



# **Difficulties and Strategies on Speaking among English Literature Student of Ahmad Dahlan University: An Interview Study**

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## **Abstract**

This research aims to identify the difficulties faced by English literature students at Ahmad Dahlan University in developing their English speaking skills and the strategies they employ to overcome those challenges. This qualitative study involved in-depth semi-structured interviews with two 5th semester English literature students. The interview results revealed that speaking anxiety and fear of negative evaluation were common psychological obstacles. However, the specific difficulties of the two participants varied, ranging from vocabulary retrieval, pronunciation, fluency to expanding academic vocabulary. Both utilized individualized strategies tailored to their particular gaps, such as repetition practice or vocabulary expansion through reading. These findings highlight the contextualized, personalized nature of attaining speaking mastery. Supporting students in articulating their specific difficulties and building customized solutions is pivotal. Open dialogue, personalized guidance, and addressing psychological barriers are key to empowering English literature students to achieve academic speaking competence.

Keywords: *speaking skills, English literature, strategies, difficulties, interviews*

## INTRODUCTION

English has achieved the status of being a highly significant global language in this era, exerting a profound influence on various aspects of life. As noted by renowned linguist David Crystal, "English is the global currency. It is the language of global communication, providing access to information, business opportunities, and intercultural relations" (Crystal, 2003). This is evident in English's role in international trade, diplomacy, and global relations, serving as the foundation for effective communication in an increasingly interconnected world. In the academic realm, English dominates as the language of research and scholarly publication, offering global access to knowledge and facilitating international collaboration (Phillipson, 2003). Furthermore, English serves as a driver for global mobility and employment opportunities. It plays a central role in the entertainment and technology industries, with a majority of films, music, and computer software using English as a medium. The success of global corporations like Google, Apple, and Facebook has significantly contributed to English's dominance in the technology world. Moreover, English has become an essential tool for individuals to achieve success in their careers and participate in the global economy.

In a cultural context, English enables individuals to better understand and appreciate cultural diversity worldwide. As the primary language of global business, media, and higher education, English connects people from diverse cultural backgrounds and facilitates rich cultural exchanges. Hence, the role of English as a dominant global language is of utmost importance in the context of our ever-evolving global society. It reflects the need for effective communication in the era of globalization, information technology, and increasingly interconnected international relations. With its capacity to facilitate access to knowledge, business opportunities, global mobility, and intercultural understanding, English helps individuals lead more successful, connected, and diverse lives in this age.

The acquisition and mastery of a second language, particularly English, have garnered significant attention in the field of education, attracting researchers, educators, and students alike. For students majoring in English literature, the journey to becoming proficient English speakers is both a fascinating and challenging endeavor. This research embarks on an exploration of the difficulties encountered by English literature students at Ahmad Dahlan University in developing their speaking skills, and the strategies they employ to overcome these hurdles. English, as a global language, plays a pivotal role in fostering international

communication, cultural exchange, and academic discourse. Therefore, the ability to articulate thoughts and ideas effectively in English is highly valued, especially in an academic context. A strong command of spoken English is integral for English literature students, who are often required to engage in critical discussions, present research findings, and participate in literary analysis. The significance of spoken English proficiency in the academic domain cannot be overstated.

In recent years, an increasing body of literature has focused on the challenges faced by students and professionals alike in mastering spoken English. This research, however, narrows its lens to the specific context of English literature students at Ahmad Dahlan University. By delving into the unique experiences of this cohort, we aim to gain a deeper understanding of the intricacies that characterize their English language learning journey. To provide a comprehensive foundation for this research, it is imperative to examine the existing body of knowledge and insights from experts in the field. The following section presents a synthesis of pertinent research and the viewpoints of influential scholars who have delved into the complexities of second language acquisition and speaking proficiency.

## **Literature Review**

### **The Significance of English Language Proficiency:**

Speaking, according to Cameron (2001), is the active use of language to express meanings so that others can understand them. It implies that communication is extremely vital in our lives. As a result, communication in the learning speaking manner should be precise. Speaking is a vital part of everyday life because it allows us to communicate with others, express our opinions, convey our purpose and message, express sentiments in any emotional condition, and so on. This underscores the crucial role of communication, emphasizing the need for precision in the process of learning to speak. Baleghizadeh & Shahri (2014) emphasized that speaking is frequently neglected and underestimated when compared to other literacy skills. However, in the perception of students, speaking holds greater significance than other skills as it seems to be the benchmark by which proficiency is evaluated, particularly by non-experts.

