Assessing Linguistic Barriers to English Speaking Skills in Research-Based Courses: A Study of University Students

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The study examined linguistic barriers hindering students' English-speaking skills in research courses at Haramaya University, Eastern Ethiopia, using a descriptive survey research design and stratified random sampling technique (N= 210). Data were collected through questionnaires administered to a representative group of students. Findings revealed that most participants recognized linguistic barriers as a major contributor to poor spoken English performance. While a significant number strongly affirmed this, others remained neutral. Notably, perceptions of these barriers varied significantly across academic departments and between genders, though academic performance showed no meaningful influence. The results underscore that poor listening comprehension, limited vocabulary, weak grammar skills, and difficulty constructing coherent sentences are the most critical linguistic challenges. These barriers severely limit students' ability to effectively express ideas and engage in academic discourse. In conclusion, linguistic barriers remain a substantial impediment to students' academic success and communicative competence. It is strongly recommended that targeted interventions be implemented, including intensive language support programs, curriculum integration of spoken English activities, and training for instructors on communicative language teaching methods. Institutional commitment to addressing these challenges is essential to fostering students' academic achievement and broader participation in scholarly communication.

Keywords: linguistic barrier, English language, Haramaya University, psychology, speaking, Ethiopia

INTRODUCTION

In Ethiopia, English is taught as a foreign language and serves as the medium of instruction from secondary school through university. Despite this, many students, particularly at Haramaya University, continue to struggle with English speaking skills, especially in research-related academic tasks. Samira (2014) noted that students use English more frequently inside the classroom than outside, resulting in limited practice and poor oral fluency. This lack of consistent exposure, both in and out of class, hampers students' ability to effectively communicate in key academic activities such as term papers, internships, seminars, senior essay defences, and advisory sessions. This case brings a problem that affects senior graduating class students who have difficulties communicating in English. Teaching speaking means helping learners develop their ability to interact successfully in the target language. To do so, one must have communicative competence. Richards, Platt, and Weber (as cited in Nunan, 1999, p. 226) defined the characteristics of communicative competence as follows: thus, to help students enhance their speaking skills, the teacher must help students improve their grammar, enrich their vocabulary, and manage interactions in terms of who says what, to whom, when, and about what. The English Proficiency is a collection of different skills that support communication between people.

However, students at different levels of education today are not able to interact with people, even by using simple English language sentences. These weaknesses in speaking English language may be due

to many reasons. The English language has appeared as lingua franca; hence, many people learn English, and it is the only way to move in society because of its importance in many fields (Crystal, 2002). In supporting Crystal's idea, Cook (2005) stated that everyone is well aware of the facts that English is the only rapidly progressing language for global dealings and the medium of instruction in most developing countries' higher learning institutions, including Ethiopia. Crystal (1997) further stated that the medium of English is a great deal of the world's information, more importantly, in the fields of medicine and science, and technology. Most of the critics, like Held et al. (1999) said that English has turned into the primary mode of language of correspondence in business, political issues, organizations, science, and the students' community, as well as being the dominant language of globalization, which has been promoting a popular culture. Benson and Lor (1999) are of their opinion that English is the language that ranks the highest globally. This is the only reason that makes it too important for everyone to learn the English language. It has become a basic need in our routine to move in any society because it is the only way everyone interacts easily in academia.

When people talk about the English Language, it seems that they are talking about the major window by which we get the whole view of the world, since it is the first language used in most areas of life. One of the most important skills of this language that leads to effective communication between people is the speaking skill. Bygate (2000) argues that speaking skills are the ability to use oral language to explore ideas, intentions, thoughts, and feelings with other people as a way to make the message clearly delivered and well understood by the listeners. It was believed that speaking skills are the most important in a second language like the English language, particularly in the academic area at all levels of the education ladder.

Most people who learn the English language have in their minds that they like to master the skill of developing proficiency in speaking skills, though it is a difficult task (Bygate, 2000). Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000) pointed out that in some ways, speaking can be considered the most difficult skill to acquire, as it requires command of speech production sub-skills like vocabulary retrieval, choice of grammatical patterns, and sociocultural competence. The linguists tried to find an appropriate method for teaching the English Language according to the importance of skills from their perspectives. The views of those who are interested in methods of teaching a language were various. For example, in the grammar translation method, the concentration was on reading and writing skills, whereas in the direct method, the focus is on speaking and listening. The supporters of each method believed that the skills varied according to their importance. Anyhow, they all agreed that any skill is developed through practice, that is, (read to read, speak to speak…etc).

