

PROBLEMS AND OBSTACLES IN DEVELOPING ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILLS AMONG FIRST-YEAR UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS*

Sivakorn Tangsakul

Faculty of Liberal Arts and Science, Nakhon Phanom University, Thailand

Corresponding Author's Email: sivakorn_tk@npu.ac.th

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the problems and obstacles in developing English-speaking skills among first-year students at a public university in northeastern Thailand. The sample consisted of 30 first-year students enrolled in the English for Communication course during the first semester of the 2025 academic year, selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire consisting of 35 items, which was divided into three parts: (1) participants' general background information, (2) problems related to English-speaking skills, and (3) obstacles affecting the development of these skills. The questionnaires were administered directly to the participants during class sessions. The data were analyzed using mean and standard deviations (S.D.).

The findings revealed that two out of twenty items were rated at a very high level of speaking difficulty. The most significant problems identified were limited vocabulary ($\bar{x} = 4.63$) and limited understanding of grammar ($\bar{x} = 4.53$), suggesting that linguistic competence is a major barrier to effective communication. In terms of obstacles to developing speaking skills, the results

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showed that large class size was the most critical issue ($\bar{x} = 4.60$), as it limited students' opportunities to engage in speaking activities effectively. Additionally, students reported other challenges, including a noisy classroom environment, lack of confidence, and limited opportunities to practice English with teachers, classmates, and foreign speakers. These factors collectively hinder the development of students' English-speaking proficiency.

Keywords: English-Speaking Skills, Problem, Obstacle, Communication

Introduction

English functions as a global lingua franca and is widely used for communication across countries, particularly in the context of globalization (Crystal, 2003; Jenkins, 2015). It enables individuals to travel, work, and interact effectively in diverse international environments. In addition, the widespread use of English has enhanced mutual understanding among people from different cultural and national backgrounds, reducing communication barriers and fostering global interconnectedness. Among the four fundamental language skills, speaking is often considered the most crucial for effective communication (Richards, 2008; Brown, 2004). Through speaking, individuals express ideas, share opinions, and interpret the messages of others. Communication largely depends on spoken interaction; without it, meaningful exchanges are limited. When individuals from different linguistic backgrounds are unable to communicate effectively, misunderstandings are more likely to arise. This view is supported by Burns (2019), who describes speaking as a productive skill that involves active oral communication. It requires not only the ability to produce language but also the integration of communicative competence, including pronunciation, grammatical accuracy, and appropriate vocabulary use. Therefore, speaking plays a vital role in language learning and remains an essential skill for learners in any context.

Although English is widely taught at both school and university levels in Thailand, many students continue to demonstrate limited proficiency in spoken English. This issue is not unique to Thailand but is common in many EFL contexts, where learners have restricted exposure to authentic language use (Nunan, 2015; Richards, 2008). One major contributing factor is the lack of opportunities to practice speaking both inside and outside the classroom. In many instructional settings, interaction tends to be teacher-centered, with students participating only when prompted, resulting in limited communicative engagement (Harmer, 2007).

In addition, affective factors such as anxiety, low confidence, and pressure during classroom speaking tasks can significantly hinder learners' oral performance (Dörnyei, 2005; Horwitz et al., 1986). Learners often feel reluctant to speak due to fear of making mistakes or being evaluated by peers and instructors. Furthermore, linguistic limitations remain a key barrier. Many learners struggle with insufficient vocabulary, grammatical inaccuracies, pronunciation issues, and difficulty producing certain sounds, which affect their overall communicative competence (Brown, 2004; Celce-Murcia et al., 2010).

Although a number of studies have examined problems in English-speaking development among Thai EFL learners, most previous research has focused on students in major urban universities or institutions located in central Thailand. Limited attention has been given to students studying in provincial public universities in northeastern border areas such as Nakhon Phanom Province, where learners may experience different educational contexts, language exposure, and access to communicative learning resources. In addition, few studies have specifically investigated both linguistic and environmental obstacles affecting first-year university students' speaking development in this regional context. Therefore, there remains a gap in the literature regarding how local learning environments, classroom conditions, and opportunities for

authentic English communication influence students' speaking proficiency in provincial universities. This study seeks to address this gap by providing context-specific evidence from a public university in Nakhon Phanom Province, Thailand.

