

Communication Challenges Facing Soran University Students in Speaking English as a Foreign Language

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the current study is to identify the reasons behind students' weakness in speaking and determine the challenges of oral communication that some students face in English Department of the Faculty of Arts at Soran University. Quantitative research was used as a method of data collection of this case study to achieve the goal. The population of the study was undergraduate students at Soran University. A five-level Likert-scale questionnaire with closed-ended items was distributed among 121 English Foreign Language students to investigate participants' views on this issue. The instrument comprised twenty-eight items classified into three main domains of linguistic, psychological, and sociocultural factors with different sub-aspects in each domain. The data were analysed using the Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS, version 24). The findings showed that linguistic factors were the primary cause for English speaking difficulties with 36.42%, followed by affective and sociocultural factors with 35.63% and 27.95 % respectively.

1. Introduction

Learning a foreign language (FL) is not an easy task; especially if learners are in a country where the target language they learn is not the first or the main language. Learners are often worried about developing their oral communication despite spending years developing their semantic and syntactic competences, and have probably experienced the frustrating feeling of not being able to participate effectively in FL oral communication (Alyan, 2013; Jamshidnejad, 2010; Lafford, 2004). Learning a language requires the mastery of four main skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Foreign language teaching and learning involve complex processes, especially when referring to the speaking skill. Besides, for researchers, speakers, and learners, speaking is considered as the most challenging aspect of English for language learners due to the linguistic differences in English with learners' mother tongue (Huwari, 2019; Jamshidnejad, 2010; Nijat, 2019; Pinter, 2006). Not all language learners can communicate fluently and accurately in English due to several difficulties that they may encounter.

According to Hedge (2000), to speak a language, it is important to have communicative competence, that is, linguistic, sociolinguistic, strategic, and discourse competence. These factors are affected by subjective factors such as affective/psychological, linguistic, and sociocultural factors. Therefore, learners' participation can be affected by a variety of factors, including psychological issues, linguistic and social factors. In this research, the key focus is to investigate the effect of these objective factors on English speaking performance.

1.1 Context of the Study

English is taught in the elementary and secondary school in Kurdistan. Recently English teaching and learning in the educational systems in school and university level have been changed to the communicative approach to enable the students to be competent in English communication. However, numbers of students have been unable to master English speaking skills upon completing secondary school or even university level. Students of English department at Soran University are not an exception and they face certain problems that prevent them to communicate easily in English. Students' participation can be affected by a variety of factors such as affective/psychological, linguistic, sociocultural factors. Thus, it needs to examine different factors leading to weak speaking performance of students speaking skill. Therefore, investigating what is the secret behind students' poor speaking performances and shedding the light on some main factors that obstruct students to speak properly in English and also find the factors contributing to students' difficulties in speaking English are the main goals of this research.

Based on the mentioned issue and in order to investigate whether these variables have a considerable effect on FL learners' speaking performance as the dependent variable, the researcher tried to answer the following questions:

RQ1: Which domain of psychological, linguistic, and sociocultural is the most influential factor that Soran University EFL undergraduate students face in speaking English?

RQ2: What are the most frequent speaking challenges that negatively affect students in each domain of psychological, linguistic, and sociocultural, from students' perspectives?

2. Literature Review

Many studies have highlighted the multiple factors and problems that negatively affect students' speaking performance and cause speaking problems. The findings of the majority of the studies conducted on this topic have revealed that English Foreign Language (EFL) students might encounter linguistically-related, psychologically related, or sociocultural problems lying in the way of the development of their speaking skills (Huwari, 2019; Soomro et al., 2019; Zainurrahman, and Sangaji, 2019).

The first related study was conducted by Afshar and Asakereh (2016) in the context of Iran to investigate the speaking skills problems encountered by Iranian EFL freshmen and senior students. This research used quantitative methods and was conducted among 238 students (138 freshmen and 100 seniors) and thirty English instructors from four state universities (Zanjan University, Bu-Ali Sina University-Hamadan, Shahid Chamran University-Ahvaz, and Khoramabad University). The findings of this research suggest that students experience shyness, low self-confidence and anxiety and do not have enough opportunities to speak English. The study also found that poor pronunciation and grammar were among the main factors.

Another study conducted by Keong et al. (2015) investigated the difficulties faced by Iraqi EFL undergraduates at Garmiyani University when communicating in English. The researcher interviewed eight students and distributed a questionnaire to thirty-six students. Iraqi EFL students were found to have a poor command of speaking because of low self-confidence. Linguistic difficulties included pronunciation problems, lack of vocabulary, obstructions when using grammar in speaking, using their mother tongue, and a lack of practice.

A study by Abu Alyan in (2013) in the Palestinian context aimed to identify the speaking difficulties of Palestinian university students in Gaza. The researcher interviewed twenty students majoring in the English language and six teachers. The researcher summarised students' responses into seven main reasons, namely: incorrect pronunciation, limited vocabulary, lack of exposure to the target language, using the mother tongue, the particular strategies that students used in listening and reading, lack of self-confidence, and finally, difficulties in organising students' ideas and meaning coherently. The researcher divided these reasons into two main factors, namely linguistic problems and psychological barriers.