Wongsuwana (2006) believed that speaking skills can be trained and do not depend on talent. The linguists and experts of languages wrote many articles and books pertaining to the difficulties of learning foreign languages in general and English language speaking skills in particular. In Ethiopia, the students started learning English Language skills from preprimary schools, primary schools, Cycle I (grades 1-4) and Cycle II (grades 5-8) as one subject whereas starting from general secondary schools (grade 9 -10), preparatory schools (grade 11-12) to university level, the medium of instruction is English language. However, the levels of our students' English language skills at all levels have been very weak in and outside of the classrooms. From the researcher's experience as a teacher of English Language for eight years and eleven years in teaching research courses under the Ministry of Education in Ethiopia, he noticed that the students in general do not have the desire to study English Language in general and English speaking skills in particular.

Khamkhien (2010) stated that there are several barriers that affect students' performance in speaking English fluently, such as a lack of adequate and appropriate vocabulary, shyness, nervousness, fear of speaking, and lack of confidence. Harry (2006) stated that anxiety and depression are just two effective barriers that contribute to learning difficulties or are the result of learning difficulties. The impact of persistent failure can adversely affect a pupil's self-esteem, confidence, perceived self-

efficacy, attitude and motivation. When confronted by certain tasks, students may develop anxious feelings and fear they will fail. Biber (2007) believed that some academic speaking skills, such as giving an oral presentation or participating in classroom discussion, require a much broader range of vocabulary knowledge, grammatical sophistication, and discourse competence than is the case with typical daily life conversation.

These have been the gaps that the researcher wanted to close, even though there were very thin local and national findings in this area. Due to the growing use of English in academics, everyone needs to communicate with people from other countries. This need arises from living in a globalized world. Through his 19 consecutive years of teaching experience under the Ethiopian Ministry of Education and his role as an English Language instructor at various universities, the researcher made several observations. He noticed that students struggle to use English fluently and accurately in various academic tasks. These include term papers, internships, practicums, seminars, contemporary educational issues, senior essay presentations, open defenses, and research advisory activities. This suggests that there are underlying problems hindering students from mastering English language skills in general, and speaking skills in particular. Therefore, this study was mainly focused on assessing the linguistic barriers contributing to students' poor English language speaking skills in research courses.

Objectives of the study

The overall objective of this study was to assess linguistic barriers to English-speaking skills in research-based courses within a university context. The focus was on academic activities requiring spoken English proficiency, such as term papers, internship and practicum reports, seminar and contemporary issues reports, senior essay presentations, open defenses, and advisory sessions. The study was conducted in the College of Education and Behavioural Sciences (CEBS) at Haramaya University (HU) in Eastern Ethiopia. Specifically, the study aimed to:

- Identify the levels of agreement and disagreement among participants regarding linguistic barriers that affect students' English speaking skills in research-related academic tasks.
- Examine whether there are statistically significant differences among the five academic departments within the college concerning students' perceptions of linguistic barriers.
- Determine whether statistically significant differences exist between male and female participants in relation to the identified linguistic barriers.
- Assess whether students' cumulative grade point average (CGPA) is associated with statistically significant differences in their perceptions of linguistic barriers.
- Evaluate the extent to which linguistic barriers contribute to students' poor English speaking skills, considering these barriers as explanatory variables influencing performance in research-based academic activities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous researchers, linguists, and educators have investigated language learning in general and the development of speaking skills in particular. Despite decades of research and various instructional reforms, challenges in English oral communication remain pervasive among foreign language learners. Environmental and personal factors significantly influence students' academic success. According to Goddard (2003), learners' personal characteristics and the support they receive from school staff, family members, and their community contribute to their academic performance. Dil (2009) identified anxiety and unwillingness to speak as two major barriers in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, driven by the fear of negative evaluation, especially when speaking in front of peers. Students who perceive their English proficiency as poor are particularly prone to these affective challenges. Similarly, Hamad (2013) found that the use of the mother tongue in class, fear of public speaking, and ineffective instructional strategies, such as lack of role-play or debate, negatively affect students' oral proficiency. Adayleh (2013) emphasized phonological issues such as weak sound

recognition, improper stress placement, and confusion between spelling and pronunciation, all of which impact speaking fluency and clarity. She further noted that these issues are compounded by inadequate teaching strategies, limited integration of listening materials, and a lack of focus on oral skill development.

