

ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS AMONG EGYPTIAN EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: CHALLENGES, PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIERS, AND PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES

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Abstract

Although English proficiency has become a central requirement in academic and professional settings, many EFL university students remain unable to communicate effectively in spoken English, even when they possess sufficient grammatical and lexical knowledge. This literature review examines how oral communication is conceptualized in EFL higher education, identifies key psychological factors that hinder students' oral communication, and synthesizes evidence-based pedagogical strategies for improving communication competence. Drawing on research in applied linguistics and educational psychology, the review highlights that oral communication extends beyond linguistic accuracy to include pragmatic, paralinguistic, and interactional skills. However, students frequently experience anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, shyness, low confidence, and fluctuating motivation, which inhibit their willingness to speak and reduce fluency. The review further shows that teacher-centered practices and limited classroom interaction exacerbate these challenges. In response, communicative tasks, such as communicative games, storytelling, interviews, discussions, podcasting, and visually supported description, are shown to reduce anxiety, increase autonomy, and support meaningful language use. Moreover, technology-enhanced speaking tools offer additional opportunities for practice, though their effectiveness depends on intentional pedagogical integration. The paper concludes by recommending learner-centered approaches and guided digital tool use to create supportive, interactive environments that foster confident and competent oral communication in EFL university classrooms.

Keywords: Oral Communication Skills; EFL University Students; Psychological Barriers; Foreign Language Anxiety; Technology-Enhanced Language Learning

INTRODUCTION

In today's business and education world, communication skills are considered major skills that EFL university students need to possess in order to secure suitable job opportunities. English functions not only as an international language of science, technology, and business, but also as a primary medium for interaction in many higher education settings. Employers increasingly prioritize graduates who can participate confidently in discussions, deliver presentations, negotiate meaning, and express ideas clearly in professional contexts (Chemir & Kitila, 2022). Therefore, developing strong oral communication skills (OCSs) is essential for enhancing employability, promoting collaboration, and enabling individuals to interact effectively in both formal and informal settings (Ismael et al., 2025).

Oral communication (OC) refers to the process of conveying and interpreting verbal messages between speakers and listeners (Nurakhir et al., 2020; Scenters-Zapico, 1987; Taye & Teshome, 2025). It involves selecting appropriate vocabulary, organizing ideas logically, using accurate pronunciation and intonation, and interpreting nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice (Martín-Raugh et al., 2023). Thus, oral communication is not limited to the simple exchange of words; rather, it is a social and interactive process that allows individuals to build relationships, share knowledge, and negotiate meaning in real time (Velde et al., 2024).

Furthermore, OC requires understanding what to say, how to say and when to say it (Wang et al., 2024). Although people live in the age of rapid internet, yet the spoken word still dominates. For example, politicians may rise or fall, relationships may start or end, and lawyers may win or lose based on what they say and how they say it (Ignatavičius, 2023). In this regard, EFL university students need to learn the art of communication in order to express opinions, offer explanations, transmit information, make impressions upon others, speak well in their personal lives, attend meetings, make presentations, participate in discussions and arguments (Zadorozhnyy & Lee, 2024).

Despite the importance of oral communication, EFL university students, no matter how many years they have been learning English, still face many difficulties in oral communication. For instance, Gobena (2025) revealed the following reasons for the students' inability to communicate in English language classrooms: lack of exposure to rich language environments, pronunciation mistakes, influence of mother tongue, lack of exposure to rich environments, overloaded curriculum that does not give students enough time to go in-depth and difficulty in inferring meaning without the use of dictionary. In addition, overloaded curricula often restrict opportunities for meaningful oral practice, and students frequently depend on dictionaries or memorized language structures rather than communicating spontaneously (Zadorozhnyy & Lee, 2023). Similarly, Wang (2025) noted that many EFL learners perceive English primarily as an academic subject required for examination purposes rather than as a medium for real communication. Consequently, when students enter university, where English becomes the primary language of instruction in many fields, they find themselves unable to use the language effectively, leading to frustration, disengagement, and decreased motivation (Apat et al., 2023).

These challenges are further compounded by classroom conditions and institutional constraints. Large class sizes, limited teaching time, high textbook costs, and mismatched class schedules can all hinder active participation (Benlahcene et al., 2020 & Cheung, 2023). Additionally, classroom discussions are often dominated by a small number of confident students, while quieter students may avoid participation due to fear of negative judgment (Armeni et al., 2025). This dynamic contributes to communication anxiety and prevents learners from practicing the language in supportive environments. Moreover, oral communication skills often receive less instructional attention than reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary, particularly when speaking and listening are not included in final examinations (Attia & Algazo, 2025; Park, 2022). As a result, many EFL students complete their schooling without acquiring the communicative competence needed for real-life interaction. In the Egyptian context specifically, the reliance on coursebook-based instruction and teacher-centered lectures limits students' opportunities for authentic language use. Students frequently adopt passive learning roles, which leads to difficulties such as hesitation, long pauses, inaccurate phrasing, mispronunciation, and weak intonation when attempting to speak (Abdelfattah et al., 2023; Gebril & Brown, 2013).

