Exploring the Factors Affecting the Speaking Skills of Undergraduate Students at Khushal Khan Khattak University Karak

Shaher Yar
MS Scholar, Department of English, Kohat University of Science and Technology Kohat Pakistan
Email: shaheryar926@gmail.com
Dr. Syed Azaz Ali Shah*
Assistant Professor Department of English, Kohat University of Science and Technology Kohat Pakistan
Corresponding Author Email: azazali@kust.edu.pk
Muhammad Saad Khan
MS Scholar, Department of English, Kohat University of Science and Technology Kohat Pakistan
Email: saadkhanat1238@gmail.com

ABSTRACT
This quantitative study explores the factors that affect the speaking skills of undergraduate students at Khushal Khan Khattak University Karak (KKKUK). The study used a structured and an adapted questionnaire for the data collection. The questionnaire comprised of eighteen items under the four main categories that influence the speaking skills of the students: psychological and affective factors, linguistic factors, teachers and teaching related factors, curriculum and environmental related factors. Data were collected from the eighty respondents studying in the department of English through stratified random sampling technique. The data were analyzed through using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Descriptive statistical techniques were applied with frequencies and percentages, and were presented through tables and bar graphs to clarify interpretation. The results revealed that the undergraduate students' speaking skills are affected by numbers of factors. Psychological and affective factors comprising anxiety, fear of mistakes, less confidence and worries about negative feedback appeared as the most significant barriers to speaking skills. Other factors including: linguistic factors show that even with basic vocabulary knowledge, problems in word retrieval and sentence construction hinder oral communication while restricted interactive teaching practices and inadequate focus on speaking activities within the curriculum and classroom environment limit students' active participation.

Introduction
English has grown as a global lingua franca, with a substantial role in education, research, and professional communication around the world. Proficiency in English, particularly speaking skills, is regarded vital for academic performance and social mobility in higher education settings (Crystal, 2003; Richards, 2008). **Speaking**

is seen as the most difficult of the four language skills for learners of English as a second or foreign language, as it requires the real-time use of linguistic knowledge, cognitive processing, and social interaction (Bygate, 2010). Empirical studies have identified various issues that influence speaking skills in the same institute setting. As an example, vocabulary constraints, classroom setting, cultural factors, motivation, and intellectual processing have a considerable impact on speaking and listening skills of ESL learners in Pakistani universities (Bango, Channa & Niaz, 2023). In both ESL and EFL settings, students often have skills in reading and writing; however, their skills in oral communication tend to be less developed. Many researchers have identified that challenges in speaking are not solely due to linguistic deficiencies but are shaped by a complicated influence of psychological, affective, pedagogical, and contextual factors (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Dörnyei, 2005). Anxiety, fear of making mistakes, lack of self-confident, and worries about negative evaluation have been identified as significant psychological obstacles that impede learners' willingness to communicate in English (MacIntyre, 2007). In the rural setting, there are also limitations of the educational system, deficits in teaching and learning, and insufficient awareness of the English second language that additionally hinder oral communication (Ork et al., 2024). Moreover, according to psychological dimensions, there are low self-confidence, fear of making mistakes, shyness, anxiety, which are also reported as significant barriers to speaking performance (Ork et al, 2024). Moreover, the classroom dynamics is an important phenomenon that enables or inhibits speaking growth. A recent study cites poor classroom setup, teacher conduct and social anxiety, which all do not assist a learner to participate actively (Amani and Fedai, 2024). Likewise, language related factors such as pronunciation, mother tongue interruption, accent and vocabulary have been identified to affect speaking and listening abilities among students in the Sindh language. Linguistic obstacles such as limited vocabulary, difficulty with formation of sentences, and a lack of fluency hinder learners' ability to convey ideas effectively in actual communication (Nation, 2013). Even if learners have basic vocabulary and grammar skills, they may fail to recall and use it spontaneously in spoken communication.

