Effective Strategies to Overcome EFL Speaking Difficulties

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates the speaking difficulties and strategies used by Saudi university students learning English as a foreign language (EFL). The results reveal significant barriers to speaking fluency, with "limited vocabulary" identified as the most obstructive factor, followed by "lack of practice" and "limited exposure to receptive skills". Pronunciation issues and reliance on memorization also contributed to speaking challenges, though to a lesser degree. Most participants agreed that these issues hinder fluency development. The research also highlights the effectiveness of various strategies used by fluent EFL students. "Socializing with fluent speakers" and "organizing ideas in advance" emerged as the most effective strategies. Additional strategies like studying a topic thoroughly and receiving feedback from expert speakers were also deemed highly effective. The findings align with existing research on EFL fluency, particularly the emphasis on vocabulary, practice, and social interaction. However, the study provides unique insights into the specific cultural and linguistic challenges faced by Saudi learners, underlining the importance of context-specific approaches to language learning.

INTRODUCTION

Speaking, such a quotidian task. Speaking is such a habitual act that most people do not think twice when speaking or what speaking about; no strategies are involved. However, not the same could be said about speaking in a second or foreign language like English for instance. According to (Shumin, 2002; Pawlak, 2018) since the learner does not live in the target language setting and has lower exposure and insufficient access to that language and culture, it is probable that acquiring the speaking skill will be notably challenging. This research's trajectory aims to explore the esoteric strategies utilized by a fluent foreign-English-speaking community to straddle conversing in English and unveil the difficulties contributing to idling progress when learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Mastering oral communication is a critical component of English language ability, especially in EFL context. In Saudi Arabia, the shift towards global communication has placed greater emphasis on English fluency among university students. However, many EFL learners face challenges in improving their oral skills due to limited exposure to English outside the classroom and cultural factors that impact language use. Despite these challenges, a subset of students has achieved notable fluency, prompting a need to understand the strategies they employ for effective communication.

Previous research on speaking strategies highlights the importance of cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategies in achieving fluency. Oxford (1990) emphasized that learners who utilize cognitive strategies, such as practicing new words or consciously organizing their thoughts, tend to improve their speaking skills more rapidly. Similarly, studies by Chamot and Kupper (1989) revealed that metacognitive strategies, like planning for a conversation or self-monitoring during speaking, are vital in developing communicative competence. Social strategies, including interacting with native speakers and engaging in group discussions, have also been found to enhance oral fluency (Nakatani, 2006). Al-Seghayer (2014) provides insights into the challenges and strategies employed by Saudi students in learning English, particularly speaking skills and concludes that Saudi EFL learners face unique cultural and linguistic challenges, and successful students often employ a combination of cognitive and social strategies. According to Alrabai (2016) autonomy and use of strategies significantly impact Saudi students' speaking skills.

Using prolific speaking strategies interests many as English is viewed as a gaudy subject to deal with because of repeated failure to progress in the language in general and in speaking in particular. Therefore, an immediate investigation is cited to divulge effective speaking strategies that can benefit Saudi university students and unblur common hindrances, both idiomatic and psychological, to the Saudi pedagogical scene. Too many Saudi university students have difficulties speaking in English and EFL learning in general is still faraway beyond the hope despite the growing amount of administrative support and obligatory English language classes throughout primary and secondary education (Alsiyat, 2021), which later surmounts and results in a handicapped acquisition of English that hinders many students from excelling in subjects where English is the language of instruction. Saudi university students can attest to the ubiquitous struggle of learning and exercising English among students and throughout lecture halls. The Saudi university audience is simply oblivious to interactive strategies and is severely lacking in adequate confidence to

practice the language due to occasional negligence towards the language or seeing it as nothing more than a cumbersome obstacle in their academic journey. In other cases, exemplary students, unfortunately, give up in the face of the seeming adversity of learning English. The necessity for developing communication and speaking skills is considered by most Saudi EFL students as highly needed (Ali, Shamsan, Guduru, Yemmela, 2019), so lack of proficiency and confidence when speaking is an urgent conundrum, it anchors many Saudi students in their primary stages of tertiary education and veils even more consequences if not addressed promptly. Underlining these past points, it is evident that new research is required to buoy many Saudi university students out of this decades-long hurdle and assimilate them with numerous proficient English-language speakers globally. To combat that, a survey will be conducted to spot the difficulties faced by the students and also disclose strategies used by more proficient students to facilitate speaking. Not only will this widen their horizons linguistically and culturally, but also rocket them to new heights in their academics and future careers.