On the other hand, MacIntyre et al. (2020) emphasize that the shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic significantly hindered EFL university students' oral communication development, as reduced opportunities for real-time interaction, unstable internet connection, limited teacher-student engagement, and varying levels of technological literacy all restricted meaningful speaking practice. Given these challenges, this article aims to examine the importance of oral communication competence in EFL higher education, identify the key difficulties and psychological obstacles faced by university students, and propose pedagogical strategies that can support the development of more confident and effective oral communicators.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Oral Communication Skills in EFL

It is worth mentioning that speaking and oral communication skills are two completely different skills. Mastering speaking does not imply mastering the art of oral communication. While speaking refers to the production of verbal language, oral communication (OC) entails the ability to convey messages effectively through both verbal and non-verbal means (Murphy, 1991). For example, a speaker can speak for a long time in a debate without reaching a solution (Muntrikaeo & Poonpon, 2022). This can be due to the fact that they lack the necessary OCSs, such as eye contact, body language and critical listening (Horowitz &

Samuels, 1987). Thus, teaching OC to EFL university students is necessary to nurture the process of socialization, convey messages effectively, resolve conflicts and build rapport.

Although oral communication (OC) is commonly defined as the exchange of information through spoken language supported by non-verbal cues (Gray, 1982; Dunbar et al., 2006), this definition is limited as it views OC only as a simple transmission of messages. Such an understanding neglects the interactive, context-dependent, and socially negotiated nature of communication in real-life situations. In practice, OC requires not only verbal expression but also the ability to interpret and appropriately use non-linguistic cues such as gesture, eye contact, and facial expression (Li et al., 2025). These features do not merely accompany speech; they actively shape meaning and determine how messages are perceived. Other scholars view OC as a tool for personal and social development, enabling individuals to express identity, build relationships, and participate effectively in social contexts (Abdikarimova et al., 2021). However, this perspective assumes that students already possess the linguistic and cultural resources needed to communicate. In EFL contexts, this is often not the case, as students may know what to say but lack awareness of how or when to say it (Mahboob et al., 2022). Therefore, it is more accurate to define oral communication as a set of interrelated skills that enable speakers to construct, interpret, and negotiate meaning in real time, rather than as a one-directional exchange of information.

The process of OC is also shaped by interactional dynamics. For example, during a university lecture, both lecturer and students use verbal and non-verbal signals to negotiate meaning and maintain engagement (Shofiya & Basuni, 2023). In this sense, meaning is co-constructed rather than delivered in one direction. This highlights OCSs are crucial for EFL university students to function effectively in academic and professional environments. Yet, in EFL contexts, successful communication is frequently hindered by limited linguistic competence, weak sociolinguistic awareness, and insufficient use of communication strategies (Ari, 2022; Ratnasari, 2020). Even when speakers share the same communicative purpose, they may still fail to understand one another if they cannot interpret register, cultural norms, or interactional cues (Ramat, 1995). As a result, misunderstandings and communication breakdowns occur, not because speakers lack ideas, but because they lack the strategic competence required to express and negotiate meaning effectively (Yang & Ren, 2022). Consequently, oral communication in EFL is not merely speaking or transferring information. It is a complex, interactive skill set involving linguistic accuracy, strategic flexibility, and sociocultural awareness.

The concept of communicative competence, originally proposed by Hymes (1972) and later developed by Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983), offers a framework for understanding effective oral communication. Communicative competence comprises four main components:

Grammatical Competence

This refers to knowledge of vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammatical structures used accurately and appropriately (Brunson & Pritchett, 1995). Despite years of study, many EFL university students struggle to apply grammatical rules in real-time speaking, often due to overemphasis on memorization and decontextualized grammar instruction (Avramenko et al., 2023). Sometimes students do not use the verb *be* (*is*, *am*, or *are*) while expressing their ideas in the present simple. They also use a present verb with an inflection of *-s* to express an affirmative sentence with a modal auxiliary “*can*”. Besides, a large number of students still use a singular verb instead of a plural verb, and vice versa. In other cases, some students use an adjective instead of a noun, for example, “*healthy*” instead of “*health*”. Also, students use a noun instead of a verb; for example, “*consumption*” instead of “*consume*.” Consequently, EFL university students should be allowed to experiment with grammar in communicative contexts and convert it into the available automatic output in real-life communication (James, 1998). It can be concluded that adequate grammar competence enables students to make effective communication because they always apply grammatical accuracy in using the language (Setiyorini et al., 2020).

Sociolinguistic Competence (SC)

Sociolinguistic competence involves using language appropriately according to social context, cultural norms, and interpersonal relationships (Bayley & Regan, 2004; Ranney, 1992). Without this competence, even grammatically correct sentences may be perceived as rude, inappropriate, or unclear (Rasha, 2024). Despite the importance of SC, EFL university students still face a wide range of challenges, such as poor

language ability, academic study problems, and cultural differences. Poor language ability includes different pronunciation, limited vocabulary, errors in formulating sentences, and poor voice projection. Developing SC involves learning how to use language for various functions, such as getting things done in different contexts (Mujiono & Herawati, 2021). In this sense, the ability to use language cleverly and politely is regarded as crucial. In the same vein, lack of SC can lead to failure to convey formality, politeness, friendship, and group membership, and this will negatively affect the communicative outcome (Subandowo, 2022).

