

# Chinese EFL Learners' Perceptions of English Speaking Difficulties in Thailand

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## Abstract

This study aimed to investigate (1) the factors affecting Chinese EFL learners' difficulties when speaking English, (2) the levels of English speaking difficulties experienced by Chinese EFL learners, and (3) how they perceive teachers' help to overcome such difficulties. Eighty-five non-English major Chinese postgraduate students at a Thai university participated in this study. This study used a mixed-methods design that included a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. Percentage, mean, and standard deviation were used to analyze the data obtained from the questionnaire. Content analysis was used to look for themes that emerged from the data obtained from the semi-structured interview. The finding indicated that linguistic factors were the most influential for non-English major Chinese postgraduate students at a Thai university when speaking English. Moreover, this study also found that the overall mean score of 85 non-English major Chinese postgraduate students at a Thai university who participated in the survey was 3.66 out of 5 in English speaking difficulties, which indicated that the 85 participants generally experienced a high level of English speaking difficulties. Furthermore, the results revealed in the semi-structured interviews can be divided into five themes: teaching pronunciation, teaching vocabulary, offering more opportunities for English speaking, reducing criticism, and giving positive feedback.

**Keywords:** English speaking difficulties, Chinese EFL learners, factors, levels

## 1. Introduction

Speaking is a communication ability that a person possesses in expressing ideas and thoughts to convey to the interlocutor (Baron, 2020). Rao (2018) stated that speaking is an essential skill among all four language skills to communicate well in this global world. According to Rizqiningsih & Hadi (2019), Speaking is a productive skill of language learning. It involves communicative performance, and other important elements, such as pronunciation, intonation, grammar, vocabulary, etc. Speaking skill is regarded as one of the most difficult aspects of language learning (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). Zainurrahman & Sangaji (2019) defined speaking difficulties as the factors that cause the students' lack of speaking skills. Furthermore, Zainurrahman & Sangaji (2019) divided students' speaking difficulties into three main categories: linguistic category, psychological category, and social category.

Chinese international students are the biggest international student body worldwide (Meng et al., 2018). Many Chinese students travel overseas in order to pursue their higher education. According to Hui (2017), OBOR Initiatives attracted more than 30,000 Chinese students to enroll in management, marketing, and Thai language programs at Thai public and private universities in 2016. Many Chinese students are coming to Thailand to pursue higher education. This study focuses on postgraduate Chinese EFL learners studying at a Thai university. Many studies have shown that Chinese international students have English speaking difficulties in other countries. For example, Yang (2017) found that Chinese international students face some problems with English speaking, including (a) speed and accent, (b) vocabulary deficiency, and (c) limited verbal participation. Lack of practicing aural and oral English in previous EFL classrooms and lack of confidence in using the language are

expected. Furthermore, many Chinese postgraduate students are studying for their Master's degree in management in Thailand, and their English proficiency is generally low. They are taught Thai in the classroom, so they struggle to speak English.

While several previous studies have examined the oral performance of students in ESL and EFL settings, there is no study investigating the levels of English speaking difficulties among Chinese EFL postgraduate students who are studying for their Master's degree in management at a government university in a Thai EFL setting. Therefore, this research aimed to bridge this gap. The present study could contribute insight into knowledge about English speaking difficulties experienced by Chinese EFL postgraduate students that can affect learners' academic achievement. This research aimed to investigate the factors affecting Chinese EFL learners' speaking difficulties when speaking English, the levels of English speaking difficulties experienced by Chinese EFL learners, and how they perceive teachers could help them overcome speaking difficulties, which has significance for providing useful information for Thai teachers. With the possible outcomes of this study, teachers can use them as a guideline for designing effective English-speaking courses that could help students overcome their speaking difficulties and later improve their English speaking skills. Moreover, this research contributed to classroom management regarding how teachers give instructions differently based on their levels of speaking difficulties. And it could help teachers manage classroom environments, learning resources, or learning atmospheres according to learners' speaking difficulties. Last, knowledge of English speaking problems can greatly benefit material selection. It can aid the teacher in considering the advantages and limitations of material types to link them with learners' different speaking difficulty levels and support them in reaching their goals easily. Moreover, the teacher can alternatively apply the materials according to the learners' levels of speaking difficulties.

## 2. Review of Literature

### 2.1 *Speaking*

There were a lot of definitions of “speaking” that have been suggested by many researchers. For example, speaking, according to Mandasari & Aminatun (2020), is oral communication in a two-way process between speaker and listener that involves productive speaking skills and receptive comprehension skills. Furthermore, Irsyad & Narius (2013) defined speaking as verbal communication used by individuals in their social relations. Through speaking, individuals can express their opinions, thoughts, and emotions to other people.