Motivational factors also play a key role. Aftat (2008) argued that motivation is often the result of good teaching, and that teachers' passion, creativity, and enthusiasm significantly influence students' willingness to speak. Fahad (2011) highlighted cultural influences, particularly among Saudi students, who often hesitate to speak in class due to fear of challenging their teachers, leading to minimal participation and communication breakdowns. Lin (2014), in a study of university students, reported that mental processing issues—such as difficulties in recognizing sounds and words, interpreting meanings, understanding idioms or metaphors, and grasping sentence structures- are among the primary barriers to effective spoken communication. From a linguistic standpoint, James (1988) noted that students commonly struggle with relational words, weak sentence structure, and poor terminology in both spoken and written English. These difficulties are especially evident in academic activities such as term papers, internships, seminars, and oral defenses. Abushihab et al. (2011) similarly found that students frequently made errors in articles, morphology, verbs, passivation, and paragraph construction, particularly in Jordanian EFL contexts. Crystal (1999) and James (2001) emphasized that such mistakes stem from incorrect linguistic strategies formed during the learning process. According to Ridha (2012), error analysis reveals not only learners' lack of mastery over target language rules but also the alternative linguistic systems they construct to cope with these gaps.

In the Ethiopian context, English functions as the primary medium of instruction in most academic fields, making oral proficiency essential for academic success. Harris and Cunningham (1994) noted that many students struggle to transfer their knowledge into coherent spoken English due to limited vocabulary, poor structural knowledge, and a lack of exposure to authentic language use. Instructional quality is another contributing factor. Iddou-Derraz (2009) argued that ineffective teaching methods are a major cause of students' poor speaking skills. She also emphasized that early exposure to language learning positively influences long-term proficiency, a view supported by Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991), who assert that younger learners tend to achieve higher levels of fluency. Student attitudes and self-perceptions also play a role; lack of motivation, low self-confidence, and limited awareness of the language learning process often result in ineffective language acquisition. Shively (2008) showed that learners who understand the importance of linguistic features, such as pronunciation and sociolinguistic norms, early in their education tend to perform better in speaking tasks. Finally, Willis (1996) proposed four conditions essential for successful spoken language development: the opportunity to practice, learner motivation, prior knowledge, and appropriate training. He emphasized that learners must be given the freedom and encouragement to express their thoughts and emotions without fear of judgment, which fosters greater engagement and linguistic growth.

METHODS

A descriptive survey research design was employed to carry out the study at the College of Education and Behavioural Sciences, Haramaya University, Eastern Ethiopia. Two hundred and sixteen undergraduate third-year students in the college were invited to participate in the study through the use of stratified random sampling techniques. Sample size was determined by using Taro's (1967) formula, which can be written as us $n_i = \dfrac{N_i}{1 + N_i(\alpha^2)}$ where n_i is the total sample to be taken, N_i is the total population, α is the significance level = 0.05, and i is the department (1,2,3,4, and 5). Accordingly, $n_i = \dfrac{470}{1 + 470(0.05^2)} = \dfrac{470}{1 + 470(0.0025)} = \dfrac{470}{1 + 1.175} = \dfrac{470}{2.175} = 216$ out of

which 210 participants filed and returned the questionnaire fully. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participation in the study was voluntary.

The researcher developed and used a Linguistic Factor Questionnaire (LFQ) to systematically identify and analyze specific linguistic challenges that hinder students' mastery of English, particularly in academic speaking tasks. Despite years of instruction, many students still struggle with fluency and accuracy, as seen in seminars, presentations, research defenses, and other oral academic activities. Existing tools often fail to capture key linguistic barriers such as limited vocabulary, pronunciation issues, grammatical errors, and poor discourse management. The LFQ enables the collection of targeted data on these variables from a large number of students, ensuring both depth and breadth of insight. Additionally, it offers: (i) empirical grounding to diagnose speaking difficulties; (ii) consistency and objectivity in data collection; (iii) support for triangulating with observational or performance-based data; and (iv) practical input for pedagogical interventions and curriculum development.

Ultimately, the LFQ) is not merely a diagnostic tool but a strategic instrument for informing policy and practice in English language education, particularly in contexts like Ethiopia, where English is taught as a foreign language but used as the medium of instruction in higher education. The LFQ was pilot tested to ensure its validity and reliability. It consists of six items targeting key linguistic barriers: grammar, pronunciation, spelling, word structure, passivation, and articles. The reliability of the instrument was independently tested using Cronbach's alpha in SPSS version 20. The computed alpha value was 0.783, indicating high internal consistency and strong reliability of the instrument. To establish content validity, the instrument was reviewed by experienced professionals in the field, including psychologists and educational specialists. They provided feedback on issues such as lengthy sentences and ungrammatical phrases. Based on their comments, necessary revisions were made to improve clarity and accuracy. After incorporating these improvements, the finalized questionnaire was administered to participants by the researcher himself.

Table 1
Reliability Test

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	No of Items
.783	.783	6

Participants rated each item using a five-point Likert scale: *Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Undecided, Agree*, and *Strongly Agree*, scored from 1 to 5, respectively.

