Challenges in Academic Speaking for Non-Native Speakers: The Case of Libyan Students Studying in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Malaysian universities' adoption of English as a medium of instruction provides Libyan international students, who have been reported as the seventh largest ethnic group enrolled in those institutions, with opportunities to pursue various fields of study. However, Libyan students struggle with academic speaking resulting from inadequate prior EFL learning experience characterised by a lack of speaking practice. Consequently, causing communicative incompetency that contributes to language anxiety. Therefore, this study investigates the academic speaking challenges of Libyan students in Malaysian academic settings using an explanatory mixed-mode research design. Data were collected through an online questionnaire, interviews, and a focus group discussion. The research found that Libyan international students faced challenges in academic speaking due to insufficient linguistic knowledge and a lack of prior academic speaking practice. The study further found that the Libyan students' speaking challenges in the academic setting were affected by cognitive inhibition resulting from communicative incompetency. The qualitative phase of the study revealed that the students were reluctant to engage in academic discourse because of their incompetency in academic speaking skills, which caused anxiety and embarrassment. The study results could inform stakeholders such as the Libyan Ministry of Education about the academic speaking challenges of Libyan students studying abroad. Furthermore, it could lead to improvements in preparatory programs, English teaching practices and materials,

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and exposure to academic settings in foreign universities to prepare students to further their studies abroad and achieve international academic success.

Keywords: Academic practice challenges, academic speaking, international students, language anxiety, prior learning experience

INTRODUCTION

Internationalisation has become a significant and desirable trend in international higher education institutions. The success of this trend depends on the effectiveness of academic speaking in English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a second language (ESL) setting (Lee, 2004). Speaking is an activity performed individually and socially, involving actions that typically occur before, during, and following speaking events (Cohen, 1996). Learners' speaking skills depend on their cognitive abilities and use of style and interaction strategies in their delivery of public speeches or when participating in discourse with interlocutors.

However, the diverse sociolinguistic backgrounds among academic colleagues pose challenges to interaction in academic contexts. It is especially problematic for international students with EFL learning backgrounds as they may lack sufficient prior practice and practical experience with spoken academic English discourse in authentic natural language situations (Attrill et al., 2016; Diaab, 2016). These students thus need more academic knowledge and proficiency in English language usage, including morphology, academic terminology, and phonology. They also consequently lack awareness of language variation and knowledge of the types of discourse needed for oral interaction in academic contexts with interlocutors from different or unfamiliar sociolinguistic backgrounds. Thus, the students' inadequate communicative competence ultimately leads to a lack of confidence in academic speaking.

LITERATURE REVIEW

International students' academic English-speaking challenges include recognising various views expressed by interlocutors and understanding questions (Amiryousefi, 2019; Halali et al., 2021; Singh, 2019). Several studies focused on academic speaking have found that international students faced difficulties applying appropriate academic speaking skills, which were traced to deficiencies in communicative competence. Furthermore, the research found that students often needed higher-order thinking skills and sufficient English language proficiency levels to comprehend and participate in academic discourse related to their fields of study.

These challenges often lead to problems in performing tasks such as engaging in discussions, taking notes during lectures or discussions, and reviewing information regarding coursework or exams. Previous research revealed that international students had difficulties applying academic speaking skills due to inadequate communicative competence. In reviewing related literature, it was found that most international students

experienced challenges in using academic language (Razak et al., 2019; Pourfarhad et al., 2012; Saad et al., 2017). Moreover, these studies revealed that international students frequently needed more requisite higher-order thinking skills and levels of English language proficiency needed for participating in and comprehending the academic discourse relevant to their fields of study.

Research on the academic speaking abilities of international students has found that they encountered problems in the appropriate application of speaking skills in academic settings. The related literature reveals that international students experienced these academic language use challenges at various higher-education levels (Razak et al., 2019; Pourfarhad et al., 2012; Saad et al., 2017). In addition, research on international students' academic speaking challenges has been conducted among students of various nationalities. These include research on students from South-East Asia (Attrill et al., 2016; Sawir, 2005), the Middle East, Africa, and Asia (Singh, 2013), and several other countries (e.g., Andrade, 2006; Singh et al., 2013; Pourfarhad et al., 2012). These studies reveal that the academic speaking challenges encountered by international students involved problems with their accuracy and fluency in grammar usage and pronunciation, confidence in information sharing, and active engagement in academic discourse.