Many researchers believed that speaking skills played a vital role in English learning. According to Rao (2019), speaking skills are essential skills for all learners who wish to learn English to enhance their career, improve business, build confidence levels, get better job opportunities, make public speeches, attend interviews, participate in debates and group discussions, give presentations, etc. Speaking is one of the most essential skills to be developed and enhanced as means of effective communication (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). Dionar & Adnan (2018) stated that speaking is an essential skill for students. Learning English speaking skills is a preference for many English as a Foreign/Second Language (EFL/ESL) learners.

There were several important aspects of speaking ability. For example, Rahmawati (2022) classified speaking into four aspects: pronunciation, grammar, fluency, and vocabulary. Furthermore, Alrasheedi (2020) stated that there are five aspects of speaking skills: vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, fluency, and comprehension. In addition, Lackman (2010) identified the following as important and integral to developing speaking skills: functions, fluency, accuracy, appropriateness, grammar, turn-taking skill, relevant length, responding and initiating, repair and repetition, range of words, and discourse markers.

### 2.2 *English Speaking Difficulties*

Al Nakhalah (2016) stated that speaking difficulties are difficulties that a speaker could have when dealing with speaking skills. Furthermore, According to Wang (2021), speaking difficulties can be understood as obstacles that language learners encounter in language acquisition. English speaking difficulties in oral communication and discourse production, unable to express their thoughts and understanding clearly.

A number of studies have examined various aspects of English speaking difficulties. Younes & Albalawi (2016) found that students face the following speaking difficulties when they try to speak: fear of mistakes, criticism, the inability to think of anything to say, speaking very little in their mother tongue, and feeling shy to speak. Furthermore, Zhang (2019) also indicated that there are two kinds of oral English speaking difficulties among non-English major Mongolian college students: language difficulties (pronunciation and intonation difficulties, grammar difficulties, and vocabulary difficulties) and non-language difficulties (learning method and habit difficulties, psychological difficulties, environmental difficulties, and cultural difficulties).

Many researchers have studied the factors influencing students' English speaking skills. For example, Amoah & Yeboah (2021) stated that Chinese EFL learners have speaking problems that relate more to psychological factors like anxiety, fear of mistakes, unwillingness, and fear of negative evaluation than linguistic factors such as lack of vocabulary, pronunciation, insufficient knowledge of grammar rules, reading, and oral presentation. Abda (2017) also indicated that the students' speaking skills are related to motivation, attitude, fear of making mistakes, self-confidence, grammar knowledge, vocabulary, speaking background, and experience.

### *2.3 Previous Studies on English Speaking Difficulties in ESL/EFL Context*

There have been some studies that have investigated the speaking difficulties encountered by ESL/EFL learners. For example, Al Nakhalah (2016) studied the problems and challenges of speaking experienced by language students at Al Quds Open University. This study's results indicated some difficulties in speaking among the students due to fear of mistakes, shyness, anxiety, and lack of confidence.

In another study, Suliman (2020) also investigated English speaking difficulties among ESL students, and the findings demonstrated that students face several speaking difficulties, such as linguistic problems, using their mother tongue, and oral communication apprehension.

Additionally, Wansgen (2019) investigated seven Thai students in the English department at the University of Muhammadiyah Malang. The questionnaire result revealed five difficulties: complicated feelings, grammar mistakes, improper pronunciation, less vocabulary, and less confidence.

Moreover, Günes & Sarigöz (2021) investigated 88 fourth-grade students in a public primary school in Turkey. The results indicated that the young EFL learners in focus are eager to speak in the EFL lessons. However, factors such as attitude, language aptitude, negative beliefs about foreign language speaking skills, and linguistic difficulties evoked a delay in speaking.

Similarly, Burhanuddin & Indallah (2021) investigated 30 first- and second-year students from a university in Indonesia and pointed out that most students might suffer from inadequate linguistic knowledge, negative effects of self-perception, and feelings of lack of confidence. These factors worsen their motivation to learn.

Furthermore, Thao & Trung (2022) investigated the speaking difficulties encountered by Vietnamese University students. This study found three linguistic difficulties (pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary) and three psychological difficulties (attitude, difficulties, and motivation). The findings of the study revealed that students tend to encounter linguistic difficulties rather than psychological difficulties.

According to previous studies, there have been numerous studies on English speaking difficulties, but there are very few studies on the English speaking difficulties of Chinese international students, and there is no research on the English speaking difficulties of Chinese students studying in Thailand. However, many Chinese postgraduate students are studying management in Thailand, and their English proficiency is generally low. Thus, this study aimed to investigate English speaking difficulties among Chinese postgraduate students studying for a master's degree in Management at a government university in Thailand.