Discourse Competence

Discourse competence (DC) enables speakers to produce coherent and cohesive spoken texts suited to communicative purpose and context (Matiso & Tyantsi, 2023). It includes the ability to structure ideas logically, maintain topic flow, and use cohesive devices appropriately. DC includes not only the creation of complete and coherent texts, but also knowledge of different types of discourse and the ability to interpret these discourses in the light of the communicative situation and considering the non-verbal cues of the situation (Yuldasheva, 2022).

Strategic Competence

Strategic competence refers to the use of communication strategies (e.g., paraphrasing, circumlocution, asking for clarification, using gestures) to overcome gaps in linguistic knowledge (Aporbo, 2024). Encouraging EFL learners to employ communication strategies reduces anxiety and supports fluency, even when linguistic resources are limited (Meyers, 2023).

Overall, oral communication in EFL is a complex, multifaceted process that requires more than linguistic knowledge. It demands contextual awareness, strategic flexibility, and the coordinated use of verbal and non-verbal cues. Developing communicative competence enables EFL university students to interact effectively and confidently in academic and professional settings.

Types of EFL Oral Communication

Researchers have proposed different classifications of oral communication, depending on the aspect of communication they emphasize. For instance, some researchers classify oral communication based on the channel of expression, distinguishing among verbal, nonverbal, and visual modes of meaning-making (Beebe et al., 2016; Djalolovna, 2025). This perspective highlights that spoken interaction is not limited to linguistic output; rather, speakers rely on tone, facial expressions, gesture, and visual cues to negotiate meaning. However, other scholars classify oral communication based on its social function and level of formality, differentiating between formal and informal oral exchanges (Diamantopoulou & Orevik, 2021). This approach views communication as context-dependent, shaped by institutional expectations, audience roles, and sociocultural norms.

The coexistence of these frameworks implies that oral communication is a multidimensional skill, not a single behavior. For EFL university students, this multidimensionality can become a source of difficulty. Students may have sufficient vocabulary to speak but lack pragmatic awareness to adapt speech to academic or professional contexts; or they may produce grammatically accurate sentences yet fail to convey confidence or clarity due to weak nonverbal control (Blitvich, 2024). Therefore, adopting a classification based on communication channels (verbal, nonverbal, visual) is pedagogically meaningful in EFL contexts, as it allows instructors to identify which component of communication learners struggle with and why (Ari, 2022). This classification also aligns with the focus of the current study, which examines how psychological barriers and classroom conditions affect students' ability to integrate linguistic, behavioral, and visual cues during oral performance (Kurnaz, 2022).

Importance of Oral Communication for University Students

As Choo et al. (2024) note, individuals engage with spoken language long before they acquire reading or writing skills, which suggests that communication competence develops primarily through social interaction. However, the ability to speak does not automatically translate into the ability to communicate effectively; the strategic selection of words, tone, and nonverbal cues determines how meaning is

constructed and negotiated (Zhang et al., 2022). When speakers are unable to manage these linguistic and paralinguistic resources, misunderstandings can arise, not because of limited ideas, but due to ineffective message delivery (Chou, 2024; Muradkhani & Hashemian, 2021).

Within higher education, the importance of oral communication is increasingly emphasized due to the shift toward globalized academic and professional environments. To cite an instance, Le (2021) stated that university students need English for their studies in order to search for information and obtain knowledge; therefore, a lot of universities throughout the world need to include the English language as one of their educational tool requirements. In professional settings, on the other hand, employees are expected not only to perform technical tasks, but also to participate in decision-making, collaborate in teams, and engage in persuasive or informative discourse (Qamariah & Hercz, 2025). As Salih (2025) argue, oral communication skills are essential across diverse professions, from engineering and accounting to public relations and education, because they enable individuals to present ideas clearly, negotiate meaning, influence others, and manage interactions in multicultural contexts.

In addition, the value of oral communication also lies in its integrative role in overall language development. Oral interaction provides authentic opportunities for students to draw on and strengthen their grammar, vocabulary, and discourse skills, while simultaneously shaping pragmatic awareness and cultural sensitivity (Puspa et al., 2020). In this sense, oral communication does not function as an isolated skill; rather, it contributes to holistic linguistic competence by encouraging learners to use language purposefully in real situations.