These findings are in line with those of other studies on international students that additionally identified fluency and accuracy as the most challenging when expressing information without hesitancy that requires linguistic and content knowledge richness, which many international students do not possess (e.g., Wette & Furneaux, 2018; Wolf & Phung, 2019; Yavari & Shafiee, 2019).

Although students may endeavour to overcome these problems, their success in doing so may be impeded by affective factors such as their inadequate prior learning experience and psychological factors such as feelings of embarrassment, anxiety, and frustration, as well as their levels of motivation (Al-Zubaidi & Richards, 2010; Kamaşak et al., 2021; Oxford & Ehrman, 1992; Wolf & Phung, 2019). The limitations imposed by these factors could impede the students' communicative performance in academic discourse, negatively affecting their academic success. For example, Juan and Zainol-Abidin (2013) and Singh (2019) investigated international students' academic speaking challenges while studying in Malaysian universities and found that the students' problems resulted from their prior educational backgrounds, which led to poor English language proficiency. The results of past studies (e.g., Andrade, 2006; Chen et al., 2019; Juan & Zainol-Abidin, 2013; Singh, 2019) indicate that communicative language learning outcomes are affected by several factors. Prior learning experience, individual differences, and cultural differences in educational settings influence the performance of EFL-speaking international students in ESL academic contexts. Furthermore, Brown (2005) found

that personality traits, anxiety, attitude, and prior learning experience inhibit learners' success in speaking.

Language anxiety has been recognised as a negative factor inhibiting foreign language learning and performance (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Furthermore, many previous studies (Andrade, 2006; Chen et al., 2019; Singh, 2019) found that language anxiety affected international students' language learning performance. For example, Andrade's (2006) research revealed that when speaking, "international students experience more anxiety" (p. 149), and this negatively affects their academic success. Moreover, other studies, such as those by Mulyadi et al. (2021) and Shafaei and Razak (2016), found that international students experience various types of anxiety when exposed to new social or educational environments.

In contrast to the above discussion, with the activation of a prior learning experience, new stages of learning can be enabled if learners' prior learning experience provides relevant linguistic knowledge and fosters communicative competence. However, ineffective prior learning would result in a deficient acquisition of linguistic knowledge and thus negatively affect other internal and external factors, which would significantly negatively affect learning processes (Krause et al., 2009; Mulyadi et al., 2021). Moreover, research by Lee et al. (2013) and Singh (2019) investigating international students' speaking challenges found that their poor English proficiency resulted from their prior educational backgrounds.

As many as 1,453 Libyan students are reported to be studying overseas, and the top destination for pursuing their higher education has been Malaysia (Said & Yassin, 2014). Nevertheless, a review of related literature found no previous research on this population. Furthermore, although the Libyan Ministry of Education has supported opportunities for education at the world's 300 top universities, there is a lack of consideration regarding the students' preparation for the English medium of instruction used in Malaysian universities (Abduljalil, 2018; Said & Yassin, 2014). Therefore, it would be beneficial to investigate such issues to identify the coping strategies of Libyan international students in overcoming their academic English learning challenges through reliable, in-depth descriptive research conducted in overseas universities. Thus, this study's objective was to investigate the academic speaking challenges of Libyan international students studying in Malaysian universities and determine the reasons for these speaking challenges.

PROPOSED RESEARCH MODEL

This study highlighted and explored the academic English-speaking challenges of Libyan international students studying in Malaysian universities and why students experienced these challenges. Therefore, the study sought to answer two research questions.

RQ1: What academic speaking challenges do Libyan students experience while studying in Malaysian universities?

RQ2: Why do Libyan students experience academic speaking challenges while studying in Malaysian universities?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed an explanatory, sequential, mixed-methods research design, which was implemented in two phases. The first phase relied on an online questionnaire (i.e., conducted by email) to collect quantitative data, which were submitted to statistical analyses. In the second phase of the research, qualitative data were collected through face-to-face interviews and a focus group discussion with survey respondents selected through purposive snowball sampling. The subsequent qualitative data analyses were explanatory, focussing on the participants' experiences regarding speaking challenges and their perceptions regarding them.