### *2.4 Conceptual Framework*

According to some scholars (Al Nakhalah, 2016; Wang, 2021; Zainurrahman & Sangaji, 2019), English-speaking difficulties can be thought of as difficulties that language learners experience during language acquisition. Also, based on the related literature on the factors influencing students' English speaking skills (Abda, 2017; Amoah & Yeboah, 2021; Thao & Trung, 2022), these studies generally classify the factors into two or several categories. However, the author believed that three factors (psychological, linguistic, learning environmental) are indispensable to the influence of English speaking difficulties, so the author adopted the conceptual framework from Shen & Chiu (2019) and classifies the factors of English speaking difficulties into three categories: psychological (fear of making mistakes, peer pressure, nervousness, stuttering, lack of confidence, worries about not being understood, timidity and low volume), linguistic (insufficient vocabulary, insufficient grammar, inaccurate pronunciation, insufficient expressions, talking intermittently, insufficient sentences organization), and learning environmental (infrequent English conversation, learning environment with less support, insufficient practice, insufficient resources, low participation in class), to investigate the factors affect Chinese EFL learners' speaking difficulties when speaking English and the levels of English speaking difficulties experienced by Chinese EFL learners.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1 Research Questions

This research is intended to investigate the factors that affect Chinese EFL learners' speaking difficulties when speaking English, the levels of English speaking difficulties experienced by Chinese EFL learners, and how they perceive teachers' help to overcome speaking difficulties.

The three questions that guide this study are as follows:

- (1) What factors affect Chinese EFL learners' speaking difficulties when speaking English?
- (2) What are the levels of English speaking difficulties experienced by Chinese EFL learners?
- (3) What do the participants think the teacher could do to help them overcome speaking difficulties?

#### 3.2 Participants and Setting

Eighty-five Chinese postgraduate students studying for a master's degree in Management were purposefully selected from a government university located in Thailand. Purposeful sampling is widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015). These students were enrolled in English for Graduate Students taught in English by a Thai assistant professor in the second semester of the academic year 2022. The course aimed to promote students' oral fluency in communicative English in academic settings. All the participants volunteered to take part in the study, and the participants were informed of the purpose of the study.

##### 3.2.1 Participants in the Questionnaire Section

The participants in the questionnaire section were 85 Chinese EFL postgraduate students studying for a master's degree in Management at a government university in Thailand. 85 participants were included in the study, with more females (51.76%) than males (48.24%). The age range of the participants was 22–49 years old. Regarding their language learning background, 55.29% of the students stated that they had learned English for less than ten years, and 44.71% indicated that they had learned it for over ten years. When asked about the opportunities to use English with foreigners, 63.53% of the students almost did not use English with foreigners, 31.76% of students sometimes used English with foreigners, 4.71% of the students often used English with foreigners, and no students always used English with foreigners. In terms of their level of English speaking proficiency, 47.06% of the students could only have simple everyday conversations, 37.65% of the students hardly dared speak, 10.59% of them could understand what the other person said but could not express themselves, and only 4.71% of them could communicate with foreigners without obstacles.

##### 3.2.2 Participants in the Interview Section

After the questionnaire, the participants were divided into high, moderate, and low levels of English speaking difficulties based on the questionnaire score. Two participants were selected for the high, moderate, and low groups, a total of six participants were purposefully chosen to take part in a semi-structured interview to explore how participants perceived how teachers could help them overcome speaking difficulties.

#### 3.3 Research Instruments

The study used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. A mixed-method study is one in which the researcher incorporates both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection and analysis in a single study. This type of study enables a policy researcher to understand complex phenomena qualitatively as well as explain them through numbers, charts, and basic statistical analyses (Creswell, 1999). A questionnaire and a semi-structured interview were used in this study. They were used to answer the three research questions. Each instrument was described in detail as follows:

##### 3.3.1 Questionnaire (Q1+Q2)

A Speaking Difficulties Questionnaire, which was adopted from Shen & Chiu (2019), was used to investigate the factors that affect Chinese EFL learners' speaking difficulties when speaking English and the levels of English speaking difficulties experienced by Chinese EFL learners. According to Hyman et al. (2006), one advantage of using these pre-existing questions is that they will have been extensively tested at the time of first use, and information on the exact reliability of each question will be easily accessible. The speaking difficulties questionnaire includes 18 items, and all the items were divided into three sections: linguistic, psychological, and learning environment. The questionnaire is a 5-point Likert scale. Each question has five preferences, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, with "1 as Strongly disagree", "2 as Disagree", "3 as Neither agree nor disagree", "4 as Agree", and "5 as Strongly agree". The questionnaire was written in English. The questionnaire

was translated into Chinese to prevent misunderstandings due to language barriers. Back translation was used to screen the item's quality. Back translation, also called reverse translation, is the process of re-translating content from the target language to its source language in literal terms. The researcher translated each item of the questionnaire from English to Chinese. Then the translator wrote a back translation from Chinese to English to make the research more understandable. When the back translation was completed, the questionnaire items were revised.

