings based on qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method research data, allowing meaningful synthesis of reported challenges and responses.

Selection and Screening Procedure

The selection process began with compiling a set of research articles relevant to EFL speaking difficulties and instructional responses. The screening process was conducted in stages to ensure that the included studies were aligned with the research focus. First, the titles and abstracts

of collected articles were checked for relevance to speaking difficulties and instructional strategies. Second, full texts were reviewed to confirm that each article met the inclusion criteria and provided sufficient empirical evidence to be synthesised. This screening approach helped ensure that the final dataset ($n = 22$) contained studies that were directly relevant to the scope of the review and suitable for thematic analysis (Omar, 2023).

Data Analysis Technique

The included studies were analysed using thematic synthesis, which involved identifying recurring themes related to speaking difficulties and categorising instructional responses reported in the reviewed literature. The analysis process followed three main stages.

First, the findings and discussion sections of each study were carefully read to extract key statements related to speaking difficulties and teaching responses, such as vocabulary limitations, pronunciation barriers, anxiety, lack of practice opportunities, large class issues, and assessment constraints (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021; Bhutto et al., 2023; Saragih et al., 2024). Second, the extracted points were coded and grouped into broader categories under three main dimensions: linguistic factors, psychological/affective factors, and instructional/contextual constraints, in line with the theoretical framework of this study (Güneş & Sarıgöz, 2021; Vu, 2023). Third, the instructional responses described in the literature were mapped against the identified difficulties to construct a clearer synthesis of how recent studies propose addressing speaking problems, including both classroom-based strategies and technology-mediated responses such as ASR and AI-supported practice (Benlaghrissi & Ouahidi, 2024; Li et al., 2025; Sun, 2023). In this process, the analytical rubric was used as a guiding instrument to ensure consistency and transparency in coding and categorisation across all selected studies.

Instrument for Data Analysis

To ensure systematic analysis, this study employed an analytical coding rubric to classify speaking difficulties and instructional responses across the selected studies. The rubric was developed based on the theoretical framework of this study, which includes linguistic factors, psychological factors, instructional/contextual constraints, and strategic factors.

The instrument consists of predefined categories and indicators used to extract and organise data from each article. Linguistic factors include vocabulary limitations, grammar uncertainty, and pronunciation difficulties. Psychological factors cover anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and low

confidence. Instructional or contextual constraints refer to classroom conditions such as large class size, limited time, insufficient materials, and restricted speaking opportunities. In addition, strategic factors include learners' use of communication strategies in managing speaking tasks.

Each identified issue and instructional response in the reviewed studies was coded according to these categories to ensure consistency in analysis. This coding process allowed the researcher to systematically compare findings across different studies and identify recurring patterns of speaking difficulties and instructional responses.

Instrument Validation

The analytical rubric used in this study was reviewed by an expert in English language teaching to ensure its validity and relevance to the research objectives. The validation process focused on the clarity of categories, the appropriateness of indicators, and the consistency of the coding framework. Based on the expert's feedback, minor revisions were made to refine the categorisation and improve the alignment between the instrument and the focus of the study.

Trustworthiness and Rigour

To enhance the rigour of the synthesis, several strategies were applied. First, the review focused on empirical studies published in peer-reviewed journals within the stated timeframe, ensuring that the dataset was recent and research-based (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021; Vu, 2023). Second, the inclusion and exclusion criteria were explicitly defined to strengthen transparency in article selection. Third, the thematic coding process was conducted consistently across the dataset by applying the same analytical categories to all included studies. This approach supported coherence and reduced the risk of selective interpretation of findings across contexts (Bhutto et al., 2023; Omar, 2023).

4) RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the synthesized findings from 22 empirical studies published from 2021 to 2025, focusing on EFL learners' speaking difficulties and the instructional responses proposed in the literature. The synthesis is guided by the analytical framework and coding rubric applied in this study. Across contexts, the reviewed studies show a consistent pattern: speaking difficulties are shaped by linguistic constraints, psychological barriers, and instructional realities, while teaching responses tend to focus on classroom interaction, confidence building, curriculum

adjustment, and technology-supported speaking practice (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021; Saragih et al., 2024; Vu, 2023). The themes presented below reflect recurring issues across different educational levels (young learners to university students) and varied EFL contexts, indicating that many speaking challenges are widely shared rather than context-specific (Güneş & Sarıgöz, 2021; Omar, 2023).