Population and Sampling Procedures

As this study is concerned with Libyan international students studying in Malaysian universities, the target population's size and availability were first determined. Then, it was accomplished using data supplied by official sources with the assistance of the Libyan Embassy in Malaysia. According to these sources, in 2020, 257 Libyan students were enrolled in five universities in Malaysia: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), and Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). In addition, students aged 18 years and above were enrolled in bachelor's, master's, and PhD programmes. Approval for the research involving these students was granted by the Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects at UPM.

Survey response rates more often depend on sampling size than other factors (Sax et al., 2003), so it was essential to determine a valid sample size for the questionnaire survey conducted in the first phase of the research. The sample size was calculated considering Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) recommended sample size of n =155 for a population of N = 260 using Cochran's formula, which yielded a recommended sample size of 154 from the population of 257 students. As Salkind (2012) recommended oversampling of 40–50% to compensate for unreturned incomplete questionnaires, the final calculation included conservative oversampling of 40% (i.e., 154 * 0.40 = 62; 154 + 62 = 216), resulting in an optimal sample size of 216 for the study's quantitative research phase.

A total of 20 initial informants were selected for the qualitative phase of the research through purposive sampling. In addition, 20 initial informants were selected from the online questionnaire respondents after analysing the collected data. Fifteen of them participated in the face-to-face interviews, and five in the focus group discussion. The interview venues and times were arranged with the assistance of key informants selected by the researcher following the participants' preferences.

Research Instrument (Survey Questionnaire)

The items included in the study's survey questionnaire were adopted from previous research to ensure that the content was the latest available and supported the instrument's reliability and validity. In addition, the academic speaking challenges questionnaire developed by Evans and Green (2007) was adopted for the research and validated through a pilot study and by a panel of experts.

The questionnaire items included an eight-point Likert scale with responses corresponding to the students' frequencies of experience with speaking challenges. The responses ranged from "0 = Never face this challenge" to "7 = Every time face this challenge." The Likert scale with all responses is presented in Table 2.

The survey questionnaires were emailed to 257 Libyan students with assistance from the Libyan Embassy in Malaysia. In addition, reminders were sent to respondents if their completed questionnaires were not returned within the stipulated time frame. These procedures resulted in the return of 246 questionnaires. The questionnaires were subsequently screened and cleaned for bias, which resulted in accepting 223 questionnaires for the final data analyses.

The finalised quantitative data were submitted to descriptive statistical analysis to obtain frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations using SPSS.

The overall survey response rate was 86%, with individual rates of 74%, 98%, 91%, 97%, and 100% for the five universities involved in the study.

Interviews and Focus Group Discussion

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 15 informants for 30–40 minutes. Protocol questions regarding the research constructs were prepared for the interviews based on the questionnaire results. These were validated through a pilot study. The focus group discussion involved five informants for 90 minutes. The sessions were documented with transcripts, field notes, and member checks (see Appendices A & B). Confirmation of data saturation was achieved through a qualitative sequential process, ensuring the data collection's reliability and internal validity. The reliability of the qualitative phase results of the study was obtained through triangulation of results from the interviews, focus group discussion, field notes, and member checks. The interview and discussion data were used to support the qualitative analyses of the research constructs, the results of which are discussed below. Qualitative data saturation was achieved through manual thematic analysis and NVivo software. After interpreting the results of the quantitative data analyses, the results were utilised to determine the themes found in the qualitative data sequentially, and the data were then coded using NVivo and thematic analysis. The purpose of combining NVivo software with manual thematic analysis was to ensure that the results were valid.

Ethical Approval and Ethical Considerations

The ethical considerations of this study were addressed by obtaining approval from the Ethics Committee for Research Involving

Human Subjects (JKEUPM) at Universiti Putra Malaysia (JKEUPM-2020-062). Furthermore, ethical concerns regarding data collection for the study were addressed by stipulating that the collected data would be kept confidential and securely stored for protection against public access. Subsequently, letters of consent were provided to the research participants. Once the above procedures were completed, data collection was allowed to commence, starting with the questionnaire survey. An additional measure of ethical compliance was that the universities, participants, and informants involved in the research were reported anonymously.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The descriptive statistics results from analyses of the quantitative survey questionnaire data on speaking challenges are discussed with the support of qualitative data collected through the interviews and focus group discussion conducted during the qualitative research phase. This mixed-methods approach allowed for an in-depth interpretation of the results. In addition, the qualitative results complemented the quantitative analyses to support the study's findings regarding the participants' experiences with speaking challenges.