### 3.3.2 Semi-structured Interview (Q3)

Six participants with high, moderate, and low levels of English speaking difficulties (based on the questionnaire scores) were purposefully chosen to take part in a semi-structured interview to explore how participants perceived teachers' help to overcome speaking difficulties. The interview questions were developed to be utilized in this interview. An interview session with each participant lasted 15–20 minutes. The interview was recorded using an audiotape. The recordings were systematically transcribed to determine themes as answers to Research Question 3. The following are examples of interview questions:

- (1) What are the main factors that affect your speaking difficulties when speaking English in class?
- (2) Do you think the teacher can help you overcome your speaking difficulties in English class?

### 3.4 Data Collection Procedure

The researcher collected the data in a step-by-step manner. First, the researcher contacted offices overseeing international student affairs at this university, acquired the exact number of target students, and asked for their cooperation in using Google Forms to distribute the online questionnaire. Data were collected using the questionnaire on Speaking Difficulties developed by Shen and Chiu (2019). The data were collected in November 2022. The questionnaire was distributed to 85 Chinese EFL postgraduate students studying for a master's degree in Management at a government university in Thailand. These participants were informed of the purpose of the study and asked to sign a consent form. They were asked to complete the Speaking Difficulties Questionnaire. After the questionnaire, six participants with high, moderate, and low levels of English speaking difficulties (based on the questionnaire scores) were purposefully chosen to participate in a semi-structured interview. The interview was conducted in Chinese. The interview lasted 15–20 minutes. And the interview was recorded and transcribed later for data analysis.

### 3.5 Data Analysis

To answer Research Questions 1 and 2, the quantitative data obtained from the Speaking Difficulties Questionnaire, which consists of 18 items, was analyzed using the mean and standard deviation. For Research Question 2, following Zhang (2019), a mean score of more than 3.5 reflects a high level of speaking difficulties, whereas a mean score ranging from 2.5–3.4 reflects a moderate level of speaking difficulties. A mean score of less than 2.4 indicated low speaking difficulties. To answer Research Question 3, the qualitative data obtained from the semi-structured interview was analyzed using content analysis in qualitative research after the data were obtained. Content analysis enables researchers to sift through large volumes of data with relative ease in a systematic fashion; it can be a useful technique for allowing us to discover and describe the focus of individual, group, institutional, or social attention (Stemler, 2000).

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Research Question 1: What Factors Affect Chinese EFL Learners' English Speaking Difficulties?

This part of the questionnaire aimed to investigate the factors affecting Chinese EFL learners' lack of speaking skills, including linguistic, psychological, and learning environment factors.

#### 4.1.1 Factors of Students' English Speaking Difficulties

The quantitative data was collected through the English Speaking Difficulties Questionnaire, which comprises 18 items. The questionnaire uses the Likert five-level scale, with answers ranging from "1-5" to different levels of agreement, with a median of 3. The larger the mean value of the options, the higher the degree of agreement among the students on the reason item. For this part, the total score, mean score, and standard deviation based on each respondent's answers to each item on the Likert scale were tabulated (see Table 1). By comparing the mean value between the three factors, the researcher can determine which element significantly impacts students.

Table 1. Total Score, Mean Score, and Standard Deviation of English Speaking Difficulties Items

Section	No.	Items	N	Sum	Mean	S.D.	Rank	
Linguistic Factors	1	Insufficient vocabulary	85	352	4.14	0.77	3	
	2	Insufficient grammar	85	336	3.95	0.94	8	
	3	Inaccurate pronunciation	85	305	3.59	1.18	10	
	4	Insufficient expressions	85	348	4.09	0.89	7	
	5	Talking intermittently	85	349	4.11	0.95	5	
	6	Insufficient sentences organization	85	352	4.14	0.98	4	
					Total Mean: 4.00	High Level		
Psychological Factors	7	Fear of making mistakes	85	296	3.48	1.18	11	
	8	Peer pressure	85	265	3.12	1.27	16	
	9	Nervousness	85	279	3.28	1.23	14	
	10	Stuttering	85	249	2.93	1.32	18	
	11	Lack of confidence	85	275	3.24	1.18	15	
	12	Worries about not being understood	85	293	3.45	1.20	12	
Learning Environment Factors	13	Timidity and low volume	85	250	2.94	1.16	17	
						Total Mean:3.21	Moderate Level	
	14	Infrequent English conversation	85	359	4.22	1.03	1	
	15	Learning environment with less support	85	349	4.11	1.01	6	
	16	Insufficient practice	85	355	4.18	0.95	2	
	17	Insufficient resources	85	307	3.61	1.21	9	
Learning Environment Factors	18	Low participation in class	85	283	3.33	1.18	13	
						Total Mean: 3.89	High Level	