To better understand this problem, we must look into the roots beneath it. Much divulgation has been done on this topic and this research does not overlook the aforementioned. Saudi students have historically struggled with EFL, this varies from cultural differences to alien pronunciation. Those aspects encompass inconvenient environment, unsuccessful curricula, and lack of interest and low drive on the part of students. For example, many learners believe that inadequate collection of lexis is a key reason of their inability to express themselves in English (Alrasheedi, 2020). With factors leading to the dismal progress Saudi students make in English out of the way, reasons relating to the ineffective approach to language instruction must be addressed. The problem is only seen from two perspectives, either the teacher's or the student's, with a lack of variety in teaching. Many of today's methods do not rely on letting the students articulate as much as they can through the language. The teacher's directions and lesson proposal should be constructed to improve students' interaction proficiency. According to Littlewood & William (1981), this could be accomplished through communicative verbal training; the role of the learner is not only as the receiver, but they are energetic and contribute enthusiastically (Alrasheedi, 2020). That role, as vintage as it may sound, is still ubiquitous in many Arab states and leaves students famishing for more opportunities to speak; although a discourse is set for both the teacher and the student to intercommunicate on, the student is still unequipped with strategies to defend himself when verbalizing, which is why this research is cited to glean new information to resolve the issue. Alhaisoni and Rahman (2013) resounded this worry; they also declared the necessity to provide pupils with adequate knowledge of essential skills and suggested that English teachers in the Kingdom must overlook outdated approaches of teaching such as "the lecture mode of instruction and the dictation of notes".

Finally, it is evident that novel research is needed to complement existing information. In addition, the issue proposed in this research is going to be resolved by investigating more into the difficulties faced by Saudi university students. Having prospected for these hindrances, this paper pursues more techniques to combat these debilitations shared by the local fluent EFL community and fomenting more confidence in students when speaking. By acquiring distinguished techniques adhered to by the fluent EFL community to overcome speech hurdles, non-fluent EFL speakers can improve their speaking fluency, overcome hindrances and develop their idiomatic skills. By addressing the two questions below, this research will contribute to the growing body of literature on EFL learning strategies and provide valuable insights for improving English language education in Saudi universities. The findings could offer practical recommendations for teachers and curriculum designers aiming to foster more effective speaking skills in EFL learners. The paper aims to develop narrative answering on the two following research questions (RQs):

1) What areas of difficulty do EFL Saudi university students have in speaking fluency?
2) What are the most effective speaking strategies fluent EFL Saudi university students utilize to overcome such difficulties?

METHODOLOGY

To explore the areas of difficulty EFL Saudi university students have in speaking fluency and discover the most effective speaking strategies used by fluent EFL university students to overcome such difficulties, a questionnaire was developed. The data collection tool used in this research was a survey, reason being that it was an affordable, effacing way to reach the masses and extrapolate information regarding speaking fluency problems and effective methods used by fluent EFL college students. This survey did a commendable job deducing the recondite reasons for perpetual poor speech communication in English in Saudi Arabia and exhibited the greatest speaking strategies approved by fluent EFL.

The researcher created two fluent five-member guided focus groups. With the help of the colleagues who teach IE200 course (a communication skills English course focuses on the productive skills, writing and speaking, and taken by engineering students at King Abdulaziz University) the researcher invited 20 candidates who were the most fluent to a meeting where he explained to them the objective of the study and its two RQs. Depending on a short interview and a checklist prepared in advance, the researcher selected the ten most enthusiastic entrants about the study objective and put them in two focus groups. Under the supervision of the researcher and using the brainstorming technique they were asked to create questionnaire items that can help in answering the two RQs. The distinctive facets in speech were specified. Identifying speaking hindrances, suggesting potential strategies, obtaining feedback from fluent EFL Saudi university students and measuring the effectiveness of sets of speaking practices was the subject of the brainstorming session. 26 items throughout four questions which were mainly Likert scale (Agree-Disagree) and rating spectrum were invented. Not only did these items aid in defining and zeroing in on the speaking difficulties

