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Exploring English Speaking Proficiency Challenges Faced by ESL Learners in the English Department at the Shaikh Ayaz University

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Abstract

Speaking is one of the essential skills in English language learning, along with reading, writing, and listening. English is a prestigious global language as well as the official language of many countries in the world, including Pakistan. As Pakistani learners acquire English as a second language (ESL), they face various complications while speaking English. The present study aims to explore the English-speaking challenges faced by the English department students in Shikarpur, Sindh, Pakistan. It adopts a quantitative research design with a sample of 132 out of 200 to address the existing gap, following Krejcie & Morgan (1970) (0.05%) through purposive sampling. A closed-ended, five-point Likert scale questionnaire was used as an instrument to collect the data through WhatsApp online. The results were presented in pie charts. The results reveal that the students experience several challenges in speaking, including nervousness, fear of making grammatical and pronunciation mistakes, and a lack of adequate vocabulary. The study also provided recommendations for both students and teachers to address and overcome speaking challenges and mitigate these challenges, and enhance speaking fluency.

Keywords: Language proficiency, English language challenges, speaking anxiety, Pakistan.

Introduction

Language serves as a tool for individuals to communicate with each other. (Maitlo, Tumrani & Ali, 2022). English is reflected as one of the most commonly used languages globally. It ranks as the third most widely spoken language across the globe. (Iyosovna, 2020). In today's world, English is a Standard, developed, and modern language. It serves as the main language in various fields, including information technology, commercial activity, science, technology, Engineering, pharmaceuticals, apothecary, instructions, tourism, enjoyment, cyberspace, and



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Profession (Rao 2019).

To master English, learners need to develop proficiency in all four language skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Among these, speaking holds a prominent position, particularly for those studying English as a foreign language or second language. Speaking is considered the most vital of the four language skills since a learner's competence is often assessed based on their ability to communicate in the target language. (Houn & Em 2022). Additionally, earlier studies conducted by Arbain (2017) and Maulidar et al. (2019) agree that speaking is one of the crucial skills. They assert that developing effective speaking skills in English is essential for language learners, as it serves as a primary goal for many English learners. Learners' success in language learning and the effectiveness of their English courses are evaluated based on improvements in their verbal communication. It is an excellent way to show competence through speaking; thus, developing effective communication skills is essential.

Speaking is the process of building and sharing meaning through both verbal and nonverbal symbols across different contexts. (Houn & Em 2022). Speaking serves as a beneficial language skill that enables both speakers and listeners to engage orally for information exchange, relationship building, and sharing. As one of the passive skills, speaking is a process of relationship building and sharing. As one of the active skills, speaking is a method of transforming thoughts into meaning using language in the form of monologues or dialogues (Karpovich et al., 2021). According to Gillies (2019), speaking is mainly used in daily life for communication. Speaking is considered the most essential skill in daily life since people primarily communicate with one another through speaking. It enables a speaker to inform and persuade others. If speakers speak effectively and confidently, they will be able to gain and retain the audience's attention.

Furthermore, accurate and fluent sound articulation (pronunciation), a large vocabulary, and solid knowledge of grammar played an important role when it comes to communicating in English. (Arooj et al, 2024) Pronunciation is particularly important for vocabulary as it helps differentiate the sounds that make up words. The greater the vocabulary knowledge students possess, the simpler it becomes to learn English. Vocabulary (lexicon) in language learning is a crucial aspect of mastering grammar. Grammar (language structure) consists of rules that arrange language components into a coherent structure. Mastering the structure of language facilitated easier learning for students, especially in forming sentences by combining words. (St Humaera Rusli et al. 2024)

On speaking skills, many researchers have conducted their studies on speaking challenges, such as (Tariq et al, 2013), which are cited in (Siraranghom, W., 2020) in the Pakistani context. This research study also aims to examine the English-speaking challenges faced by students in English departments. There is a need to investigate such issues in the Pakistani context, as students face many problems in speaking skills, especially English department students.

Problem Statement

English is the global and widely spoken language in the world, even in countries where English is not the first language. Despite English communication, especially speaking English, being one of the biggest challenges for ESL learners.



