
| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Overcoming English Speaking Anxiety: Challenges Faced by University Students in Rajasthan

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| **ABSTRACT**

English speaking proficiency remains a significant hurdle for many university students, especially in regions where English is not the primary language. This qualitative study explores the difficulties faced by first-year students in speaking English during classes at Jayoti Vidyapeeth Women's University in Rajasthan, India. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six university participants to investigate the linguistic and psychological barriers hindering effective English-spoken communication. The findings reveal that students struggle with pronunciation, vocabulary acquisition, and limited exposure to English outside the classroom. Despite receiving English instruction, many students view English as confined to the school and a subject for gaining marks rather than a means of genuine communication. The study underscores the need to address linguistic and psychological barriers that impede students' ability to speak English confidently. Recommendations emphasize providing opportunities for authentic English engagement beyond the classroom and developing bridging programs to facilitate the transition from secondary to university-level English proficiency. Future research with innovative methodologies and larger sample sizes is suggested for a deeper understanding of this issue. Fostering English speaking skills is crucial for students' academic and professional success in an increasingly globalized world.

| **KEYWORDS**

Speaking anxiety, speaking barriers, teachers, motivation, ELT programs

| **ARTICLE INFORMATION**

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1. Introduction

Proficiency in spoken English is a critical skill for academic and professional success, yet many students face significant obstacles in developing this competency. This study addresses a critical issue in Indian higher education, focusing on the English speaking anxiety experienced by university students in Rajasthan. As English proficiency becomes increasingly important for academic and professional success in a globalized world, understanding and mitigating speaking anxiety is crucial. The paper's exploration of specific challenges faced by Rajasthani students can inform targeted interventions and teaching strategies, potentially improving educational outcomes and career prospects for a significant student population. By shedding light on this regional context, the research contributes to the broader field of English language education in multilingual societies and may offer insights applicable to similar settings worldwide.

Despite efforts by teachers to encourage English speaking through various activities, many students lack motivation and struggle to participate (Bhatti et al., 2018; Kato et al., 2020; Rao, 2019; Sharma, 2021, 2022; Weekly et al., 2022). Even after enrolling in English language programs, students often find themselves unable to communicate

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effectively in English (Celik, 2020; Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2020; Setyarini et al., 2020; Sharma, 2023). This disparity between expectations and actual performance in speaking English could stem from a lack of prior proficiency or insufficient exposure to the language (Holbah & Sharma, 2022; Kachru et al., 2006; Kashinathan & Aziz, 2021; Rao, 2019; Sharma, 2024; Slabodar, 2023). The proposed study aims to address a critical gap in research by examining the speaking anxiety problem among students in Rajasthan, India, specifically at Jayoti Vidyapeeth Women's University. While previous studies have explored similar issues faced by students in various contexts, there appears to be a lack of focused research on this particular population and region. In Rajasthan, where English is not the primary language, students often encounter significant linguistic and psychological barriers that impede their ability to communicate effectively in English. This investigation seeks to uncover the unique challenges faced by first-year students when speaking English during classes, with the goal of identifying the underlying factors contributing to their struggles and proposing targeted solutions. By focusing on this specific demographic and educational setting, the study aims to provide valuable insights that can inform pedagogical practices and support strategies tailored to the needs of students in Rajasthan's educational landscape.

The research objectives are:

1. To identify the linguistic and psychological barriers that impede effective English speaking among first-year education students.
2. To explore the role of exposure and practice in developing English speaking proficiency.
3. To recommend strategies for creating an environment that facilitates English language interest and active participation in speaking practice.

By addressing these objectives, the study seeks to contribute to the understanding of the challenges faced by students in developing spoken English proficiency and provide insights for educators to better support their language learning journey.