students run into but also in discovering useful speaking strategies that can help students overcome such difficulties. These items were gathered, organized, and utilized to form the first version of the questionnaire. For consistency and accuracy drives a study reliability and validity were founded. Regarding the validity, the first version was pretested with a cohort of 3 EFL professors and an improved draft was established. Concerning reliability, the valid draft of the survey (See appendix A.) was retested and exhibited a high interior consistency.

The questionnaire was illustrated by Google Forms Survey to ensure having a clear, comprehensible outline. The number of participants was 79 students with the targeted demographic consisting of fluent EFL speakers from Saudi Arabia who were currently attending universities in the kingdom. Those participants were reached mainly by WhatsApp. The data received was investigated using Google Forms, which has the possibility of viewing charts and tabular results of the data gathered, as well as analyzed by Excel Sheets for a comprehensive understanding of the quantitative outcomes, mainly number of respondents out of 79 and mean standards. Each table or chart was followed by an explanation using language expressions and quantifiers to elucidate the findings and facilitate it for readers to comprehend and finished with a kind of conclusion that recaps that explanation.

RESULTS

The findings section covers the results obtained from the survey distributed and embarks on demonstrating the charts regarding the two RQs. This section aims to expose the difficulties that Saudi university students go through in speaking English and display the strategies fluent EFL students use to help them improve. The charts are finally analyzed, and data is studied to exhibit final findings.

RQ1: What areas of difficulty do EFL Saudi university students have in speaking fluency?

Two survey questions helped in answering this RQ. One showed to what extent each speech difficulty affects students' speaking fluency, while the other question reflected an overall opinion about all speech issues together.

Question 1: In your opinion, to what extent do the following issues hinder the development of EFL Saudi university students' speaking fluency? (5 being the most obstructive)
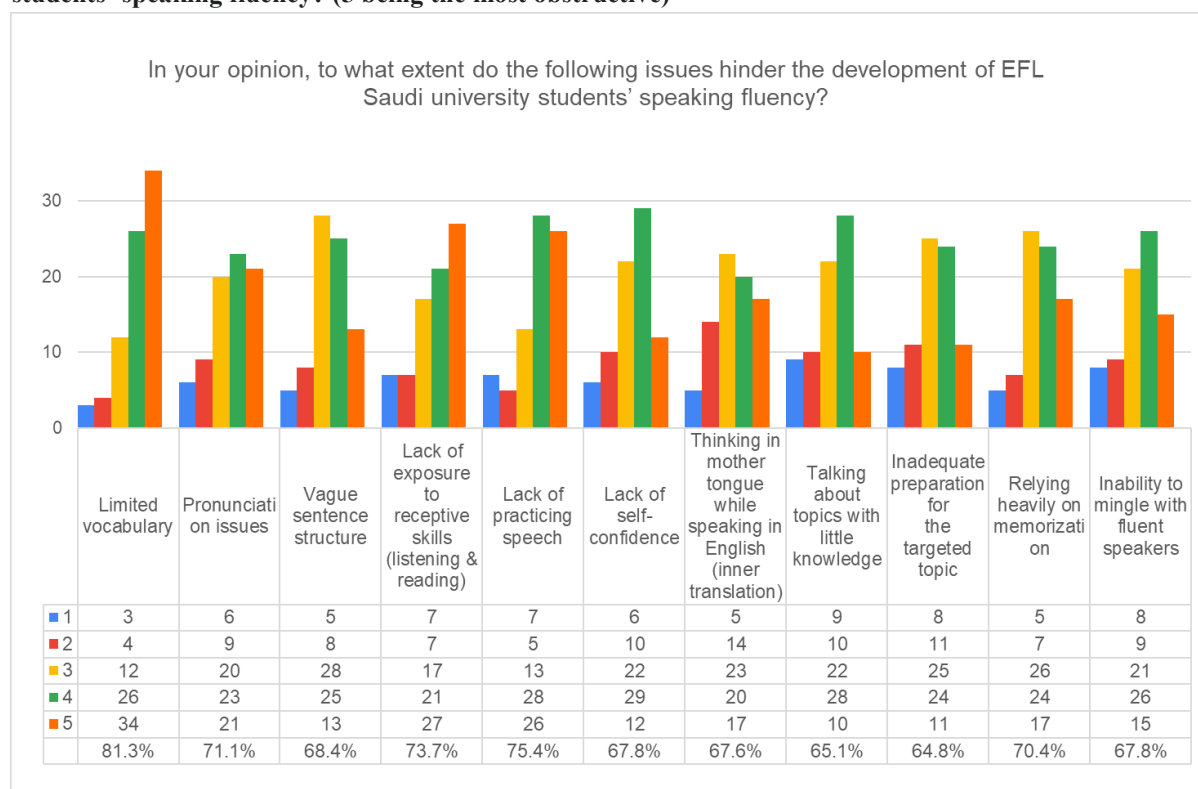