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Due to the social dominance of the native language, the ESL learners are unconfident and unskilled in speaking skills. In Pakistan, the native language is predominantly used to speak in common settings and social interactions. Moreover, the syllabus in the early grades of Pakistani education does not focus on developing the speaking skills of students. Consequently, most Pakistani students feel unconfident and shy in speaking English. Hence, this study aims to investigate the English-speaking problems faced by the students of the English department in the Pakistani context at Shaikh Ayaz University, Sindh, Pakistan, and address the gap.

Research Object

- To Exploring English Speaking Proficiency Challenges Faced by ESL Learners in the English Department at the Shaikh Ayaz University.

Research Question

RQ: 1 What challenges do the ESL learners in English departments face in English Speaking at the Shaikh Ayaz University?

Significance of the study

Although much research has been done on speaking skills, there are limited studies on the speaking issues in the Pakistani context. Since English is the dominant language in the education system of Pakistan, fluency in English speaking has become a common requirement. Therefore, this study provides more recent findings on the English-speaking challenges faced by the students of the English department in the Pakistani context. Moreover, the study also provides recommendations that will aid the students in coping with English-speaking challenges. Besides, these recommendations will also assist the teachers to adopt their teaching and enhance their English speaking fluency.

Limitations of the study

The research is confined to the district level within the Sindh province. It focuses on the specific university, excluding other educational institutions such as colleges, private universities, and technical institutes. The study targets only the undergraduate level, overlooking students from other departments' faculties and academic levels, such as postgraduate or diploma programs. Moreover, the population and sampling of the current study are also limited.

Literature Review

In their studies, researchers such as Ur (1996), Leong & Ahmadi (2017), and Shteiwi & Hamuda (2016) argue that speaking is the most productive and significant skill among the four language skills. In the world, a large number of language learners learn English to enhance their proficiency in speaking. Speaking skills, therefore, are regarded as the most important language skill (Jeevan et al., 2023; Kalhoro et al., 2023). On the contrary, it is difficult for a large number of students at the university to speak English fluently. Many studies have been conducted on exploring the English-speaking challenges faced by students of ESL and EFL. (Richards & Renandiya, 2002)

Previous Related Studies



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Tariq et al (2023) researched the speaking problem faced by the BS students of the English Department in South Punjab. This research was a quantitative descriptive Survey approach. To find the problems of the students in speaking English, a questionnaire was used to collect the data. The sample of this research was all the students of BS English, Department of English, Government Graduate College Kot Addu, Concordia College Kot Addu, and Punjab College Kot Addu, which consisted of 150 students. The questionnaire was accessed by the student's physical survey. This research discussion shows that poor pronunciation, limited vocabulary, grammar, usage of the mother tongue, sudden going blank, and difficulty in Structuring are the most common issues.

Ali et al. (2020) researched the *speaking English Problems of Pakistani Learners in the ESL Context*. The population for this study comes from Pakistan, while the sample is selected from four Sindh, Punjab, Balochistan, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa(KPK), as well as the federal capital of Pakistan. The researchers selected 100 sample size, 20 participants from each province, and also the federal capital Islamabad. For this research, the quantitative method is employed, in which the questionnaire is used to collect the data from students regarding the challenges faced by they face in speaking English. The results indicate that the students face linguistic issues (making grammar and pronunciation mistakes), psychological barriers (anxiety and fear of being insulted), and social problems (a non-supportive classroom environment) while speaking English.

Sandika (2021) researched Speaking Problems Faced by Second-Grade Students in Conversation. This study used qualitative research and descriptive methods in this study because all data were collected in the form of words and tables. When analyzing the data, the researcher used Tuan and Mai's theory about students' speaking problems in conversation. The results of this research show that students faced challenges in speaking English. Due to a lack of confidence, they feared that other people laughed at so they rarely used English. Secondly, students can understand all the words spoken by the speakers in the communication, but feel embarrassed to speak because their English is poor. Students mostly think that they don't have good pronunciation, so they are shy to speak English (using their mother tongue).