In summary, as shown in Table 1, the factors affecting English speaking difficulties among 85 Chinese EFL learners at a Thai university included linguistic, psychological, and learning environment factors. The order of the average values of the three factors was linguistic factors (4.00), learning environment factors (3.89), and psychological factors (3.21). The average value of linguistic factors was the highest, it indicated that linguistic factors are the most influential factor for Chinese EFL learners at a Thai university when speaking English. The learning environment and psychological factors also affect English speaking difficulties among 85 Chinese EFL learners at a Thai university.

#### 4.1.2 Linguistic Factors

As shown in Table 1, a majority of the learners agreed that insufficient vocabulary and weak sentence organization (4.14) were their predominant difficulties in English speaking, followed by talking intermittently (4.11) and inadequate expressions (4.09). However, it was interesting to find that poor grammar (3.95) and incorrect pronunciation (3.59) did not annoy the learners as much as the others.

#### 4.1.3 Psychological Factors

As shown in Table 2, a majority of the learners report their fear of making mistakes (3.48), worries about not being understood (3.45), nervousness (3.28), and lack of confidence (3.23). These were the main causes of English speaking difficulties. Those findings were consistent with Thornbury (2005), who argued that psychological factors such as anxiety or shyness, lack of confidence, and fear of mistakes are the common factors that hinder students from speaking. In addition, the author found that peer pressure (3.12), timidity and

low volume (2.94), and stuttering (3.93) did not annoy the learners as much as the others. On the contrary, one possible reason might be that the learners considered peer pressure less intimidating because they had been familiar with each other for years.

#### 4.1.4 Learning Environment Factors

Table 1 showed that the average values of the learning environment factors for Chinese EFL learners at a Thai university in English speaking were generally high. Thus, the poor learning environment also resulted in English speaking difficulties. The order of the average values from high to low was lack of opportunity for English conversation (4.22), lack of practice (4.18), poor support learning environment (4.11), lack of learning resources (3.61), and low participation in class (3.33). The findings supported those indicated in Lukitasari (2008), who found that the EFL learners faced such speaking problems as inhibition, nothing to say, low or uneven participation, and mother tongue use. We assumed that the EFL learning context without an English-only environment might cause the EFL learners in this study to become anxious to speak English. In other words, the less practice they have in speaking English, the more anxious they become.

#### 4.2 Research Question 2: What are the Levels of English Speaking Difficulties Experienced by Chinese EFL Learners?

This part of the questionnaire aimed to investigate the overall English speaking difficulties level of 85 Chinese EFL learners at a Thai university, and the proportion of students at each level. Following Zhang (2019), a mean score of more than 3.5 reflects a high level of speaking difficulties, whereas a mean score ranging from 2.5–3.4 reflects a moderate level of speaking difficulties. A mean score of less than 2.4 indicates low speaking difficulties.

##### 4.2.1 Overview of Chinese EFL Learners' Level of English Speaking Difficulties

As for the second research question, the English Speaking Difficulties Questionnaire data was used to calculate the total score and find the total mean score, maximum, minimum, and standard deviation.

Table 2. Students' Overall English Speaking Difficulties Level

		N	Total Mean	Max	Min	S.D
Score	Valid	85	3.66	4.94	1.83	0.79
	N	85				

Table 2 showed that the overall mean score of 85 Chinese EFL learners at a Thai university who participated in the survey was 3.66 out of 5 in English speaking difficulties. The participants' overall English speaking difficulties level was high.

##### 4.2.2 Levels of Students' English Speaking Difficulties

For this part, the number and percentage of students at each level (high, moderate and low level) was tabulated.

Table 3. Statistics of Students with Different Speaking Difficulties Levels

Levels of Speaking Difficulties	High Level	Moderate Level	Low Level
Range of Mean Score	3.5-5.0	2.5-3.4	1.0-2.4
N	53	25	7
%	62.35%	29.41%	8.24%

In Table 3, there were 53 participants (62.35%) whose English speaking difficulties level was high, while 25 participants (29.41%) whose English speaking difficulties level was moderate. Only 7 participants had low English speaking difficulties, accounting for 8.24%. The questionnaire analysis showed that students generally have English speaking difficulties, and most students had a high level of English speaking difficulties.