	Limited vocabulary	Pronunciation issues	Vague sentence structure	Lack of exposure to receptive skills (listening & reading)	Lack of practicing speech	Lack of self-confidence	Thinking in mother tongue while speaking in English (inner translation)	Talking about topics with little knowledge	Inadequate preparation for the targeted topic	Relying heavily on memorization	Inability to mingle with fluent speakers
1	3	6	5	7	7	6	5	9	8	5	8
2	4	9	8	7	5	10	14	10	11	7	9
3	12	20	28	17	13	22	23	22	25	26	21
4	26	23	25	21	28	29	20	28	24	24	26
5	34	21	13	27	26	12	17	10	11	17	15
	81.3%	71.1%	68.4%	73.7%	75.4%	67.8%	67.6%	65.1%	64.8%	70.4%	67.8%

Fig. 1: Issues hinder the development of EFL Saudi university students' speaking fluency

The first survey question in RQ1 introduces the topic of the research while highlighting the difficulties. As Figure 1 demonstrates, the 11 items are on a (1-5) spectrum, 1 meaning that the difficulties shown are not grave, while 5 meaning the most obstructive. As it can be seen, "Limited vocabulary" was considered a major driver for poor speaking fluency. With an 81.3 mean score, this item was considered the most obstructive. In the second place comes "Lack of practicing speech" and "lack of exposure to receptive skills" which got a significant level of hindrance, 75.4 and 73.7 mean scores, respectively. "Pronunciation issues" and "Relying heavily on memorization" come in the third place and were considered real speaking difficulties. Finally, the rest of the issues, with a range between 64.8 to 68.4 mean scores, were considered the least obstructive, but still have relevantly a basic kind of hindrance. In conclusion, all speaking issues showed a noticeable level of hindrance.

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Question 2: I believe the issues above do hinder the development of university students' speaking fluency. (1 being strongly agree, 3 neutral and 5 strongly disagree)

2. I believe the issues above do hinder the development of university students' speaking fluency.
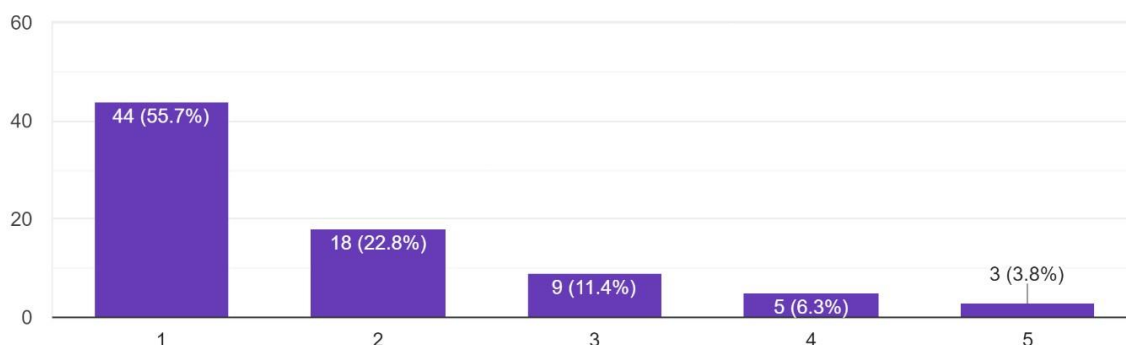79 responses