Theme 1: Psychological Barriers as the Most Dominant Speaking Difficulty

A strong theme across the reviewed literature is that psychological barriers frequently appear as the most immediate reason why learners do not speak actively in EFL classrooms. Learners' anxiety, fear of making mistakes, fear of negative evaluation, and low confidence repeatedly emerge as key obstacles that reduce participation in speaking activities (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021; Omar, 2023). In the Chinese EFL context, for instance, learners' speaking difficulties were reported to be more strongly associated with psychological factors such as anxiety, fear of mistakes, unwillingness, and fear of negative evaluation than with linguistic issues (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021). Similar patterns are also reported in university settings where learners describe shyness, fear of criticism, and hesitation as major reasons for being "tongue-tied" during speaking tasks (Al-Hassaani & Al-Saalmi, 2022; Al-Hassaani & Qaid, 2021).

This psychological pressure is not only experienced by adult learners but also by young EFL learners. In primary school contexts, learners may appear eager to speak, yet negative beliefs and speaking anxiety can still delay oral production and increase silence in the classroom (Güneş & Sarıgöz, 2021). Evidence from young learners also shows that anxiety is not simply a personal trait but may be reinforced by classroom practices, such as the fear of being corrected publicly or being laughed at by peers (Saragih et al., 2024). These patterns suggest that speaking difficulties cannot be fully understood through linguistic explanations alone, because learners often avoid speaking even when they possess basic language knowledge (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021). Similar findings are also reported in case-based studies, where learners' anxiety and lack of confidence are influenced by classroom interaction patterns and instructional practices, indicating that psychological barriers are closely linked to learning environments (Apichat & Fatimah, 2022).

From a pedagogical perspective, psychological barriers shape not only how learners speak but also whether they speak at all. When anxiety becomes dominant, learners tend to limit their output, rely on short responses, or remain passive during group interaction (Omar, 2023). This

finding implies that improving speaking performance requires instructional responses that address affective conditions, such as building confidence and reducing fear of mistakes, rather than focusing only on correcting language form (Al-Hassaani & Qaid, 2021).

Instructional responses to Theme 1 commonly include creating a supportive environment, providing encouragement, and using speaking activities that gradually increase learners' confidence. For example, studies recommend that teachers reduce anxiety by making the classroom more comfortable for speaking practice, and by using strategies such as classroom debates or regular oral presentations to strengthen confidence over time (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021). In higher education contexts, learners are also reported to benefit from increased speaking practice time and supportive feedback that lowers fear of making mistakes (Al-Hassaani & Al-Saalmi, 2022). These responses indicate that psychological barriers are not fixed problems, but issues that can be reduced through thoughtful classroom design (Güneş & Sarıgöz, 2021).

Theme 2: Linguistic Constraints and Limited Language Resources

Although psychological barriers appear dominant, linguistic constraints remain a persistent and widely reported speaking difficulty in the reviewed literature. Learners often struggle with limited vocabulary, pronunciation problems, and grammar uncertainty, which restrict their ability to express ideas fluently and accurately (Omar, 2023; Saragih et al., 2024). In speaking-focused classrooms, learners frequently report difficulty finding appropriate words, building sentences spontaneously, and maintaining fluency during discussions (Omar, 2023). In addition, learners' limited vocabulary may reduce confidence, because they fear being unable to communicate meaning or being misunderstood by others (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021). Similar patterns are also found in other contexts, where vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation are consistently identified as dominant linguistic barriers affecting learners' speaking performance (Normawati et al., 2023).

Pronunciation emerges as a particularly critical linguistic issue, especially in contexts where learners have limited phonological awareness and limited exposure to accurate spoken English. Research focusing on pronunciation challenges in Saudi EFL contexts suggests that pronunciation difficulties may hinder learners' ability to communicate effectively and may contribute to fear of making mistakes (Al Shaibani, 2023). In young learners' contexts, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary are similarly reported as key contributors to speaking difficulty, particularly when learners rarely use English beyond classroom boundaries (Saragih et al., 2024). These findings

indicate that linguistic barriers remain an important part of speaking difficulties, but their impact often becomes stronger when combined with anxiety and low confidence (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021). In addition, learners' ability to apply communication strategies has been found to influence how they manage linguistic limitations during speaking tasks, particularly in maintaining interaction and compensating for gaps in vocabulary (Rayati et al., 2022).