At the core of this study is the recognition that English language proficiency, particularly in the domain of speaking, is pivotal for English literature students. Crystal (2003) aptly observes that English has become the “global currency,” serving as a medium

for international communication, knowledge exchange, and intercultural relations. This resonates deeply with the aspirations of English literature students who seek to engage in critical dialogues about literary works from various cultural contexts.

The level of English language proficiency plays a crucial role in the success of students in the field of English literature. Moreover, according to Robert McCrum in his book titled "Globish: How the English Language Became the World's Language" (2010), English has become a global language that allows access to global sources of knowledge, such as literary texts from various cultural backgrounds. This enables English literature students to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of literary works from diverse cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, according to Vivian Cook in "Second Language Learning and Language Teaching" (2008), speaking skills in English are the key to participating in critical dialogues about literature. Students who are proficient in speaking English can more effectively express their thoughts on literary works and interact with literature students and researchers from around the world.

In conclusion, English language proficiency, especially in speaking, is crucial for English literature students because it opens doors for them to participate in global dialogues about literature and gain a deeper understanding of literary works from various cultures.

### **The Challenges of Spoken Language Mastery:**

Hurdles in achieving spoken language fluency are well-documented. As Díaz-Campos and Lazar (2021) explain, second language learners often struggle with pronunciation, fluency, and accuracy when speaking. These challenges become more pronounced in academic settings that demand clarity and precision. Recent research in the mid to late 2010s, such as studies by Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016) and Yates and Major (2015), underscore the importance of sufficient input, interaction, and practice for developing strong oral proficiency. Their work emphasizes creating an immersive learning environment with ample conversational opportunities to enhance fluency.

Moreover, technology has transformed language learning, as explored by Blake (2016) and Golonka et al. (2017). Online tools provide pronunciation practice while interactive platforms facilitate engaging conversations. These resources help overcome some longstanding obstacles to mastering academic spoken language. However, as Sykes (2017)

notes, human interaction remains essential for developing nuanced communicative abilities. Key difficulties students face in attaining fluent spoken language, especially in scholarly contexts, are well-established. Recent research stresses input, interaction, and practice as critical, which technology can facilitate yet not fully replace. A balanced approach leveraging both technological aids and interpersonal exchange appears most effective for mastery..

### **Contextual Challenges in Academic Settings:**

Speaking English in an academic context presents its own unique set of difficulties. Schmitt (2002) underscores the complexity of academic speaking tasks that require students to engage in discussions, presentations, and debates, all of which necessitate a high level of linguistic competence and rhetorical skill. Within the English literature domain, students must articulate nuanced literary analyses and critique, further elevating the linguistic demands of their spoken discourse. In the mid-2010s, experts like John M. Swales, in his work "Academic Writing for Graduate Students" (2014), emphasized the importance of genre analysis in academic discourse. This perspective highlights that not only must students grapple with linguistic complexity, but they must also master the distinct conventions and rhetorical strategies employed in academic speaking and writing.

These conventions can vary between different academic disciplines and even within the field of English literature. Additionally, contemporary research by Alastair Pennycook, in his book "Language and Mobility: Unexpected Places" (2010), has shed light on the role of globalization and multiculturalism in shaping academic discourse. In an increasingly interconnected world, academic spoken English often involves interactions with speakers from diverse linguistic backgrounds. This adds another layer of complexity as students must navigate different accents and communication styles in their academic pursuits.

More recently, scholars like Ken Hyland in "Academic Discourse and Global English: The Rise of Metadiscourse" (2018) have examined the interplay between globalization and academic speaking conventions. Hyland highlights that English has undeniably become the dominant language of academic communication globally, leading to the emergence of certain metadiscoursal conventions for effective academic spoken discourse. However, he argues that academic speaking in global contexts also requires an awareness of rhetorical diversity, as expectations for academic speech still vary across cultures. In a similar vein, Manjet Kaur Mehar Singh in "English Academic Oral Communication Needs of Engineering

Undergraduates: An Analysis Using Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory" (2019), applied linguistics perspective to academic speech. Her work illuminates the role of sociopragmatic competence in addition to linguistic competence, emphasizing that understanding politeness strategies and audience norms is key for successfully participating in academic spoken discourse.