Fig. 2: An overall opinion about all speech issues together

Figure 2 shows how grave the difficulties in the previous chart are. The majority of participants (78.5%) agreed that the previous 11 items do hinder the development of their speaking fluency, while a small percentage of nearly 10% disagreed. In conclusion, the bar chart reveals significant challenges and substantial barriers in speaking fluency. The participants believed that the aforementioned speech difficulties do hinder the development of university students' speaking fluency.

RQ2: What are the most effective speaking strategies fluent EFL Saudi university students utilize to overcome such difficulties?

Two survey questions helped in answering this RQ. One showed to what extent each speaking strategy helps students overcome speaking difficulties, while the other question reflected an overall opinion about all speaking strategies together.

Question 1: In your opinion, to what extent do the following speaking strategies help fluent EFL Saudi university students overcome speaking difficulties? (5 being the most effective)
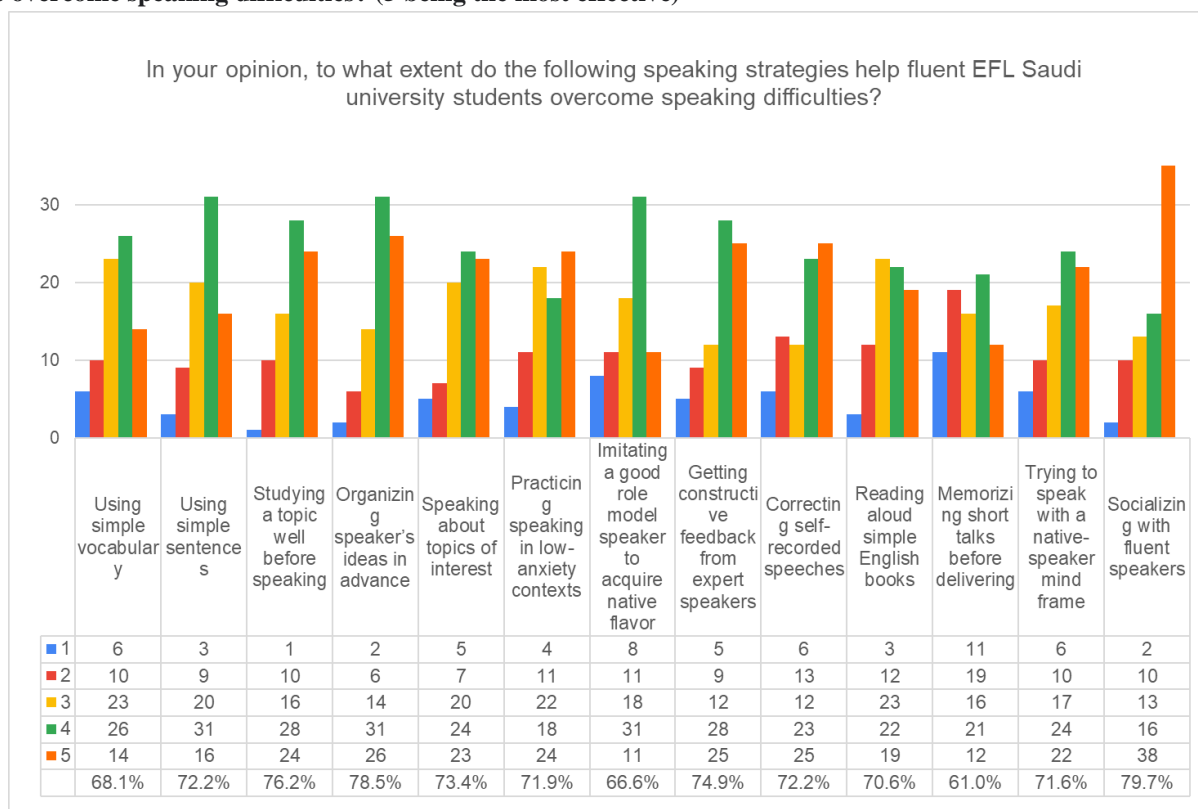