Finally, a study by Shteivi and Hamuda (2016) investigated the speaking problems among students at the Educational Faculty in Misrata University, Libya. The researcher used a questionnaire and interviews among students. The findings showed that students relate their problems to feedback, the limited time to speak English and linguistic matters such as pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. Finally, students mentioned that they lacked the necessary self-confidence to speak in English.

3. Methodology

The descriptive study was used as the research methodology. Fitriani, et al., (2015) stated that the descriptive research provides information about situations, and conditions that occur in the present time. By doing this descriptive research, it is expected that the problems of speaking will be found regarding to the affective, linguistic, and sociocultural the problems in

student’s speaking. Quantitative research method was used in the study to collect the data to investigate the affective, linguistic, and sociocultural and environmental factors that affect students speaking performance.

3.1 Participants

Eight classes of the first to the fourth stage of different sizes with a total number of 238 students studying at the English Department of the Faculty of Arts at Soran University were the population of this study (Table 1).

Table 1: Distribution of the population of the study

Stages	First		Second		Third		Fourth	
Class	A	B	A	B	Literature	Linguistics	Literature	Linguistics
Number	32	30	32	36	29	34	21	24
Total	62		68		63		45	
	238							

One class in each stage selected randomly in order to ensure that the sample was an unbiased representation of the population. Then a questionnaire was distributed among the selected sample, 121 EFL undergraduate students (Table 2).

Table 2: Distribution of the sample according to stages

Stage	First	Second	Third	Fourth
Class	A	B	Literature	Linguistics
Number	32	36	29	24
Total	121			

3.2 Research Instrument

As a research instrument, a questionnaire was built in light of the general EFL literature. The researchers depended on different sources to construct the questionnaire, including previous studies. Along the same lines, the items included in the questionnaire of this study were adopted and adapted from Asakereh and Afshar (2016) and Keong et al. (2015). The scale had five levels to show the degree of agreement/disagreement with each statement. In order to calculate the results of the questionnaire mean scores, the data were coded according to the research questions of this study. The results of the questionnaire and student’s answers were analysed using a rating scale type from Likert (1932) as follows (Table 3).

Table 3: Scale values of the questionnaire

Agreement / frequency	Scale values	Mean range	Level of problem
Strongly agree (SA)	5	4.50 - 5.00	very high
Agree (A)	4	4.00 - 4.49	High
Neutral (N)	3	3.00 -3.99	Moderate
Disagree (D)	2	2.00 -2.99	Low
Strongly Disagree (SD)	1	1.00 -1.99	very low

The five-level Likert-scale questionnaire consisted of twenty-eight items classified into three domains. The first domain included difficulties related to affective factors, the second domain included difficulties related to the linguistic factors, and the third domain included difficulties related to the sociocultural and environmental factors. The items were designed in line with the objective of the study, research questions, and issues raised in the review of the related literature. The questionnaire was designed with closed-ended questions; required the respondents to choose the response that most closely represented their perspective as shown in (Table 4).

Table 4: Domains of the questionnaire and corresponding items

No.	Domains of problems	Number of question item
1	Students’ affective factors	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10
2	Linguistically-related factors	11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20
3	Sociocultural factors	21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28

3.3 Validity and Reliability of the questionnaire

After adapting the questionnaire, the items were reviewed by two EFL lecturers and specialists in this area from the English Department at Soran University. The questionnaire was modified based on their recommendations, and some items were omitted while others were modified. After taking into account their comments and recommendations, the instrument was modified and adopted as a final version. In addition to testing the validity of the questionnaire, the researchers calculated Cronbach's alpha through SPSS (Version 24) to find out the internal consistency and reliability of the questionnaire. Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the questionnaire was 0.816; it means that the reliability of the questionnaire is high. Therefore, the questionnaire was considered reliable. The result of the reliability test of the instrument and the alpha coefficient of the questionnaire are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Reliability Statistics

Reliability statistics	
Cronbach's alpha	Number of items
.816	28

3.4 Data Analysis

To investigate their views and identify the problems they encounter in English speaking skills the participants were asked questions about the speaking skills. They were asked to fill out a closed-ended questionnaire, which was used to test the hypotheses of the research. To analyse the data, they were entered into SPSS (version 24) software. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations and frequencies), crosstabs measurement and Cronbach's Alpha were applied to address the research questions to identify speaking challenges.

4. Results and Discussion

Results of the first research question

To answer the first research question, it was necessary to calculate the total percentage of each problem and the percentage of the three domains in the questionnaire. Table 6 shows the results of the descriptive statistics of all the items of the questionnaire.

