

# The Problems Faced by Middle Eastern Students in Speaking Skills

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**Abstract:** This research aimed to discover the problems and their cause of Middle Eastern students in speaking skills. This research was conducted in Cairo, Egypt, specifically at Al-Azhar University. This research employed a descriptive analysis method with a qualitative approach. The participants included fifteen Middle Eastern students majoring in English. Interviews and questionnaires were employed for data collection of the research. The findings reveal that the most common problem faced by Middle Eastern students in speaking skills is having a limited vocabulary (80%), as it is proven that forming sentences in English is challenging for them. Additionally, other problems are followed by pronunciation (67%) as writing and pronunciation in English often differ significantly. Next, grammar deficiency (60%) due to a lack of the students' ability to form coherent sentences, and deficiency in fluency when speaking (87%) due to difficulty imitating pauses, rhythm, stress, and intonation. Meanwhile, the causes of problems Middle Eastern students faced are a lack of self-confidence, fear of making mistakes, anxiety, embarrassment, and lack of support from both their universities and their external environments, such as family and community.

**Keywords:** Middle Eastern Students, Speaking Skills, Qualitative Approach, Cairo

**Abstrak:** Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui permasalahan dan penyebabnya pada mahasiswa Timur Tengah dalam keterampilan berbicara. Penelitian ini dilakukan di Kairo, Mesir, tepatnya di Universitas Al-Azhar. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode analisis deskriptif dengan pendekatan kualitatif. Partisipan penelitian ini adalah lima belas mahasiswa Timur Tengah jurusan Bahasa Inggris. Wawancara dan angket digunakan untuk pengumpulan data penelitian. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa masalah yang paling sering dihadapi oleh siswa Timur Tengah dalam keterampilan berbicara adalah keterbatasan kosakata (80%), terbukti bahwa menyusun kalimat dalam bahasa Inggris merupakan tantangan bagi mereka. Selain itu, masalah lainnya adalah pelafalan (67%) karena penulisan dan pelafalan dalam bahasa Inggris sering kali ditemukan sangat berbeda. Berikutnya, kurangnya pemahaman tata bahasa (60%) karena kurangnya kemampuan siswa untuk menyusun kalimat yang benar, serta kekurangan dalam kelancaran berbicara (87%) karena kesulitan meniru jeda, ritme, tekanan, dan intonasi. Sementara itu, penyebab masalah yang dihadapi mahasiswa Timur Tengah adalah kurangnya kepercayaan diri, takut membuat kesalahan, kecemasan, rasa malu, dan kurangnya dukungan dari universitas dan lingkungan eksternal, seperti keluarga dan masyarakat.

**Kata kunci:** Mahasiswa Timur Tengah, Kemampuan Berbicara, Pendekatan Kualitatif, Kairo

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the process of learning English, there are four fundamental skills that students must master, such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Each pillar aims to achieve a specific goal in mastering the English language. There are two types of language skills, as noted by (Masduqi,

2016), receptive skills, which include listening and reading, involve students receiving information from the teacher. In contrast, productive skills include speaking and writing, where students generate language information on their own. Skills focusing on students' ability to interact orally in English, as well as their mother tongue, namely speaking skills. According to

Karpovich et al. (2021) speaking is the process of transforming thoughts into meaning using language, either in monologues or dialogues. Speaking skills are one of the language skills that students must master, as it is considered a crucial skill for oral communication and interaction (Islam, et al., 2022).

Harmer in Wahyuni (2016) also states that speaking is the ability to speak well and fluently, and it does not only specifically assume education knowledge of the characteristics of languages. It is essential for individuals to learn English, as it serves as a foundational tool for enhancing their skills. Mastery of the English language enables effective communication and comprehension, which are critical in various academic and professional contexts.

However, speaking, one of the most challenging skills for language learners to develop (Ork et al., 2024), often proves difficult for individuals who acquire a new language, as they struggle to communicate effectively and accurately due to their limited understanding of this specific area (Ghafar et al., 2023). Additionally, according to Shteivi & Hamuda (2016), speaking skill reflects people's proficiency in that language.