Gut et al. (2022), in their study, investigated the challenges faced by the secondary level students in speaking English in District Kohat, KPK, and Pakistan. The participants for this study were selected from class 10 students of five government high schools in Distrust Kohat, namely, GHS Behzadi Chikarkot, GHS No 1 Kohat, GHS No 2 Kohat, Govt. Comprehensive High School, Kohat and Govt. Centennial High School No. 4 Kohat. The data were collected from 70 students, i.e., 14 students were taken from each school who were studying in class 10. Data were analyzed through SPSS software. The study highlighted several issues, including social, psychological, and cultural factors that hinder English-speaking proficiency among school-level students in the district.

Al-Jamal & Al-Jamal (2014), in their study, *An Investigation of the Difficulties Faced by EFL Undergraduates in Speaking English*, aim to present and investigate the English speaking difficulties faced by the students of English departments across Jordanian universities. The researchers conducted stratified sampling, in which 566 students responded through a questionnaire, and 64 of them were interviewed. The results of the study show that students face difficulty communicating effectively because of their low self-confidence.



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Chand (2021), in his study *Challenges Faced by Bachelor Level Students While Speaking English*, explores the English speaking problems faced by the students at the undergraduate level and also the causes of those problems. The data is collected from the students of the Department of English Education, Far Western University. The researcher employs a qualitative research design using both a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews to collect the data from 15 undergraduate students studying at the university. The findings are categorised into two areas: problems of speaking and causes of speaking problems. The study explores how students face personal, social, psychological, and environmental problems in speaking English.

Al-Roud (2016) conducted a study on the Problems of English Speaking skills that University Students Encounter from Their Perspectives. The members of the examiner had 239 students, both men and women. The sample was chosen randomly from the students inside the Faculty of Art who specialized in English Language at three universities. The tool on this takes a look at turned into a questionnaire using a five-factor Likert scale. The findings revealed that the students from three universities faced many forms of English-speaking issues associated with the Social, mental, and instructor.

Rhandy Maulana (2016) conducted research, "Students' view on EFL speaking problems". The purpose of this study is to investigate the problem faced by students in EFL speakers. To determine the challenges faced by students in learning this skill, a qualitative study design is undertaken by using purposive sampling. The study's findings show that every student struggles with communication. The biggest difficulties people have learning how to talk are losing their vocabulary, having trouble pronouncing words, having less self-confidence, being afraid to speak, and being afraid of making mistakes.

Khan et al. (2024) explored the challenges faced by female undergraduate EFL students in speaking English at ULM. To find out these challenges, they used a quantitative method, and collected data through questionnaires from the different semesters' students of the department of English and Applied Linguistics, and then analyzed it on SPSS software by applying the descriptive statistical analysis method. The findings show various factors or challenges, including social, environmental, economic, and psychological.

Al Nakhalah (2016) in his study, *Problems and Difficulties of Speaking That Encounter English Language Students at AI Quds Open University*, investigates the English challenges faced by the students studying at AI Quds University at Gaza Branch. The researcher employs random sampling, selecting 14 participants who study the English Language. The experimental method is used in which the data is collected through observation and interviews to investigate their grammar, pronunciation, and fluency problems in speaking. The interview is conducted with each participant to assess their speaking skills. The results indicate that students face speaking problems such as fear of mistakes, shyness, lack of confidence, and anxiety. The study not only explores the English speaking challenges but also provides solutions to overcome them.

Jannah & Fitriati (2016), in their research article *Psychological Problems Faced by the Eleven-Year Students of MA Nurul Ittihad Demak in English Speaking*, aim to investigate the psychological problems faced by the eleven-year students in English speaking as well as the causes and effects of those problems. The researcher conducted a qualitative study in which the data were collected



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through observation. As a teacher and participant observer, the researchers directly observed the challenges faced by students in speaking English. The findings of the show three main results. Firstly, the students face psychological issues such as fear of making mistakes and being judged by others. Secondly, most students are shy because they cannot communicate well and fear being humiliated by others. Finally, the results show that students feel anxiety because of being closely observed by their teacher and friends while speaking English.

Research Methodology

Research Methodology is a systematic study of the process (Ahmed, Maitlo & Rao, 2022). It is the technique used by the researcher to represent the information (Cheema et al., 2023; Jalbani et al., 2023).