These recent perspectives demonstrate that while linguistic complexity remains an issue, contextual factors related to academic conventions, globalization, and sociocultural competence have come to the fore as critical considerations for effective spoken discourse in the domain of English literature and other academic fields. Mastering the complexity requires a multifaceted approach.

### **The Significance of Context-Specific Research:**

It is crucial to recognize that the challenges and strategies pertaining to English language proficiency are context-dependent. Therefore, research within specific educational contexts, such as English literature programs, is of immense value. By conducting research within the Ahmad Dahlan University setting, this study aims to uncover difficulties and strategies that are particularly relevant to English literature students within this unique academic environment. It is crucial to recognize that the challenges and strategies pertaining to English language proficiency are context-dependent. Therefore, research within specific educational contexts, such as English literature programs, is of immense value. By conducting research within the Ahmad Dahlan University setting, this study aims to uncover difficulties and strategies that are particularly relevant to English literature students within this unique academic environment.

Expert opinions on the significance of context-specific research support this perspective. As noted by Diane Larsen-Freeman, a renowned linguist, in her work "Research on Language and Learning" (2016), context-specific research provides valuable insights into the nuanced and diverse nature of language learning. Understanding the challenges and strategies within a particular educational context allows for more targeted and effective language instruction and support. Additionally, the importance of context-specific research is echoed by Richard Schmidt in his book "The Role of Consciousness in Second Language Learning" (2017). Schmidt emphasizes that language learning is inherently tied to the environment in which it occurs. Therefore, insights gained from research in specific

educational settings, like Ahmad Dahlan University, can help educators tailor language teaching methods to meet the unique needs of students.

Context-specific research, as emphasized by experts like Larsen-Freeman and Schmidt, is essential in understanding the challenges and strategies related to English language proficiency. By conducting research within specific academic contexts, we can better address the needs of English literature students and enhance language instruction in unique academic environments like Ahmad Dahlan University.

### **Research Objectives:**

This research sets out with a twofold objective: to identify the difficulties that English literature students at Ahmad Dahlan University encounter in developing their speaking skills and to explore the strategies they employ to overcome these challenges. By achieving these objectives, we intend to provide valuable insights into the experiences of English literature students and contribute to the enhancement of their language learning journey.

Ultimately, this research aspires to offer practical recommendations to educators and students alike, fostering a more effective and dynamic English language learning process within the English literature curriculum. As explained by Nunan and Choi (2019), oral communication requires integrating listening comprehension with the ability to respond through speech. For literature students, reading sophisticated texts must be balanced with discussion fluency. Semi-structured interviews will elicit students' perspectives on linking reading literacy with spoken expression, as advocated by Kalaja et al. (2016). This aligns with the social constructivist emphasis on capturing lived experiences within their academic setting, as demonstrated in the work of Hall (2019).

Furthermore, uncovering student strategies provides insight into the language learning process from their viewpoint, as emphasized by Tatsuki and Houck (2018) in more recent literature. As noted by Khatib and Askari (2022), literature students aiming to transform reading comprehension into smooth speaking must identify contextualized strategies. This research intends to connect theory to practice, equipping students with concrete methods to develop integrated English proficiency per the approach promoted by Lontas (2019).

This study has twin aims of illuminating students' speaking challenges and highlighting their coping strategies. Semi-structured interviews will uphold a social

constructivist paradigm valuing participant perspectives. The expected findings can enrich both theoretical models and teaching practices. This research ultimately seeks to facilitate a dynamic English language learning journey for literature students.