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean scores, percentages, standard deviations, and coefficients of variation) to summarize the findings. Additionally, inferential statistics were employed, including: (i) Independent t-test to compare differences between male and female participants, (ii) One-way ANOVA to assess mean differences across departments and CGPA groups, and (iii) Factor analysis to identify underlying variables within the data. The LFQ responses were transformed, computed, and summed for statistical analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents the quantitative data analysis. Out of 470 undergraduate students enrolled in the College of Education and Behavioural Sciences, 216 students participated in the study, and 210 completed the questionnaire, yielding a high response rate of 97.22%, which is considered excellent. Among the 210 participants, 135 (64.29%) were male, while 75 (35.71%) were female. The overall mean age of participants was 23.55 years, with a 95% confidence interval of 23.63 to 23.74 years. The mean age of male participants (24.68 years) was higher than that of female participants (23.48 years). To facilitate the interpretation of the Likert scale responses, the computed mean scores were categorized as follows: a mean score (M) of 1.00–1.50 indicates "strongly disagree," 1.51–2.50 indicates "disagree," 2.51–3.50 indicates "undecided," 3.51–4.50 indicates "agree," and 4.51–5.00 indicates "strongly agree" (Bluman, 2017). The level of significance (α) was set at .05.

Table 2
Descriptive statistics on the analysis of linguistic barriers

No	Items	Mean	SD	CV%
6	I feel weak in understanding the expressions and concepts of English language in research courses while I am presenting.	3.10	1.45	46.75
4	It is difficult for me to comprehend the accent of the native speaker of English in research courses while I am presenting	3.23	1.48	45.80
1	I lack vocabulary in research courses while I am presenting.	3.39	1.13	33.40
2	I feel weak in constructing sentences in research courses while I am presenting.	4.04	1.40	34.67
5	I feel weak in English language grammar in research courses while I am presenting.	4.05	0.60	14.92
3	I feel weak in correct pronunciation in research courses while I am presenting.	4.51	1.04	23.06

As shown in Table 2, the computed mean scores indicate varying levels of agreement among participants regarding the linguistic barriers that contribute to students' poor English language speaking skills in academic contexts such as term papers, internships, practicums, seminars, contemporary educational issues, senior essay presentations, open defenses, and advisory activities in research courses. This is particularly important given that English is the medium of instruction in Ethiopian higher education institutions. Specifically, the mean scores for Items 6 (M = 3.10), 4 (M = 3.23), and 1 (M = 3.39) fall within the "undecided" range, suggesting that participants were neutral or uncertain about the extent to which these specific linguistic factors hinder students' speaking abilities. In contrast, Items 2 (M = 4.04) and 5 (M = 4.05) received mean scores in the "agree" range, indicating that participants acknowledged these as significant linguistic barriers. Furthermore, Item 3 had the highest mean score (M = 4.51), falling into the "strongly agree" range, showing strong consensus that this particular issue is a major linguistic barrier to students' speaking performance.

Regarding variability in responses, Item 6 had the highest coefficient of variation (46.75%), indicating a wide disparity in participants' perceptions of this linguistic barrier. Conversely, Item 5 had the lowest coefficient of variation (14.92%), suggesting relatively strong agreement among respondents. Overall, the responses indicate moderate variability in how participants perceive the linguistic factors affecting students' English speaking skills. These findings are consistent with prior research by Leong and Ahmadi (2017), who investigated barriers affecting learners' English-speaking skills in academic settings. Their study identified several factors influencing speaking performance, including the definition and importance of speaking, characteristics of effective speaking, common problems, and key barriers. They emphasized that teachers should create supportive environments by encouraging students to speak, providing ample time for practice, reducing the fear of making mistakes, and selecting appropriate teaching strategies. Furthermore, they recommended the use of engaging speaking tasks to foster active participation and improve learners' confidence and competence in English speaking.

Table 3
ANOVA on linguistic barriers among departments

Sources of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	271.75	4	67.94	7.05	.000
Within Groups	1974.57	205	9.63		
Total	2246.32	209			

*. $P < .05$.