Research design

According to Maitlo et al. (2025), research methodology involves research design, population, sampling, data collection procedures, and instruments. The study has been conducted at the Department of English Language and Literature by using a quantitative research design.

Population and sampling

The population of research can be defined as the wide number of people aimed for conduct research (Maitlo et al., 2024; Ahmed, Shahid & Farhat, 2023). The population of the current study comes from the English department of a university in Shikarpur. The population consists of 200 students of the English department, out of which 132 students are chosen as the sample size through Yamane's formula. The sample is selected by purposive sampling.

Research instruments and data collection

The questionnaire is a technique that is used by researchers to collect data. It consists of a set of written questions that are given to the respondents to know their answers (Sugiyono 2008:142). According to Arikunto (2005: 152), open open-ended questionnaire is a type of questionnaire where respondents give their answers, while in a closed-ended questionnaire, they are given statements with choices. The current study uses a closed-ended, five-item Likert survey questionnaire containing ten items as an instrument to collect the data. The speaking problems of the students were explored by getting their responses through a questionnaire.

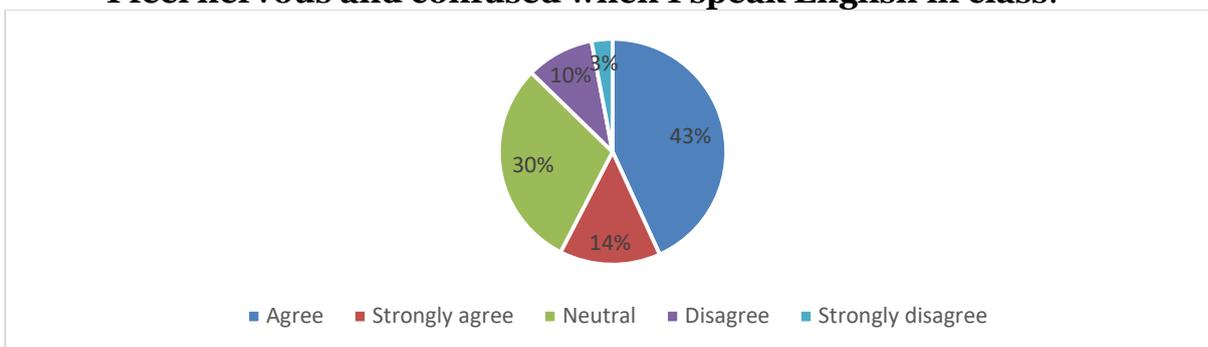
Results and Data Analysis:

The responses to the questionnaires were analyzed through Microsoft Excel. The data is collected through a 5-point Likert scale (agree, strongly agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree) was analysed by applying frequency and percentage tests in Microsoft Excel. Questionnaires consist of ten statements, and the results of each statement is represented in a separate Pie Chart in the form of a percentage.



Chart: 1

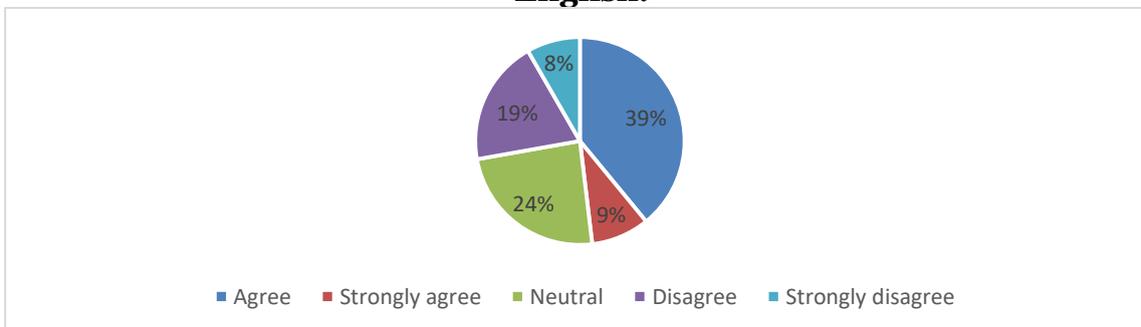
I feel nervous and confused when I speak English in class.