The descriptive statistics results from analyses of the survey data on speaking challenges, including frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations, are presented in Table 1. These results are organised according to the respondents' reported experiences as low, moderate, and high speaking challenges.

According to the results, 66 (29.6%) of the respondents reported having experienced low levels of speaking challenges, 98 (43.9%) reported moderate levels of speaking challenge experience, and 59 (26.5%) reported speaking challenges at high levels (Table 1). The mean and standard deviation were 3.41 and 1.65, respectively.

The descriptive data (Table 2) consist of frequencies, percentages, modes, means, and standard deviations for the survey responses on speaking challenges corresponding to the questionnaire's eight-point Likert scale. These data are arranged in descending order based on the modes and means for the speaking challenges experienced by Libyan students.

The data(Table 2) shows that the survey respondents reported experiencing speaking challenges at moderate levels for every questionnaire item, with an overall mean of 3.41 (SD = 1.65). However, the most serious challenge reportedly experienced by

Table 1
Categories of speaking challenges

Levels of Speaking Challenges	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Mean	Std. Deviation
Low (0.00–2.339)	66	29.6%		
Moderate (2.34–3.669)	98	43.9%	3.41	1.65
High (4.67–7.00)	59	26.5%		

Note. n = Sample size; % = 100.0.

Table 2
Descriptive statistics on speaking challenges

Items	Percentage (%)								Mo	M	SD	L
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7				
Challenges in communicating ideas fluently	9 4.0%	18 8.1%	40 17.9%	33 14.8%	36 16.1%	41 18.4%	27 12.1%	19 8.5%	5	3.77	1.90	M
Challenges in speaking accurate academic English	10 4.5%	29 13.0%	32 14.3%	32 14.3%	35 15.7%	35 15.7%	24 10.8%	26 11.7%	4	3.72	2.04	M
Challenges in using terms related to the field in academic discussions, lectures, and when sharing ideas	12 5.4%	33 14.8%	34 15.2%	31 13.9%	41 18.4%	39 17.5%	20 9.0%	13 5.8%	4	3.43	1.92	M
Challenges in having academic speaking with the lecturers or supervisors on academic topics or matters	20 9.0%	24 10.8%	38 17.0%	35 15.7%	38 17.0%	35 15.7%	16 7.2%	17 7.6%	2	3.35	1.99	M
Challenges in having academic speaking with peers on academic topics or matters	17 7.6%	26 11.7%	36 16.1%	47 21.1%	30 13.5%	30 13.5%	21 9.4%	16 7.2%	3	3.35	1.96	M
Challenges in participating in academic presentations	18 8.1%	28 12.6%	36 16.1%	44 19.7%	42 18.8%	29 13.0%	16 7.2%	10 4.5%	3	3.19	1.85	M
Challenges in exploring "teaching stuff" and peers' social norms, such as values	14 6.3%	35 15.7%	45 20.2%	43 19.3%	34 15.2%	21 9.4%	18 8.1%	13 5.8%	2	3.11	1.89	M
Overall					n = 223; % = 100.0					3.41	1.65	M

Note. n = Sample size. Eight-point Likert scale: 0 = Never face this challenge, 1 = Rarely face this challenge, 2 = Occasionally face this challenge, 3 = Sometimes face this challenge, 4 = Frequently face this challenge, 5 = Often face this challenge, 6 = Usually face this challenge, 7 = Every time face this challenge. Mo = Mode, M = Mean, SD = Standard deviation. M: Medium levels of challenges

the students was fluency in communicating ideas, with 18.4% of the respondents having faced such challenges often, resulting in the highest overall mean of 3.77 (SD = 1.90). Furthermore, the students reported frequently facing challenges regarding the use of terms related to their fields of study in academic discussions and lectures when sharing ideas (M = 3.43, SD = 1.92) and occasionally or frequently having difficulties while speaking with lecturers and their supervisors on academic topics (M = 3.35, SD = 1.99). In addition, the respondents reported that participation in academic presentations was sometimes difficult, with an overall mean of 3.19 (SD = 1.85). Finally, 19.3% of the respondents faced difficulties exploring "teaching stuff" and understanding their peers' social norms and values, which was reported with an overall mean of 3.11 (SD = 1.89) and was the challenge with the lowest frequency.