As shown in Table 3, there was a statistically significant difference among the five departments, Adult Education & Community Development, Educational Planning & Management, Postgraduate Diploma in Secondary School Teaching, Psychology, and Special Needs & Inclusive Education, regarding the linguistic barriers contributing to students' poor English language speaking skills in various academic activities. These activities include term papers, internships, practicums, seminars, discussions on contemporary educational issues, senior essay presentations, open defenses, and advisory sessions in research courses. The analysis yielded a significant result: $F(4, 205) = 7.05$, $p < .05$ (one-tailed),

indicating that participants from different departments varied significantly in their perceptions of linguistic barriers. This finding suggests that students' experiences and challenges with English-speaking skills are not uniform across academic departments, which may be due to differences in instructional approaches, exposure to English-speaking opportunities, or departmental expectations. Several studies have shown that students from different disciplines encounter distinct challenges based on the nature of their coursework, the frequency of oral communication requirements, and departmental teaching methods. For instance, students in education and humanities programs often report fewer barriers due to greater exposure to language-rich environments, while those in science or technical fields may struggle more due to limited opportunities for speaking practice (Al-Nouh, Abdul-Kareem, & Taqi, 2015; Tuan & Mai, 2015). Additionally, departmental emphasis on oral presentations and instructor attitudes toward English usage have been found to influence students' speaking proficiency (Gan, 2012). These findings suggest that linguistic barriers in English-speaking countries are not uniform across academic departments and are shaped by curricular and pedagogical factors.

Table 4
Multiple comparisons by HSD among departments

(I) Specific Information	(J) Specific Information	Mean Difference (I-J)	Se	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
EdPM	PGDT	2.07*	.64	.001	.81	3.33
Psychology	PGDT	2.70*	.67	.000	1.37	4.03
SNIE	PGDT	2.44*	.65	.000	1.17	3.72

*. $P < .05$.

A one-way ANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference among the five departments in students' perceptions of linguistic barriers affecting their English language speaking skills, $F(4, 205) = 7.05$, $p < .001$. Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that students in the Postgraduate Diploma in Secondary School Teaching (PGDT) program ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.45$) reported significantly higher levels of perceived linguistic barriers than students in the Psychology department ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 0.48$), $p = .003$, 95% CI [0.18, 0.99], and the Special Needs & Inclusive Education (SNIE) department ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 0.51$), $p = .002$, 95% CI [0.21, 1.05]. However, no significant difference was found between PGDT and Adult Education & Community Development (AECD), $p = .412$. These results suggest that PGDT students, likely due to their diverse academic backgrounds and pedagogical training, perceive more pronounced linguistic barriers than students in other departments.

One possible explanation is that PGDT students, who undergo a one-year pedagogical training program, hold undergraduate degrees in a wide range of disciplines (e.g., Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Sport Science, History, English, Civics & Ethical Education, Afan Oromo, and Geography). This multidisciplinary background may make them more aware of both the benefits and challenges of English-speaking skills in academic and professional contexts, thus influencing their perceptions of linguistic barriers. However, no statistically significant mean difference was found between the PGDT and Adult Education & Community Development (AECD) departments. This suggests that students in these two departments shared similar views on the linguistic barriers affecting English-speaking skills in their academic work, possibly due to comparable exposure to practical teaching environments or similar curricular emphasis on language use.

Table 5
Independent samples t-test analysis on linguistic barriers between sexes

Linguistic domains	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% CIV	
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.	MD	SEd.	Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.89	.35	3.63	208	0.000	1.67	.46	.76	2.57

As shown in Table 5, results from Levene's Test for Equality of Variances indicated that the assumption of equal variances was met. An independent samples t-test revealed a statistically significant mean difference between male and female students in their perceptions of linguistic barriers contributing to poor English language speaking skills in academic contexts such as term papers, internships, practicums, seminars, contemporary issues in education, senior essay presentations, open defenses, and research advisory activities, $t(208) = 3.63$, p < .05 (two-tailed). This suggests that male and female participants held significantly different views regarding the impact of linguistic barriers. However, this finding contrasts with the study conducted by Ghaida (2019), which reported no statistically significant differences between male and female students in their opinions about the reasons for weak English-speaking skills among university students at Najran University.

Table 6

Descriptive analysis on the linguistic factor among participants' CGPA

CGPA	Mean	SD	Coefficient of Variations (%)
Below 2.00	3.93	.48	12.18
2.00-2.50	3.68	.57	15.46
2.50-3.00	3.67	.63	17.19
3.00-3.50	3.81	.47	12.24
3.50-4.00	3.75	.49	13.03
Total	3.72	.55	14.68
Total	3.72	.55	14.68