Given these challenges, this study aims to investigate the problems and obstacles in developing English speaking skills among university students at a public university in Nakhon Phanom Province, Thailand. In particular, the study seeks to examine key factors such as learners' linguistic limitations, confidence and anxiety in speaking, exposure to authentic English use, teaching methodologies, and the availability of supportive learning environments both inside and outside the classroom.

The study is motivated by the growing importance of English as a global lingua franca, particularly within the ASEAN context (Baker, 2012). Despite years of instruction, many students in provincial universities still struggle with oral communication, which can affect their academic success and future career opportunities (Todd, 2011).

This research is expected to contribute both theoretically and practically. It will provide context-specific insights into the challenges faced by students in regional universities and offer guidance for lecturers and curriculum designers to improve speaking instruction. Ultimately, the findings aim to support the development of more effective, communicative English courses and better prepare students for real-world communication.

Objective

To investigate the problems and obstacles in developing English speaking skills of first-year undergraduate students.

Question

1. What are the main problems of speaking skills experienced by first-year undergraduate students?
2. What are the obstacles in developing English speaking skills of first-year undergraduate students?

Literature Review

1. Importance of Speaking Skills in Language Classroom

Speaking is a central component of English language learning and a core element of human communication. In second and foreign language contexts, learners are expected to develop competence across the four main skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—which function in an integrated manner (Richards, 2008; Brown, 2004). Among these, speaking is often viewed as the most immediate and practical skill, as it enables learners to express ideas, interact with others, and negotiate meaning in real-time communication.

Despite its importance, many learners in EFL contexts continue to experience difficulties in developing speaking proficiency (Shen & Chiu, 2019). One common reason is the limited opportunity to practice spoken English in authentic or communicative settings (Nunan, 2015). In addition, affective factors such as fear of making mistakes, low self-confidence, and anxiety can discourage students from actively participating in speaking activities (Dörnyei, 2005; Horwitz et al., 1986). These challenges often result in learners having underdeveloped speaking skills compared to other language areas.

From a global perspective, the ability to communicate effectively in English is increasingly important. English serves as a lingua franca in international communication, allowing non-native speakers to engage in academic, professional, and social interactions across borders (Crystal, 2003). In this context, speaking proficiency is commonly evaluated based on the ability to sustain

meaningful conversations and convey messages clearly and appropriately. As a result, many second and foreign language learners perceive speaking ability as a key factor contributing to academic achievement and professional advancement.

2. Speaking Problems of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Learners

A substantial body of research has identified speaking-related difficulties among learners in EFL contexts, with language anxiety emerging as a major barrier. Foreign language anxiety—particularly in speaking situations—has been widely documented as a factor that negatively affects learners’ performance and willingness to communicate (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre, 2007). More recent studies also confirm that anxiety, especially in oral communication, continues to hinder learners’ participation in classroom interaction (Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018; Su, 2024).

One of the primary sources of speaking anxiety is limited language proficiency. Learners with insufficient vocabulary and grammatical knowledge often struggle to comprehend input and produce appropriate responses, which reduces their confidence in communication (Schmitt, 2010). As a result, some students avoid participating in classroom discussions or hesitate to seek clarification, fearing negative judgment from peers or instructors.

Fear of making mistakes is another significant factor influencing speaking performance. Learners may feel anxious about being evaluated or ridiculed, which discourages them from actively engaging in oral tasks (Dörnyei, 2005). This fear is closely linked to the concept of “willingness to communicate,” where learners’ readiness to speak is shaped by both linguistic competence and psychological factors (MacIntyre et al., 1998).

Classroom conditions also play an important role. Large class sizes and teacher-centered instruction often limit opportunities for meaningful interaction, making it difficult for students to practice speaking in a supportive environment (Nunan, 2015). In such settings, learners may feel uncomfortable speaking in front of a large audience, particularly in cultures where maintaining face is important.

In addition, individual learner differences such as risk-taking behavior and tolerance of ambiguity can influence speaking development. Learners who are reluctant to take risks tend to avoid using the target language, thereby reducing their exposure and opportunities for improvement (Brown, 2004; Elham, 2012). Similarly, students with low tolerance for ambiguity may feel uncomfortable when they do not fully understand instructions or language input, which can increase anxiety and hinder participation.