	Using simple vocabulary	Using simple sentences	Studying a topic well before speaking	Organizing speaker's ideas in advance	Speaking about topics of interest	Practicing speaking in low-anxiety contexts	Imitating a good role model speaker to acquire native flavor	Getting constructive feedback from expert speakers	Correcting self-recorded speeches	Reading aloud simple English books	Memorizing short talks before delivering	Trying to speak with a native-speaker mind frame	Socializing with fluent speakers
1	6	3	1	2	5	4	8	5	6	3	11	6	2
2	10	9	10	6	7	11	11	9	13	12	19	10	10
3	23	20	16	14	20	22	18	12	12	23	16	17	13
4	26	31	28	31	24	18	31	28	23	22	21	24	16
5	14	16	24	26	23	24	11	25	25	19	12	22	38
	68.1%	72.2%	76.2%	78.5%	73.4%	71.9%	66.6%	74.9%	72.2%	70.6%	61.0%	71.6%	79.7%

Fig. 3: Speaking strategies help fluent EFL Saudi university students overcome speaking difficulties

The first survey question in RQ2 suggests solutions. As Figure 3 demonstrates, the 13 items are on a (15) spectrum, 1 meaning that the solutions shown are the least effective while 5 meaning the most effective. As it can be seen, "Socializing with

fluent speakers" and "Organizing speaker's ideas in advance" were considered major drivers for overcoming speaking difficulties. With 79.7 and 78.5 mean scores, respectively, these two strategies were considered the most effective. In the second place comes "Studying a topic well before speaking" and "Getting constructive feedback from expert speakers" which got a significant level of effectiveness, 76.2 and 74.9 mean scores, respectively. As shown in the chart above, with a range between 70.6 to 73.4 mean scores, six items come in the third place and were considered good speaking strategies. Finally, three strategies, with a range between 68.1 to 61.0 mean scores, got under 70% and were considered the least effective, but still have relevantly a basic kind of effectiveness. In conclusion, all speaking strategies showed a noticeable level of effectiveness.

Question 2: I think the strategies above do help fluent EFL university students overcome speaking difficulties. (1 being strongly agree, 3 neutral and 5 strongly disagree)

4. I think the strategies above do help fluent EFL university students overcome speaking difficulties.
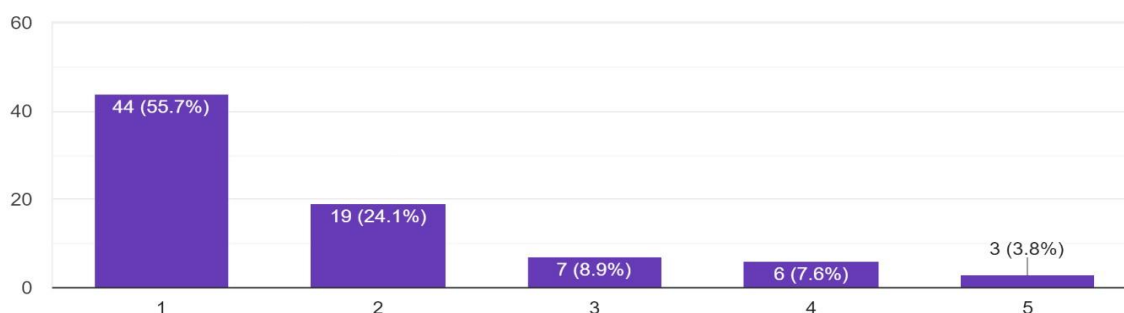79 responses

Fig. 4: An overall opinion about all speaking strategies together

It seems that there was a general consensus that the 13 speaking strategies mentioned before are effective by fluent EFL audience with about 80% voting "Strongly Agree" and "Agree", as shown in Figure 4. Almost 9% voted in the middle and less than 12% combined voted various levels of "Disagree". In conclusion, the wide majority of fluent EFL students advocated for the practice of the speaking strategies suggested in the survey.