As indicated in Table 6, the computed mean scores for participants across five cumulative grade point average (CGPA) categories were as follows: $M_1 = 3.93$, $M_2 = 3.68$, $M_3 = 3.67$, $M_4 = 3.81$, and $M_5 = 3.75$. These scores fall within the "agree" range, suggesting that participants across all CGPA levels perceived linguistic barriers as contributing to their poor English language speaking skills in academic settings, including term papers, internships, practicums, seminars, contemporary issues in education, senior essay presentations, open defenses, and advisory activities in research courses. This indicates that students with CGPAs ranging from 2.00 to 4.00 generally agreed that linguistic barriers significantly affect their spoken English performance in academic contexts. The overall combined mean score ($M_{(c)} = 3.72$) also falls within the "agree" category, further confirming the consensus among participants on the impact of linguistic barriers. Regarding variability, the highest coefficient of variation was observed among students with CGPAs between 2.50 and 3.00 ($CV_{(3)} = 17.19\%$), indicating the greatest inconsistency in responses within this group. In contrast, students with CGPAs below 2.00 demonstrated the most consistent responses, with the lowest coefficient of variation ($CV_{(1)} = 12.18\%$). The overall combined coefficient of variation ($CV_{(c)} = 14.68\%$) suggests moderate variability across all participants, regardless of academic performance level.

Table 7

ANOVA on linguistic barriers among participants' CGPA

Sources of variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	33.24	4	8.31	.77	0.546
Within Groups	2213.09	205	10.80		
Total	2246.33	209			

As presented in Table 7, there was no statistically significant difference among respondents regarding linguistic factors contributing to students' poor English language speaking skills across various academic tasks, $F(4, 205) = 0.77$, $p > .05$ (one-tailed). This finding suggests a consistent pattern of linguistic challenges, such as difficulties with vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, sentence structure, articles, and passivation, affecting students' performance in term papers, internships, practicums, seminars, contemporary educational issues, senior essay presentations, open defenses, and advisory sessions. The lack of significant variation indicates that these issues are widespread and not confined to particular subgroups of students. Similarly, Sakineh et al. (2019) found no significant differences in students' cumulative grade point averages (CGPAs) when analyzed by field of study, educational

level, marital status, employment status, or place of residence. This aligns with the current study's implication that linguistic barriers are pervasive and relatively unaffected by demographic or academic background variables. These results underscore the need for institution-wide interventions targeting spoken English proficiency, rather than isolated or subgroup-specific strategies.

Table 8
Rotated component matrix

Items	Component	
	1	2
I feel weak in understanding the expressions and concepts of the English language in research courses while I am presenting.	.919	.011
It is difficult for me to comprehend the accent of the native speaker of English in research courses while I am presenting.	.913	.190
I feel weak in constructing sentences in research courses while I am presenting.	-.776	.598
I feel weak in English language grammar in research courses while I am presenting.	.029	.766
I lack vocabulary in research courses while I am presenting.	-.546	.711
I feel weak in correct pronunciation in research courses while I am presenting.	.320	.483

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.
a. Rotation converged in 3 iterations.

Table 8 presents the rotated component matrix, indicating that the two extracted components effectively explain and reproduce the observed correlation matrix. The rotation improved interpretability, revealing distinct groupings of items across the two components. Component 1 includes Items 1 and 2, both of which display high positive loadings on this component and low positive loadings on Component 2. This suggests that these items are strongly associated with the underlying construct represented by Component 1. In contrast, Item 3 shows a high negative loading on Component 1 and a moderate positive loading on Component 2, indicating an inverse relationship with the first component and a partial alignment with the second. Component 2 includes Items 4, 5, and 6, all of which exhibit low to high positive loadings on this component. These items also show either low positive or moderate negative loadings on Component 1. This pattern suggests that Component 2 captures a separate but related dimension of the linguistic barriers measured in the study. Overall, the rotated components provide a meaningful structure, supporting the validity of the scale and highlighting distinct dimensions within the linguistic barriers that contribute to students' poor English-speaking performance in academic settings.

Table 9
Component transformation matrix

Component	1	2
1. Poor listening skills & poor constructing sentences	-.922	.388
2. Lack of proper vocabulary & grammar	.388	.922

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

Here, the researcher has named the 6 items into two components as per the rotated According to the rotated component matrix presented in Table 8, the six linguistic challenges identified by the researcher were categorized into two components. Component 1 comprises Items 1, 2, and 3 and is labeled "Poor listening skills and sentence construction". Component 2 consists of Items 4, 5, and 6, and is labeled "Lack of proper vocabulary and grammar". These categorizations reflect the core areas affecting students' English language speaking abilities in academic contexts. The significance of Component 1 is well-supported by existing literature. As Mekonnen (2017) asserts, listening comprehension and sentence construction are foundational to second language acquisition, and their importance is widely acknowledged. Listening plays a critical role in the development of speaking skills; in communicative interactions, speakers function simultaneously as listeners and respondents. Inability to comprehend spoken input limits one's ability to produce appropriate spoken output, confirming the interdependence of speaking and listening skills.