Instructional responses to Theme 2 often emphasize integrated practice rather than isolated drills. One common recommendation is embedding pronunciation practice within meaningful speaking activities rather than teaching pronunciation separately (Al Shaibani, 2023). Similarly, speaking development is suggested to improve when learners receive repeated opportunities to use vocabulary and grammar in authentic communication tasks, rather than focusing heavily on form-based exercises (Omar, 2023). This approach aligns with the broader view that speaking proficiency develops through practice, interaction, and gradual improvement, rather than through knowledge of rules alone (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021).

Theme 3: Instructional and Contextual Constraints Limiting Speaking Practice

A third theme emphasised across the reviewed studies is the influence of instructional and contextual constraints that reduce learners' chances to practise speaking effectively. Large class size is repeatedly highlighted as a major barrier to teaching speaking, because it limits the teacher's ability to monitor student performance, provide feedback, and manage speaking activities efficiently (Bhutto et al., 2023). In contexts where classrooms are overcrowded, learners may receive fewer turns to speak and fewer opportunities to engage in interaction-based tasks, resulting in limited speaking growth (Özmat & Senemoğlu, 2021). This problem is also linked to limited use of audiovisual materials and insufficient classroom facilities, which reduces exposure to listening and speaking input necessary for oral development (Özmat & Senemoğlu, 2021).

Beyond class size, the reviewed literature also points to curriculum and syllabus issues as recurring constraints. In university contexts, learners' speaking difficulties are described as being influenced by inadequate syllabi, unsuitable teaching materials, and limited instructional focus on real-life speaking needs (Al-Hassaani & Al-Saalmi, 2022; Al-Hassaani & Qaid, 2021). When speaking courses are not aligned with learners' communication needs or labour market expectations, learners may complete the course without substantial improvement in oral competence (Al-Hassaani & Al-Saalmi, 2022). These findings suggest that speaking difficulties are

not always individual weaknesses, but are often shaped by systemic instructional constraints that limit meaningful practice (Vu, 2023). Case study findings also highlight that speaking difficulties are influenced by a combination of instructional design, classroom environment, and learners' limited opportunities to practise speaking in meaningful contexts (Apichat & Fatimah, 2022).

Teacher-related and institutional constraints also appear in several studies, particularly those focusing on teachers' beliefs and practices. Teachers may believe that communicative, student-centred approaches can improve speaking performance, yet their classroom practices may remain restricted due to policy demands, assessment pressures, and low teaching efficacy (Vu, 2023). As a result, learners' motivation and willingness to participate may decrease when speaking lessons do not provide sufficient interaction, meaningful engagement, or supportive feedback (Al-Hassaani & Al-Saalmi, 2022; Vu, 2023). This demonstrates that speaking difficulties should be interpreted not only as learner limitations, but also as consequences of limited opportunities and structural conditions within the teaching environment (Bhutto et al., 2023). These findings reinforce the view that speaking difficulties should be understood not only as learner-related issues, but also as outcomes shaped by instructional conditions and institutional practices.

Instructional responses to Theme 3 often include classroom management strategies and interaction design that maximise learner participation. In large classes, cooperative learning, group activities, and structured speaking lesson plans are suggested as practical approaches to engage learners and maintain speaking practice despite classroom size limitations (Bhutto et al., 2023). In addition, studies recommend curriculum and material development to better match learners' daily communication needs and increase the relevance of speaking instruction (Al-Hassaani & Al-Saalmi, 2022). These responses imply that instructional constraints are not fixed barriers, but challenges that can be mitigated through targeted pedagogical planning and institutional adjustment (Vu, 2023).

Theme 4: Instructional Responses and Emerging Technology-Mediated Practices

A notable pattern in more recent studies (particularly from 2023 to 2025) is the increased attention given to technology-supported speaking practice as a way to expand learners' opportunities beyond traditional classroom limits. Automatic speech recognition (ASR) and AI-based learning tools are reported as promising approaches for supporting speaking performance, especially in pronunciation practice and repeated oral production tasks (Li et al., 2025; Sun, 2023).

Such tools may help learners practise more frequently and receive feedback that supports improvement, which is particularly helpful in contexts where classroom time is limited and teacher feedback cannot reach every learner equally (Sun, 2023). Technology-mediated learning has also been linked to self-regulation, suggesting that learners' ability to manage their learning process may improve alongside speaking development when digital tools are used effectively (Qiao & Zhao, 2023).