2. Literature Review

In light of the context provided in the introduction, this research proceeds with the understanding that achieving proficiency in spoken English presents a significant challenge for numerous students, particularly in regions where English is not the primary language. This issue is especially pronounced in educational environments where English is taught as a second or foreign language. Several studies have proved that developing proficiency in spoken English remains a significant challenge for many students, particularly in contexts where English is learned as a second or foreign language as proven in several studies (Khokhotva & Albizuri, 2020; Holbah & Sharma, 2022; Sharma, 2022, 2023). Despite being exposed to English instruction, students often struggle to communicate effectively in spoken English, facing both linguistic and psychological barriers (Sharma et al., 2023; Setyarini et al., 2020). In addition, linguistic difficulties encompass various aspects, including grammar comprehension (Kusumaningrat, 2021), vocabulary acquisition (Chen, 2021; Sharma et al., 2023), and pronunciation abilities (Masuram & Sripada, 2020; Sharma, 2017). Even with a solid grasp of grammatical rules, students may still encounter challenges when applying them during spoken communication (Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2020). Adequate exposure and practice are crucial for developing linguistic competence (Sharma, 2017; Holbah & Sharma, 2022).

Psychological factors, such as anxiety, lack of confidence, fear of making mistakes, and lack of motivation, can significantly impact students' willingness to engage in spoken English (Abrar, 2018; Ainin et al., 2020; Andas, 2020; Holbah & Sharma, 2022; Sharma, 2015, 2022). These psychological barriers can hinder students' performance, even when they possess strong linguistic abilities (Poedjiastutie et al., 2020). Creating a supportive environment that encourages active participation and reduces anxiety is essential for fostering speaking proficiency (Sharma, 2017). Additionally, several other challenges have been identified, including students' reserved nature, lack of topic knowledge, disinterest or indifference towards English (Mouhoubi-Messadh & Khaldi, 2022), lack of participation (Sedova & Navratilova, 2020; Sharma, 2022), and the influence of the mother tongue (Garra-Alloush & Mock, 2022).

Furthermore, some students may prioritize earning marks or passing the exam over developing speaking skills, particularly if English proficiency is not a requirement for their desired career paths (Laib, 2021; Sharma, 2022).

Research has consistently demonstrated the critical importance of English speaking proficiency across various aspects of life, yet many students learning English as a foreign language struggle to achieve confidence and fluency (Kashinathan & Aziz, 2021; Octaberlina et al., 2022; Sharma, 2021). These challenges stem from both linguistic and psychological factors. Linguistic difficulties often involve issues with grammar comprehension (Kusumaningrat, 2021), vocabulary acquisition (Holbah & Sharma, 2022), and pronunciation (Masuram & Sripada, 2020). While extensive study of English grammar at the college level does not guarantee speaking proficiency, it remains a crucial foundation (Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2020). Psychological barriers, including anxiety, lack of confidence, and fear of making mistakes or being judged, significantly impact students' ability to master English speaking skills (Abrar, 2018; Sharma, 2015, 2022).

Several key issues hinder English speaking proficiency among EFL students. These include students' reserved nature and fear of criticism (Andas, 2020), lack of topics to discuss (Mouhoubi-Messadh & Khaldi, 2022), unequal participation in classroom conversations (Sharma, 2015, 2022), and overreliance on their mother tongue (Garra-Alloush & Mock, 2022). Additionally, some students prioritize exam scores over developing speaking skills, particularly if they aim for government jobs where English speaking is not mandatory. It is also noted that a lack of overall English language mastery often correlates with poor speaking skills, highlighting the need for comprehensive language education approaches.

Research has identified linguistic challenges as a significant source of difficulty for students learning to speak English (Akmal et al., 2020; Ekanayaka, 2020; Sharma, 2022). While some students achieve proficiency in pronunciation, many university students struggle with vocabulary, resulting in lower speaking scores. These difficulties are often attributed to the distinct sentence structures and pronunciation patterns of English, requiring EFL students to invest additional effort in mastering the language. Psychological factors such as lack of self-confidence, nervousness, and fear of criticism also hinder students' ability to converse in English (Octaberlina et al., 2022; Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2020; Sharma, 2022). Notably, there is a scarcity of research specifically addressing the challenges faced by first-year English Education students in their speaking classes (Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2020). Recognizing this gap, researchers are motivated to investigate this phenomenon to enhance the understanding of English Education students, aiding their preparation for university enrollment and assisting teachers in identifying and addressing the difficulties students encounter when speaking English as a second language in the classroom. To address these issues, a research project titled "Overcoming English Speaking Anxiety: Challenges Faced by University Students in Rajasthan" has been proposed.