Despite this recognized importance, many EFL university students continue to struggle to articulate ideas confidently or sustain conversations in English. Limited exposure to interactive speaking opportunities, anxiety, and reliance on receptive rather than productive language activities often result in passive classroom participation and weak communication performance (Chand, 2021). Moreover, Islam et al. (2022) pointed out that EFL university students have insufficient or limited exposure to the language outside the classroom; they spend most of their time with their family, friends, and the community, where their target language is constantly used. Hence, they cannot practice oral communication and consider it an academic subject rather than a means of communication. On the other hand, Normawati et al. (2023) determined that students encounter difficulties in learning a foreign language due to cultural differences that make them feel disturbed. They found that even though students master a sufficient number of vocabularies, they still cannot understand various expressions and sentences in English due to cultural differences. Therefore, students must be aware of the English culture because cultural awareness is needed to adjust the English language in daily use.

The previously mentioned gaps highlight a persistent tension in EFL higher education: while oral communication is essential for academic and professional success, instructional practices frequently remain oriented toward written examinations and knowledge recall rather than spoken language use. Therefore, strengthening oral communication competence requires rethinking pedagogical priorities in EFL classrooms. Providing consistent, meaningful, and low-anxiety speaking opportunities is essential for enabling students to transform linguistic knowledge into communicative ability, particularly for future professional engagement and social participation.

MAIN PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS HINDERING EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' ORAL COMMUNICATION

Psychological factors have been widely acknowledged as central determinants of EFL students' oral communication performance. While linguistic limitations can impede expression, research increasingly emphasizes that emotional and affective variables often play a more decisive role in whether learners actually attempt to speak (Peng & Shuhong, 2025). Within the university context, where oral communication is linked to academic participation, professional preparation, and identity formation, the impact of psychological barriers becomes especially pronounced (Mai et al., 2024). The following factors, though conceptually distinct, frequently interact to shape students' willingness to communicate in English.

Fear of Making Mistakes

Fear of making mistakes is consistently identified as one of the most inhibiting factors in EFL oral performance. Many students perceive speaking in English as a high-risk act in which errors publicly signal incompetence (Torres-Marín et al., 2021). This perception is often intensified in settings where classroom discourse emphasizes correctness over communicative effectiveness. In overcrowded university classes, students have limited opportunities to speak, which heightens the pressure that each speaking attempt must be accurate and flawless (Tuyen & Hien, 2022). As a result, learners may avoid participation altogether.

Although making errors is a natural and necessary part of language development (Belmont, 2024), many students continue to associate mistakes with personal failure, low intelligence, or embarrassment. This suggests that the issue is not simply linguistic, but socio-emotional: students fear how they will be perceived (Quynh & Ngoc, 2022). Therefore, instructional environments must shift from evaluative to supportive interaction norms that validate risk-taking and normalize error as a communicative process (Ariyanti, 2016). The challenge, then, lies not in eliminating mistakes, but in reshaping the social meaning attributed to them.

Shyness

Shyness represents another key emotional constraint affecting oral communication. Zimbardo (1977) described shyness as avoidance of participation in social situations, particularly when interacting with unfamiliar people. Elov et al. (2025) similarly noted that shy students tend to withdraw from spoken tasks, preferring written work where self-exposure is minimized.

Nurakhir et al. (2020) and Mahboob et al. (2022) found that shy students often hesitate, pause frequently, remain silent to avoid attention, and closely monitor others' reactions, which further inhibits participation. During public speaking, shyness manifests in reduced vocal projection, limited eye contact, tense posture, and restricted facial expression, which together diminish communicative clarity and audience engagement (Akbar et al., 2022).

According to Chen et al. (2022) and Mundelsee & Jurkowski (2024), shyness does not occur in isolation; rather, it is shaped by the social and pedagogical environment in which communication takes place. When classrooms emphasize evaluation, comparison, or linguistic accuracy over meaning, speaking becomes a high-risk activity in which students feel exposed. In such contexts, remaining silent can function as a protective response rather than a sign of low ability. Thus, shyness should be understood not simply as a personality trait but as an adaptive reaction to classroom norms, peer dynamics, and the perceived consequences of making mistakes. Effective pedagogy must therefore focus on creating socially supportive interactional spaces, where errors are treated as developmental, peer judgment is minimized, and participation is scaffolded, to enable shy learners to speak without fear of self-exposure (Fikni et al., 2022; Gobena, 2025; Iizuka, 1994).

Anxiety

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) is one of the most widely examined psychological factors influencing oral communication. Horwitz et al. (1986) defined FLA as an anxiety that arises specifically when learners are required to use the target language, particularly in speaking situations. Oral communication demands quick thinking and immediate language production, leaving little time for students to think and monitor their speech (Guzman & Jesus, 2021). Consequently, students may fear making mistakes, being corrected, or being negatively evaluated by teachers and peers. This pressure can lead to hesitation, reduced participation, and avoidance of speaking opportunities, even when students possess the necessary linguistic knowledge. FLA therefore affects not only how students speak, but whether they choose to speak at all.

According to Mai et al. (2024) anxiety is rooted in fear of negative evaluation and beliefs about insufficient competence. When anxiety is activated, cognitive resources shift away from language retrieval, leading to

pauses, hesitations, and breakdowns in fluency. This creates a self-reinforcing loop: anxiety reduces performance, which reinforces anxiety, resulting in a silent learner identity (Mohamad, 2025). Thus, managing anxiety is not merely a support strategy but a core pedagogical requirement for oral communication development.