Despite the enlightening nature of these studies in terms of certain factors of oral proficiency, not many studies have focused on the speaking ability of undergraduate students in regional and socio-academic specificity. Such a gap highlights the necessity of conducting localized research on the issue, focusing on the differences in educational background, classroom activities, psychological preparedness, and socio-cultural limitations. To address the gap, the current research examines those factors that influence speaking skills of undergraduates in KKKUK in a systematic way. It analyzes the linguistic deficiencies, psychological barriers, pedagogical strategies and environmental impacts with one integrated scope. This study aims to identify the most inhibitory and enabling factors to oral competence in this context through the application of quantitative surveys.

Research Questions
1. What are the factors affecting the speaking skills of undergraduate students at Khushal Khan Khattak University?
2. Which of these factors have the most significant impact on the speaking proficiency of undergraduate students at Khushal Khan Khattak University?

Research Objectives
- To **identify** the factors those, affect the speaking skills of undergraduate students at Khushal Khan Khattak University.
- To determine which of these factors have the most significant impact on the speaking proficiency of undergraduate students at Khushal Khan Khattak University.

Significance of the Study

The results give handy information to language teachers who can then embrace better learner-focused methods that will directly address the oral communication problem of the students. To the curriculum designers and policymakers, the research emphasizes the need to incorporate communicative activities, encouraging classroom settings as well as skill-based assessment in language programs. On a larger scale, the study assists the field of applied linguistics by providing evidence on a regional university setting since it is not usually represented in the existing literature. In a practical sense, developing speaking skills among students make them more involved in their academic and classroom activity, and also make them more confident and employable, as well as competitive both nationally and internationally.

Review of Literature

Speaking is an interactive process of meaning construction involving production, reception and processing of information (Tarasenko et al., 2022). This definition states that speaking is not just a one-way process rather it is a two-way process involving both the producer and receptor in processing the information. According to Nunan (2003), it is a mutual process of constructing shared meaning. Its emphasis that connection between interlocutors is necessary. It is a dynamic process in which both the speaker and listener are actively engaged. Brown (2001) also highlights that effective speaking involves process knowing how to say and what to say and how to say. Speaking is the basic skill of human interaction and communication. It is the basis of an effective communication. Engaging in spoken communication facilitates the overcoming of cultural and language barriers by allowing for immediate interaction and collaboration (Harmer, 2007). It is a productive skill that requires the integration of linguistic, cognitive, and social knowledge to achieve effective oral communication. According to Wang, Abdullah, and Leong (2022), speaking is "a transient, unplanned, context-dependent, oral, and dynamic process" (p. 3). It needs proficiency in many components. These components are pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, interactional competence, discourse management, sociolinguistic awareness, and cognitive–affective factors form the basis of communicative competence.

Krashen (1982) proposes that affective factors such as motivation, confidence, and anxiety work as filters that can either expediate or impede the processing of language input. A high affective filter (for instance, high anxiety and low motivation) lessens a learner's ability to acquire a language, whereas a low filter progress speaking performance. Long (1996) Interaction Hypothesis states the foundation for the role of conversational interaction in language teaching and learning. This hypothesis underscores that language learners utilize from comprehensible input, opportunities for productive output, and corrective feedback through conversations with each other. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) focuses that the utmost aim of language learning is

effective communication, rather than simply mastering grammatical correctness (Hymes, 1972; Canale & Swain, 1980).

Monib and Hadi (2025) conducted a study by using mixed method approach to explore determinant factors influencing English speaking skill among undergraduates at universities in Brunei and the United States. Their findings highlighted that each factor significantly impacts students' speaking ability, highlighting that overemphasis on grammatical correctness can obstruct fluency. The study suggested that active learning, authentic materials, and a supportive learning environment are critical for improving speaking skills.

Naseem et al., (2023) conducted research in Hazara division universities including: Abbottabad University of Science and Technology and COMSATS Abbottabad to explore the perceptions of undergraduate Students about their English-Speaking skills. They used quantitative method and employed questionnaire as a tool. They found that the undergraduates showed confidence in speaking English, expressed thoughts clearly by using vocabulary but faced problems when maintaining conversation and accents.