Based on the research of Houn & Em (2022), despite years of instruction, many students still struggle to speak and understand English accurately. The difficulty and struggle students face lead them to problems in speaking skills. It is proven by the findings of Ratnasari (2020), research indicates that Mechanical Engineering students learning English as a foreign language face several challenges in their speaking skills. These challenges are attributed to a lack of

vocabulary, feelings of nervousness, an unsupportive environment, and insufficient knowledge of grammar. Additionally, Siagian et al. (2020) researched the challenges faced by second-semester English department students in Medan regarding their speaking skills. The study found that the main issues in their speaking abilities arose from ineffective knowledge transition into practice. This was attributed to several factors, including a lack of foundational English knowledge, socioeconomic influences, non-English instruction in the classroom, and anxiety about speaking English. Meanwhile, Islam et al. (2022) conducted similar research on the speaking skills of public and private first-year university students of English major in Dhaka, Bangladesh. As a result, it is stated that public university students are generally more proficient in English and encounter fewer challenges compared to private university students. Another research conducted by Anh Tram (2020) in Vietnam led to research on English major students facing problems with their speaking skills. It is stated that there were two types of problems the students faced, linguistic problems (stuck in the first language, vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and others) and non-linguistic problems (psychology and socially related problems and lecturer' learning method-related problems).

Furthermore, the challenges and the problems university students face in developing their speaking skills vary across different regions. Based on the preliminary research data obtained by interviewing one English lecturer, most Middle Eastern students struggle to use their English during real interactions in the classroom. Middle Eastern students face several obstacles

when speaking, including insufficient vocabulary and a lack of confidence to start speaking, and primary influence, namely the use of the first language of their respective countries, is a huge influence on pronunciation. This lack of effort could make it challenging to achieve the goal of becoming active and proficient in the English language. It can be concluded from several of these explanations that speaking skills are crucial because, with the speaking skills students possess, they are expected to be able to express criticism or opinions and they are expected to be able to make students understand better how to speak well by learning speaking skills themselves.

From the previous literature research, it shows that foreign language learners in some Asian regions face problems with their English-speaking skills. There is a significant amount of research focusing on the problems that foreign language learners, particularly university students in Asia, face in developing their English-speaking skills. Most of the research are concentrated in South and Southeast Asia. However, there is limited research on the problems encountered by university students in the Middle Eastern region, especially among newcomers from different countries into a Middle Eastern country, namely Egypt. Therefore, from the preliminary research arises research to discover the problems Middle Eastern students face in speaking English at Al Azhar University in Cairo.

## **2. RESEARCH METHOD**

This research employed qualitative research with descriptive data. This type of

qualitative research focuses on description. The theory quoted by Schrieber in Yendra (2018) states that descriptive research only describes a phenomenon by using numbers to create a picture of a group or individual. The data consists of what problems Middle Eastern students experience in speaking English and what causes these problems.

### **2.1 Participants of the Research**

The participants were 15 first-year students of English major at Al Azhar University. The students were engaged in discussions, as this research aimed to gather data about teachers and the problems faced by students.

### **2.2 Data Collection of the Research**

To overcome Middle Eastern students' difficulties in mastering speaking skills, this research employed two instruments including interviews, and questionnaires. In this case, observation was conducted in the speaking class using the non-participant observation method to analyze the behavior of the participants. The interviews were conducted to collect data from one teacher and distribute questionnaires to Middle Eastern students. Some questionnaire was given to each Middle Eastern student to explore more about opinions and aspects that can influence student learning activities and support the answers given by the teacher.

From the data collected through questionnaires, the results were identified about the issues faced by Middle Eastern students and the causes behind their difficulties in practicing speaking skills. Therefore, in this case, percentage research is also important to calculate how many Middle Eastern students experience difficulties in

practicing to master speaking skills and the causes of Middle Eastern students' problems in mastering speaking skills.

### 2.3 Data Analysis of the Research

Data analysis involves several steps for each instrument, including data reduction, data display, and lead to the research results or interpretation (Yendra, 2018).

#### 2.3.1 Data Reduction

This is the former step of analyzing qualitative data research. It is related to the selection process, focusing on a problem (focus), simplifying, abstracting, and changing data that appears in a list of written field notes or transcriptions. The data gathered from the interviews was selectively processed to focus on exploring the problem of speaking skills and the cause of the problem.

#### 2.3.2 Data Display

The second step is displaying data. Displays can be chunks of text or expanded diagrams, graphs, charts, tables, or matrices provide new ways of organizing thoughts about data that are more textually embedded. In this research, the data were displayed in tables from the interviews of the teacher and questionnaire results of Middle Eastern students.

#### 2.3.3 Research Results

The research results were analyzed and explained, including interpretations of the speaking skills problem and its causes, to generate findings. This research was conducted using method triangulation to employ various data collection methods for obtaining more reliable results. The researcher employed interviews and observations to verify the data. Additionally, the

researcher employs various informants, including interviews with teachers and questionnaires to students, validating the data.