Motivation

Motivation determines students' readiness to engage, persist, and invest in oral communication tasks. In foreign language learning, motivation shapes not only effort but also emotional resilience; students who value communicative competence are more willing to tolerate ambiguity, persist through challenges, and take interpersonal risks (Alfares, 2025; Amoah & Yeboah, 2021). However, when motivation is absent, even well-designed instructional methods cannot produce communicative engagement (Kamaie & Baharloo, 2023).

Lightbrown and Spada (2013) emphasize that motivation in language learning is inherently social, as it depends on students' perceived future opportunities to use English and their attitudes toward English-speaking communities (Aladini & Gheisari, 2025). If students see English as irrelevant to their lives, participation in oral communication tasks declines. Therefore, enhancing motivation requires linking English use to real academic, professional, and personal goals, not merely classroom exercises.

Self-Confidence

Self-confidence functions as a mediating factor through which fear, anxiety, and motivation exert their influence. Students with higher self-confidence are more likely to speak, tolerate mistakes, and view challenges as opportunities for growth (Audina et al., 2021). In contrast, low self-confidence often reflects negative self-image, fear of criticism, and perfectionist standards (Benlahcene et al., 2020).

However, EFL university students may have some difficulties in self-confidence that affect their performance in oral communication, such as poor self-image, fear of listeners' evaluation, fear of teachers' negative feedback, fear of losing face while talking in front of others, having some breathing problems while talking, unrealistic expectations of perfection, and a false sense of humility (Ahsan et al., 2020; Attia & Algazo, 2025). Thus, it is important to enhance students' self-confidence to enable them to communicate smoothly and handle setbacks with ease. Without self-confidence, no language learning activity will be carried out successfully. Furthermore, foreign language learners who possess self-confidence perform well and most likely believe themselves to be capable learners.

Taken together, these psychological factors are interrelated rather than independent. Fear of mistakes contributes to shyness; shyness intensifies anxiety; anxiety weakens confidence; and weakened confidence reduces motivation to communicate. Addressing them requires shifting from a linguistic-accuracy model to a communicative-development model grounded in emotional safety, identity support, and dialogic interaction.

ACTIVITIES FOR DEVELOPING ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Developing oral communication skills in EFL contexts requires instructional practices that provide meaningful opportunities for students to negotiate meaning, express viewpoints, take interpersonal risks, and receive feedback (Martín-Raugh et al., 2023). Importantly, the activities chosen should directly address the psychological barriers previously discussed, such as anxiety, shyness, fear of making mistakes, and low self-confidence, by creating supportive, interactive, and purposeful speaking environments. The following activities integrate both traditional communicative approaches and technology-enhanced tools that extend practice beyond the classroom.

Communicative Games

Communicative games provide structured yet motivational contexts where language use is spontaneous, goal-oriented, and interactive (Castillo-Cuesta, 2020). They reduce anxiety by shifting the focus from linguistic correctness to task completion and shared meaning-making (Elsa et al., 2021). Contrary to the misconception that games are more appropriate for young learners, university students may benefit even more, as they often experience heightened fear of evaluation and loss of face.

In addition, Fithriani (2022) emphasized that competitive-collaborative activities mirror authentic speaking situations, as students ask questions, clarify meanings, negotiate decisions, and justify their opinions. For example, speed chatting activities, in which students rotate among partners to discuss short prompts within limited time intervals, promote fluency by reducing overthinking and encouraging spontaneous speech (Muntrikao & Poonpon, 2022). Another effective communicative game is information gap, in which students are given incomplete story details and must speak to peers to gather missing information before collaboratively reconstructing the full narrative (Marzuki & Kuliahana, 2021).

In Taboo, students must explain a target word without using a list of restricted words, which encourages paraphrasing and adaptive vocabulary use (Hidayatullah & Haerazi, 2022). In Find Someone Who, students move around the classroom asking classmates questions to complete a checklist, supporting question-formation and interaction with multiple peers (Saha & Singh, 2021). Role-play simulations, such as acting out a customer-service situation, a job interview, or a disagreement between friends, allow students to practice tone, intonation, and pragmatic awareness. These activities create a supportive communicative environment that enhances confidence, linguistic flexibility, and social interaction.

Storytelling

Storytelling enhances oral communication by requiring students to organize ideas, evaluate relevance, highlight key events, and engage an audience (Fatima et al., 2021). In addition, storytelling lowers anxiety by encouraging personal expression rather than formulaic language reproduction (Jaca, 2021). By integrating emotional expression, non-verbal cues, and sensitivity to audience reactions, storytelling provides a supportive context that strengthens students' confidence and expressive fluency (Mostafa, 2020).