Ali et al. (2020) conducted a study by investigating speaking skills problems of Pakistani learners in ESL context at four provinces of Pakistan and federal capital Islamabad by utilizing quantitative method of research. They found that students faced many obstacles while speaking in English including: Psychological problems like self-confidence, motivation, shyness and anxiety; linguistic problems such as lack of vocabulary, sentence construction; social problems lack of opportunities for oral communication.

Ghori et al. (2024) studied to identify challenges in oral communication among undergraduate students at Bacha Khan University. They opted for quantitative method of research. They found that students' excessive dependence on their mother tongue, Limited exposure, low confidence insufficient training in oral skills, grammar and vocabulary are the main challenges faced by undergraduates.

Research Methodology

The researcher chose to use quantitative research approach. Quantitative research is a well-structured investigation that is based on the use of numerical or statistical data to measure the problem of study. The researcher used the descriptive statistics to show frequencies and percentage. Data were displayed through tables showing frequencies and percentage along with the bar graph.

Sample

The sample for this study is English department undergraduate students enrolled in KKKUK. The researcher used a stratified random sampling technique to select the participants for this study. The researcher used a total population of 80 students.

Tools for Data Collection

In quantitative research especially the descriptive or a survey design, the most generally data collection instrument is the questionnaire. The research adopted the questionnaire adopted by Monib and Hadi (2025) and excluded some of the items that were either repetitive, irrelevant or overlapped with the other items in order to bring clarity. The questionnaire consisted of 18 items.

Procedure for Data Collection
Questionnaires were distributed randomly among students. The researcher explained all the items to the students in order to clear their minds on questionnaire. The researcher also explained the goal of data collection. Reasonable time was given to the students for filling the questionnaire and students were ask to feel free if there is any problem they can ask for. After filling all the questionnaires, they returned it.

Procedure for Analysis
The data were analyzed through SPSS software. Descriptive statistics were employed to show the frequencies and percentage with the Bar graphs.

Data Analysis and Results

Table

Factors Affecting Speaking Skills of Undergraduate Students

No.	Statement	SA%	A%	N%	D%	SD%
1.	I feel anxious about speaking English in public settings.	41.3	15	5	20	18.
2.	I feel anxious about speaking English due to fear of making mistakes.	55	17.5	8.8	11.3	7
3.	I feel uncertain when speaking in front of others.	45	15.00	7.50	20	12.5
4.	I feel worried about being criticized when I speak english	46.3	13.8	3.8	27.5	8.8
5.	I do not have enough vocabulary to speak English.	22.5	1.3	10	40.0	26.3
6.	I have difficulty finding the right words to speak.	42.5	31.3	3.8	18.8	3.8
7.	I have difficulty to form sentences.	32.5	11.3	15	17.5	23.8
8.	The teacher encourages English speaking in groups.	40	26.3	15	17.5	1.3
9.	The teacher does not involve us in activities related to personal preferences, such as breakfast choices.	47.5	31.3	2.5	12.5	6.3
10.	The teacher does not involve us in practicing speeches for specific situations (like job interviews, meeting new people, giving directions etc.)	55.	28.7	7.5	3.8	5
11.	The teacher engages us in short dialogues to enhance speaking skills.	17.5	16.3	8.8	38.8	18.8
12.	The teacher starts with basic language concepts gradually introduces more complex speaking tasks.	20.0	15.0	23.8	23.8	17.5
13.	The subject includes various speaking themes.	20	5	12.5	38.8	23.8
14.	The subject does not have enough speaking activities.	30	40	7.5	10	12.5
15.	The classroom atmosphere is not supportive for speaking.	21.3	12.5	8.8	35	22.5

No.	Statement	SA%	A%	N%	D%	SD%
16.	The classroom is equipped with resources to speaking abilities.	20	1.3	5	52.5	21.3
17.	The classroom is free from distractions that interfere with my speaking abilities.	35	52.5	6.3	1.3	5.0
18.	There are too many students in the class.	27.5	21.3	12.5	26.3	12.5

Anxiety about Speaking English in Public

The results showed that a considerable proportion of respondents felt anxiety when speaking English in public settings. 56.3% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they felt anxious when speaking English in public setting, (5.0%) were neutral; 38.8% of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed. This showed that majority of respondents agree that they feel anxious when they speak English in public setting.