Table 6: Descriptive statistics of the three domains

Domains	Question items	Mean score	Level of problem	Percentage
Students' affective related factors	Q 1	3.95	Moderate	3.95 %
	Q 2	3.63	Moderate	3.63 %
	Q 3	3.58	Moderate	3.58 %
	Q 4	3.77	Moderate	3.77 %
	Q 5	3.67	Moderate	3.67 %
	Q 6	3.53	Moderate	3.53 %
	Q 7	3.64	Moderate	3.64 %
	Q 8	3.48	Moderate	3.48 %
	Q 9	3.18	Moderate	3.18 %
	Q 10	3.20	Moderate	3.20 %
Total, average and percentages	10	3.56	Moderate	35.63 %
Students' linguistic-related factors	Q 11	3.44	Moderate	3.44 %
	Q 12	3.40	Moderate	3.40 %
	Q 13	3.67	Moderate	3.67 %
	Q 14	3.62	Moderate	3.62 %
	Q 15	3.53	Moderate	3.53 %
	Q 16	3.60	Moderate	3.60 %
	Q 17	3.94	Moderate	3.94 %

	Q 18	3.83	Moderate	3.83 %
	Q 19	3.65	Moderate	3.65 %
	Q 20	3.74	Moderate	3.74 %
Total, verage and %	10	3.64	Moderate	36.42 %
	Q 21	3.68	Moderate	3.68 %
	Q 22	3.08	Moderate	3.08 %
	Q 23	3.35	Moderate	3.35 %
Students' sociocultural factors and environment	Q 24	3.87	Moderate	3.87 %
	Q 25	3.80	Moderate	3.80 %
	Q 26	3.31	Moderate	3.31 %
	Q 27	3.54	Moderate	3.54 %
	Q 28	3.32	Moderate	3.32 %
Total, average and %	8	3.49	Moderate	27.95 %
Total, average and percentage	28	3.57	Moderate	100 %

As the sum of all percentages for each domain and the mean scores of factors that affect EFL students' speaking illustrated in Table 6, the results are moderate in the three domains (3.56, 3.64 and 3.49) with a total mean of 3.57. These results are summarised in Table 7.

Table 7: Means, standard deviations, level of problem, percentages and rank of the three domains

Domains	Mean score	Std. Deviation	Level of problem	Percentage	Rank
Students' linguistic-related factors	3.64	1.099	Moderate	36.42 %	1
Students' affective factors	3.56	1.187	Moderate	35.63 %	2
Students' sociocultural factors	3.49	1.209	Moderate	27.95 %	3
Average and total	3.57	1.165	Moderate	100 %	

Table 7 above illustrates the means recorded with the standard deviations, the level of the problem, the percentage as well the rank of each domain in terms of the difficulty it represents for EFL students' speaking. The highest rank is the students' linguistic-related factors, with a mean of 3.64 and a standard deviation of 1.099. As Table 7 illustrates, the sum of the items' percentages shows that 36.42 % of the sample have difficulty in speaking English because of linguistic factors. In the second position come the affective factors with a mean of 3.56 and a standard deviation of 1.187. The percentage indicates that 35.63 % of the sample has difficulty in speaking English due to affective factors. Finally, in the last rank is the students' sociocultural factors and environment, with a mean of 3.49 and a standard deviation of 1.209. As indicated by the results, 27.95% of the respondents have difficulty in speaking English because of sociocultural factors.

4.1 Results of the second research question

For the second question, two functions of the SPSS program were used: descriptive statistics and crosstabs. The results of the second research question, which set forth to investigate EFL students' most frequently reported speaking skills difficulties in every domain from their perspectives, are summarised in the following tables. As indicated in Table 8 for the first domain, the mean score and standard deviation of each question item show the most frequent communication difficulties encountered by the respondents that are related to the students' affective factors.

Table 8: Descriptive statistics and the ranks of the affective factors

No.	Questionnaire Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Rank
1	<i>I am afraid of making mistakes in speaking English.</i>	3.95	1.285	1
4	<i>My anxiety is too high. This prevents me from speaking well.</i>	3.77	1.117	2
5	<i>I fear criticism and evaluation from others while speaking.</i>	3.67	1.125	3
7	<i>Formal English communication creates stress and communication anxiety.</i>	3.64	1.145	4
2	<i>I feel shy when speaking English in front of other students.</i>	3.63	1.143	5

3	<i>I cannot speak well in the classroom because my self-confidence is low.</i>	3.58	1.316	6
6	<i>Speaking English makes me feel worried, and I feel pressured by the teacher and other students.</i>	3.53	1.167	7
8	<i>I get nervous when the English teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.</i>	3.48	1.095	8
10	<i>I get nervous when I don't understand some words the English teacher says.</i>	3.20	1.259	9
9	<i>I find it hard to participate in a discussion going on in my class in the English language.</i>	3.18	1.213	10

As shown in Table 8, the difficulties from the most important to the least important have been arranged to their mean score. Item 1, “*I am afraid of making mistakes in speaking English*” occupies the first rank with a mean of 3.95 and a standard deviation of 1.285. In the second rank came item 4, “*My anxiety is too high, this prevents me from speaking well*”, with a mean of 3.77 and a standard deviation of 1.117. In the third rank came item number 5, which is the fear of criticism and evaluation from others while speaking. Items 7, 2, 3 6, 8 and 10 come in the fourth to the ninth position, respectively. Finally, in the last rank comes item 9, “*I find it hard to participate in a discussion going on in my class in the English language*”, with the lowest degree in this domain. Table 9 illustrates the above linguistic-related difficulties encountered by the students.