Thus, it was found that the challenges of engaging in academic discourse with lecturers and supervisors accounted for the highest percentage of responses reported on that challenge, which indicated that this was a serious hindrance to the student's success in academic discourse in the relevant contexts. Previous studies also found that students experienced speaking challenges related to academic speaking with lecturers and supervisors on topics or matters related to academia (Singh et al., 2014). The extant research also indicated that the comprehension of accents challenges students' abilities in international educational contexts.

The qualitative analyses of data collected from this study's interviews and focus group discussion allowed for a more in-depth understanding of the findings compared to the quantitative phase of the research reported above. Thus, the analyses led to the identification of three main themes confirming the types of speaking challenges encountered by the Libyan students: (a) lack of language proficiency, (b) lack of confidence in academic speaking, and (c) lack of content knowledge in their disciplines/fields of study. These themes are discussed in detail in the following sections.

Lack of Language Proficiency

English language proficiency is the ability to communicate fluently and accurately with interlocutors concerning the accurate use of the observable linguistic features of pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar appropriate to communicative situations (Cummins, 1980). This study's survey respondents reported that difficulties related to academic speaking with their lecturers and supervisors resulted from their poor English language proficiency. It was characterised by the student's lack of fluency in communicating ideas due to their insufficient knowledge of field-related terminology. These deficiencies were attributed to inadequate prior English language learning and lack of practical usage experience in their home country. The Libyan students involved in this research were found lacking in these requisite features of language proficiency. For example, an interview informant attributed their

difficulties in academic speaking to lacking "the correct and proper pronunciation of English terms and words" (Informant 11).

Furthermore, language distance affected the degree to which language transfer was possible between the native and target languages, restricting their ability to improve in unsupervised language learning. Thus, the students reported that they experienced anxiety due to their linguistic performance limitations in academic situations. These findings are supported by Glew's (2013) research focusing on academic terms and scientific usage among international students in Australian universities. Glew (2013) reported that "students may experience difficulties in using nursing terminology for interactions" (p. 105), resulting from their insufficient prior English language knowledge and practice.

The Libyans' recognition of their deficiencies led to anxiety about making mistakes and thus being embarrassed while speaking, which led to their reluctance to engage in academic discourse. This reluctance was also attributable to their lack of understanding of academic contexts. Additional information on this was provided during the interviews by an informant who said, "I faced challenges in providing academic presentations and effective academic discussion because of lack of English language teaching and learning in Libyan education" (Informant 2). Another informant, describing the effects of lacking prior academic English knowledge, explained that problems encountered in academic discussions were because it was

"a new experience for the presentation and academic discussion in English in the academic community" (Informant 13).

The results discussed above indicate that the availability of academic terminology in learners' minds is another factor necessary for successful academic speaking and discussion in academic contexts. Thus, vocabulary knowledge is important in facilitating and simplifying academic speaking in academic discourse. Furthermore, it results in the learner being more willing to engage in academic discourse, which reflects well on the learner's academic background and strength. Unfortunately, the Libyan research informants reported having extreme limitations regarding their academic vocabulary knowledge, particularly concerning field-specific terminology.

Lack of Content Knowledge in the Discipline/Field of Study

Discipline content knowledge corresponds to comprehension of the subject matter of academic discourse. The study respondents reported experiencing challenges resulting from their lack of understanding that impeded their participation in academic presentations, engaging in discussions with lecturers and supervisors, exploring teaching content, and understanding the social norms of their peers, including their values (Singh, 2019). It was found that Libyan students lacked knowledge of their fields of study. Their deficiencies in content knowledge aligned with their insufficient knowledge of terminology relevant to their

disciplines, which was attributed to their negative prior English learning experience, as discussed above.

