

Exploring Students' Difficulties in Speaking for Academic Purposes at the University Level

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ABSTRACT

The ability to speak effectively in academic contexts is a fundamental competency for university students, as it supports active participation in presentations, seminars, and classroom discussions. Nevertheless, many students encounter persistent challenges when communicating their ideas in English within formal academic settings. This study investigates the difficulties experienced by university students in speaking for academic purposes and explores the underlying factors contributing to these challenges. A qualitative descriptive research design was employed, involving semi-structured interviews and classroom observations with undergraduate students from the [Department/Faculty Name]. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns across participants' experiences.

The findings demonstrate that students experience multiple challenges in academic speaking, including limited academic vocabulary, insufficient grammatical competence, low self-confidence, and high levels of speaking anxiety. Psychological barriers, particularly fear of making mistakes and concern about negative peer evaluation, were found to reduce students' willingness to participate in academic speaking activities. Furthermore, the limited availability of authentic opportunities to practice academic speaking in classroom settings was identified as an additional factor constraining students' oral performance. These findings highlight the need for lecturers to implement structured, supportive, and interactive learning activities that progressively develop students' confidence and academic speaking competence. By providing a deeper understanding of students' challenges, this study offers practical implications for improving pedagogical approaches to English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instruction at the university level.

Keywords : academic speaking, speaking difficulties, university students, English for Academic Purposes (EAP), qualitative study

INTRODUCTION

Oral communication plays a central role in higher education, enabling students to exchange ideas, participate in academic discourse, present research findings, and collaborate with peers. In many university programs, particularly those using English as a medium of instruction or within English language courses, students are expected to demonstrate effective speaking skills in formal academic situations such as seminars, presentations, classroom discussions, and oral assessments.

Consequently, academic speaking competence has become an important component of students' academic achievement and future professional success (Richards, 2008).

Unlike casual conversation, Speaking for Academic Purposes (SAP) requires learners to communicate in a structured, coherent, and academically appropriate manner. Students are expected to employ discipline-specific vocabulary, organize arguments logically, think critically, and express their ideas confidently in formal settings (Brooks & Wilson, 2015). Developing these competencies, however, remains a significant challenge for many learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Research has consistently shown that students encounter linguistic obstacles, including insufficient academic vocabulary, limited grammatical competence, and pronunciation difficulties, all of which reduce their ability to communicate ideas effectively (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). In addition to linguistic limitations, affective factors such as speaking anxiety, fear of making errors, and low self-confidence further constrain students' oral performance (Horwitz et al., 1986).

The difficulties associated with speaking have been widely discussed in previous studies involving university students. Existing evidence suggests that students' speaking performance is shaped by multiple interacting factors, including language proficiency, classroom atmosphere, learning experiences, instructional practices, and opportunities to practice the target language (Tuan & Mai, 2015; Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). These factors often discourage students from participating actively in academic speaking activities, even when they recognize the importance of oral communication in their academic lives.

Despite the growing body of literature on speaking difficulties, much of the existing research has concentrated on speaking ability in general rather than the more specialized domain of academic speaking. Speaking for academic purposes presents distinct communicative demands, requiring students to construct evidence-based arguments, respond critically to questions, and communicate effectively within formal academic environments. Therefore, conclusions drawn from studies on general speaking ability may not adequately explain the challenges associated with academic speaking.

In addition, previous investigations have largely described students' speaking problems without thoroughly examining how these difficulties influence their participation and performance in academic learning activities at the tertiary level. This indicates a need for further research that specifically investigates students' experiences in academic speaking contexts and provides a deeper understanding of the challenges they encounter.

Responding to this research gap, the present study examines the difficulties experienced by university students in Speaking for Academic Purposes. The study seeks to identify the major challenges encountered by students and explore the ways these challenges affect their participation and performance in academic speaking tasks. It is anticipated that the findings will enrich the existing literature on academic speaking and offer practical insights for lecturers in designing pedagogical strategies that foster students' confidence and proficiency in academic oral communication.

METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive design to investigate the challenges experienced by university students in Speaking for Academic Purposes (SAP). A qualitative approach was selected because it facilitates a comprehensive exploration of participants' experiences, perspectives, and interpretations of the difficulties they encounter in academic speaking. Rather than testing hypotheses or manipulating variables, the study sought to describe these experiences within their authentic educational context.

The participants consisted of undergraduate students enrolled in a Speaking for Academic Purposes course at a university. Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants who had actively engaged in academic speaking activities, including classroom presentations, group discussions, seminars, and oral assignments. A total of approximately 15–20 students participated in the study, as they were considered capable of providing rich and relevant information regarding the research topic.