Another notable advantage of storytelling lies in its flexibility. For instance, students can rely on personal experiences, fictional narratives, cultural traditions, or academic content, allowing the activity to align with various levels of linguistic proficiency and educational goals (Hava, 2019). The performative nature of storytelling encourages learners to move from simply producing correct sentences to shaping language intentionally for clarity, emphasis, and audience impact. For instance, tasks in which students narrate a meaningful personal experience using temporal connectors (such as first, then, after that, later, and in the end) encourage organized, coherent speech while also supporting emotional engagement. Similarly, collaborative "story circle" activities, in which each participant contributes a sequential element to a shared narrative, foster active listening, real-time meaning negotiation, and collective creativity (Anggeraini, 2018). Through these conditions, storytelling promotes not only linguistic development but also social interaction and identity expression within the learning environment.

Podcasts and Audio Production

Podcasting extends oral communication practice beyond the boundaries of classroom time and promotes learner autonomy in monitoring and refining speech performance (Katasila & Poonpon, 2022). Namaziandost (2025) further highlighted that the opportunity for students to rehearse, record, listen, and revise their spoken output encourages awareness of pronunciation, rhythm, pacing, coherence, and audience engagement. Since podcasting tasks are asynchronous, students do not have to perform in real time, which reduces performance pressure, allows additional planning and refinement, and gradually builds confidence in speaking (Hamzaoğlu & Koçoğlu, 2016; Indahsari, 2020).

For instance, one feasible classroom task is to have students produce a short (1–3 minute) recorded narrative in response to a reflective prompt, such as "One idea I changed my mind about during university." In this regard, students draft a brief outline, record several takes, and select their best version before sharing it with peers (Tobin & Guadagno, 2022). Peer review can also be conducted using a simple rubric focusing on clarity of message, pronunciation intelligibility, and listener engagement (Namaziandost, 2025). This approach combines structured reflection, expressive communication, and purposeful listening while

remaining feasible even in large classes. To support accessibility, several free digital tools are available for student use. Table 1 presents the tools and their primary instructional purposes.

Table 1. Digital Tools for Student Storytelling and Oral Communication Development

Tool	Primary Purpose	Pedagogical Notes
Podomatic	Record and publish podcast episodes	Suitable for individual student channels or portfolios.
Anchor.fm	Easy mobile-based recording and distribution	Allows collaborative episodes and remote co-recording; excellent for pair/group assignments.
Vocaroo	Quick, disposable voice recordings	No login required
Audacity	Audio editing and voice enhancement	Supports pronunciation training and reduction of hesitations through self-monitoring in edits.

As shown in Table 1, these iterative production and reflective listening tools position students as authentic communicators whose voices carry value. By allowing students to create, refine, and publicly share spoken work, podcasting supports the development of oral proficiency while also reinforcing learners' identities as confident and capable users of English.

Describing Pictures and Visual Prompts

Describing visual prompts encourages learners to retrieve vocabulary, apply discourse markers, and effective fillers which is particularly beneficial for students who experience anxiety or struggle to generate content spontaneously (Phuong, 2018). Since pictures externalize the topic, students do not need to rely solely on memory or imagination; instead, they can interpret, infer, compare, evaluate, and hypothesize based on what they see. This shifts speaking from "finding something to say" to "saying something about what is visible," thereby increasing fluency and confidence (Issa, 2024).

The pedagogical value of image-based oral tasks also lies in their adaptability. Visual prompts can be tailored to academic themes, cultural topics, real-world scenarios, or imaginative narratives (Eisenlauer, 2020). When students are encouraged to justify interpretations or explain the reasoning behind what they see, the activity moves beyond simple object identification and supports higher-order thinking as well as discourse organization. As a result, picture-based activities can function effectively as both introductory warm-ups and more advanced communicative tasks, including storytelling, debate preparation, and problem-solving discussions (Ghaderi & Afshinfar, 2014). For example, Picture Sequencing activity involves the teacher selecting 4–6 related images depicting a scenario (e.g., a travel mishap, a scientific discovery, or a misunderstanding). In this regard, students work in pairs to arrange the images in a logical order, narrate the sequence, and justify their choices. Table 2 provides examples of commonly used image sources and their pedagogical applications.

Table 2. Sources of Visual Prompts and Their Pedagogical Uses

Platform	Type of Images	Pedagogical Use
ESLflow	Classroom-oriented picture prompts	Useful for structured speaking tasks in controlled lessons.
British Council “Picture Stories”	Sequenced narrative visuals	Supports storytelling, inference, and integrated skills tasks.
Pixabay	Real-life, high-quality photos	Ideal for discussion, cultural comparison, and interpretive speaking.

Interviews

Interview-based speaking tasks promote authentic interaction by requiring students to formulate questions, listen actively, and respond spontaneously, rather than rely on rehearsed or scripted language (Stauffer, 2021). In addition, interviews involve turn-taking and real-time meaning negotiation, which closely mirrors natural conversational dynamics and helps students develop pragmatic competence and interpersonal awareness (Hendriani, 2018). When interviews are conducted beyond the classroom, such as with peers, professors, or staff members, students are encouraged to adapt their speech to different social roles and levels of formality, which strengthens communicative confidence and cultural sensitivity. Recording interviews for later reflection further supports metacognitive awareness, enabling learners to analyze their pronunciation, pacing, vocabulary choices, and breakdown moments (Maca, 2020). For example, students may conduct a short interview on a campus-related issue, share the audio with peers, and use guided reflection prompts to evaluate their performance and set improvement goals. In this way, interviews function as both communicative practice and self-assessment, bridging classroom learning with real-world language use (Haryanti et al., 2021).