Another important issue is the competitive nature of some classroom environments. When learners compare their performance with peers, it may lead to increased self-consciousness and reluctance to speak, especially among those with lower proficiency levels (Dörnyei, 2005). Furthermore, limited opportunities for practice remain a persistent challenge. Even after years of studying English, many learners report insufficient exposure to real-life communication, which restricts the development of their speaking skills (Richards, 2008).

Overall, previous research indicates that EFL learners commonly face multiple, interrelated challenges in developing speaking skills, including linguistic limitations, psychological barriers, and contextual constraints. These issues often result in low confidence, reluctance to participate, and limited communicative competence. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the speaking problems and obstacles experienced by first-year university students in order to determine whether similar patterns exist in this specific context and to provide implications for improving speaking instruction.

Recent developments in Thailand's higher education policy have also emphasized the importance of improving students' English proficiency. The Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation (MHESI) has encouraged universities to align English learning outcomes with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and promote communicative English competence among university students. Many public

universities have implemented English proficiency assessments and exit examinations as graduation requirements in response to national policy reforms (Wudthayagorn, 2021). Recent reports further indicate that Thai universities are expected to support students in achieving practical communication skills, particularly speaking proficiency, through communicative and learner-centered approaches rather than traditional grammar-focused instruction (British Council, 2024). However, despite these policy efforts, many students in regional universities continue to face challenges in spoken English due to limited exposure to authentic communication, large classroom settings, and unequal access to English learning resources (Jiang & Sukying, 2025). This suggests a gap between national policy expectations and actual classroom practices, particularly in provincial universities in northeastern Thailand.

3. Class Size and Student Engagement in EFL Classrooms

Class size is an important factor affecting student engagement in EFL classrooms. In large classes, teachers may have difficulty managing interaction and providing individual feedback, resulting in fewer opportunities for students to practice speaking (Harmer, 2007). According to communicative language teaching (CLT), learners develop language skills more effectively through active communication and interaction (Richards, 2008). However, large classes often encourage teacher-centered instruction, which can reduce students' participation and speaking confidence.

Previous studies have shown that overcrowded classrooms may increase learners' anxiety and limit speaking performance (Nunan, 2015). In the Thai educational context, large class size remains common in many public universities, particularly in general English courses. As a result, students may receive limited opportunities for authentic speaking practice, which can negatively affect their English-speaking development (Sripathum, 2013).

4. Research Framework

This study is based on the concept that English-speaking skill development among first-year undergraduate students is influenced by three interrelated factors: linguistic, affective, and contextual factors. Linguistic factors include limited vocabulary, grammar difficulties, and pronunciation problems; affective factors involve anxiety, low confidence, and fear of making mistakes; while contextual factors include large class sizes, teacher-centered instruction, and limited opportunities for authentic communication. These factors interact and collectively hinder students' English-speaking proficiency. The research framework is presented in Figure 1. below.

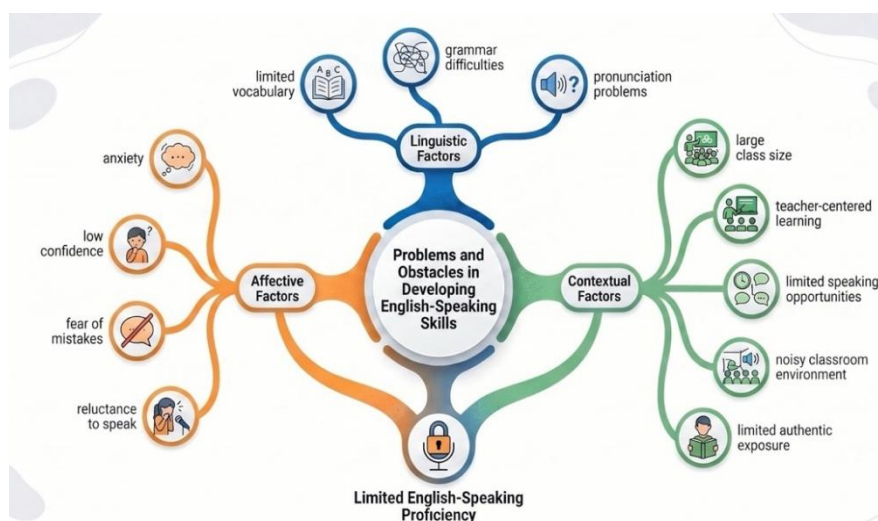


Figure 1 Research Framework

Methodology

This section presents the research methodology used to examine the problems and obstacles in developing English speaking skills among first-year undergraduate students at a public. It describes the population and participants, the research instrument, data collection procedures, and the methods of data analysis used to interpret the findings.