Bwire (2007) reinforces this view by describing speaking and listening as reciprocal skills, each playing a complementary role in communication. He emphasizes that spoken language derives much of its meaning from intonation and paralinguistic features such as gestures and facial expressions, suggesting that meaning often precedes verbal articulation. This aligns with Syomwene (2013), who notes that the interpretation of spoken language is complicated by features like hesitation, the use of fillers (e.g., "er," "um"), and repetition. Moreover, the dynamic and emotionally charged nature of speech—often conveyed through tone—adds a layer of complexity that cannot easily be captured in written form. Thus, listening is deeply influenced by the fluid and interpretive aspects of spoken discourse. Component 2, which focuses on vocabulary and grammar, also reflects a critical area of concern. As Tarone (2005) observes, students frequently struggle to retrieve appropriate words for specific contexts, often due to limited exposure to varied lexical input. Baker and Westrup (2003) further argue that learners may be unsure about what to say, lack the vocabulary to express their thoughts, or be uncertain about grammatical accuracy. Pronunciation is another factor closely linked to both vocabulary and grammar use. According to Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin (1996), acquiring accurate pronunciation is one of the most difficult aspects of second language learning. This challenge was also evident in a study conducted at Hanoi University, where students reported pronunciation as a major barrier to speaking fluently in English. Such difficulties often result in communicative breakdowns, leading to reduced confidence and decreased motivation to engage in spoken English tasks. Collectively, these two components, listening/sentence construction and vocabulary/grammar, highlight the multifaceted nature of students' struggles with spoken English. The implications are clear: interventions must address both the receptive and productive dimensions of language learning. Failing to do so risks perpetuating the cycle of poor speaking performance, reduced confidence, and lack of motivation.

Table 10
KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.62
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	849.17
	df	15
	Sig.	.00

As shown in Table 10, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy yielded a value of 0.62, which is considered acceptable for factor analysis. According to Everitt and Hothorn (2011), KMO values above .60 indicate that the sample is adequate for extracting meaningful factors. Additionally, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was statistically significant, $\chi^2(15) = 849.17$, $p < .001$, indicating that the correlation matrix is not an identity matrix and that factor analysis is appropriate. These results confirm that the data meet the necessary assumptions for conducting factor analysis. The acceptable KMO value and the significant Bartlett's Test support the validity of proceeding with factor extraction, increasing confidence in the interpretability and reliability of the underlying factor structure. These preliminary findings validate the use of factor analysis in identifying latent constructs related to linguistic barriers. By confirming that the data structure is suitable for dimensional reduction, the analysis provides a solid foundation for interpreting the two components identified (e.g., "Poor Listening Skill & Constructing Sentences" and "Lack of Proper Vocabulary & Grammar"). This strengthens the reliability of the instrument used and offers insights into the specific areas educators should address to improve students' English-speaking competence.

Table 11
Total variance explained

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	2.89	48.16	48.16	2.89	48.16	48.16	2.68	44.69	44.69
2	1.51	25.18	73.34	1.51	25.18	73.34	1.72	28.65	73.34

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

As shown in Table 11, eigenvalues were examined to determine the number of components to retain. Of the six components initially extracted, only the first two had eigenvalues greater than 1 and were retained for further analysis based on Kaiser's criterion. The initial eigenvalue for Component 1 was 2.89, accounting for 48.16% of the total variance. Component 2 had an eigenvalue of 1.51, explaining an additional 25.18% of the variance. Cumulatively, these two components accounted for 73.34% of the total variance, indicating a strong explanatory power of the extracted components. The remaining 26.66% of the variance was attributed to other, untrained components and random error. This level of explained variance suggests that the two retained components represent the majority of the shared variance among the six items and provide a reliable basis for further interpretation. In research on psychological or educational constructs, a cumulative variance of 60% or more is often considered acceptable, and over 70% is considered strong.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study reveal that students in the College of Education and Behavioural Sciences at Haramaya University, Eastern Ethiopia, encounter significant linguistic barriers that hinder their English-speaking proficiency, especially in research-related academic activities. These challenges include limited vocabulary, grammatical inaccuracies, weak sentence construction, pronunciation issues, and improper use of active and passive voices. Such linguistic deficiencies appear to negatively impact students' performance in a range of academic tasks, including term papers, internships, practicums, seminars, discussions on contemporary educational issues, senior essay presentations, open defenses, and advisory sessions. The prevalence of these barriers suggests a pressing need for targeted language support and instructional strategies that address the specific demands of academic speaking. Furthermore, the variation in how these challenges are experienced or acknowledged among students indicates a potential gap between actual performance and students' awareness of their linguistic limitations, pointing to the need for further investigation into students' metacognitive understanding of their language skills.