The students' responses supported and explained this view during the study's face-to-face interviews. For example, regarding this challenge, Informant 9 explained, "I faced these challenges of understanding the academic content due to the lack of training, practicing and the use of the language in Libya in general and in the scientific and academic field in particular." Another interview informant explained that this lack of knowledge represented a "large barrier" between interlocutors, which led to feelings of being "confused and less focused" due to "fear and anxiety." The extent of these challenges was further elaborated upon in the interviews by Informant 14, who reported "challenges involved in engaging in discussions with colleagues, understanding the academic content, difficulty communicating an idea or expressing an academic topic properly and clearly." In the interviews, Informant 8 commented on the challenge of academic content being "difficult to understand," and Informant 9 elaborated on this challenge in more detail, explaining, "I faced these challenges of understanding the academic content due to the lack of training, practicing and the use of the language in Libya in general and in the scientific and academic field in particular."

In related research, Singh (2019) found noticeable academic speaking challenges experienced by international students from EFL backgrounds who were continuing their studies in Malaysian universities. The study revealed that these international students lacked the necessary "discipline content knowledge to communicate" (p. 295). In similar research, Mahfoodh (2014) found that international students experienced challenges concerning the socialisation aspects of academic speaking due to their academic speaking challenges regarding linguistic content.

Therefore, the above results indicate that discipline knowledge facilitates the acquisition of knowledge and that activation of prior acquired knowledge related to the current academic area of study is essential to successful engagement in academic speaking (VanPatten & Williams, 2015). Unfortunately, this discipline's content knowledge is often unavailable to Libyan international students. As a result, these Libyans face hurdles in comprehending discussion content resulting from their lack of prior knowledge, which raises their communicative language anxiety regarding academic language practice, preventing them from active participation.

Lack of Confidence in Academic Speaking

In academic speaking, self-confidence is dependent on successfully transmitting thoughts, beliefs, and facts through academic speech in academic settings. Thus, transitioning to a new educational setting could either increase an international student's self-confidence and self-esteem (Sandhu, 2017) or inhibit these characteristics (Youssef, 2018). The Libyan

students in this study reported that they lacked self-confidence and felt fear and anxiety related to participation in academic discourse. It was due to their deficient academic English-speaking abilities. It was elaborated on during the interviews when Informant 2 explained, "I face feeling of anxiety, fear, and hesitation to discuss with the supervisor and the lecturer and the inability to follow the academic and discussion debate effectively because of my fear of putting myself into an embarrassing situation in front of others due to the lack of academic terminologies." Informant 2 shared additional experience of this in an interview:

> *I face anxiety, fear, and hesitation to discuss with the supervisor and the lecturer and the inability to follow the academic and discussion debate effectively because of my fear of putting myself into an embarrassing situation in front of others due to the lack of academic terminologies.*

It indicates the essential role of self-confidence in the student's academic success. Thus, the student's lack of self-confidence resulted from their recognition of the academic speaking challenges they faced and the realisation that they had not been prepared through prior practical English language experience in academic settings. For example, interview Informant 3 remarked, "I was having a very negative feeling of fear and anxiety from having an academic discussion with the lecturer/supervisor/colleagues because of no emphasis on the English language in Libyan education and the lack of interest to learn it." Thus, the results of the study point to the importance of self-confidence as an essential factor in students' academic success. It might be achieved through acquiring discipline content knowledge and practice to attain a rich English language proficiency level. However, this was not the case for the Libyan students involved in this study.

Furthermore, in the focus group discussion, several informants expressed these insights in the following examples from the focus group discussion.

> R: *I studied courses in Libya and Malaysia before starting my master's and doctoral studies. Nevertheless, there is anxiety, tension from communicating, and fear from the academic discussion.*
>
> A: *At the beginning of my studies, I faced great challenges and difficulties understanding and communicating with my peer in academic English.*

The informants provided more information about their academic speaking challenges, describing their insufficient language proficiency levels, poor discipline-related content knowledge, and low confidence regarding academic speaking as interrelated.