Technology-Enhanced Speaking and Listening Tools

Digital technologies have increasingly been integrated into foreign language learning to support oral communication through individualized, flexible, and feedback-rich practice environments (Pinphet & Wasanasomsithi, 2022). Several studies argue that digital platforms extend learning beyond the classroom and create low-pressure opportunities for repeated speaking practice, self-monitoring, and confidence building (Setiawan & Ratnawati, 2022; Arianto, 2021; Cruzatty & Yanza, 2025). These tools can also help learners rehearse, record, and revise their spoken production in ways that are difficult to sustain in traditional classrooms, where limited time and large class sizes restrict meaningful speaking opportunities.

However, some scholars caution that technology alone does not guarantee communicative development. Baker et al. (2019) argue that without structured guidance, students may simply repeat mechanical drill patterns without transferring skills to real interaction. In response, recent advancements in AI-mediated language learning have attempted to address this issue by providing adaptive conversational feedback and pronunciation correction within meaningful contexts (Madhavi et al., 2023). AI tools are increasingly capable of detecting segmental and suprasegmental pronunciation errors, offering real-time corrective scaffolding, and simulating interactive dialogue. Yet, they still lack full sensitivity to pragmatic nuance, cultural appropriateness, and emotional tone, dimensions crucial to authentic oral communication (Bannus & Emeal, 2025).

Thus, the usefulness of digital tools lies in how they are pedagogically framed as they are most effective when combined with classroom discussion, reflection, and performance-based speaking tasks. Table 3 provides an overview of commonly used platforms that support both speaking and listening development in EFL contexts:

Table 3. Technology-Enhanced Speaking and Listening Tools for EFL Learners

Tool	Function	Notes
TalkPal AI	AI conversation partner	Provides adaptive real-time corrective feedback in conversational form
ELSA Speak	Pronunciation training	Uses speech recognition to target specific phonetic and prosodic errors
Speechling	Audio recording with coach feedback	Offers structured improvement through coach-reviewed speech samples
VoiceThread	Asynchronous oral discussion platform	Reduces performance anxiety and promotes reflective speaking participation
BBC Learning English / VOA Learning English	Listening and pronunciation input	Supplies authentic and level-adjusted models for segmental and rhythmic patterns
Flip (Microsoft)	Video-based speaking exchange	Encourages multimodal communication and peer interaction through recorded responses
YouGlish	Context-based pronunciation and usage search	Helps learners observe real-world pronunciation and collocations across diverse speakers

Despite their advantages, digital speaking tools present certain limitations. AI-based feedback systems often over-emphasize pronunciation accuracy while providing limited guidance on discourse organization, pragmatic appropriateness, and interpersonal tone (Li & Lan, 2022). Moreover, excessive reliance on automated scoring may cause students to prioritize “pleasing the algorithm” rather than developing genuine communicative effectiveness (Luo & Yang, 2023). Research also suggests that students with lower self-confidence may avoid speaking tasks even when tools are easily accessible, indicating that technology cannot fully address anxiety without supportive classroom climate and guided reflection (Cruzatty & Yanza, 2025; Liu & Wang, 2023).

Therefore, the academic value of technology-enhanced speaking practice depends on balanced integration. The most effective approach combines digital practice with collaborative classroom tasks, teacher scaffolding, and structured peer feedback. In this framework, digital tools function as supplementary rehearsal spaces, while the classroom remains the site for negotiation of meaning, interpretive nuance, and shared interaction (Madhavi et al., 2023). Taken together, technology can extend and reinforce oral communication development, but it does not replace the social and relational dimensions of speaking that remain central to language learning.

DISCUSSION

The present study emphasizes that oral communication skills among Egyptian EFL university students are shaped by the interaction of linguistic competence, psychological factors, and classroom practices. Although many students have studied English for several years, their oral communication remains limited in real contexts. This aligns with Wang et al.’s (2024) argument that English is often viewed as an academic subject rather than a communicative tool, leading to passive learning and reduced willingness to speak. Likewise, Setiawan & Ratnawati (2022) highlight that insufficient exposure to rich language environments and curriculum overload further restrict spontaneous spoken interaction, which this study confirms in the Egyptian context.

Psychological variables were found to be particularly influential. Fear of making mistakes, shyness, and foreign language anxiety significantly hinder participation, consistent with previous research showing that affective barriers may be more restrictive than linguistic limitations (Gumede, 2025; Ariyanti, 2016). These emotional constraints often interact with classroom social dynamics; for example, fear of negative evaluation is intensified in teacher-centered learning environments where correctness is emphasized over communication. This reinforces Mai et al.’s (2024) assertion that learners may withhold participation not due to lack of ability, but due to perceived interpersonal risk.