#### 4.3 Research Question 3: What do the Participants Think Teacher could do to Help Them Overcome Speaking Difficulties?

A semi-structured interview was administered to participants to answer research question 3. It sought six students' opinions on how they perceive teachers could help them overcome speaking difficulties by using the coding procedure of content analysis. These findings are discussed based on the interview's different themes: teaching pronunciation, teaching vocabulary, offering more opportunities for English speaking, reducing criticism, and giving positive feedback.

#### 4.3.1 Teaching Pronunciation

The first suggestion teachers could make to help students overcome speaking difficulties was to teach them proper English pronunciation. Accurately mastering the knowledge of English pronunciation is the basis for cultivating and improving oral communication skills. Three of six respondents mentioned it. The excerpt below shows the participants' claims (see Table 4).

Table 4. Teaching Pronunciation

Participants	Excerpts
Cindy	...teachers should let students realize the importance of correct pronunciation by comparing correct pronunciation with wrong pronunciation (...) Teachers can introduce certain phonetic knowledge to students in class, such as pronunciation organs, phonemes, syllables, etc.
John	Appropriate pronunciation practice activities can be arranged before each class; for example, the teacher can let us imitate the dialogue of the movie and then correct our pronunciation (...) so that we can master correct pronunciation and intonation.
Brown	... teacher can teach me pronunciation ...

#### 4.3.2 Teaching Vocabulary

The second suggestion about how teachers could help students overcome speaking difficulties was to teach them enough vocabulary. Pronunciation is the basic requirement of a person's English speaking level. However, if students do not have enough vocabulary knowledge, they will likely fail to express themselves in communication, which easily creates anxiety in communication, making students lose confidence and feel ashamed to speak. Four out of six respondents mentioned it. The following excerpt revealed the students' perceptions (see Table 5).

Table 5. Teaching Vocabulary

Participants	Excerpts
Brown	..., teachers should also teach students some necessary strategies to memorize vocabulary (...) and encourage students to learn and accumulate vocabulary independently after class, collect and organize English Idioms, slang, and some fixed expressions.
Lisa	Teachers can use a variety of teaching methods to teach vocabulary... For example, teachers can use English songs to assist teaching and use lyrics as an example to explain English vocabulary (...) so that students (...) consolidate (...) vocabulary.
John	Teachers can help students to use various methods to memorize more vocabulary, (...) strengthen the inspection of vocabulary, encourage students to memorize words, and increase vocabulary.
Cindy	I dare not speak because of insufficient vocabulary, (...) If the teacher lets me remember enough vocabulary can help me overcome difficulties

#### 4.3.3 Offering More Opportunities for English Speaking

The third most common reply among the answers regarding the approach teachers took to help students overcome speaking difficulties was "offering more opportunities for English speaking". According to the questionnaire and interview results, the students think that the English speaking opportunities offered by the school for Chinese students are relatively lacking, and few related English activities are conducive to students' English speaking learning. All interviewees had similar opinions. The following excerpt revealed the students' perceptions (see Table 6).



Table 6. Offering More Opportunities for English Speaking

Participants	Excerpts
Jennifer	...Teachers can set up special English days or English corners or carry out some English competitions (such as singing English songs, dubbing, English short plays, English speeches, etc.) (...) I think the interesting activities will let us speak English speaking more.
Cindy	The teacher should allow us to speak English in the classroom because we cannot overcome our speaking difficulties without speaking (...) Some fun activities can make us more willing to talk.
Tony	Teachers should encourage us to speak in the classroom. (...) For example: with the help of the appreciation of the film, (...) organize students to discuss the film's theme. Active discussions can also lead to many new topics, (...) using English to express the relevant points of view.
John	(...) , I think the class should be 100% in English communication, and let the students participate in the topic discussion, express their views in turn, and let the students show their oral English expression to strengthen their class participation and oral ability.
Lisa	Teachers can provide English corners for students to practice oral English after class.
Brown	The teacher should let me (...) practice the conversation in class

#### 4.3.4 Reducing Criticism

The third approach to dealing with Chinese postgraduate students' speaking difficulties was "reducing criticism". In the classroom, if the teacher criticizes the students too much, it likely causes them to feel ashamed of learning English, which leads to speaking difficulties. Two out of six respondents acknowledged "reducing criticism" as a useful approach. The following excerpt revealed the students' perceptions (see Table 7).

Table 7. Reducing Criticism

Participants	Excerpts
Brown	When we learn to speak English, the teacher should not pay too much attention to our mistakes and reduce criticism. (...) With too much criticism (...), we refuse to speak English on our initiative. (...) pay special attention to error correction methods, (...) correcting errors after class.
Cindy	...teacher should (...) reduce criticism, (...) let us learn to speak English more happily.