DISCUSSION

The finding of this study aligns with the result of research conducted by Singh (2019) on lecturers' views regarding international

students' problems with academic speaking skills. The study revealed, "academic speaking challenges such as lack of discipline content knowledge to communicate, lack of confidence to communicate orally and lack of English language proficiency" (Singh, 2019, p. 205).

The results thus support cognitive theory on speaking skills in the ESL context in that higher-order thinking skills are crucially important to learners as analytical, and reasoning abilities function mainly to enhance cognitive system development to fulfil individual cognitive needs (Lyytinen, 1985; Takac, 2008). The acquisition of these skills depends on rich comprehensible input. It is reflected in the learners' communicative competence, which is a product of their ability to contribute to and engage in academic discussion. However, such skills were not manifested among the study's Libyan students, who attributed the challenges affecting their academic speaking performance to their poor communicative competence resulting from their negative prior learning experience, which inhibited their engagement in the social aspects of academic speaking.

The academic speaking challenges faced by the Libyan international students in this study are due to language proficiency, insufficient discipline content knowledge, and low levels of confidence concerning academic speaking. Previous research findings concerning international students from EFL backgrounds studying in ESL settings are concordant with those reported by this study (Attrill et al., 2016; Yates &

Wahid, 2013). The participants lacked the necessary L2 knowledge that should have been emphasised previously during long-term English language learning and practical experience in natural settings. This deficient prior learning experience led to difficulties in academic English-speaking performance and poor overall academic performance (Attrill et al., 2016). Furthermore, Jalleh et al.'s (2021) supported Singh's (2019) study that the insufficient prior learning and practice of the international students affected the students' subsequent learning experiences by raising their anxiety, which was manifested as communication apprehension.

The reactions of the Libyan students to their academic speaking challenges are in alignment with Piaget's (1987) cognitive theory, Hymes's (1976) communicative competence and Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis in that comprehensible input is necessary for learners' enhancement of cognitive awareness, which is crucial to the attainment of communicative competence. Implementing language practice that involves storing and retrieving knowledge in long- and short-term memory could lower a learner's effective filter, thus facilitating the improvement of communicative competence. However, inadequate prior language learning and a lack of practice negatively affect learners' cognitive awareness, raising their effective filter and blocking the possibility of receiving comprehensible input, resulting in poor communicative competence. Other previous research (Adarkwah & Zeyuan, 2020;

Kurum & Erdemli, 2021) has associated students' academic speaking challenges with deficient communicative competence and learners' analytical and reasoning abilities, which function to enhance cognitive development specific to individuals' needs (Lyytinen, 1985; Takac, 2008).

This research supports the view that prior learning experience "is a potentially important educational variable" (Dochy, 1988, p. 1) and that communicative language anxiety is important to the linguistic processing of information (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). These findings agree with previous studies (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994) that revealed relations between deficient academic speaking ability and learner anxiety. Moreover, the results provide insight into the cognitive processes involved in strategies to overcome academic English academic speaking challenges.

The deficiencies in the cognitive processes and knowledge of the Libyan students resulted from inadequate academic speaking experience required for conceptualised language use. These challenges hindered the students' cognition and contributed to their lack of motivation to participate in academic discourse due to increased anxiety. Furthermore, deficient competence in academic speaking negatively affects students' abilities to communicate knowledge fluently and thus increases their anxiety, making participation in academic discourse more difficult (Singh, 2019; Youssef, 2018).

Finally, it is notable that the students took personal responsibility for enhancing their speaking abilities, thus becoming more autonomous learners. Therefore, the findings of this study indicate a new direction for research in understanding the effects of anxiety on EFL and ESL learners in academic contexts. Research should thus consider the influence of prior learning experience on communicative language anxiety. The combined quantitative and qualitative methods used in this research add to the existing literature and research approaches in studying the affective factors of academic speaking and determining strategies to mediate the challenges.