Finally, the results were astounding. On the one hand, the biggest fluency difficulties were mainly due to limited vocabulary, lack of practice and exposure to the spoken language. On the other hand, the huge outline from this survey is that socializing, organizing the speaker's ideas, knowing the subject of conversation well and getting constructive feedback were the most efficient strategies used to improve one's speaking fluency.

DISCUSSION

Talking in a new language poses itself as a great struggle for many Saudi university students. The results of this study on the speaking difficulties faced by Saudi EFL students and the strategies utilized by fluent speakers align with existing literature, yet also offer distinct understandings into the specific context of Saudi university learners. The discussion highlights both the congruence and divergence with previous research while interpreting the study's findings in light of the broader academic dialogue on EFL speaking proficiency.

Concerning speaking difficulties, the speculations conclude that most students struggle with "limited vocabulary", which may handicap their expressions. A towering 81.3% of participants found that "limited vocabulary" was a huge obstacle for many KAU college students, considering it the most significant hindrance to speaking fluency. This corroborates earlier research. According to Alrasheedi (2020), many Saudi students cite inadequate vocabulary as the primary reason for their inability to express themselves in English, which significantly impedes their communicative competence. This supports the view that vocabulary acquisition is central to fluency development. The deficiency in vocabulary amongst Saudi college students can be attributed to the old-fashioned teaching methods that is heavily dependent on memorization and conveying only transactional language. Probably the negligence of focusing on learning English language spread among most public-school pupils, teachers and families delays the enrichment of vocabulary in the first place, this predicament also prevails in the shape of "vague sentence structures" as supported by more than two thirds of the participants. Students are usually only taught transactional words and phrases; there's nothing that challenges them to expand their linguistic ken.

The role of "lack of practice" and "limited exposure to receptive skills" mirrors the conclusions drawn by Shumin (2002) and Pawlak (2018), who assert that EFL learners often struggle with speaking fluency due to insufficient real-world language

exposure. However, while the study identified "pronunciation issues" as another significant barrier, it was ranked slightly lower in importance than vocabulary and practice. This contrasts with Nakatani (2006), who emphasized pronunciation as a key factor in EFL speaking difficulties. The difference could be attributed to the unique cultural and linguistic context of Saudi students, where pronunciation may not be as heavily stressed in classroom instruction or evaluated as critically in social interactions, compared to other learning contexts.

The study also highlighted the reliance on memorization as an issue, which aligns with Alhaisoni and Rahman's (2013) observation of traditional teaching methods still prevalent in Saudi classrooms. These methods tend to emphasize rote learning over communicative practice, limiting students' ability to apply language skills in spontaneous speaking situations. The moderate hindrance posed by this factor (mean scores between 64.8 to 68.4) shows that while memorization is a recognized issue, its impact is less severe than factors like vocabulary and practice. Other factors such as "lack of self-confidence", "thinking in mother tongue while speaking in English (inner translation)" and "inability to mingle with fluent speakers" all got relatively high mean scores and definitely affect students' speaking fluency. For example, mingling with native speakers can accelerate progress, and also mimicking these speakers aids act as beneficial strategies to defy speech difficulties and low self-confidence. All in all, it is worth mentioning that all of the above speaking difficulties have reciprocal relations and connections that need more in-depth investigation.

Regarding speaking strategies, the findings reveal significant parallels with established research on cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategies. Fluent students overwhelmingly endorsed "socializing with fluent speakers" and "organizing ideas in advance" as the most effective strategies for overcoming speaking difficulties
(mean scores of 79.7 and 78.5, respectively). These results are consistent with Nakatani's (2006) advocacy for social strategies and Chamot and Kupper's (1989) emphasis on metacognitive strategies. Socializing with fluent speakers provides learners with authentic language exposure and practice, allowing them to internalize linguistic structures and improve fluency through interaction. Organizing ideas beforehand helps reduce anxiety and enhances coherence, an insight that supports Oxford's (1990) claim regarding the role of cognitive strategies in effective communication.