In addition to ASR and AI-supported practice, mobile-assisted project-based learning is presented as an instructional approach that creates meaningful speaking opportunities through collaboration and task engagement. Project-based learning supported by mobile technology is reported to promote speaking development by encouraging learners to use English for authentic interaction and shared outcomes (Benlaghrissi & Ouahidi, 2024). Storytelling is also reported as an instructional method that improves speaking performance by providing learners with an engaging structure for oral production, which may be particularly useful for learners who need more supportive speaking contexts (Ibrahim, 2022). These instructional approaches point to a wider view in recent literature: speaking improvement is supported when learners are given structured, meaningful tasks and a safe space to practise orally (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021). In addition to these approaches, digital storytelling has been identified as an effective instructional method that supports learners' speaking development by providing structured and engaging opportunities for oral production. Similarly, flipped classroom instruction allows learners to access input before class and use classroom time for interactive speaking activities, which may increase participation and improve speaking performance.

Overall, the instructional responses identified in this review suggest that speaking difficulties are increasingly addressed through two major directions: (1) classroom-based interaction and confidence-building strategies, and (2) technology-supported practice that expands speaking opportunities and feedback access. This combined direction reflects the current reality of EFL speaking instruction, where teachers work within classroom constraints while also exploring tools and methods that may support learners' oral development more effectively (Li et al., 2025; Vu, 2023). These developments indicate that recent instructional responses tend to integrate both pedagogical strategies and technology to expand learners' speaking opportunities beyond traditional classroom settings.

Overall, the findings suggest that EFL speaking difficulties are best understood as a multidimensional issue, where linguistic, psychological, strategic, and instructional factors interact dynamically. Consequently, effective instructional responses require a balanced approach that addresses both learners' internal conditions and external learning environments.

5) CONCLUSION

This literature-based study synthesised findings from 22 empirical studies published between 2021 and 2025 to identify recurring EFL learners' speaking difficulties and the instructional responses proposed in recent research. The findings indicate that speaking difficulties do not stem from a single factor but arise from the interaction of linguistic limitations, psychological barriers, and instructional conditions.

Across contexts, psychological factors appear as the most immediate barriers influencing learners' participation in speaking activities. Anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and low confidence often prevent learners from expressing their ideas, even when they possess sufficient linguistic knowledge. At the same time, linguistic constraints such as limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, and uncertainty in grammar continue to restrict learners' fluency and clarity in communication. These challenges become more complex when combined with limited opportunities for meaningful speaking practice.

In addition, the findings highlight that instructional and contextual conditions play a significant role in shaping learners' speaking development. Large class sizes, limited instructional time, and insufficient speaking practice reduce learners' opportunities to develop fluency and confidence. Therefore, speaking difficulties should not be viewed solely as learner-related problems, but also as outcomes influenced by classroom practices and institutional conditions.

Overall, addressing speaking difficulties requires a comprehensive approach that considers both learners' internal conditions and external learning environments. Effective instructional responses should integrate supportive classroom practices with opportunities for meaningful and sustained speaking engagement.

Implication for EFL Teaching

Based on the findings, several implications can be drawn for EFL teaching practice. First, teachers need to pay greater attention to learners' psychological readiness by creating a supportive classroom atmosphere in which mistakes are viewed as part of the learning process. Encouraging

participation and reducing fear of negative evaluation can help increase learners' willingness to speak.

Second, speaking instruction should integrate linguistic support within communicative activities. Rather than teaching vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation in isolation, these elements can be embedded in meaningful speaking tasks to support the development of both fluency and confidence.

Third, in contexts where large classes and limited instructional time are unavoidable, teachers may adopt structured interaction strategies such as pair work, group discussions, and task-based activities to maximise speaking opportunities. These approaches can help ensure that more learners are actively engaged in speaking practice.

Finally, the use of technology can be considered as a complementary tool to support speaking development. Digital tools such as automatic speech recognition, mobile-assisted learning, and online platforms may provide additional opportunities for practice and feedback beyond classroom limitations.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study is limited to a synthesis of empirical studies published between 2021 and 2025, which provides a focused perspective on recent developments but may not fully represent earlier foundational research on EFL speaking. In addition, the reviewed studies were conducted in diverse contexts, which may result in variations in how speaking difficulties and instructional responses are defined and implemented.

Future research may explore speaking difficulties and instructional responses in more specific contexts, such as different educational levels or particular learner groups. Further studies are also needed to examine the long-term effectiveness of emerging instructional approaches, especially those involving technology-supported speaking practice. In addition, future research could investigate how institutional policies and classroom conditions influence the implementation of speaking instruction in real teaching environments.

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