Population

The population consisted of 262 first-year students enrolled in the *English for Communication* course at a public university in northeastern Thailand, located in Nakhon Phanom Province, during the first semester of the 2025 academic year.

Participants

The participants consisted of 30 first-year students enrolled in the English for Communication course during the first semester of the 2025 academic year. The participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation from various academic disciplines, including Science Education, Hospitality Industry, Agriculture, Public Administration, Languages, and Management. The sample size was deemed appropriate for this exploratory study, as it enabled the researcher to obtain preliminary insights into students' English-speaking problems and obstacles within the specific institutional context. Furthermore, a sample size of at least 30 participants is commonly considered acceptable for pilot-scale and descriptive studies in educational research (Creswell, 2014).

Questionnaire

A structured questionnaire was employed to examine students' problems in English speaking and the underlying causes of these difficulties. The instrument was adapted from established frameworks in second language learning and speaking anxiety research (e.g., Horwitz et al., 1986; Richards, 2008).

The questionnaire consisted of three parts. The first part collected participants' demographic information, including age, major, and length of English study. The second part focused on students' English-speaking problems and included 20 items addressing common difficulties encountered in everyday communication. The third part examined obstacles to the development of English-speaking skills, comprising 15 items related to linguistic, psychological, and contextual factors.

For Parts II and III, respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each statement using a five-point Likert scale (Likert, 1932). The scale ranged from 5 (strongly agree), 4 (agree), 3 (moderate), 2 (disagree), to 1 (strongly disagree).

Table 1 Students' level of agreement or disagreement

Scale	Agreement	Mean Range	Levels of Problem
5	Strongly agree	4.50 – 5.00	Very high
4	Agree	3.50 – 4.49	High
3	Uncertain	2.50 – 3.49	Moderate
2	Disagree	1.50 – 2.49	Low
1	Strongly disagree	1.00 – 1.49	Very low

The questionnaire was examined by three experts in English language teaching and applied linguistics to evaluate content validity using the Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC). The IOC values ranged from 0.67 to 1.00, indicating acceptable content validity. In addition, a pilot study was conducted with 30 students who were not included in the main sample to examine the reliability of the instrument. The internal consistency of the questionnaire was analyzed using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, which yielded a reliability value of 0.89, indicating a high level of reliability and consistency of the research instrument.

Data Collection

Data were collected in September 2025, a self-administered questionnaire. The researcher personally distributed the questionnaires to the participants and was present in each class to provide clarification and assistance

when needed. Completed questionnaires were collected immediately after administration to ensure a high response rate.

Participants were informed that their responses would be kept strictly confidential and used solely for research purposes. All personal information was anonymized, and the data were securely stored and scheduled for disposal upon completion of the study.

Data Analysis

The data collected from a questionnaire were analyzed by mean score ($\bar{x}$) and standard deviation (S.D.).

Results

To address Research Question 1—*What are the main problems in speaking skills experienced by first-year undergraduate students?*—data from Part II of the questionnaire were analyzed. This section focused on identifying the specific speaking difficulties encountered by the participants.

Students were asked to rate each item using a five-point Likert scale, where 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = uncertain, 2 = disagree, and 1 = strongly disagree.

The results regarding students' English-speaking problems are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2 The students' English-speaking problems of first-year students

Problems	Mean	S.D.	Level of problem
1. I find speaking English very difficult.	4.03	.80	High
2. I am too shy to speak English.	3.43	.93	Moderate

3. I find speaking English is difficult because of my limited pronunciation.	3.93	.82	High
4. I always forget to say a final sound of each word.	3.40	.77	Moderate
5. I find it difficult to pronounce some words correctly for example $\int$, $t\int$, and θ .	3.46	.73	Moderate
6. If someone laughs at me while I am speaking English, I do not want to continue my speech.	3.33	.66	Moderate
7. I find it difficult to speak English because of my limited vocabulary.	4.63	.55	Very High
8. I find it difficult to speak English because of my limited understanding of grammar.	4.53	.81	Very High
9. It is difficult for me to speak in complete sentences.	3.26	1.01	Moderate
10. I speak slowly because I always translate from Thai to English before I speak English.	3.86	1.04	High
11. If I do not know how to say something in English, I find it difficult to concentrate.	3.30	1.20	Moderate
12. I am afraid to speak to foreigners because I think they will not understand my pronunciation.	3.46	.86	Moderate
13. I want to speak as fluently as a native speaker but I find it difficult.	3.16	.98	Moderate
14. I find it difficult to speak English with the correct intonation.	4.36	.80	High