Table 9: Descriptive statistics and ranks of the linguistic factors

No.	Questionnaire Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Rank
17	<i>My vocabulary knowledge is not sufficient enough to orally produce ideas and arguments about any topic.</i>	3.94	1.080	1
18	<i>I do not have enough knowledge of phrases and collocations.</i>	3.83	1.012	2
20	<i>When I speak English, I need to search for the proper words.</i>	3.74	1.027	3
13	<i>My pronunciation is not good enough which causes difficulty in my communication.</i>	3.67	1.161	4
19	<i>The main cause of my difficulty in speaking English is fluency.</i>	3.65	1.059	5
14	<i>I do not have enough grammar knowledge which leads to a lack of accuracy in my speaking.</i>	3.62	1.065	6
16	<i>I have some phonological, syntactic, and morphological complexities that make me unable to express and articulate ideas easily.</i>	3.60	1.110	7
15	<i>I find it difficult to build sentences, I know the grammar but I can't put it into sentences.</i>	3.53	1.109	8
11	<i>I think English speaking skill is a difficult task for me.</i>	3.44	1.345	9
12	<i>My English conversation skill tends to be poor.</i>	3.40	1.027	10

Table 9 shows that item 17, “*My vocabulary knowledge is not sufficient enough to orally produce ideas and arguments about any topic*”, comes in the first rank with the highest mean of 3.94 and a standard deviation of 1.080. In the second rank came item 18, “*I do not have enough knowledge of phrases and collocations*”, also with a high mean of 3.4 and a standard deviation of 1.012. In the third rank came item 20, “*When I speak English I need to search for the proper words*”, with a moderate mean of 3.74 and a standard deviation of 1.027. Finally, in the last rank came item 12, “*My English conversation skill tends to be poor*”, with a mean of 3.40 and a standard deviation 1.027. All the remaining items had a moderate degree.

Moreover, Table 10 illustrates the results based on the mean scores of the question item and the factors affecting students' speaking difficulties encountered by the participants that are related to the students' sociocultural and environmental problems.

Table 10: Descriptive statistics and the ranks of the third domain

No.	Questionnaire Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Rank
24	<i>I have difficulty finding opportunities to practice speaking outside the classroom.</i>	3.87	1.130	1
25	<i>The environment does not support us to speak English frequently.</i>	3.80	1.082	2
21	<i>I think in my mother tongue when I speak in English, which leads to my lack of fluency and naturalness in speaking.</i>	3.68	1.267	3
27	<i>Our classes are overcrowded.</i>	3.54	1.195	4
26	<i>There is limited exposure to English spoken in class. The time of our speaking classes is not appropriate.</i>	3.35	1.191	5
28	<i>In order not to participate in the English class, I like to sit at the back rows.</i>	3.32	1.146	6
23	<i>There is no cooperation spirit among my classmates in speaking classes.</i>	3.31	1.396	7
22	<i>My family does not encourage and support me to speak English.</i>	3.08	1.323	8

Table 10 illustrates that item 24 “*I have difficulty finding opportunities to practice speaking outside the classroom*”, with a mean of 3.87 and 1.130 of standard deviation, came in the first rank. “*The environment does not support us to speak English frequently*” occupied the second position with a mean of 3.80. “*I think in my mother tongue when I speak in English, which leads to my lack of fluency and naturalness in speaking*” came in third place with a mean of 3.68 and a standard deviation of 1.082. In the fourth rank came item 27, “*Our classes are overcrowded*”, with a mean of 3.54 and a standard deviation of 1.195. In the last rank came item 22, “*My family does not encourage and support me to speak English*”, with a mean of 3.08 and a standard deviation of 1.323.

After the analysis of the 28 items of the instrument, it appears that item number 1, “*I am afraid of making mistakes in speaking English*” with a mean of 3.95 occupies the first rank, while item number 22, “*My family does not encourage and support me to speak English*” with a weighted mean of 3.08 occupies the last rank.

Table 11 shows the detailed results of each of the 28 questionnaire items on the EFL speaking difficulties of the respondents in the three domains. The crosstabs function was utilised to investigate the most reported problems encountered by the students and to indicate agreement and disagreement percentages of all items individually.

Table 11: Crosstabs (case processing summary)

No	Items	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	<i>I am afraid of making mistakes in speaking English.</i>	8.3%	17.4%	19 %	28 %	27.3%
2	<i>I feel shy when speaking English in front of other students.</i>	9.9%	14.0%	32.2%	33.1%	10.8%
3	<i>I cannot speak well in the classroom because my self-confidence is low.</i>	11.6%	19.8%	28.9%	29.8%	9.9%
4	<i>My anxiety is too high. This prevents me from speaking well.</i>	5.8%	20.7%	24.%	36.4%	13.1%
5	<i>I fear criticism and evaluation from others while speaking.</i>	14.9%	19.8%	18.2%	31.4%	15.7%
6	<i>Speaking English makes me feel worried, and I feel pressured by the teacher and other students.</i>	16.5%	22.3%	24 %	26.5%	10.7%
7	<i>Formal English communication creates stress and communication anxiety.</i>	9.1%	20.7%	24.8%	35.5%	9.9%
8	<i>I get nervous when the English teacher asks questions which I haven't prepared in advance.</i>	14.9%	19.%	28.1%	27.3%	10.7%
9	<i>I find it hard to participate in a discussion going on in my class in the English language.</i>	7.4%	28.1%	28.1%	28.1%	8.3%
10	<i>I get nervous when I don't understand some words the English teacher says.</i>	7.4%	21.5%	31.4%	25.6%	14.0%
11	<i>I think English speaking skill is a difficult task for me.</i>	15.7%	24.8%	24.8%	19 %	15.7%
12	<i>My English conversation skill tends to be poor.</i>	7.4%	28.1%	32.2%	27.3%	5 %
13	<i>My pronunciation is not good enough which causes difficulty</i>	4.1%	18.2%	34.7%	31.4%	11.6%