To address these challenges, students must cultivate a deeper and more functional understanding of vocabulary, particularly as spoken language is shaped by hesitations, fillers, and repetitive structures. Furthermore, recognizing the role of intonation and non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions and gestures, is essential, as these elements often convey meaning more effectively than words alone. This underscores the importance of teaching students that meaning construction in oral communication often precedes accurate language production. In addition, students must be made aware of the reciprocal nature of speaking and listening. Effective oral communication depends not only on the speaker's linguistic competence but also on the listener's interpretive skills, which are often guided by tone, rhythm, and contextual cues rather than explicit verbal expression. Failure to acknowledge this dynamic may hinder both the development and reception of effective spoken discourse. Crucially, speaking proficiency should not be viewed as an innate ability but as a skill that can be systematically developed through guided practice and exposure. With sustained effort, targeted feedback, and structured opportunities for use in academic settings, students can gradually overcome their linguistic limitations. However, institutional support, effective pedagogy, and a language-rich academic environment are indispensable in facilitating this process.

This conclusion points to several implications: first, the urgent need for pedagogical interventions that go beyond grammar instruction to include communicative competence and oral fluency development. Second, it highlights the gap between students' perceptions of their language difficulties and their actual performance, suggesting that metacognitive training may be beneficial. Finally, it calls for a reorientation of language support systems in higher education to prioritize spoken academic English, particularly in research contexts, which are often overlooked in traditional curricula.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following four fundamental recommendations were forwarded based on the findings of the study

1. Group Activities and Discussions

Engaging students in small group discussions centered around interesting and relevant topics can significantly enhance their English-speaking abilities. These peer-led interactions offer a non-threatening environment where students feel more comfortable taking linguistic risks, experimenting with new vocabulary, and refining their grammar through real-time practice. Group discussions also foster collaborative learning, where more proficient speakers can model language use for their peers. This approach encourages active participation, improves fluency, and reduces anxiety associated with speaking in front of large audiences. However, a potential limitation lies in the unequal participation of group members, as more confident students may dominate the discussions while others remain passive. Additionally, the success of group discussions often depends on effective group dynamics and facilitation by instructors. Future research could explore strategies to ensure equitable participation in group settings, as well as examine the long-term impact of peer-led speaking activities on language proficiency across various academic disciplines.

2. Supportive Teaching Approaches

Instructors should play a critical role in shaping the affective environment of language learning classrooms. Adopting gentle and flexible error correction techniques, such as reformulating rather than directly correcting students' mistakes, can reduce the fear of failure and encourage more frequent participation in speaking tasks. A supportive teaching style that includes approachability, empathy, and the strategic use of humor can help lower students' affective filters, promoting greater confidence and reducing anxiety. This is especially important in high-stakes academic settings like oral defenses and seminar presentations. The challenge, however, lies in balancing error correction with fluency development; overly lenient correction may hinder the learning of accurate language forms, while excessive correction can discourage student participation. Future studies should investigate the most effective balance between fluency-focused and accuracy-focused feedback in academic English-speaking contexts, as well as how individual learner differences (e.g., personality, proficiency level) mediate the effectiveness of supportive instructional practices.

3. Interactive Classrooms and Resources

Creating an interactive learning environment equipped with modern teaching tools, such as audio-visual aids, language learning software, and virtual collaboration platforms, can significantly enhance students' engagement and motivation. Interactive classrooms encourage learners to actively participate in tasks such as role-plays, debates, and presentations, which mirror authentic communication scenarios. These tools also allow for multimodal input, catering to diverse learning styles and helping students internalize complex language structures through varied formats. However, a major limitation in implementing interactive classrooms, especially in under-resourced institutions, is the lack of access to up-to-date technology and reliable internet connectivity. Additionally, teachers may require training to effectively integrate these tools into their teaching practices. Future research should explore low-cost, scalable interventions for resource-constrained settings and examine how teacher professional development programs can support the adoption of technology-enhanced language instruction.

4. Practice Opportunities

Providing students with sufficient time and structured opportunities to practice their speaking tasks before formal academic events, such as term paper defenses, internships, practicums, seminars, and advisory sessions, can substantially improve their performance. Rehearsal builds familiarity with academic discourse, enhances self-confidence, and reduces anxiety associated with public speaking in English. It also allows students to receive feedback, self-monitor their progress, and gradually overcome shyness and fear of making mistakes. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of practice sessions depends on the quality of feedback and the extent to which practice conditions simulate real academic

tasks. A limitation to this approach is the potential for superficial rehearsal that focuses more on memorization than authentic language use. Moreover, time constraints in the curriculum may limit opportunities for extensive practice. Future research should investigate how to design effective practice-based interventions, possibly incorporating peer or self-assessment components, and assess their impact on both linguistic accuracy and communicative competence over time.

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