Anxiety About Fear of Making Mistakes

The results revealed that fear of making mistakes also hindered the speaking skills of undergraduates. 72.5% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they felt fear of making mistakes in speaking English. On another hand 8.8% of the respondents were neutral; 18.5% respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed. This showed that a substantial number of respondents feel anxiety about fear of making mistakes in speaking English which significantly hampered the development of spoken English among them.

Feeling Uncertain in Front of Others

The data revealed that respondents felt uncertain when speaking English in front of others. 60.0% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they felt uncertain when speaking English in front of others. 12.5% were neutral; 27.5% of respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed. It indicated that a substantial number of students feel uncertain when speaking English in front of other as a result it badly affected their spoken English.

Worrying about Being Criticized

The responses revealed that the majority of students felt worried about being criticized while speaking in English. 60.1% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed demonstrating that the respondents felt worried about being criticized by others. 3.8% were neutral; 36.3% of the respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed. It suggested that majority of the students felt worried about being criticized by others when they speak in English.

Lack of English Vocabulary

The responses revealed that the respondents had enough vocabulary to speak in English. 66.3% strongly disagreed or disagreed indicated that they had sufficient vocabulary to communicate in English orally. 10.0% of the respondents were neutral; 22.5% strongly agreed or agreed. This suggests that a majority of respondents do not perceive vocabulary insufficiency as a serious problem.

Difficulty to Form Sentences

The data revealed that a slightly larger percentage of participants had trouble forming sentences when speaking English. 43.8% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they had problems to form sentences when

speaking in English. 15% were neutral;41.3% were strongly disagreed or disagreed. It shows that some respondents find it easy to form sentences, while others have difficulty with its arrangement in verbal communication.

Teacher's Encouragement in Speaking English in Groups

The data revealed that teachers encouraged their students to speak English in groups. **66.3%** of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that their instructors encouraged them to communicate in English in the groups.15% were neutral;18.8% strongly disagreed or disagreed. The findings show that the majority of students opine that their teachers encourage them to speak English in groups.

Lack of Students' Involvement in Practicing Speeches for Specific Situations

The results revealed that teachers do not involve students in practicing targeted speaking for real-life situations. 83.8% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that their teachers rarely involved them in real life situations.7.5% were neutral;8.8% remained strongly disagreed or disagreed. The results show that the majority of respondents realize that there is little participation in practicing speeches for certain scenarios.

Diverse Speaking Themes in the Subject

The data revealed that the respondents felt that the subject lacks various communicative themes. 62% of the respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement.12.5% were neutral;25% strongly agreed or agreed. This shows that due to restricted or repetitive communicative content students have very fewer opportunities to involve in diverse and meaningful spoken communication tasks.

Lack of Speaking Activities in the Subject

The results revealed that the respondents perceived that the subject did not provide them ample opportunities to engage in oral communicative activities.70% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the statement.7.5% were neutral;22.5% remained strongly disagreed or disagreed. This shows that the learners have not given enough opportunities to get involved in oral communicative activities to enhance their speaking skills consequently it shows the disparity between speaking activities and other language components within the subject.

Speaking Resources in Classrooms

The results showed revealed that the students perceived insufficient resources in their classrooms to enhance their speaking skills. 73.8% of the respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed.5% were neutral;21.3% remained strongly agreed or agreed with the statement. This shows that lack of audio-visual aids, language labs, multimedia tools, and speaking prompts which can play a critical role in developing speaking skills are limited or absent which hindered the development of oral fluency among undergraduates.

Classrooms are Free from Distractions

The findings revealed that the respondents felt that their classrooms are free from distractions.87.5% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the statement.6.3% were neutral;6.3% remained strongly disagreed or disagreed. This shows that the physical and instructional setting in the classrooms is generally conducive for enhancing oral skills.