Data were gathered primarily through semi-structured interviews. An interview protocol was developed to elicit detailed information about students' experiences, perceived challenges, and opinions regarding academic speaking. The flexible nature of semi-structured interviews enabled participants to elaborate on their responses while allowing the researcher to ask probing questions to obtain deeper insights whenever necessary.

The interview sessions were conducted individually, either in person or through online platforms, depending on participants' preferences and availability. Prior to data collection, participants received an explanation of the research objectives and ethical procedures before providing informed consent. Each interview lasted approximately 20 to 30 minutes and, with participants' permission, was audio-recorded to ensure the accuracy of the collected data. The recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, member checking was carried out by inviting participants to review the interview transcripts and verify whether the recorded information accurately reflected their perspectives. In addition, the researcher maintained comprehensive research documentation throughout the study to support transparency and ensure the consistency of the research process.

The interview data were analyzed using the thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis began with repeated reading of the interview transcripts to develop familiarity with the dataset. Meaningful units of information were then systematically coded, after which related codes were organized into broader themes representing the major difficulties encountered in academic speaking. These themes were subsequently reviewed, refined, and interpreted to ensure that they accurately represented the participants' experiences. The final themes served as the basis for addressing the research questions and achieving the objectives of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The data identified five major themes representing the difficulties hh experienced by university students in Speaking for Academic Purposes (SAP). These themes include: (1) limited academic vocabulary, (2) lack of confidence and speaking anxiety, (3) grammatical difficulties, (4) limited opportunities for academic speaking practice, and (5) the impact of speaking

difficulties on academic performance. The data were obtained from questionnaire completed by 21 undergraduate students. The findings are presented in Table

No	Statements	Percentage			
		SS	S	TS	STS
1.	Saya merasa kesulitan menyampaikan ide secara lisan dalam konteks akademik.	(2) 9.5%	(12) 57.1%	(7) 33.3%	
2.	Saya sering kesulitan menggunakan kosakata akademik saat berbicara.	(4) 19%	(14) 66.7%	(3) 14.3%	
3.	Saya mengalami kesulitan menyusun kalimat yang tepat ketika melakukan presentasi akademik.	(2) 9.5%	(16) 76.2%	(3) 14.3%	(1) 5.6%
4.	Saya sering melakukan kesalahan tata bahasa saat berbicara dalam kegiatan akademik.		(19) 90.5%	(2) 9.5%	
5.	Saya kesulitan menjelaskan suatu topik secara runtut dan jelas.	(1) 4.8%	(13) 61.9%	(6) 28.6%	(1) 4.8%
6.	Saya merasa sulit mengungkapkan pendapat secara spontan dalam diskusi akademik.	(4) 19%	(11) 52.4%	(6) 28.6%	
7.	Saya mengalami kesulitan dalam pengucapan (pronunciation) kata-kata bahasa Inggris akademik.	(4) 19%	(7) 33.3%	(8) 38.1%	(2) 9.5%
8.	Saya sering tidak memahami pertanyaan yang diajukan dalam diskusi atau presentasi akademik.		(5) 23.8%	(16) 76.2%	
9.	Saya kesulitan memberikan tanggapan atau argumen terhadap pendapat orang lain.	(2) 9.5%	(10) 47.6%	(9) 42.9%	
10.	Saya merasa kemampuan berbicara saya belum memadai untuk kebutuhan akademik.		(15) 71.4%	(6) 28.6%	
11.	Kesulitan berbicara membuat saya kurang aktif dalam diskusi kelas.	(1) 4.8%	(11) 52.4%	(9) 42.9%	
12.	Saya merasa kurang percaya diri ketika harus melakukan presentasi akademik.	(2) 9.5%	(12) 57.1%	(5) 23.8%	(2) 9.5%
13.	Kesulitan berbicara menyebabkan saya tidak dapat menyampaikan ide secara maksimal.	(5) 23.8%	(11) 52.4%	(5) 23.8%	
14.	Saya sering merasa cemas ketika diminta berbicara di depan kelas.	(5) 23.8%	(10) 47.6%	(5) 23.8%	(1) 4.8%
15.	Kesulitan berbicara memengaruhi nilai saya dalam tugas presentasi.	(4) 19%	(12) 57.1%	(5) 23.8%	
16.	Kesulitan berbicara membuat saya sulit berpartisipasi dalam kerja kelompok.	(3) 14.3%	(4) 19%	(14) 66.7%	
17.	Saya merasa kemampuan berbicara yang rendah menghambat keberhasilan akademik saya.	(4) 19%	(12) 57.1%	(4) 19%	
18.	Saya kesulitan menjawab pertanyaan dosen dengan baik saat kegiatan akademik berlangsung.	(3) 14.3%	(11) 52.4%	(6) 28.6%	(1) 4.8%