The chart shows that most of the participants agree with it (14% strongly agree and 43% agree). On the other hand, 10% of participants disagree, and 3% strongly disagree. Further, the percentage of neutral respondents is 30%. Based on this result, it can be concluded that most of the students feel nervous and confused in speaking English.

Chart: 2

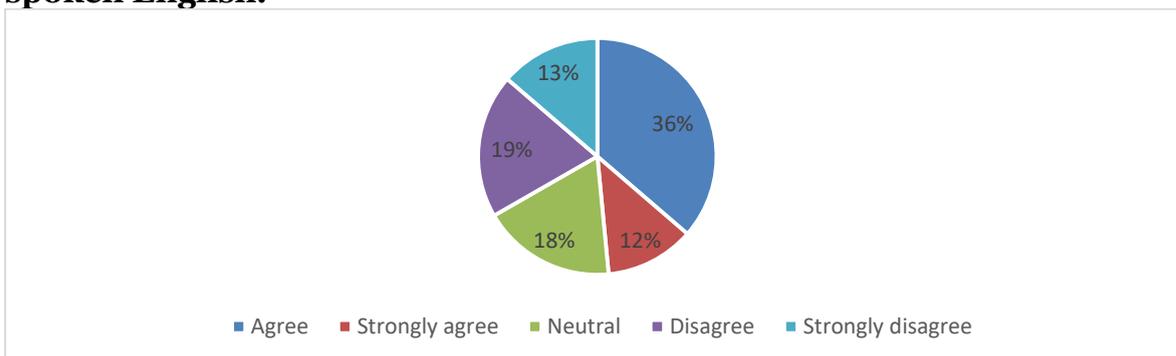
I fear making grammatical mistakes. Therefore, I avoid speaking English.



The second chart shows that 39% of respondents agree and 9% strongly agree. This indicates that most respondents have a fear of making grammatical mistakes, which is why they avoid speaking English. Only 24% of participants are neutral, while 19% disagree and 8% strongly respectively with this statement.

Chart: 3

I fear being judged by others, which makes me lowly confident in spoken English.



This chart shows that most respondents agree with the question's statement 36%

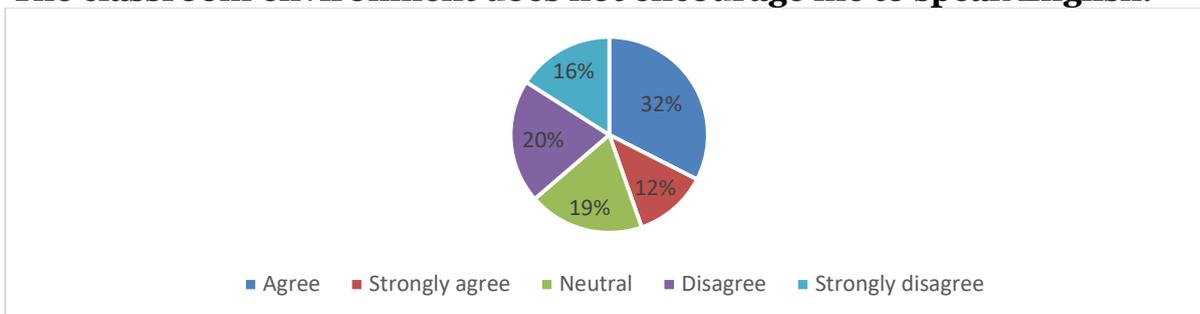


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agree and 12% strongly agree). Moreover, 20% disagree and 14% strongly disagree, while 18% of students are neutral. This reflects that students feel a speaking problem due to a lack of confidence and fear of peer judgment.