#### 4.3.5 Giving Positive Feedback

Another suggestion that the teacher should adopt to deal with Chinese postgraduate students' speaking difficulties and report as being beneficial was "giving positive feedback". Teachers should consider positive feedback as a useful approach and a constructive element that they could utilize to help students overcome their speaking difficulties. Three out of six respondents demonstrated similar opinions. The following excerpts revealed the students' perceptions (see Table 8).

Table 8. Giving positive feedback

Participants	Excerpts
Brown	Teachers should praise our progress in time and encourage us to build self-confidence.
Cindy	The teacher should give appropriate encouragement after we speak English, ... such as giving some positive comments.
John	... if we are anxious and nervous, teachers should wait and encourage us.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Factors of Students' English Speaking Difficulties

Findings from the quantitative data of the current study revealed the factors affecting English speaking difficulties among 85 non-English major Chinese postgraduate students at a Thai university in three sections: linguistic factors, learning environment factors, and psychological factors. The average value of linguistic factors was the highest; it indicated that linguistic factors are the most influential factor for non-English major Chinese postgraduate students at a Thai university when speaking English. These factors were discussed in detail in the following sections.

#### 5.1.1 Linguistic Factor

The quantitative results showed that linguistics was the most difficult factor that affected the speaking of Chinese EFL learners studying in Thailand. This is followed by the learning environment and psychological factors, respectively. This situation could be explained by vocabulary being a critical component of language ability. Insufficient vocabulary knowledge may cause a struggle to convey one's thoughts and ideas clearly and accurately. Students with inadequate vocabulary may also rely on simple or repetitive language to communicate. This can result in a lack of precision, nuance, and impact in their communication, which can be a barrier to effective communication. In addition, linguistic factors (e.g., sentence organization) could also make students unclear, ambiguous, or confused when speaking. This may be because sentence organization is a skill that enables learners to process sentence information in units more prominent than a single sentence (Weaver, 1979). Weak sentence organization can make it difficult for Chinese EFL learners to follow the speaker's ideas and can detract from the overall effectiveness of the speech. Moreover, according to Xia (2015), talking cannot be done consistently, at an even pace and pitch, or effortlessly. Native English speakers often pause to emphasize a point. For English learners, inappropriate pauses or repetitions often occur, making the conversation difficult to understand.

Another explanation could be insufficient expressions (e.g., words, phrases, or sentences) that inadequately convey the intended meaning or fail to communicate the message clearly and effectively. Oral expressions are one of the requirements for proper linguistic communication; they consist of syntactic concepts compatible with the mental growth of students in the early stages. These patterns consist of the parts of speech (noun, verb, etc.) and the structures these parts can compose, such as the nominative or verbal sentences and various methods, interrogation, and exclamation (Khasawneh, 2021). Moreover, insufficient expressions can lead to confusion, miscommunication, and misunderstandings, which can impact the effectiveness of the communication.

Poor grammar could be another linguistic factor affecting speaking difficulties among Chinese university participants. Grammar guides students in constructing English sentences to communicate with others (Muhsin, 2015). In addition, grammar is bound to other language skills, like speaking. Poor grammar can significantly affect the clarity and effectiveness of communication. It can make it difficult for Chinese EFL learners to understand the message being conveyed and can create confusion or misunderstanding. Besides, inaccurate pronunciation refers to the incorrect or improper articulation of sounds and words in spoken language. Understandable pronunciation is one of the basic requirements of learners' competence, and it is also one of the most important features of language instruction. Good pronunciation leads to learning, while wrong pronunciation promotes great difficulties in language learning (Pourhosein, 2012; Putri et al., 2020). Incorrect pronunciation can impact communication, making it difficult for others to understand the speaker's message. It can also affect the credibility and professionalism of Chinese EFL learners, particularly in formal or business settings. These findings align with previous studies showing that linguistic factors are a critical factor affecting learners' speaking difficulties (Asgari & Mustaph, 2011; Thao & Nguyet, 2019).

The qualitative data from the interview supplements the quantitative results. The participants reported that lacking linguistic English knowledge (e.g., vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation) affected their ability to speak or communicate in English. Together, the linguistic factor was the most critical factor contributing to Chinese EFL learners' English speaking difficulties. The participants' responses can support this claim:

“My vocabulary is insufficient, and I have problems with grammar. When I was studying in China, my basic knowledge of English was weak. We want to speak but don't know the words” (Cindy).

“My English vocabulary is not insufficient to support the expressions needed in English class” (John).

“The lack of vocabulary knowledge and the structure and tense of English sentences makes me struggle to speak English in class” (Brown).