The research questions are as follows:

1. What particular problems do English Education students face in speaking classes?
2. Which steps should be taken to address these specific difficulties for ESL students in speaking classes?

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach, employing semi-structured interviews to gather comprehensive data on English speaking difficulties among students. Six participants, all English education students with primary school English learning backgrounds, were selected from different universities in Jaipur, Rajasthan using purposive sampling. The study employed purposive sampling to select participants who could best contribute to understanding the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2018; Isaac, 2023). The interviews focused on both linguistic difficulties (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation) and psychological challenges (anxiety, confidence, willingness to speak). The research procedure involved obtaining informed consent, scheduling interviews at participants' convenience, conducting 25-30-minute video conference interviews, and sharing recordings for participant review. Data analysis followed a qualitative process of transcription, coding, and thematic classification. Initial coding was based on research questions and background literature, followed by interpretive coding to

identify patterns and correlations. The analysis aimed to provide detailed insights into participants' experiences and coping strategies. While the small sample size may limit generalizability, the study's in-depth approach offers rich, contextual data that is valuable for future research and practice in English language education. Ethical considerations were maintained throughout, ensuring participant confidentiality and informed consent.

This methodology allows for a comprehensive exploration of the research questions, providing valuable insights into the challenges faced by English education students in their speaking skills development.

4. Results and Discussion

The present research has uncovered several studies highlighting the difficulties faced by Indian students and teachers in their first year in the English department, particularly in speaking classes. Notably, six participants from separate universities in the Jaipur region encountered similar challenges in their English speaking courses. Participant 1 (hereafter, P1), Participant 2 (hereafter, P2), Participant 4 (hereafter, P4), and Participant 6 (hereafter, P6) reported experiencing linguistic difficulties that hindered their ability to speak English fluently. In contrast, Participant 3 (hereafter, P3) and Participant 5 (hereafter, P5) believed that the challenges extended beyond mere linguistic issues to encompass psychological factors as well. P3 and P5 experienced fear and anxiety when speaking in front of other students and teachers, which resulted in reduced participation despite having numerous thoughts to share. The stress of making errors and being scrutinized by peers prevented P3 and P5 from speaking extensively, leading to an unwillingness to communicate in English. This finding aligns with the research of Sharma (2022), who observed similar patterns of reluctance in English language learners. These observations highlight the complex nature of language learning challenges, encompassing both linguistic and psychological barriers that can significantly impact students' willingness to engage in speaking activities.

P1, P4, and P6 reported a significant challenge in word pronunciation, which greatly affected his speaking skills. P1 expressed fear of mispronouncing words, stating, "I was reluctant to speak English because I was afraid of mispronouncing the words." This aligns with a study conducted by Sharma (2015), which found that pronunciation was a major hurdle for many students, as indicated in questionnaire responses (Nyimas, 2022). The difficulty in pronunciation is often attributed to the differences between Indian languages and English in terms of spelling and pronunciation. In India, words are typically pronounced as they are written, whereas in English-speaking countries like England, pronunciation can differ from spelling. Interestingly, P3 and P5 did not experience similar pronunciation difficulties. P5 stated, "In my opinion, I know how to pronounce the English words correctly." When asked about her proficiency, P3 explained that she frequently watched English movies and listened to English songs, a strategy that correlates with the findings of Sharma et al. (2023). She also mentioned using WhatsApp and engaging in fun English-speaking activities, which improved her pronunciation accuracy compared to other students. P5's exposure to English through video games and spoken English activities contributed to her confidence in pronunciation. However, despite her improved pronunciation skills, P3 acknowledged that she had not yet mastered fluent English speaking due to a lack of proficiency in English grammar. This contrast between (P1, P2, P4, P6) and (P3, P5) highlights the importance of diverse language exposure and practice methods in developing pronunciation skills. While some students struggle with the fundamental aspects of pronunciation, others find success through immersive and interactive approaches to language learning.