Chart: 4

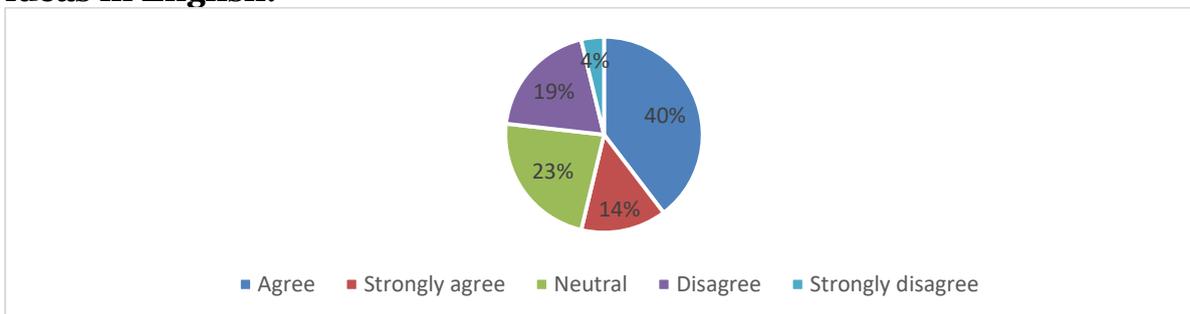
The classroom environment does not encourage me to speak English.



In this chart, 33% of respondents agree and 12% strongly agree. While 20% disagree and 16% strongly disagree. Only 19% of participants remained neutral. The result shows that most students face challenges in speaking English due to the lack of a supportive classroom atmosphere.

Chart: 5

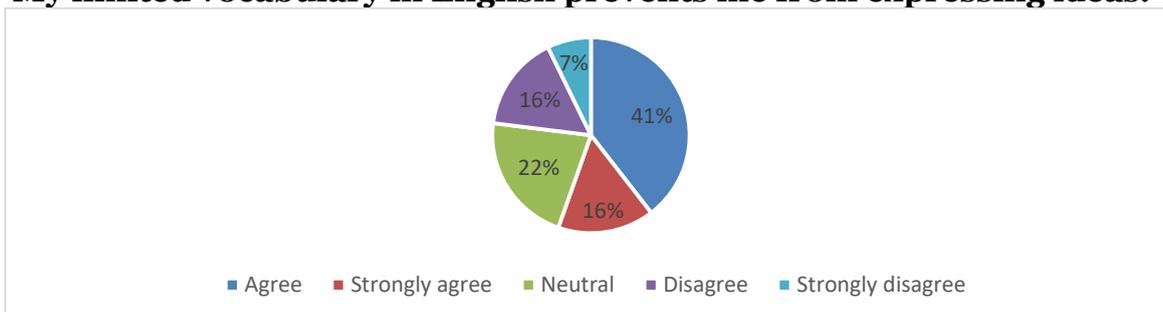
I think in my mother tongue, therefore, it becomes difficult to express ideas in English.



This chart demonstrates that most participants are inclined to favour the statement (40% agree and 14% strongly agree). On the other hand, only 19% disagree and 4% strongly disagree. Additionally, 23% of participants remained, which indicates that 1 that many participants experience mother tongue interference. Due to the influence of their mother tongue, it becomes difficult for students to express their ideas in English.

Chart: 6

My limited vocabulary in English prevents me from expressing ideas.

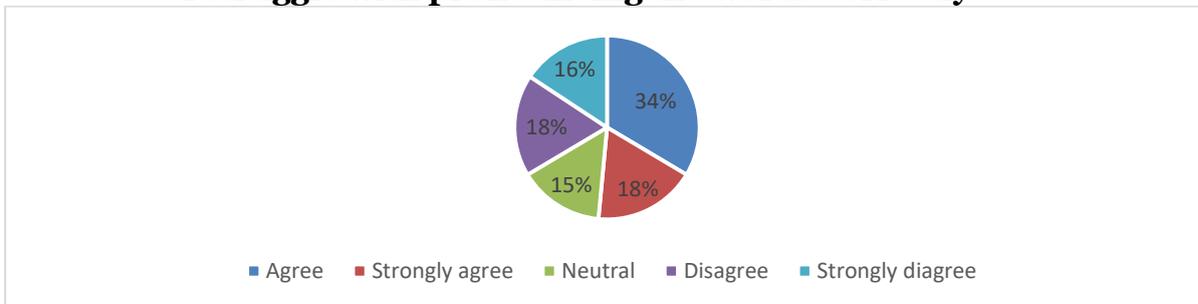


The result of this chart shows that 39% agree and 16% strongly agree. However, 16% disagree and 7% strongly disagree, while 22% of students are uncertain and remain neutral. These results suggest that a shortage of vocabulary is a major