19.	Saya merasa performa saya dalam kegiatan akademik akan lebih baik jika kemampuan berbicara saya meningkat.	(14) 66.7%	(6) 28.6%	(1) 4.8%	
20.	Saya cenderung menghindari kesempatan berbicara dalam kegiatan akademik.	(3) 14.3%	(9) 42.9%	(8) 38.1%	(1) 4.8%

The findings of this study demonstrate that university students encounter multiple challenges in Speaking for Academic Purposes (SAP). These challenges arise from the combined influence of linguistic limitations and psychological factors, both of which affect students' ability to communicate effectively in academic settings. The questionnaire results indicate that difficulties related to academic vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, and sentence construction are among the most common problems experienced by students, suggesting that language proficiency remains a key determinant of successful academic speaking.

The study also highlights the significant role of affective factors in students' speaking performance. Many respondents reported experiencing low self-confidence and speaking anxiety, particularly when delivering presentations or participating in classroom discussions. Such emotional barriers appear to discourage students from expressing their ideas freely and limit their engagement in academic speaking activities. Consequently, students often hesitate to contribute during discussions despite understanding the subject matter.

In addition, the results reveal that many students experience difficulties producing spontaneous responses, organizing ideas coherently, and answering lecturers' questions during academic interactions. These findings suggest that students require not only greater linguistic competence but also more opportunities to practice real-time academic communication in authentic learning situations.

The study further shows that weaknesses in academic speaking have important consequences for students' learning experiences. Speaking difficulties were associated with lower participation in classroom discussions, reduced presentation performance, and obstacles to achieving academic success. At the same time, an overwhelming majority of respondents believed that improving their academic speaking ability would positively influence their overall academic performance, emphasizing the important contribution of oral communication skills to success at the university level.

An interesting finding is that speaking difficulties did not substantially prevent students from participating in group work. This may indicate that collaborative learning activities create a more supportive and less intimidating environment than individual presentations or whole-class discussions, allowing students to communicate more comfortably with their peers.

Overall, the findings suggest that improving students' academic speaking competence requires instructional approaches that address both linguistic and psychological dimensions of learning. Lecturers are encouraged to provide regular opportunities for authentic academic speaking practice while integrating vocabulary development, grammar support, confidence-building activities, and constructive feedback into classroom instruction. Such learning experiences are expected to strengthen students' communication skills, increase their participation in academic activities, and enhance their overall academic achievement.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that university students experience a range of challenges when engaging in Speaking for Academic Purposes (SAP). These challenges are influenced by both linguistic competence and psychological readiness, which together affect students' ability to communicate effectively in formal academic environments. The questionnaire responses suggest that students continue to struggle with academic vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, self-confidence, and spontaneous communication. This supports the view of Brooks and Wilson (2015), who argue that successful academic speaking depends not only on language knowledge but also on learners' confidence and ability to communicate ideas appropriately in academic contexts.

Among the identified challenges, insufficient academic vocabulary emerged as one of the most prominent obstacles. Most respondents acknowledged experiencing difficulty selecting appropriate academic words and expressions while speaking. Such limitations reduce students' ability to convey ideas clearly, often forcing them to rely on simple vocabulary or hesitate before responding. As a result, their participation in presentations and classroom discussions becomes less effective. This finding is in line with Leong and Ahmadi (2017), who reported that vocabulary limitation is one of the principal factors restricting oral communication among learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Possessing an adequate range of academic vocabulary is therefore essential for expressing opinions, presenting arguments, and engaging in academic discourse.

Another important issue highlighted by the findings is students' limited grammatical competence. The majority of participants reported experiencing difficulty constructing grammatically accurate sentences during presentations, while almost all admitted making frequent grammatical mistakes during academic speaking activities. These responses indicate that students often concentrate on grammatical correctness while speaking, which may reduce fluency because they attempt to formulate ideas and monitor language accuracy simultaneously. Consequently, many learners choose to produce shorter and simpler sentences to avoid making errors. This observation supports Richards (2008), who emphasized that communicative effectiveness depends on balancing grammatical competence with fluency rather than focusing exclusively on linguistic accuracy.