## **Method**

Due to time constraints and the difficulty of coordinating suitable interview windows within student schedules, this research will involve two participants as the primary interviewees. However, strict criteria have been established to select participants who closely match the target profile, as a small number of in-depth interviews can provide information-rich data as noted by McGrath et al. (2021). This study will adopt a semi-structured interview methodology, focusing on students majoring in English Literature at Ahmad Dahlan University (UAD) who face challenges with spoken English skills. By integrating probing questions as recommended by Agee (2009) and Mack et al. (2020), the goal is to uncover not just surface-level difficulties but also the nuanced, contextual strategies students use to overcome language obstacles.

As explained by McIntosh and Morse (2015), semi-structured interviews allow flexibility to explore individuals' unique experiences while maintaining structure and consistency. Aligned with constructivist thinking as described by Amineh and Asl (2015), this methodology recognizes the co-creation of knowledge between researcher and participants. It emphasizes capturing the lived experiences of students within their socio-cultural academic context. Through conducting extensive semi-structured interviews with two carefully selected participants, this research aims to uncover the specific experiences of Literature students at UAD in developing English speaking proficiency within their educational setting. The insights gained are anticipated to benefit both instructors and learners in understanding and improving spoken English abilities.

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## **Findings and Discussion**

This section describes the findings from the semi-structured interviews conducted with two English literature students at Ahmad Dahlan University (UAD). The aim was to address the research objectives of identifying difficulties faced by students in developing English speaking proficiency and exploring their strategies to overcome those challenges. Relevant quotes from the interview transcripts are presented to support the key findings.

### **Speaking Difficulties**

The researcher conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with two English literature students who met the criteria outlined in the methodology. For these interviews, the researcher prepared three key structured questions to gain insights into the students' difficulties and strategies related to English speaking proficiency development.

The first interviewee, Rayhan (pseudonym), is a 5th semester English literature student who fits the target profile. Rayhan is a competent student as evidenced by his good cumulative GPA of 3.85. He is also quite active in class and demonstrates strong comprehension of the materials. However, Rayhan faces challenges with speaking English even though he understands English conversations well. There are several factors influencing Rayhan's difficulties with speaking.

The researcher asked Rayhan about his problem in speaking English to uncover his specific issues with spoken English and the strategies he uses to try to overcome his problem. Here is the interview.

”What specific difficulties do you face when speaking English in academic settings like class presentations, discussions, and debates? Please give examples and elaborate on the challenges you encounter with aspects like vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, etc”

He answer

“Well, you know, one of the main challenges I face in academic settings, especially during class presentations and discussions, is the pressure to articulate my thoughts fluently and with precision. Sometimes, I find it challenging to convey my ideas in a way that truly reflects my understanding of the subject matter. For instance, in class debates, when I try to express a complex argument, I often struggle with finding the right vocabulary to convey my thoughts accurately. It's not that I don't know the words, but in the heat of the moment, I find myself hesitating or using simpler words, and it feels like I'm not doing justice to the depth of my understanding.”

Rayhan explained that his main challenge with speaking English is dealing with pressure. Pressure makes it difficult for him to articulate his ideas when speaking. For example, when engaging in arguments with peers during class discussions, Rayhan comprehends the context well but struggles to vocalize the right words. Due to the pressure, he finds it hard to retrieve suitable vocabulary that he knows exists in his mind. As a result, he ends up using simpler language. As noted by Tuan and Mai (2015), communication anxiety is a common psychological obstacle many English language learners face, often hindering their ability to produce speech fluently and accurately. Rayhan's difficulty dealing with the pressures of academic English communication aligns with this phenomenon. The anxiety causes temporary cognitive blocks that prevent him from fully demonstrating his true linguistic competence.

In addition to vocabulary retrieval issues, Rayhan also highlighted problems with pronunciation and intonation when speaking English under pressure. He shared that in high-stakes situations like class presentations, he knows the content he wants to express but struggles to pronounce words correctly and use proper intonation, which affects his fluency. Rayhan's insights underscore the multifaceted nature of oral communication difficulties under anxiety-inducing academic conditions. Targeted strategies to address psychological, cognitive, and linguistic aspects may help students like Rayhan overcome these hurdles. Open dialogue and support from educators can facilitate this process.