<i>in my communication.</i>						
14	<i>I do not have enough grammar knowledge which leads to a lack of accuracy in my speaking.</i>	6.6%	26.4%	23.1%	34.7%	9.1%
15	<i>I find it difficult to build sentences, I know the grammar but I can't put it in a sentence.</i>	6.6%	28.1%	27.3%	28.1%	9.9%
16	<i>I have some phonological, syntactic, and morphological complexities that make me unable to express and articulate ideas easily.</i>	5.0 %	23.1%	34.7%	25.6%	11.6%
17	<i>My vocabulary knowledge is not sufficient enough to orally produce ideas and arguments about any topic.</i>	5 %	13.2%	29.8%	34.7%	17.4%
18	<i>I do not have enough knowledge of phrases and collocations.</i>	5.0%	14.0%	34.7%	35.5%	10.7%
19	<i>The main cause of my difficulty in speaking English is fluency.</i>	8.3%	19.8%	28.9%	28.9%	14 %
20	<i>When I speak English, I need to search for the proper words.</i>	6.6%	26.4%	23.1%	34.7%	9.1%
21	<i>I think in my mother tongue when I speak in English, which leads to my lack of fluency and naturalness in speaking.</i>	4.1%	23.1%	29.8%	29.8%	13.2%
22	<i>My family does not encourage and support me to speak English.</i>	24 %	23%	20.7%	20 %	9.9%
23	<i>There is no cooperation spirit among my classmates in speaking classes.</i>	12.4%	20.7%	36.4%	23.1%	9.9%
24	<i>I have difficulty finding opportunities to practise my speaking outside the classroom.</i>	12.4%	19.8%	22.3%	29.8%	15.7%
25	<i>The environment does not support us to speak English frequently.</i>	6.6%	17.4%	31.4%	28.9%	15.7%
26	<i>There is limited exposure to English spoken in class. The time of our speaking classes is not appropriate.</i>	9.1%	19.8%	32.2%	22.3%	16.5%
27	<i>Our classes are overcrowded.</i>	11.6%	19 %	33.1%	23.1%	13.2%
28	<i>In order not to participate in the English class, I like to sit at the back rows.</i>	21.5%	19.8%	22.3%	19 %	17.4%
Overall Average		10 %	21 %	28 %	28 %	13 %

Table 11 shows that 28% of the students agreed and 27.3% of them strongly agreed, they were afraid of making mistakes in speaking English. This means that over 55% of the students were in agreement with the fear of committing mistakes when speaking in the target language. This factor can be considered as one of the main problems encountered by students when trying to speak the target language. However, about 17% of the students disagreed, and 8.3% strongly disagreed about having this problem, while about 19% did not have any idea whether they were afraid or not.

With regards item 2, “*I feel shy when speaking English in front of other students*”, about 33% of the students agreed, and 10.8% strongly agreed with the statement. Thus, it can be said that over 40% of participants were in agreement that shyness is one of the problems they encountered when speaking since they acknowledged feeling shy when speaking English with other students of the English department; however, about 14% of the students disagreed, and 9.9% strongly disagreed about having such problem, while about 32% remained undecided on the matter.

Item 3, “*I cannot speak well in the classroom because my self-confidence is low*”, shows that 29.8% of the participants agreed and 9.9% of them strongly agreed that their confidence was low in the classroom. However, 19.8% and 11.6% of them disagreed or strongly disagreed with facing this difficulty. Thus, the majority of students did not refuse to have this issue.

The item “*my pronunciation is not good enough which causes difficulty in my communication*” indicates that about 31.4% of the students agreed and 11.6% strongly agreed that their pronunciation was not good which affected their speaking ability and could be considered as one of the problematic areas that sometimes get in the way when trying to speak the target language. On the other hand, about 18.2% disagreed and 4.1% strongly disagreed about this issue, while 34.7% had a neutral position. This means that some students suffered from a problem of poor pronunciation while others did not.

Concerning the item *"I do not have enough grammar knowledge which leads to a lack of accuracy in speaking"*, it was found that about 34.7% of the students agreed and 9.1% strongly agreed that they lack grammatical knowledge. However, about 26.4% of the students disagreed, and 6.6% of them strongly disagreed with having this kind of deficit, while about 23.1% were neutral. This means that students suffer from a lack of grammatical knowledge and have difficulty in using grammar. This can be considered as a problem that impacts their speaking skills negatively.