Interestingly, the study highlighted "studying a topic well before speaking" and "getting constructive feedback from expert speakers" as highly effective strategies (mean scores of 76.2 and 74.9, respectively). This reinforces the importance of preparation and feedback in improving fluency, aligning with Alrabai's (2016) research that emphasizes learner autonomy and reflective practice. However, it also indicates that Saudi students may benefit more from structured forms of support, such as expert feedback, rather than relying solely on peer interaction or self-monitoring.
Intermediate-ranked strategies (mean scores between 71.9 and 73.4) like "speaking about topics of
interest", and "correcting self-recorded speeches" could potentially raise students' level of motivation, and "using simple sentences" "in low anxiety context" could possibly encourage students and be used as an icebreaker to help learners get familiar with speaking activities, all resulting in better self-confidence state.

Lower-ranked strategies such as "trying to speak with a native-speaker mind frame" and "imitating a role model speaker" (mean scores between 61.0 and 71.6) could be considered effective because they encourage learners to adopt authentic speech patterns, improving fluency and accuracy. This aligns with Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory, which highlights the importance of observational learning in language acquisition. Similar studies, like Murphy (2001), confirm that imitating proficient speakers helps internalize native-like pronunciation and intonation, aiding fluency.

This study reaffirms many established concepts in the field of EFL speaking strategies while providing nuanced insights specific to Saudi learners. The emphasis on vocabulary, practice, and exposure as critical barriers to fluency aligns with previous research, though the prominence of cultural and linguistic factors in the Saudi context adds depth to the discussion. Furthermore, the identification of social and metacognitive strategies as the most effective methods for improving fluency is consistent with global EFL research, suggesting that these strategies are universally applicable.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the speaking difficulties faced by Saudi EFL learners, particularly the challenges of limited vocabulary, lack of practice, and minimal exposure to authentic language use. These barriers are compounded by traditional teaching methods focused on memorization, which hinders fluency development. The research also highlights the importance of metacognitive and social strategies, such as organizing ideas in advance and socializing with fluent speakers, as effective tools for overcoming these challenges. While cultural and linguistic factors unique to the Saudi context influence learners' fluency, the strategies identified align with global EFL research, reinforcing their universal applicability. The study underscores the need for more communicative teaching methods and structured support, such as expert feedback, to help Saudi learners improve their speaking proficiency. These findings call for further exploration of the interconnection of the various difficulties and strategies to enhance language fluency.

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Appendix A

1- **In your opinion, to what extent do the following issues hinder the development of EFL Saudi university students' speaking fluency? (Rate the level of hindrance for each issue 1 to 5, 1 is the least obstructive and 5 is the most obstructive). *(Mark only one box.)**

Issue	Level of Hindrance				
	1	2	3	4	5
Limited vocabulary					
Pronunciation issues					
Vague sentence structure					
Lack of exposure to receptive skills (listening & reading)					
Lack of practicing speech					
Lack of self-confidence					
Thinking in mother tongue while speaking in English (inner translation)					
Talking about topics with little knowledge					
Inadequate preparation for the targeted topic					
Relying heavily on memorization					
Inability to mingle with fluent speakers					

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2- I believe the above issues do hinder the development of university students' speaking fluency. *(Choose one answer.)

    - Strongly agree (   )

    - Agree (   )

    - Neutral (   )

    - Disagree (   )

    - Strongly disagree (   )

3- In your opinion, to what extent did the following speaking strategies help fluent EFL Saudi university students overcome speaking difficulties? (Rate the level of effectiveness for each strategy 1 to 5, 1 is the least effective and 5 is the most effective). *(Mark only one box.)

Strategy	Level of effectiveness				
	1	2	3	4	5
Using simple vocabulary					
Using simple sentences					
Studying a topic well before speaking					
Organizing speaker's ideas in advance					
Speaking about topics of interest					
Practicing speaking in low anxiety contexts					
Imitating a good role-model speaker to acquire native rhythm					
Getting constructive feedback from expert speakers					
Correcting self-recorded speeches					
Reading aloud simple English books					
Memorizing short talks before delivering					
Trying to speak with a native-speaker mind frame					
Socializing with fluent speakers					

4- I think the above strategies did help fluent EFL university students overcome speaking difficulties.
*(Choose one answer.)

    - Strongly agree (   )

    - Agree (   )

    - Neutral (   )

    - Disagree (   )

    - Strongly disagree (   )

Thank you.