Discussion

Psychological and Affective Factors

The findings of the current study illustrate that psychological and affective factors have a crucial influence on undergraduates' oral skills. The four aspects related to psychological and affective factors regarding public speaking, fear of mistakes, anxiety when addressing audience, and worries about being criticized together show that these psychological and affective hindrances greatly limit learners' participation in oral activities. A notable concern arising from the results is the anxiety experienced by students when speaking English in the presence of others. Prior studies have consistently indicated that anxiety related to speaking is one of the major obstacles encountered by second language learners and can result in an unwillingness to participate in oral communicative activities (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Teimouri et al., 2019).

The results on linguistic factors show an intricate representation of students' speaking problems. While the majority of the respondents do not perceive insufficient vocabulary as a key obstacle to speaking English, major problems arise in lexical recall and sentence formation. This indicates that students have a basic lexical vocabulary, but they fail to access and use it effectively during spoken conversation.

Linguistic Factors

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Teachers and Teaching Related Factors

The findings show that, while some teachers encourage English speaking, particularly through group work, this encouragement is not constantly supported with organized and meaningful oral communicative tasks. Students feel less participation in activities that represent personal preferences or real-life communication settings, such as everyday conversations or context-based speaking. Communicative language teaching emphasizes the need of meaningful participation based on learners' experiences for improving speaking proficiency (Richards, 2017). Furthermore, the results indicate that a lack of practice with situational oral tasks such as role plays, brief speeches, and context-specific conversations. These tasks are important for students to use language outside the classroom. When such chances are restricted, students may acquire theoretical knowledge of a language without being able to use it smoothly in real-world communication setting. This finding is aligned with the Interaction Hypothesis, which states that language development develops through meaningful interaction and meaning negotiation (Long, 1996).

Curriculum and Environment Related Factors

The results of curriculum and classroom environment factors underscore the importance of structural and contextual circumstances in affecting students' speaking development. The findings show that curricular

deficiencies, as well as classroom environmental limitations, affect the learners' opportunities to practice and enhance spoken English. As far as curriculum-related aspects are concerned, the findings indicate that speaking-oriented activities are not appropriately prioritized in the subject syllabus. Although the curriculum offers a range of other themes, students believe that they are not commonly turned into relevant speaking activities. This demonstrates a disparity between curricular knowledge and its practical application in developing oral communication skills. Effective language curricula underscore oral communicative tasks as a key component rather than seeing them as additional activities (Richards, 2017).

Conclusion

The findings reveal that students experience speaking challenges that are complex, stemming from the collaboration of psychological, linguistic, pedagogical, curricular, and environmental factors. Psychological and affective factors were found as the most significant, as anxiety, the fear of making errors, uncertainty, and worries about negative feedback notably reduced learners' confidence and willingness to speak English. The research indicates that enhancing the speaking abilities of undergraduate students demands multifaceted strategies that reflects emotional, linguistic, pedagogical, curricular, and environmental aspects of learning. Concentrating exclusively on a single dimension will not sufficiently improve speaking skills; instead, a holistic approach is essential to foster learners' confidence, engagement, and communicative effectiveness in English.

Recommendations

Encourage risk-taking, tolerate mistakes in oral communication, and provide constructive feedback to help students gain confidence. Activities that encourage gradual engagement, such as pair and small-group conversations, should be promoted to help students to overcome these problems in public speaking settings. Teachers should incorporate vocabulary-building activities that are relevant to real-life situations, as well as structured speaking practice that promotes sentence formulation. Regular exposure to speaking tasks that demand spontaneous language use can assist students in translating their linguistic knowledge into successful oral communication. Implementing communicative language teaching techniques, including conversations, debates, role-playing, and problem-solving activities, can greatly improve students' chances to practice speaking. Teachers should be encouraged to use more interactive and learner-centered teaching practices to foster oral communication. Speaking components should be carefully integrated into course objectives, assessment methodologies, and classroom practices. Classroom environment should be organized in ways that minimize distractions and support interaction, such as flexible seating arrangements and manageable class sizes where possible.

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