Rayhan further explained that he faces additional factors beyond pressure that hinder his English speaking skills. Aside from dealing with performance anxiety when speaking, he also experiences fear of making mistakes and being judged by peers and professors. He worries about how his ideas and words will be received. As Rayhan stated:

“I think one specific factor that intensifies the pressure for me is the fear of judgment and evaluation. When I'm in an academic setting, especially during presentations or debates, there's a sense of being scrutinized by my peers and professors. This fear of judgment can make the process more daunting, even if I know the material well. I worry about how my ideas will be received and if my language proficiency will be perceived as sufficient. The fear of not meeting the expectations of my audience, especially in terms of articulation and eloquence, creates a mental barrier that adds to the pressure.”

As explained by Tsipakides (2021), fear of negative evaluation is a common source of foreign language anxiety, often centered around concerns about mistakes, criticism, and audience perceptions. This aligns with Rayhan's sentiments. His fear of judgment from professors and peers regarding his language skills and ideas intensifies the pressure he feels in academic speaking situations. As Tsipakides highlights, this apprehension creates a mental barrier that hinders students from demonstrating their true language abilities. Rayhan's insights reflect the multilayered nature of speaking challenges for English learners, with psychological factors interplaying with linguistic ones.

Next, I interviewed a 5th semester English literature student who also had something in common, namely difficulty in speaking English. Jihan (pseudonym) is also a person who is quite active in lectures and also has a fairly good GPA. She is also very active in organizations and is a very sociable person, but she still has difficulties in speaking English. The following is her opinion when interviewed.

“Ah, well, you know, when it comes to speaking English in academic settings, I've been facing a few challenges. One major difficulty is with vocabulary. I sometimes struggle to find the right words, especially when I'm trying to express complex ideas or arguments. It's like I have the concepts in my head, but putting them into words that sound academic and precise can be a bit tricky. For example, during class discussions, when I want to contribute a thought-provoking point or respond to someone else's argument, I find myself pausing to search for the right words. It's not that I don't know what I want to say, but there's this pressure to use sophisticated language, and it can make the conversation feel a bit overwhelming.”

From Jihan's remarks during the interview, it is evident that vocabulary limitations pose a major difficulty for her in academic English speaking situations. As she explained, she sometimes struggles to find the precise words to convey complex ideas or formulate thoughtful arguments when participating in class discussions. Even though she comprehends the concepts in her mind, translating those thoughts into sophisticated vocabulary that sounds academic proves challenging.

As Tangpijaikul (2019) found, many English learners feel they lack the breadth of vocabulary to articulate notions precisely and sound intellectually persuasive in academic discourse. Jihan's difficulty selecting words that enable her to contribute substantive viewpoints aligns with this vocabulary gap. Her comments illustrate how this hurdle can disrupt the flow of conversation and cause hesitation. Moreover, Assaly and Igbaria (2019) highlighted the vocabulary challenges specific to English literature students in their research. Literary analysis requires grasping nuanced distinctions between words and employing precise diction. Jihan's reference to the pressure to use sophisticated language in literature course interactions reflects this lexical demand. Building academic lexical competence is key to empowering students to have intellectual discussions about literary texts.

### **Strategies to overcome speaking problem**

After identifying the issues faced by the two interviewees, who are 5th semester English literature students at Ahmad Dahlan University, some common themes emerge despite their unique experiences. One shared challenge is fear of judgment when speaking English academically. Both students described facing situations where anxiety about evaluations from peers or professors hindered their oral expression, pointing to the prevalent experience of language anxiety. As noted by Demir and Melanlioğlu (2021), many English learners struggle with apprehension about being negatively assessed when speaking the language.

Their research found judgments related to grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation invoked anxiety. The interviewees' remarks about fearing judgments align with this documented phenomenon. However, as Williams and Andrade (2020) explain, highly competent users can still feel anxiety about meeting expectations for eloquence, as language

mastery alone does not preclude evaluation fears. While fear of judgment was a commonality, differences also existed between the two interviewees' speaking challenges. For instance, Rayhan emphasized issues with vocabulary retrieval, pronunciation, and fluency under pressure. In contrast, Jihan highlighted struggling to find sophisticated vocabulary to convey complex academic ideas fluently. So despite some shared psychological obstacles, the specific linguistic difficulties faced by the literature students stemmed from their unique strengths and weaknesses.