Regarding the item, *"My vocabulary knowledge is not sufficient enough to orally produce ideas and arguments about any topic"*, the findings showed that about 34.7% of the students agreed that the lack of vocabulary knowledge was one of the problems they faced to orally produce ideas and argue about any topic when speaking the language and about 17.4% strongly agreed about this matter. However, about 13.2% disagreed and 5% of them strongly disagreed about this problem. This means that a majority of students suffered from a lack of vocabulary knowledge, while about 30% neither agreed nor disagreed with this issue.

According to item 20, *"when I speak English, I need to search for the proper words"*, it was found that 34.7% of the students agreed that they face this issue and 9.1% strongly agreed that they encountered problems about finding appropriate words in a suitable time, which hindered their speaking fluency. On the other hand, about 26.4% of them disagreed, and 6.6% strongly disagreed that they faced such problem, whereas about 23.1% of the students neither agreed nor disagreed with this problem. This shows that the majority of students were in agreement about the fact that they have proper word and vocabulary difficulties.

Moreover, results for item 21 of the questionnaire revealed that 29.8 % of the students agreed and 13.2 % even strongly agreed with the statement, *"I think in my mother tongue when I speak in English, which leads to my lack of fluency and naturalness in speaking"*. On the other hand, 23 % and 4 % of students disagreed or even strongly disagreed with this item, while 29.8 % were neutral with it. This means that nearly a third of the students suffered from the influence of their mother tongue on their second language.

In addition, the item *"I have difficulty finding opportunities to practice speaking outside the classroom"*, investigated whether the students had opportunities to practise the language outside the classroom. The results showed that 29.8 % of the students agreed and 15.7% strongly agreed that they do not have opportunities to practise speaking skills outside the classroom. Only 19.8% and 12.4% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that they had a chance to speak and communicate outside the class, whether inside or outside the college. Meanwhile, 22.3% were neutral with this statement. This suggests that about 45% of the EFL students agreed that they had no chance to improve and to practise their speaking skills outside the class context.

Responses from the questionnaire item 25 revealed that about 28.9% of the students agreed and 15.7% strongly agreed that *"the environment does not support to speak English frequently"*. Meanwhile, only 17.4% of the respondents disagreed, 6.6% strongly disagreed, and 31.4% remained neutral. This tends to suggest that over two-fifths of the students agreed and strongly agreed about facing this problem.

4.2 Discussion

Concerning the first research question, the results revealed that the linguistic factors occupied the first rank that contributed to students' speaking difficulties. Linguistic-related factors (inappropriate and insufficient knowledge of vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and fluency) appeared to be the main difficulty for the students in this skill. The results from Table 7 show that 36.42% of the respondents declared having linguistic-related problems, which is the highest level of the three domains. The students' responses in the linguistic factors domain are moderate, with a mean score of 3.64 and a standard deviation of 1.099. This reveals that linguistic-related factors are the most influential domain in terms of their speaking skills, followed by the affective/psychological domain. This result is in agreement with Al-Lawati (1995), and Pangket (2019) who found that linguistic issues made up the most problematic and the most serious area of difficulty for EFL learners. This was mainly because of the learners' lack of sufficiently developed basic abilities of the FL.

as for this domain, the first sub-theme was inadequate vocabulary. It is clear from Table 9 that the most important issues faced by the students were linguistic problems as illustrated in items 17, 18, and 20 which relate to insufficient knowledge of vocabulary, phrases, collocations, and proper words with means of 3.94, 3.83 and 3.74, respectively. These factors had the highest scores and occupied the first to the third ranks in terms of the challenges in this domain. As shown in Table 11 above shows that 52 % students agreed that their vocabulary knowledge was not sufficient to produce ideas and arguments about

any topic orally. Also, about 46% of the students agreed that they did not have enough knowledge of phrases and collocations, followed by 43.8% of them who needed to search for proper words while speaking. Thus, nearly half the participants agreed that insufficient vocabulary was their predominant difficulty and concern when they wanted to speak English. Through the literature, it is clear that vocabulary affects ESL/EFL learners when speaking English. Students at Soran University agreed that vocabulary was one of the most challenging problems they faced when they speak English because they might not have enough vocabulary to speak.

in addition, learners in other ESL and EFL countries tend to face similar vocabulary problems. For example, Liu and Jackson (cited in Han, 2011) claim that inadequate vocabulary was regarded as the main challenge for spoken communication by Chinese English speakers and Hong Kongese English speaker. It was found to be the reason for their inadequate expression as half of the students agreed with the view that vocabulary was a major reason why they sometimes could not express themselves clearly and appropriately. They also believed that this contributed directly to a lack of fluency in their speech. Arju (2001) and Kabir (2014) also found that Bangladeshi students have often been blamed for not having enough vocabulary. For example, a significant finding from the students' responses was that despite having the interest, they could not speak because of their limited vocabulary.