Additionally, cultural perceptions regarding error and public performance influence communicative confidence. Shyness, as understood in this study, reflects not a fixed personality trait but a response to interactional pressure and perceived social judgment (Getie, 2020). This clarifies why some students who possess adequate linguistic resources still hesitate to speak, as oral communication is experienced not merely as the delivery of a message but as a moment of identity exposure.

On the other hand, several classroom conditions can limit students' willingness to speak. Teacher-centered instruction, insufficient time allocated for oral activities, and large class sizes often restrict opportunities for interaction and discourage students from taking risks, as noted by Elttayef and Hussein (2017). In contrast, activities that emphasize meaningful, low-pressure communication, such as communicative games, storytelling, interviews, and podcast production, have been shown to lower anxiety and create more supportive speaking environments, which in turn promotes fluency and confidence (Armeni et al., 2025; Castillo-Cuesta, 2020; Elsa et al., 2021).

The study also confirms the growing relevance of digital tools for oral communication development. AI-based speaking platforms can assist learners in improving pronunciation, prosody, and fluency by providing immediate feedback and ample opportunities for repeated practice (Trofi & Isaacs, 2021). However, research shows that such tools cannot independently develop deeper dimensions of communicative competence, such as pragmatic appropriateness, discourse management, or confidence in interaction (Li et al., 2025; Li & Lan, 2021). These aspects require social negotiation, cultural interpretation, and situated feedback, which are best supported through teacher mediation and guided peer interaction.

Therefore, the integration of digital tools must be intentional rather than superficial. Simply introducing new technologies for novelty or visual appeal, what Chou (2024) refers to as "performance-oriented digital adoption", does not contribute to meaningful learning. Effective use requires careful planning, alignment with learning objectives, and scaffolding that helps students reflect on their communicative performance rather than merely complete tasks (Alfares, 2025). Previous studies emphasize that when digital resources are incorporated strategically, paired with structured reflection, feedback cycles, and opportunities for live interaction, they can enhance learner autonomy, reduce anxiety, and extend speaking practice beyond the classroom (Akinsemolu & Onyeaka, 2025). Taken together, technology itself does not guarantee communicative development. Its benefits emerge when tools are selected purposefully, integrated into pedagogically grounded tasks, and accompanied by teacher guidance that supports students in making sense of feedback and applying it meaningfully.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that Egyptian EFL university students' oral communication difficulties are influenced by a combination of linguistic, psychological, and pedagogical factors. While many students have acquired grammatical knowledge and vocabulary through years of formal instruction, they often struggle to translate this knowledge into effective oral performance. Psychological barriers such as anxiety, shyness, fear of negative evaluation, and low self-confidence were found to significantly inhibit learners' willingness to speak, confirming the affective dimension of oral communication emphasized in previous research. Furthermore, classroom environments that prioritize accuracy over meaning, coupled with teacher-centered instructional practices and limited opportunities for spontaneous interaction, reinforce students' reluctance to communicate. To enable students to use English confidently in academic and professional contexts, oral communication must be approached as a dynamic and socially negotiated skill that requires supportive learning environments, purposeful communicative practice, and opportunities for identity expression. Developing oral communication competence requires not only linguistic proficiency, but also sensitivity to context, confidence in self-expression, and the strategic ability to negotiate meaning in real time.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Based on the findings, it is recommended that oral communication instruction in EFL university contexts shift toward approaches that prioritize meaningful interaction, emotional support, and gradual confidence-building. Teachers should adopt student-centered techniques that encourage collaborative speaking, such as group discussions, debates, interviews, and storytelling, which allow learners to express ideas without being constrained by fear of making mistakes. Creating a classroom atmosphere where errors are understood as natural and developmental can help reduce anxiety and foster risk-taking. In addition, explicit instruction in pragmatic and non-verbal communication, including tone, register, eye contact, and gesture, can enhance communicative effectiveness beyond grammatical accuracy. Technology may also serve as an important supplementary tool, particularly through podcasting, voice recording, and AI-mediated conversation practice, which offer learners opportunities to rehearse and monitor their oral production outside class. However, technology should support rather than replace human interaction; reflective teacher guidance remains essential. Ultimately, oral communication development is most effective when instruction is relational, interactive, and connected to students' academic and professional needs.

Future research may explore how sustained participation in communicative tasks contributes to changes in confidence, fluency, and willingness to communicate over time, as longitudinal designs can provide deeper insight into developmental processes. The relationship between cultural identity and oral communication also warrants closer examination, particularly in contexts where English use may be associated with social, academic,

or professional identities. Additionally, as digital and AI-supported speaking tools continue to advance, more empirical research is needed to assess their effectiveness in enhancing not only pronunciation, but also discourse competence and pragmatic sensitivity. Comparative studies across different universities or instructional models in Egypt may also help identify institutional factors that either facilitate or hinder oral communication development, thereby informing more contextually responsive pedagogical strategies.

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