The research revealed that all six participants experienced psychological challenges when speaking English. These difficulties primarily manifested as anxiety, lack of confidence, and reluctance to speak in English. These issues stemmed from the fear of being judged by others for making mistakes while speaking. A study conducted by Zainurrahman and Sumarni (2019) found that some students believed securing a government job would alleviate their English-speaking problems. Conversely, other students focused solely on obtaining good marks, leading them to avoid speaking English altogether. Research on university students' speaking difficulties indicated that psychological aspects were the second most significant hurdle, accounting for 38% of speaking challenges at the university level. This placed psychological barriers just behind vocabulary difficulties in terms of importance. The present study, however, found that all six participants considered psychological hurdles to be the primary obstacle to their speaking ability. P1 and P6 reported a lack of confidence when asked to speak English, primarily due to

pronunciation difficulties. P3 and P5, despite having a good grasp of English vocabulary, expressed nervousness when speaking in front of the class. They feared that others would comment on or correct her English or judge her speaking skills, which negatively impacted her confidence. P3, P5's experience highlights an interesting paradox: despite possessing adequate vocabulary and a desire to speak English, psychological factors significantly hindered her ability to do so comfortably in public settings. This underscores the complex interplay between linguistic competence and psychological factors in language learning and performance.

These findings emphasize the importance of addressing both linguistic and psychological aspects in English language education, particularly in speaking skill development. Creating a supportive and non-judgmental learning environment may be crucial in helping students overcome these psychological barriers and improve their English-speaking abilities. In addition, the study reveals significant challenges in English language education, particularly in speaking skills development. Five out of six participants reported limited English practice, confined mostly to classroom settings, which hindered their speaking abilities. Zhang (2009) and Sharma (2022) emphasized the importance of exposing students to real-world English-speaking situations to enhance their skills, while the lack of such opportunities indirectly pressured students. Despite completing a semester of English-speaking classes, participants continued to struggle with fluency. Sharma (2015) and Nakhalah (2016) noted that this is a common issue among EFL students who rarely practice English outside the classroom. To address these challenges, teachers are encouraged to focus more on students' speaking difficulties and provide targeted activities to improve their abilities. Curriculum developers should consider the unique challenges faced by Indian student teachers in their first year. Additionally, prospective students need to be aware that English education programs at the university level do not start with basic English, necessitating a strong foundation in the language before enrollment. This research underscores the need for a more comprehensive approach to English language education, emphasizing practical application and opportunities for language use beyond academic settings while also highlighting the importance of student preparedness for university-level English programs.

4.1 Discussion

First-year students in the English department, particularly those from Hindi-medium backgrounds, face significant challenges when required to participate in speaking classes. The issues encountered by these students in English speaking classes are remarkably similar to those they continue to face. The study reveals that psychological difficulties often surpass linguistic barriers for these students. Many experience intense nervousness and anxiety when compelled to speak in front of classmates and teachers. According to questionnaire responses, pronunciation emerged as one of the most significant challenges. These pronunciation difficulties stem from differences between Hindi and English language systems. In Hindi, words are typically pronounced exactly as they are written. Conversely, English pronunciation often diverges from spelling, following the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) for Standard English (Masuram & Sripada, 2020; Sharma, 2022). Indian speakers tend to stress incorrect syllables or words, affecting intonation. Interestingly, one participant reported speaking English fluently. When questioned about her proficiency, she attributed it to regular exposure to English through movies, music, YouTube channels, WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram. This exposure significantly improved her pronunciation and confidence. However, despite her improved pronunciation, she still struggled with fluency due to a limited understanding of English grammar.