Regarding this issue, similar findings were reported other studies such as Alyan (2013), Al-Jamal and Al-Jamal (2014), Han (2011), Huwari (2019), Keong et al. (2015), Şakiroğlu and Kaya, (2018), Shteiwi and Hamuda (2016), Soomro et al. (2019) and Zainurrahman and Sangaji (2019). However, the results contradict those of Tuan and Mai (2015). For example, the findings of the present study echo Abrar et al. (2018) who found that participants agreed that the most challenging factor which affected and weakened their speaking was their lack of vocabulary as they were sometimes confused about using appropriate words. The students' perspectives indicated that a limited vocabulary, in some respect, hindered their active participation and English speaking fluency.

Another critical item in the results of the study is not having enough knowledge of phrases and collocations. Indeed, lack of sufficient knowledge of collocations and phrases gained a total mean score of 3.83; it comes the second position as about 46% of the students agreed that they encountered this problem when speaking English. This result is in accordance with Shteiwi and Hamuda (2016) who found that some Libyan students faced this problem and made mistakes in producing L2 collocations. Collocations are very common and frequent in the English language, so learners should notice which words co-occur together in order to speak a foreign language as it is used by native speakers.

From item 21, it can be seen that some students searched for proper words when speaking; this was the third-highest mean with 3.74. This shows that nearly half the students had difficulty in recalling words and retrieving suitable vocabulary immediately in spoken language to express themselves or talk about a subject. Therefore, searching for appropriate words and not being able to retrieve suitable vocabulary easily can be considered as a significant problem that faces some students in speaking English, as about 44% of them had this problem. The students might, therefore, stop and think of the right words to share in a conversation.

The second sub-theme relates to the difficulty with pronunciation, which is another problem that plays a significant role in students' speaking skills. Within the domain of linguistic factors, it can be recognised as another issue that prevented participating students from speaking English correctly. However, in this study, it was found at a lower rank than vocabulary with a mean score of 3.67. Indeed, aside from their limited vocabulary, students come to an agreement that they had a problem with pronunciation. The results of this study indicated that about 43 % of the students agreed that their pronunciation was not good enough, which caused them difficulty in communication. These findings are similar to Abrar et al. (2018), Han, (2011), Huwari (2019), and Shteiwi and Hamuda (2016). However, the results of this study contradict the results of various researchers such as Al-Jamal and Al-Jamal (2014), Tokoz-Goktepe (2014) and Tuan and Mai (2015).

Concerning this domain, participants felt challenged by vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, and grammar, which inhibited them from speaking in English. However, the vocabulary score, which was higher than the grammar score, showed that they might have the words, but might not know how to use them in a syntactically correct sentence. Students may have knowledge and understanding of grammar and what they want to say, but they do not know how to use the correct words and find difficulties to build grammatically correct sentences. Perhaps, these data show that the students' linguistic competence needs to be taken into serious consideration.

The above results are consistent with other EFL/ESL research findings of Ahmed (2012), Al-Jamal and Al-Jamal (2013), Arju (2011), Keong et al., (2015), Paakki (2013), and Zainurrahman and Sangaji (2019), which indicated that low linguistic competence level and a lack of speaking activities are key reasons leading to EFL/ESL students' speaking difficulties to communicate orally or participate in speaking. In other words, EFL students' inadequate knowledge of vocabulary, problems in pronunciation, grammar, and fluency became the obstacle for them to be fluent and well-expressed in speaking the language. The findings of this study contradicted with the findings of Abedini and Chalak (2017), Jamshidnejad (2010) and Afshar and Asakereh (2016), who pointed out that, Iranian EFL students' main speaking problems belonged to the affective factors. The findings also partly stand in contrast to those of Soo and Goh (2013), who revealed that for Malaysian EFL students', the primary challenge they encountered was the psychological factors.

In addition to linguistic factors, findings emphasised on students' affective problems in speaking. Based on the data analysis related to the second research questions, it was found that the most affective and influential factors contributing to problems in terms of students speaking are divided into several aspects, such as fear of making mistakes, self-confidence, fear of criticism, shyness and anxiety. Students' perspectives recorded in the questionnaire indicate that they encountered affective problems that affected their speaking performances. The results from Table 7 show that 35.63% of the students faced challenges in speaking English because of affective factors. The students' results in the affective factors domain are moderate with a mean of 3.56 and a standard deviation of 1.187 and a mean percentage of 35.63%, which is the second dominant aspect after linguistic factors.

Regarding the psychological domain, it is clear from Table 8 that the most important issue faced by the students among the affective factors is item 1 "*fear of making mistakes*", with a mean of 3.95 and a standard deviation of 1.285. This factor is at the highest level of the challenges in this domain. Moreover, as Table 11 illustrates, about 28 % of the students agreed, and 27.3 strongly agreed that they fear to make mistakes while speaking in English. It means that over 55% were in agreement that they had this problem. Indeed, some learners are not perfectly fluent and accurate in speaking English, so making mistakes is common to these students. However, it is not only common to the Soran University students but also common to some other FEL and ESL students in different contexts. For example, Japanese students (Tsui, 2001), Taiwanese students (Timina and Butler, 2011), Indian students (Hanumtharao, 2011) and Bangladeshi learners (Kabir, 2014) were reported to face the same problem of fear of making mistakes in their speaking. Other research studies viewed these issues as psychological effects. This study is in line with Abu Alyan (2013), Abrar et al. (2018), Al- Hosni (2014), Al-Jamal and Al-Jamal (2014), Huwari (2019), Şakiroğlu and Kaya (2018), Shteivi and Hamuda (2016), Tok (2009) and Tuan and Mai (2015).