CONCLUSIONS

Although this study revealed the significant influence prior learning experience and language anxiety have on the improvement of academic speaking, future ESL and EFL research involving international students should examine other important affective factors such as emotional states and responses and their influences (Amiryousefi, 2019) regarding the processes of language learning. Furthermore, research on these other affective factors could reveal more about the academic speaking and general language use of international students from various socio-cultural settings and with various proficiency levels in English academic contexts. In addition, the findings of this research may be important to Malaysian higher education institutions in improving their pre-session English programmes so that they are more conducive to facilitate

the educational experiences of international students from EFL and other educational backgrounds. Furthermore, the Libyan Ministry of Education should seriously consider this study's findings on the effects of negative prior learning experiences on Libyan students' academic achievement in developing or improving English language educational programs. Furthermore, the findings of this study highlight the essential role of language learning theory in evaluating and strengthening international students' academic speaking skills, particularly those from EFL learning backgrounds. The findings thus suggest integrating socio-academic approaches for the enhancement of learning by taking into consideration environmental factors in enhancing international students' learning in new educational settings. Therefore, further research should be undertaken to examine Libyan and other international students' academic speaking strategies who are from various socio-cultural backgrounds and the affective factors associated with learning challenges and their related mediating strategies.

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APPENDIX A

Informant Member Check Sample

ACADEMIC SPEAKING CHALLENGES AMONG LIBYAN STUDENTS IN MALAYSIAN HIGHER EDUCATION: A MIXED METHOD STUDY

CONFIRMATION OF INTERVIEW DATA BY RESPONDENTS TO THE STUDY

I hereby agree and verify that the conversation text is based on the interview conducted by the researcher with me at the stated date and place with ....

(Mark √ on the applicable box)

No correction and additions	√
Some corrections and additions	
A lot of corrections and additions	

Signature: ████

Name: ████████████

Identity Card: ████████████████

Date: 18/4/2021

Thank you for all the cooperation and assistance given. I wish you all the success in your study journey and life.

Ahlam Ali Salim Halali
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APPENDIX B

Consent Letter for the Interviews and focus group discussion

Request for Interview

I am Ahlam Ali Salim Halali, a PhD student at University Putra Malaysia (UPM. The purpose of this interview session is to identify in detail the reasons, examine academic language challenges faced by Libyan international students, and their strategies to overcome these challenges. As you have participated in the questionnaire session and you have the overall idea about the research topic, I will be so appreciated taking a while from your time to talk to you to share more details related to your experience in academic English language in listening and speaking to benefit from your experience.

Therefore, kindly provide me with your email and contact phone number and the convenient place for you for the interview. I would be very grateful for your cooperation in case I will be looking for another interview session. The interview will be conducted in Arabic for an hour. Your responses will be protected from public disclosure, stored in a secure location. The questionnaire will be statistically analysed on a password-protected computer.

By beginning the interview, you acknowledge that you are at least 18 years old, have understood the above information, and agree based on your consent to voluntarily participate in this research.

الاسم أحلام علي سالم، طالبة دكتوراه في جامعة بوترا ماليزيا.

أقدم بين أيديكم هذه المقابلة التي تتعلق بدراسة تحديات اللغة الإنجليزية الأكاديمية، وأسبابها، واستراتيجيات مواجهتها لدى الطلبة الليبيين. وأتعهد بالتحفظ على المعلومات المقدمة، ولن تُستعمل إلا في غرض الدراسة الذي صُممَت من أجله. نظرًا لأنك شاركت في الجزء الاول وهو الاستبيانه ولديك فكرة عامة حول موضوع البحث ، فسأكون ممتنةً للغاية لأخذ البعض من وقتك لإجراء مقابلة معك لمشاركة تفاصيل اكثر متعلقة بتجربتك في تحديات اللغة لاإنجليزية الأكاديمية "الاستماع والتحدث" للإستفادة من خبرتك.

لذلك ، يرجى تزويدي برقم بريدك الإلكتروني ورقم هاتفك والمكان المناسب لك للمقابلة. سأكون ممتنةً للغاية لتعاونك في حال تطلب الامر جلسة مقابلة أخرى. سيتم إجراء المقابلة باللغة العربية لمدة ساعة.

من خلال بدء المقابلة ، فإنك تقر بأن عمرك لا يقل عن 18 عامًا، وتوافق على المشاركة الطوعية في هذا البحث. نسأل الله التوفيق للجميع

Ahlam Ali Salim Halali	Name: _____
ahlamphdstudent@gmail.com	Email address: _____
TESL/Ph.D. candidate	Phone number: _____
Signature *Ahlam. A. S. Halali*	Signature: _____

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