## 3. RESULTS

The findings derived from the interviews indicate that the teacher agrees with the theory of problems in the practice of speaking skills, as well as the causes of achieving proficiency in this area. The results obtained from the interviews are as follows, which can be seen in the table below:

**Table 1. Interview Report**

No.	Conclusion of Teacher Answer
1	Middle Eastern students have limited vocabulary skills.
2	Middle Eastern students often struggle with speaking English fluently.
3	Middle Eastern students may struggle with sentence construction due to their limited grammar skills.
4	Middle Eastern students have not yet achieved fluency in English.
5	Middle Eastern students are more accustomed to learning English words through spoken communication with others.
6	Many Middle Eastern students still feel hesitant to speak foreign languages.
7	One of the problems that teachers often face with students is their fear of making mistakes.
8	Middle Eastern students often feel hesitant to speak English due to fear of making mistakes.

9	Middle Eastern students often feel embarrassed about their pronunciation in a foreign language. They worry about making mistakes because the language used for communication in class is Arabic.
10	Middle Eastern students often lack the necessary support in learning, which is essential for helping them learn English effectively.

The interview findings concluded that the challenges Middle Eastern students face in developing speaking skills stem from several factors. These include a limited vocabulary and the perception that forming coherent sentences is difficult, even when words are combined. Additionally, poor grammar prevents students from constructing sentences accurately and fluently. These issues lead to further difficulties in speaking activities, such as fear of making mistakes, feelings of shame, stress, low confidence, and lack of support.

To complement the interview data, this study also utilized questionnaires distributed to Middle Eastern students. The purpose was to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the problems they face and the underlying causes of their struggles in mastering speaking skills. The questionnaire responses were collected from 15 first-year female students.

Based on the questionnaire responses, the study identified key issues and cross-verified them with the interview findings. The questionnaire consisted of 12 questions, providing insights into the specific problems and causes that hinder Middle Eastern students in

improving their speaking skills. The results are presented alongside detailed tables summarizing the data.

No	List of Questions	Answers		Percentage		Total
		Agree	Not Agree	Agree	Not Agree	
1	Do you feel that vocabulary is one of the problems you have in your speaking skills?	12	3	80%	20%	15

**Picture 1. Questionnaire Result of First Question**

According to the first question, "Do you feel that vocabulary is one of the challenges in your speaking skills?", the results show that 80% of Middle Eastern students in their 1st and 2nd semesters possess a limited vocabulary. On the other hand, 20% of the students believe vocabulary is not a significant issue for them. This indicates that only a minority of Middle Eastern students do not perceive vocabulary as a challenge to their speaking skills, while the majority struggle due to their restricted vocabulary.

No	List of Questions	Answers		Percentage		Total
		Agree	Not Agree	Agree	Not Agree	
2	Do you have difficulty pronouncing English words?	10	5	67%	33%	15

**Picture 2. Questionnaire Result of Second Question**

In response to the second question, "Do you have difficulty pronouncing English words?", the findings reveal that 67% of Middle Eastern students struggle with proper English pronunciation, while 33% experience no issues and are capable of pronouncing words accurately in both classroom settings and real-life situations. This suggests that a significant number of Middle

Eastern students still face challenges with English pronunciation, largely due to the well-known differences between English spelling and pronunciation.

No	List of Questions	Answers		Percentage		Total
		Agree	Not Agree	Agree	Not Agree	
3	Do you find it difficult to group words that have similar pronunciations in English?	11	4	73%	27%	15

**Picture 3. Questionnaire Result of Third Question**

Referring to the third question “Do you find it difficult to group words that have similar pronunciations in English?”, the result indicates there are 73% of Middle Eastern students have trouble grouping similar pronunciations in English, while 27% of the students do not find it difficult with words that have similar pronunciation in English. This suggests that only a minority of Middle Eastern students do not experience difficulties with English words that have similar pronunciations, most of the rest of the Middle Eastern students find it difficult.

No	List of Questions	Answers		Percentage		Total
		Agree	Not Agree	Agree	Not Agree	
4	Are you facing problems to string the words into sentences in English?	9	6	60%	40%	15

**Picture 4. Questionnaire Result of Fourth Question**

Referring to the fourth question “Are you facing problems to string the words into sentences in English?”, the result indicates that there are 60% of the total Middle Eastern students find it difficult to pronounce sentences well in English. However, another 40% of Middle Eastern students said they did not have trouble in forming

correct sentences. It can be concluded that only a small number of Middle Eastern students do not experience difficulties in grammar when they want to put words together to form correct English sentences.