In addition to the above factors, the broader social context beyond the class has also been found to be linked with speaking challenges. The results in Table 7 above showed that students' responses in the sociocultural domain were moderate with a mean of 3.49, a standard deviation of 1.209 and a percentage of about 28%. This field had the lowest mean compared with the affective and linguistic domains. This result contradicts Al-Roud's (2016) and Thaher's (2005) studies, which found that this domain had the highest mean compared with the psychological and linguistic domains. Moreover, this tends to go against some participants view in Tanveer's (2007) study who remarked that social factors were a more important cause of speaking challenge than linguistic factors.

The data showed that around 28% of the sample has problems with this factor as some students believed social factors were the cause of the problems they had in English speaking skills. According to the responses to the items of this domain, as shown in Table 10, important points can be understood about factors affecting speaking skills. The mean values of each item indicate the significance of each of the factors. It is clear that item 24, "*having difficulty in finding the opportunities to practice speaking outside the classroom*", was the highest-ranked item, with a mean of 3.87, along with item 25 "*The environment does not support us to speak English frequently*", with a mean of 3.80. Those two items are prominent problems faced by the students in terms of speaking skill in the social domain. Also, the results illustrated in Table 11 show that 45% of the students agreed that they had difficulty finding the opportunity to practice the language or speaking skills outside the classroom. Hence, this result reveals that a majority of the students, about 45%, were not satisfied with their environment.

Similar to the psychological and linguistic factors discussed in the previous sections, findings regarding sociocultural factors also appear to be similar to earlier studies' results, though certain contradictions were also found. To sum up, based on the results and the statistical data analysis, it is clear that the most dominant problem faced by the students of the English Department at Soran University was the linguistic factors, with a mean percentage of 36.42%, while the respondents believed that sociocultural factors were the least influential, with a mean percentage of 27.95%.

5. Conclusion

The study investigated how EFL students' speaking skills, in particular, were affected. Referring to the main aim of the study, it was proposed to investigate common factors that lead to oral communications challenges faced by undergraduate students at Soran University. Based on the findings, the following conclusions can be drawn.

The results of the study indicated that the students of the university was suffering from many problems in possessing English Language speaking skill, definitely those relating to, linguistic, and psychological domains, in addition to sociocultural domain. After analysing the research results, The results showed that the participants considered linguistic factors as the most influential factors and the primary barrier affecting their speaking skills in English, then followed by the psychological factors and the last one the sociocultural factors. Each factor of the speaking difficulties was divided into some others specific problems that were actually faced by the students. For the EFL students, fear of making mistakes was the main barrier that caused their difficulty in English speaking. The results of this study indicated that the students considered linguistic factors, such as insufficient vocabulary, as the predominant problem in speaking English. The majority of the EFL students agreed that some psychological and linguistic factors were also among the trouble-making factors which prohibited students from making progress in speaking.

Moreover, it can be concluded that the most frequently problems agreed by students in every domain in speaking English were related to the fear of making mistakes, anxiety, nervousness, low confidence, insufficient vocabulary, lack knowledge of phrases and collocations, incorrect pronunciation, lack of environment, and mother tongue interference and the lack of exposure to the TL, and they were amongst the factors that that hindering undergraduates' oral communication skills. Moreover, the learning environment with less English conversation, difficulty with finding opportunities to practise speaking outside the classroom, the environment factors with less English speaking opportunities were also found to seriously worsen students' speaking performance in addition to the short time allocated for speaking English.

It was found that some students had problems with speaking English as almost two-fifths of the participants agreed that they face challenges while speaking English, either inside or outside the classroom. It can be seen that the three factors are interrelated to each other, all of which leading to failure, especially in speaking. The factors form a vicious circle, which means that one problem causes another one, which then makes the first problem worse, intensified and aggravated. It was found from this investigation that challenges in EFL speaking are the result of a combination of interrelated and intersected psychological, linguistic and sociocultural factors.

5.1 Suggestions for further studies

Based on the findings of the present study, a number of suggestions for further research can be made.

First, this study was conducted only among students from the English Department in the Faculty of Arts at Soran University; therefore, there is a need for the replication of the results to a different population and samples. The scale used in this study can be applied to different groups of students from different language majors and different universities. The present study examined the students' English speaking problems in terms of performance factors. It focused on the linguistics, psychological and sociocultural difficulties, while future studies could examine other factors or problems that seem to be obstacles to students' English speaking skills.

Due to the quantitative nature of this research, and since this investigation was limited to analysing the sources of EFL speaking problems through a survey, another study could be conducted to examine these issues using different data collection procedures, such as interviews and classroom observations. Therefore, there is a critical need for in-depth, qualitative explorations to provide more detailed descriptions of the challenges faced by EFL students in speaking.

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