15. I do not want to make mistakes while speaking English in front of my friends.	3.33	.92	Moderate
16. I am afraid that people will laugh at me if I make mistakes while speaking English.	3.86	.89	High
17. I lose my self-confidence when I make mistakes and someone corrects my English.	2.83	1.17	Moderate
18. I find it too frustrating to practice speaking English with friends whose English ability is below mine.	1.86	1.07	Low
19. I get nervous and worried when I speak to foreigners.	3.33	.93	Moderate
20. I stop speaking when I cannot clearly express my ideas and thoughts.	3.36	.85	Moderate

The findings in Table 2 reveal that first-year students experience English-speaking difficulties at varying levels, with several key problem areas emerging.

Overall, the most significant challenges are related to linguistic competence, particularly vocabulary and grammar. The highest-rated problem was limited vocabulary ($\bar{x} = 4.63$, $SD = .55$), followed by limited understanding of grammar ($\bar{x} = 4.53$, $SD = .81$), both at a very high level. This indicates that insufficient language resources are the primary barriers preventing students from expressing themselves effectively. Additionally, difficulties with intonation ($\bar{x} = 4.36$, $SD = .80$) and general perception that speaking English is difficult ($\bar{x} = 4.03$, $SD = .80$) were rated at a high level, further highlighting challenges in language production.

Pronunciation-related issues also play a significant role. Students reported problems with limited pronunciation ability ($\bar{x} = 3.93$, $SD = .82$) and difficulty producing certain sounds such as /j/, /tj/, and /θ/ ($\bar{x} = 3.46$, $SD = .73$), as well as frequently omitting final sounds ($\bar{x} = 3.40$, $SD = .77$). These issues suggest that phonological competence remains a notable obstacle, although generally at a moderate to high level.

In terms of cognitive processing, many students indicated that they tend to translate from Thai to English before speaking ($\bar{x} = 3.86$, $SD = 1.04$), which slows down their speech and affects fluency. This reflects a reliance on first-language processing, which may hinder spontaneous communication.

Affective factors such as anxiety and fear were also evident but mostly at a moderate level. Students reported being shy ($\bar{x} = 3.43$, $SD = .93$), afraid of making mistakes ($\bar{x} = 3.33$, $SD = .92$), and concerned about being laughed at ($\bar{x} = 3.86$, $SD = .89$). Nervousness when speaking to foreigners ($\bar{x} = 3.33$, $SD = .93$) and fear that their pronunciation would not be understood ($\bar{x} = 3.46$, $SD = .86$) further indicate the presence of communication anxiety. However, losing self-confidence after correction ($\bar{x} = 2.83$, $SD = 1.17$) was relatively lower, suggesting that not all students are negatively affected by feedback.

Regarding communication breakdown, students moderately agreed that they stop speaking when unable to express ideas clearly ($\bar{x} = 3.36$, $SD = .85$) and have difficulty forming complete sentences ($\bar{x} = 3.26$, $SD = 1.01$). This reflects challenges in maintaining interaction and sustaining conversations.

Interestingly, the lowest-rated issue was frustration when practicing with peers of lower proficiency ($\bar{x} = 1.86$, $SD = 1.07$), indicating that peer interaction is generally not perceived as a major obstacle.

To sum up, the results indicate that the main problems faced by students are linguistic limitations (vocabulary and grammar), pronunciation difficulties, and

reliance on translation, followed by moderate levels of anxiety and lack of confidence. These findings suggest that improving students' language resources and providing more opportunities for meaningful speaking practice could help reduce these difficulties.

To address Research Question 2—*What are the obstacles in developing English speaking skills among first-year undergraduate students?*—data from Part III of the questionnaire were analyzed. This section focused on identifying the factors that hinder students' development of English-speaking skills.