Regarding psychological issues, all participants reported experiencing anxiety when speaking, feeling unconfident, and hesitating to speak in English. These challenges primarily stemmed from the fear of negative evaluation if they made mistakes while speaking. This study highlights the complex interplay between linguistic and psychological factors in English language learning for Hindi-medium students. It underscores the importance of addressing both aspects of English education, suggesting that increased exposure to authentic English content and a supportive learning environment could significantly enhance students' speaking abilities and confidence.

The aforementioned research findings indicate that university students with public speaking skills experience fewer psychological barriers, although these still rank as the second highest challenge faced by students. The current study demonstrates that all six participants considered psychological issues as major factors influencing their

speaking abilities. The first participant reported feeling insecure when required to speak English due to poor pronunciation. Participant 3 experienced anxiety when speaking in front of the class, influenced by observing public corrections of English errors on social media. This phenomenon indirectly lowered her confidence, despite her eagerness to communicate in English and adequate vocabulary.

When questioned about English usage outside the classroom, five out of six participants revealed that they limited their English practice to the classroom setting. Research suggests that exposing students to situations requiring English use is crucial for enhancing speaking skills (Masuram & Sripada, 2020; Sharma, 2022). The lack of opportunities for practice outside the classroom negatively impacted their English communication abilities. Despite nearly a semester of English-speaking classes, participants still struggled with effective communication in English (Kachru et al., 2006). This aligns with observations that most EFL students confine their English speaking to classroom settings, with limited practice outside.

4.2 Recommendations

Based on these findings, it is recommended that English teachers focus more on students' speaking difficulties and provide activities to enhance their communication skills. Understanding these challenges can help teachers and curriculum developers address the significant difficulties faced by Indian student teachers in their first year in English education departments (Mattarima & Rahim, 2011). It is crucial for prospective English teacher candidates to understand that English education programs do not start with fundamental English. They must possess basic English skills before entering these programs to support their studies effectively.

The study proposes that educators, administrators, and policymakers implement a bridging program for newly enrolled students at the beginning of the semester. This program aims to address the significant language proficiency gap and facilitate a smoother transition from school to university education, particularly in English language skills.

4.3 Limitations

The limitations of this research paper include its relatively small sample size, focusing on just six participants from universities in Rajasthan. This narrow scope may limit the generalizability of the findings to broader student populations or other regions in India. The study primarily relied on semi-structured interviews, which, while providing in-depth insights, may be subject to self-reporting biases and limitations in capturing the full complexity of students' experiences. Additionally, the research was conducted at a specific point in time, lacking a longitudinal perspective that could have revealed how students' challenges and coping strategies evolve over their academic journey. The study also did not include perspectives from English language teachers or university administrators, which could have provided a more comprehensive understanding of the issue. Furthermore, the research did not employ quantitative methods to complement the qualitative data, potentially missing out on broader trends or statistical correlations. These limitations suggest the need for future studies with larger sample sizes, mixed-method approaches, and a wider range of perspectives to build upon and validate the findings of this exploratory research.

5. Conclusion

This study examines the challenges faced by first-year university students in Rajasthan when speaking English, revealing both linguistic and psychological barriers. Despite formal English instruction, many students struggle with pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar application in real-time communication. Psychological factors such as anxiety, lack of confidence, and fear of judgment significantly hinder students' willingness to engage in English speaking activities. The research emphasizes the need for a holistic approach to English language education that addresses both linguistic competence and psychological readiness. Key recommendations include expanding opportunities for authentic English language exposure, creating supportive learning environments, developing targeted interventions to bridge proficiency gaps, raising awareness about expected university-level English skills, and integrating diverse media and technology-based learning approaches. These findings have important implications for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers in Rajasthan and similar EFL contexts. Future research should explore innovative methodologies to overcome speaking barriers and investigate the long-term

impact of targeted interventions. By implementing these recommendations, educational institutions can create more effective and inclusive English language programs that empower students to communicate confidently in an increasingly globalized world.

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