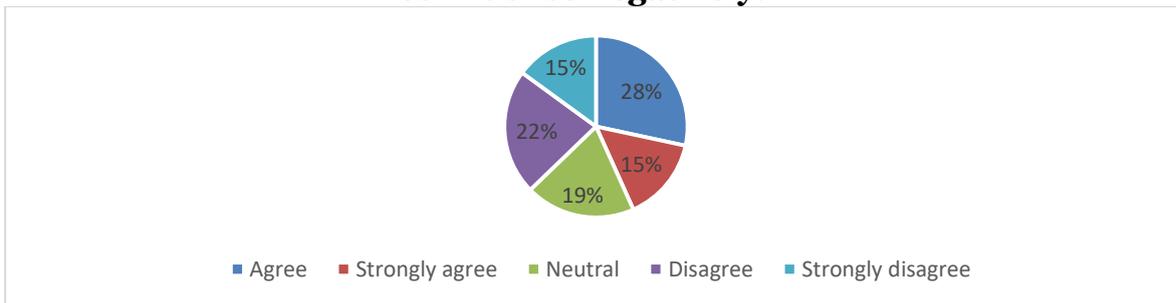
barrier to effective communication, as it limits learners ' ability to articulate thoughts clearly and confidently.

Chart: 7
I struggle with pronouncing the words correctly.



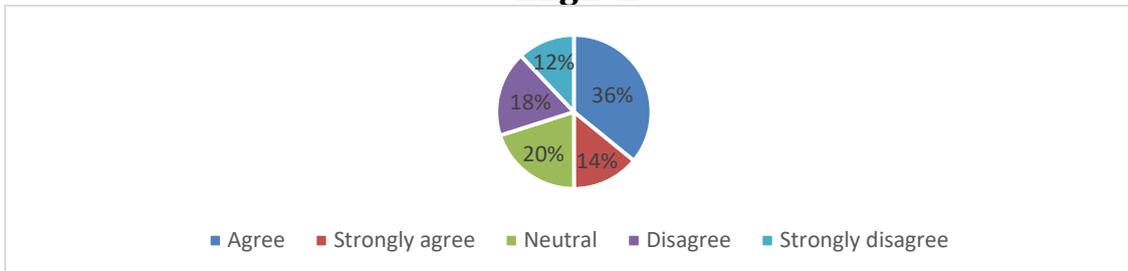
In this chart, 33% agree and 18% strongly agree. It indicates that pronunciation issues are common among learners. On the other hand, 15% of respondents remain neutral, suggesting that some students do not face the pronunciation problem. Meanwhile, 18% of respondents disagree, and 16% strongly disagree.

Chart: 8
I often compare my speaking ability to other peers, which affects my confidence negatively.



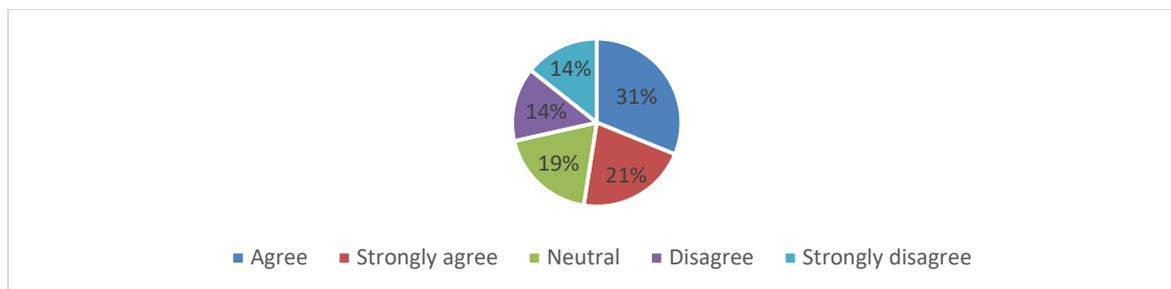
This chart demonstrates that 28% of respondents agree and 15% of respondents strongly agree. Similarly, 22% disagree and 15% strongly disagree. Only 20% of respondents were neutral. From the result of this statement, it can be observed that not all students compare their speaking ability to that of their peers.

Chart: 9
I get confused when I have to participate in class discussions in English.