The results regarding students' obstacles in developing English-speaking skills are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3 The students' obstacles in developing English speaking skills

Descriptions	Mean	S.D.	Level of problem
English lecturer			
1. An English lecturer do not speak English in the classroom.	3.23	1.27	Moderate
2. An English lecturer do not encourage me to speak English.	2.96	1.12	Moderate
3. An English lecturer do not use multimedia to support speaking activities.	2.90	1.06	Moderate
Students' attitude			
4. English is not important for communication in my daily life.	1.90	.95	Low
5. I do not enjoy learning English since I first started.	3.33	1.18	Moderate

6. I think I can find a good job even though my English is not that good.	2.03	.96	Low
Students' motivation			
7. I do not enjoy speaking English with my classmates because we cannot speak English very well.	3.26	1.25	Moderate
8. I like English, but I lack of confidence when I speak.	3.80	.80	High
9. I am too shy to practice speaking with my friends because I am afraid that they will laugh at me.	2.80	1.12	Moderate
Classroom environment			
10. I am too shy to speak English in front of my classmates.	3.40	1.10	Moderate
11. If the classroom is noisy during a speaking activity, I do not pay much attention.	4.10	.84	High
12. If the class size is too large, I find it difficult to participate in speaking activities.	4.60	.56	Very High
English exposure			
13. I hardly ever speak English with my teachers or classmates.	3.80	1.09	High
14. I do not have foreign friends to practice speaking English with.	3.76	.93	High

15. I do not watch movies and social media in English language or listening to English language songs.	3.36	0.85	Moderate
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The findings in Table 3 indicate that first-year students face several obstacles in developing English speaking skills, with varying levels of impact across different dimensions, including teacher-related factors, students' attitudes and motivation, classroom environment, and English exposure.

In terms of teacher-related factors, all items were rated at a moderate level. Students perceived that their English lecturers sometimes do not consistently use English in the classroom ($\bar{x} = 3.23$, $SD = 1.27$), provide sufficient encouragement to speak ($\bar{x} = 2.96$, $SD = 1.12$), or integrate multimedia to support speaking activities ($\bar{x} = 2.90$, $SD = 1.06$). These results suggest that while teaching practices may contribute to the problem, they are not the primary obstacles affecting students' speaking development.

Regarding students' attitudes, the findings reveal generally low to moderate levels of negative attitudes. Students largely disagreed that English is unimportant in daily life ($\bar{x} = 1.90$, $SD = .95$) and that they could succeed professionally without English proficiency ($\bar{x} = 2.03$, $SD = .96$), both at a low level. This indicates that most students recognize the value of English. However, a moderate level of lack of enjoyment in learning English ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 1.18$) suggests that affective engagement may still be an issue.

For students' motivation, the results show a mix of moderate to high obstacles. The most notable issue is lack of confidence when speaking English ($\bar{x} = 3.80$, $SD = .80$), rated at a high level, indicating that psychological factors play a significant role. Additionally, students moderately agreed that they do not enjoy speaking with classmates due to low proficiency ($\bar{x} = 3.26$, $SD = 1.25$) and feel shy about practicing for fear of being laughed at ($\bar{x} = 2.80$, $SD = 1.12$). These

findings highlight the influence of self-confidence and peer-related anxiety on speaking development.

The classroom environment appears to be one of the most significant sources of difficulty. The item large class size received the highest mean score ($\bar{x} = 4.60$, $SD = .56$), indicating a very high level of obstacle. This suggests that overcrowded classrooms severely limit students' opportunities to participate in speaking activities. Additionally, a noisy classroom environment ($\bar{x} = 4.10$, $SD = .84$) was rated at a high level, further reducing students' concentration during speaking tasks. Shyness when speaking in front of classmates ($\bar{x} = 3.40$, $SD = 1.10$) was also reported at a moderate level.

In terms of English exposure, students reported high levels of limitation. They indicated that they rarely use English in communication with teachers or peers ($\bar{x} = 3.80$, $SD = 1.09$) and lack opportunities to interact with foreign speakers ($\bar{x} = 3.76$, $SD = .93$). Limited engagement with English media, such as movies, social media, or songs ($\bar{x} = 3.36$, $SD = 0.85$), was also noted at a moderate level. These findings suggest that insufficient exposure to English both inside and outside the classroom is a key barrier to developing speaking skills.