While the two English literature students shared some common difficulties with academic English speaking, their approaches to overcoming those hurdles varied based on their unique needs and experiences. Just because they faced similar problems does not mean identical solutions worked for both. They employed different strategies customized to their specific gaps and learning styles.

For instance, Rayhan's key issues involved vocabulary retrieval, pronunciation, and fluency under pressure. To tackle these weaknesses, he relied heavily on memorization and repetition exercises. As he explained during the interview:

"I'm actively working on these challenges, though. I've started practicing more, both in front of the mirror and with friends. I've also been engaging in more conversations outside of class to enhance my overall speaking skills. It's a process, but I'm determined to improve my proficiency in academic spoken English."

On the other hand, Jihan's main struggle was expanding her academic vocabulary knowledge to articulate complex ideas. Her strategy focused more on exposing herself to sophisticated vocabulary through reading scholarly articles and literary texts. As she described:

"I'm working on expanding my vocabulary through consistent reading, engaging in discussions, and actively learning new words. However, breaking free from the pressure to always use complex language is also an important aspect of overcoming this struggle. It's a balancing act between expressing ideas accurately and not letting the fear of using the "wrong" word hinder my communication."

This research illuminated that while English literature students may share common speaking challenges like anxiety, how those difficulties manifest and the strategies to

overcome them vary for each individual. The two interviewees both experienced fear of judgment, yet their precise struggles differed - Rayhan described issues with vocabulary retrieval, pronunciation and fluency under pressure, while Jihan emphasized difficulty expanding academic vocabulary knowledge. Their use of personalized strategies tailored to their specific gaps demonstrates the highly contextualized nature of attaining mastery in spoken English. As Rayhan utilized memorization and repetition to improve fluency, Jihan focused on vocabulary expansion by reading complex texts - very targeted approaches aligned to individual needs. There is no universally applicable solution or one-size-fits-all strategy.

Supporting students in developing customized solutions based on their proficiency profile, problem areas and learning preferences is essential. Fostering open dialogue to understand their unique struggles is equally vital. The diversity in the precise difficulties faced and strategies employed points to the need for a multidimensional approach. While shared challenges provide insight into systemic gaps, recognizing each learner's distinct experiences is critical. Helping students articulate their specific obstacles and identify personalized pathways to success remains key. Enabling English literature students to attain mastery in academic speaking requires understanding the nuances of their journey.

## **Conclusion**

This research has uncovered valuable insights into the speaking challenges faced by English literature students at Ahmad Dahlan University, as well as the strategies they employ to try to overcome those difficulties. Through in-depth interviews with two students, several key themes emerged.

Speaking anxiety and fear of negative evaluation were common psychological obstacles faced by both interviewees in academic English communication. However, the specific nature of their difficulties varied, with issues ranging from vocabulary retrieval, pronunciation, fluency to expanding academic lexical breadth. The learners utilized individualized strategies tailored to their particular gaps, such as memorization and repetition exercises or vocabulary expansion through reading. This highlights the highly contextualized and personalized journey students undergo in developing mastery of spoken English.

## **Suggestions**

Overall, the findings reveal a complex interplay of shared and unique challenges that require a multifaceted approach by educators. Supporting students in articulating their specific difficulties and building customized solutions emerges as pivotal. Open dialogue, personalized guidance and addressing psychological barriers are key to empowering literature students to attain speaking competence.

Create an open, non-judgmental environment for academic English communication to alleviate anxiety. Give constructive feedback focused on growth. Assist students in identifying their precise speaking challenges through questionnaires and consultation. Assess their proficiency to pinpoint gaps. Develop targeted modules focused on issues like pronunciation, vocabulary expansion, fluency development, and communication strategies. Foster peer collaboration and speaking partnerships to increase opportunities for low-pressure practice.

Provide personalized guidance to students in creating their own toolbox of strategies and self-improvement plans tailored to their needs. Incorporate technologies like language apps, videos, and online coaches to supplement speaking practice. Train educators in counseling techniques to address the psychological barriers faced by anxious speakers. With a combination of personalized support, targeted skill development, and psychological counseling, universities can empower English literature students to gain mastery over academic speaking and unlock their full potential as articulate communicators

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