In this chart, 36% of respondents agree and 14% strongly agree that they get confused when participating in class discussion in English. Meanwhile, 20% of respondents remain neutral, whilst 18% disagree and 12% strongly disagree with this statement.

Chart: 10
I am comfortable at one- on- one communication (e.g., presentations), but I get confused in group discussions.



In the last chart, 31% of respondents agree and 22% strongly agree, indicating that students face difficulty in group discussion, but perform better in presentations (individual settings). Meanwhile, 14% of students disagree, and 14% strongly disagree. Additionally, 19% of respondents remain neutral, suggesting that they feel comfortable in group discussions due to their good speaking skills.

Discussion:

The current study identifies many speaking problems, such as fear of making grammatical mistakes, limited vocabulary, feeling nervous and confused, pronunciation problems, mother tongue influence, fear of judgment, and lack of a supportive class environment. These findings are consistent with the results of other researchers like Tariq et al. (2023), Ali et al. (2020), Aneesa et al. (2024), and Gut et al. (2022).

A significant number of students express their agreement that they feel nervous and confused when speaking English. Because of their low confidence, they are unable to speak fluently. This outcome aligns with previous studies, such as Lee (2005), who found that the students often feel nervousness and low confidence. Therefore, they often avoid speaking English.

Moreover, the fear of making grammatical and pronunciation mistakes is another concern. The students think that if they pronounce the words incorrectly or make mistakes in grammar, they will be laughed at by their peers. This finding is identical to Kurtus (2001), who identified that students are afraid of committing grammatical mistakes, which makes them reluctant to speak in English. These results are also reported in the existing research (Kondo & Ratuwango, 2003; Syifa, 2018). The results of Ali et al., (2020) research indicate that the students face speaking problems same as this research, such as grammar and pronunciation mistakes, as well as anxiety and fear of being insulted.

Another factor contributing to students' hesitation in English speaking is that the classroom environment does not encourage them to speak. Therefore, they could not build their proficiency in English speaking. This research aligns with the study conducted by Ali et al. (2020) that classrooms must encourage students by giving them a supportive environment to promote speaking.

Additionally, a lack of vocabulary is one of the major problems. Many students face problems in speaking because of a lack of adequate vocabulary. They are unable to express their ideas in English when they do not find relevant vocabulary in English. The results align with Heriansyah (2012), who pointed out that the lack of vocabulary is one of the major reasons behind the students' difficulty in English.

Furthermore, the students feel unconfident when they compare their speaking ability with those who are good at speaking. They feel more comfortable in one-on-one communication, such as presentations, while they find it challenging to



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speak in class discussions.

Overall, the results of the current study are relevant to previous related studies that students face various speaking challenges, such as anxiety, fears of making grammatical and pronunciation errors, lack of adequate vocabulary, and comparing one's speaking ability to others. The overall results also verify that the results are valid and signify the existing problem in this novice area, and need to be focused on to address the problems of students in the future in detail.

Conclusion

The present research work is based on the investigation of the speaking problem faced by the students of the English department. It is concluded that speaking is one of the crucial skills for the learner. Based on the research findings and the objectives of the study, the results show that students face several problems in speaking English. These problems include feeling nervous and confused when speaking English in class, largely due to a fear of making grammatical mistakes, limited vocabulary, pronunciation issues, and fear of being judged by their peers, all of which negatively impact their confidence. Furthermore, the classroom environment often fails to encourage speaking practice. In addition, students also face challenges in speaking English due to comparing their speaking abilities with those of their peers, which further affects their confidence.

Recommendation

Firstly, as the students get nervous when they speak English, they should get their intrinsic motivation and consider speaking as natural. Teachers should also motivate them by providing positive feedback to reduce their nervousness.

Secondly, students can overcome their fear of grammatical mistakes by focusing on their fluency rather than strict grammar rules in speaking. Moreover, the students' classroom environment does not encourage them to speak. Therefore, teachers should motivate students to communicate in English. They should incorporate interactive teaching methods and also assign them task-based activities that will help them improve their speaking fluency in English.

Finally, as the students struggle in expressing their ideas in English because of thinking in their mother tongue. To overcome this problem, they should practice thinking and speaking to themselves in English.

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