Discussion

The findings indicate that first-year students at a public university in northeastern Thailand perceived limited vocabulary as the most serious problem, rating it at a very high level. This result aligns with previous research emphasizing that vocabulary knowledge is fundamental to second language use and is essential for effective oral and written communication (Nation, 2001; Read, 2000; Schmitt, 2010). Without sufficient lexical resources, learners struggle to express their ideas clearly, which directly affects their speaking performance. In addition, students identified limited grammatical knowledge as another major difficulty (Puspasari et al., 2025). This issue is particularly evident among lower-

proficiency learners, who often focus heavily on grammatical accuracy. In many EFL contexts, including Thailand, instruction tends to emphasize grammar, which may lead students to prioritize correctness over fluency, thereby slowing down their spoken production (Tantiwich & Sinwongsuwat, 2021).

This issue may also reflect the washback effect of language testing, in which classroom instruction is strongly influenced by examination formats and assessment practices (Alderson & Wall, 1993). In many EFL contexts, including Thailand, English instruction often emphasizes grammar rules, vocabulary memorization, and preparation for standardized examinations rather than communicative language use. As a result, students may develop passive vocabulary knowledge for test-taking purposes but have limited ability to actively use vocabulary in authentic speaking situations. This learning pattern may explain why vocabulary limitations continue to persist despite many years of formal English instruction. Furthermore, limited exposure to real-life English communication outside the classroom may restrict learners' development of productive vocabulary knowledge and speaking fluency (Nation, 2001; Richards, 2008).

At a high level, students also reported difficulties with intonation and pronunciation, which are common challenges among EFL learners. Accurate pronunciation and appropriate intonation are crucial for intelligibility and effective communication. When learners lack confidence in these areas, their speech may become hesitant and less comprehensible. Another prominent issue is the tendency to translate from Thai to English before speaking, which results in slower speech and reduced fluency. This reflects the influence of the first language on second language production, a phenomenon widely discussed in second language acquisition research (Ellis, 2015).

Affective factors also play a significant role in shaping students' speaking performance. Many students reported avoiding speaking English in front of their peers due to fear of making mistakes and being negatively evaluated. This

behavior is commonly associated with low self-confidence and language anxiety, which can hinder participation and limit opportunities for practice (Dörnyei, 2005; Horwitz et al., 1986). Such negative emotions may stem from previous learning experiences, including fear of criticism or excessive emphasis on accuracy in the classroom.

Regarding obstacles to developing speaking skills, classroom environment emerged as a major factor. Students reported that large and noisy classrooms made it difficult for them to participate in speaking activities. Large class sizes are widely recognized as a barrier to communicative language teaching, as they limit opportunities for individual interaction and feedback (Alvarez et al., 2024; Roshan et al., 2022). In such environments, students—particularly those who are less confident—may feel anxious about speaking in front of a large audience and may choose to remain silent to avoid embarrassment.

This finding is supported by Nunan (2015), who suggests that smaller group work can enhance speaking opportunities and create a more supportive learning environment, especially for shy learners. Additionally, limited exposure to English both inside and outside the classroom further restricts students' ability to develop speaking skills. When opportunities for authentic communication are scarce, learners are less able to practice and internalize the language.

In summary, the major challenges faced by first-year students include limited vocabulary and grammar knowledge, pronunciation difficulties, reliance on first-language translation, affective barriers, and unfavorable classroom conditions, particularly large class sizes and limited exposure to English. These findings highlight the need for more communicative teaching approaches, increased opportunities for interaction, and supportive classroom environments to enhance students' speaking development.

Recommendations

1. Future studies should include a larger sample size and involve multiple universities or regions in Thailand. This would improve the generalizability of the findings and allow for comparisons across different institutional contexts and student backgrounds.

2. Further research should explore the impact of specific teaching strategies, such as task-based learning, communicative language teaching, or technology-enhanced instruction, on improving students' speaking skills. Experimental or quasi-experimental designs would be useful in determining which approaches are most effective.

3. This study relied on questionnaire data; therefore, future research should incorporate qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups, or classroom observations to gain deeper insights into students' speaking problems.

4. Future studies could investigate other factors influencing English-speaking development, such as learning strategies, motivation types, digital learning environments, or exposure to English outside the classroom. Comparing different proficiency levels or academic disciplines may also provide more nuanced insights.

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