No	List of Questions	Answers		Percentage		Total
		Agree	Not Agree	Agree	Not Agree	
5	Do you have difficulty arranging words into sentences to carry out foreign language conversations?	8	7	73%	37%	15

**Picture 5. Questionnaire Result of Fifth Question**

According to the fifth question, "Do you find it difficult to arrange words into sentences for foreign language conversations?", the findings reveal that 73% of Middle Eastern students at Al-Azhar University in Cairo face technical challenges in constructing proper sentences during conversations. Additionally, 37% of the students can arrange words for simple conversations but struggle to form complete sentences. This indicates that many Middle Eastern students at Al-Azhar University in Cairo are still unable to correctly structure words when engaging in English conversation.

No	List of Questions	Answers		Percentage		Total
		Agree	Not Agree	Agree	Not Agree	
6	Do you think you are not able to speak English well and fluently because you cannot master the rhythm and intonation?	13	2	87%	13%	15

**Picture 6. Questionnaire Result of Sixth Question**

Referring to the sixth question "Do you think you are not able to speak English well and fluently because you cannot master the rhythm and intonation?" the result indicates that there are 87% of all Middle Eastern students are still unable to pronounce English words with correct stress and intonation. A small portion, namely 13%, said they had no difficulty pronouncing words with stress and intonation. This suggests that only most Middle Eastern students have problems pronouncing these words with good pronunciation.

No	List of Questions	Answers		Percentage		Total
		Agree	Not Agree	Agree	Not Agree	
7	Do you often think you are unable to understand what other people say in English?	6	9	40%	60%	15

**Picture 7. Questionnaire Result of Seventh Question**

Based on the seventh question "Do you often feel unable to understand what others say in English?", the results show that 40% of Middle Eastern students struggle to comprehend words when others speak in English. Meanwhile, the majority, 60%, report having no difficulty understanding spoken English. This indicates that most of the students are still able to comprehend what others are saying to them in conversations.

No	List of Questions	Answers		Percentage		Total
		Agree	Not Agree	Agree	Not Agree	
8	Is it possible that feeling a lack of self-confidence is one of the problems you experience in communication?	9	6	60%	40%	15

**Picture 8. Questionnaire Result of Eighth Question**

Referring to the eighth question, "Is it possible that feeling a lack of self-confidence is

one of the problems you experience in communication?", the results show that a significant majority, specifically 60% of Middle Eastern students at Al Azhar University in Cairo, acknowledged facing this issue. It is widely known that self-confidence is a key factor contributing to challenges in speaking skills. Additionally, a smaller proportion, 40% of Middle Eastern students, believe they are confident and do not feel insecure when speaking English. In summary, Middle Eastern students generally still lack confidence when it comes to speaking English.

No	List of Questions	Answers		Percentage		Total
		Agree	Not Agree	Agree	Not Agree	
9	Do you hesitate to make a mistake that makes one of the causes you have in speaking?	9	6	60%	40%	15

**Picture 9. Questionnaire Result of Ninth Question**

Based on the ninth question "Do you hesitate to speak due to a fear of making mistakes?", the findings show that 60% of Middle Eastern students feel afraid and hesitant to make mistakes while speaking, which can contribute to difficulties in their speaking skills. On the other hand, 40% of the students do not face this issue and are unafraid of making errors when speaking. These results suggest that a significant portion of Middle Eastern students still lack the confidence to make mistakes, particularly when communicating in English.

No	List of Questions	Answers		Percentage		Total
		Agree	Not Agree	Agree	Not Agree	
10	Do you think anxiety is one of the problems you have in speaking?	9	6	60%	40%	15

**Picture 10. Questionnaire Result of Tenth Question**

Based on the tenth question, "Do you think anxiety is one of the problems you have in speaking?", the results reveal that 60% of Middle Eastern students at Al Azhar University in Cairo reported that anxiety was one of the reasons they struggled to improve their English-speaking skills. Meanwhile, 40% of Middle Eastern students stated that they did not experience any anxiety when speaking English. These findings suggest that the majority of Middle Eastern students still feel significant anxiety, which is the primary reason they are unable to communicate effectively in English.