Besides linguistic factors, psychological barriers were found to have a considerable influence on students' speaking performance. Many respondents indicated that they lacked confidence when giving presentations and believed that their speaking ability did not adequately meet academic expectations. Feelings of anxiety when speaking in front of classmates were also commonly reported. These findings suggest that emotional factors, particularly fear of making mistakes and concern about negative evaluation, discourage students from participating actively in classroom interactions. Similar conclusions were reached by Horwitz et al. (1986), who identified foreign language anxiety as a major contributor to reduced speaking performance among language learners.

The study also found that many students experienced difficulty responding spontaneously during academic communication. A large proportion of respondents admitted struggling to express opinions without preparation and to explain ideas in a logical and organized manner. These findings imply that students depend heavily on rehearsed presentations and have limited ability to generate immediate responses during academic discussions. Because university learning frequently requires students to answer questions, justify opinions, and participate in interactive discussions, insufficient spontaneous speaking ability may reduce the quality of their classroom participation. This result is consistent with Tuan and Mai (2015), who argued that

inadequate speaking practice limits learners' confidence and ability to communicate spontaneously.

Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that speaking difficulties extend beyond communication itself and influence students' academic engagement. Many respondents stated that speaking problems reduced their participation in classroom discussions and negatively affected the quality of their presentations. Likewise, a considerable proportion believed that limited speaking competence hindered their academic achievement. At the same time, almost all participants agreed that improving their speaking skills would positively influence their overall academic performance. These results highlight the close relationship between oral communication competence and successful learning in higher education.

An interesting outcome of the study is that most respondents did not perceive speaking difficulties as a major barrier to participating in group work. This may indicate that collaborative learning activities create a more supportive atmosphere than individual presentations or whole-class discussions. Working with peers may reduce pressure because responsibility is shared among group members, enabling students to contribute more confidently despite their perceived weaknesses in English speaking. This finding suggests that collaborative learning can serve as an effective strategy for promoting students' participation and gradually strengthening their academic speaking ability.

Overall, the results demonstrate that the challenges associated with Speaking for Academic Purposes are multidimensional, involving the interaction of linguistic competence and psychological factors. Deficiencies in vocabulary and grammar restrict students' ability to express ideas effectively, while low confidence and speaking anxiety discourage them from participating actively in academic communication. These findings imply that lecturers should design learning experiences that provide authentic opportunities for academic speaking practice while simultaneously supporting vocabulary development, grammatical competence, and students' self-confidence. Such pedagogical practices are expected to enhance students' academic speaking proficiency and contribute to improved learning outcomes at the university level.

CONCLUSION.

This study examined the challenges faced by university students in Speaking for Academic Purposes (SAP) and investigated how these challenges affect their performance in academic speaking activities. The findings reveal that students' difficulties stem from the interaction of linguistic and psychological factors. Linguistically, students encounter problems related to limited academic vocabulary, grammatical inaccuracies, and the ability to organize and express ideas clearly in academic contexts. Psychologically, low self-confidence, speaking anxiety, and fear of making mistakes were identified as major barriers that reduce students' participation in presentations, classroom discussions, and other academic speaking tasks.

The study further indicates that these challenges extend beyond oral communication and influence students' overall academic experiences. Many respondents perceived that their speaking difficulties limited their classroom participation, reduced the quality of their presentations, and affected their academic performance. At the same time, nearly all participants recognized that strengthening their academic speaking skills would improve their learning outcomes, emphasizing the important role of oral communication in higher education.

Although students reported considerable difficulties in formal speaking situations, they generally did not view these challenges as preventing them from participating in collaborative group activities, suggesting that peer interaction may help alleviate speaking anxiety.

The findings emphasize that developing academic speaking competence requires more than improving students' language proficiency. Effective instruction should also address learners' psychological needs by creating a supportive classroom environment where students feel encouraged to communicate without excessive fear of making mistakes. Integrating academic vocabulary instruction, grammar reinforcement, interactive speaking tasks, and constructive feedback into classroom practice may help students build greater confidence while enhancing their ability to communicate effectively in academic settings.

This study contributes to the understanding of the challenges encountered by university students in Speaking for Academic Purposes and offers practical implications for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instruction. Nevertheless, the study was conducted with a relatively small number of participants from a single institution, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future studies are therefore encouraged to include larger and more diverse samples across different universities and academic disciplines. Employing mixed-methods or longitudinal research designs may also provide a more comprehensive understanding of how students develop academic speaking competence over time and identify instructional strategies that effectively support this development.

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