No	List of Questions	Answers		Percentage		Total
		Agree	Not Agree	Agree	Not Agree	
11	Do you feel shy when communicating so that you have difficulty in speaking English?	10	5	67%	33%	15

**Picture 11. Questionnaire Result of Eleventh Question**

Based on the eleventh question "Do you feel shy when communicating so that you have difficulty in speaking English?", the result indicates that most Central Eastern students, namely 67% of all students, feel embarrassed so that when they shy when they want to speak English, they are afraid. Apart from that, 33% of them do not feel embarrassed when speaking English because they are used to performing. This suggests that most Middle Eastern students still agree that shame is

one of the reasons for Middle Eastern students' problems with communication skills.

No	List of Questions	Answers		Percentage		Total
		Agree	Not Agree	Agree	Not Agree	
12	Is not having motivational support in learning English a problem in speaking?	11	4	73%	27%	15

**Picture 12. Questionnaire Result of Twelfth Question**

Lastly, referring to the twelfth question "Is not having motivational support in learning English a problem in speaking?", the result indicates that there were 73% of Central Eastern students at Al Azhar University said that the absence or even insufficient support was one of the reasons they were not able to speak English confidently. Meanwhile, 27% of Middle Eastern students think that they are motivated by their biological family in learning English. We can conclude that most students agree that the absence of motivational support is the cause of problems in the effectiveness of speaking skills.

From the results of interviews and questionnaires, it was found that Middle Eastern students had several problems with speaking skills:

- (1) Many Middle Eastern students struggled with English vocabulary as it was challenging for them to form sentences in this foreign language, whereas vocabulary had a crucial role in foreign language learning (Khan et al., 2018). However, if the students lack vocabulary input, speaking the language proves difficult (Heng et al., 2023).
- (2) Middle Eastern students faced a challenge when it comes to transferring information into English, primarily due to difficulties with pronunciation. Many Middle Eastern



students struggled to pronounce words correctly, as writing and pronunciation in English often differed significantly. As a result, they found it challenging to group English words with similar pronunciations.

- (3) Middle Eastern students often struggled with grammar, which affected their ability to form coherent sentences when speaking in English.
- (4) Middle Eastern students often struggled to speak English fluently because they had difficulty imitating pauses, rhythm, stress, and intonation. This finding is similar to the research of Anh Tram (2020) that many students often think in their mother tongue first when expressing their opinions, which hinders their ability to speak English fluently and naturally.

After conducting research in the field, there were several significant causes identified contributing to the speaking skills problems faced by Middle Eastern students. Looking at the data obtained from interviews and questionnaires given to students and teachers, it was concluded that there was still a large percentage of the total number of students sampled who lacked confidence in communicating in English. According to He and Chen in the research of Nakhalah (2016), the main reason students lack confidence is their limited ability to speak English. It is evident that many students experience challenges related to low self-confidence.

In addition, Middle Eastern students were afraid that they would make mistakes in communicating. In line with this finding, Januariza & Hendriani (2016) also stated that

many EFL students fear trying to speak the foreign languages they are learning. As in this context, Middle Eastern students fear making mistakes when speaking.

They also felt anxious and confused and did not dare to be embarrassed when they wanted to have a dialogue in English. Furthermore, Houn & Em (2022) noted that anxiety is one of the significant affective aspects that leads to an obstacle to language learning among various emotional factors.

Besides that, there are also other causes Middle Eastern students at Al Azhar University in Cairo face significant challenges in developing their speaking skills in English. A primary issue is the lack of support available to them, both within the university and from their external environments, such as family and community. It aligns with Juhana in Yendra (2018), stating that insufficient encouragement or support from various sources is one of the factors of difficulties students encounter in speaking skills, while the others are: the need for improved self-confidence, a reluctance to make mistakes, shyness, and excessive stress.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Based on the research findings, the following conclusions can be drawn regarding the challenges faced by Middle Eastern students in speaking activities. They often struggle with limited vocabulary, which they frequently perceive as inadequate. Additionally, the influence of their native language, which is significantly different from English, impacts their

pronunciation. This can lead to confusion, especially since the written form of English sometimes differs from its spoken form.

Middle Eastern students face problems similar to those experienced by foreign language learners when it comes to English vocabulary. They often demonstrate poor grammar and find it difficult to speak fluently, which can include issues such as stuttering in pronunciation. Additionally, these students are often reluctant to practice speaking English, primarily because they lack close friendships with fluent speakers of the language. Furthermore, their first language can significantly influence their learning process.

However, this research presents certain limitations, particularly regarding the gender of the participants, as they are exclusively female students. Future research would benefit from an examination of speaking skills in relation to gender, specifically investigating the differences in perceptions between male and female students regarding the challenges they encounter in developing their English-speaking abilities. Such inquiries could provide valuable insights into the gender dynamics that influence language acquisition and proficiency.

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