“Because I lack vocabulary and expression ability, I find it difficult to speak English (...) I don't have enough

vocabulary to express my ideas in class, and I find it difficult to connect words into sentences” (Lisa).

Therefore, consistent with previous studies, the current research demonstrated that most Chinese non-English major students have linguistic problems, especially in pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary, which directly affect the output of their English speaking and cause difficulties in speaking. Therefore, teachers should help students improve their basic language knowledge, especially vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation.

#### 5.1.2 Learning Environment Factor

The questionnaire analysis of the study also showed that the learning environment was the second problematic factor that affected their speaking difficulties. The primary aspect of the environment that caused problems in speaking was the inadequate opportunity to use English, followed by poor support learning environment, lack of learning resources, and low participation in class, respectively. These findings could be explained by inadequate opportunities to speak English in and outside lessons, lack of a focus on language improvement in the curriculum, and an input-poor environment outside class, which lead to speaking difficulties among EFL university students. The current study is consistent with previous findings that inadequate exposure to the target language is one variable contributing to learners' speaking difficulties (Bani & Albalawi, 2016; Diaab, 2016; Gan, 2012; Maarof & Munusamy, 2015).

The analysis of the qualitative results also indicated that the learning environment affected Chinese university learners' English speaking difficulties. A lack of a supportive learning environment limits improving students' language abilities, leading to speaking difficulties. The participants' responses provided evidence to support the argument that a learning environment is essential for speaking problems:

“I can hardly use English at ordinary times, so I rarely have the opportunity to express myself in English, and I don't have the chance to practice my English speaking. I think this is why I have difficulty speaking English” (John).

“I speak English poorly because I don't have a good language environment (...). When I sit with Chinese people, we discuss in Chinese” (Cindy).

#### 5.1.3 Psychological Factors

Another factor affecting Chinese university learners' speaking difficulties was the psychological factor. The quantitative results showed that psychological factors were the third important variable for Chinese EFL learners' speaking challenges. Among psychological factors were fear of making mistakes, worries about not being understood, nervousness, a lack of confidence, and peer pressure. Those findings were consistent with Wulandari et al. (2022), who mentioned that psychological problems negatively affect language learners during the learning process. They are difficulties, low confidence, and fear of being laughed at by others.

The interview results also provided evidence to support the quantitative findings. Specifically, the participants noted that the fear of making mistakes, nervousness, not being understood, and lack of confidence affected their speaking performance, mainly when they wanted to communicate with classmates and lecturers. The following excerpts from the participants could support such an argument:

“When I communicate with the teacher, I am a little nervous. First, I was afraid I would not understand the teacher's words and was embarrassed to ask again. Secondly, when I answer the questions, I will forget the words I am familiar with and cannot express because of nervousness” (John).

“In English class, I get nervous when communicating with teachers and classmates. Because my English is not very good, sometimes, to understand what others say, I will listen to them carefully. It takes me more time to know if it is a long sentence. Because of my poor English, I fear making mistakes when communicating in English” (Cindy).

“I never raise my hand to answer the teacher's questions because I think it's too embarrassing. I'm afraid of answering wrongly, and then I will feel embarrassed, so I prefer to keep silent” (Brown).

Together, the current study provided evidence that linguistic, learning environment, and psychological factors were the main variables affecting the speaking difficulties of Chinese university learners studying for a Master's in Thailand. Indeed, the quantitative results showed that the linguistic variable was the most influential factor, followed by the learning environment and psychological factors, respectively.

### *5.2 Levels of English Speaking Difficulties Experienced by Chinese EFL Learners at a Thai University*

In this study, It was indicated that non-English major Chinese postgraduate students at a Thai university generally experienced a high level of English speaking difficulties. In their responses to the semi-structured interview, two interviewees who had a high level of English speaking difficulties stated that:

“I never raise my hand to answer the teacher's questions (...) I prefer to keep silent” (Brown).

“I hardly dare to communicate in English (...) when I sit with Chinese people; we discuss in Chinese” (Cindy).

Some researchers have also investigated the level of English speaking difficulties among English learners. For example, Zhang (2019) investigated the English speaking obstacles faced by non-English major Mongolian college students. The results showed that the average value of the sample population was 3.29 (standard deviation: 0.90), which indicated that non-English major Mongolian college students had a moderate level of English speaking difficulties. Another study by Train & Tham (2015) investigated the four aspects of speaking difficulties: affective, social, instructional, and linguistic difficulties encountered by English-majored students at one university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The results showed that speaking difficulties often affected English-majored students' speaking abilities. Many factors affect the achievement of a high level of English speaking difficulties. According to Amoah & Yeboah (2021), the study's outcome revealed that Chinese EFL learners' average for all factors was more than 3. Therefore, consistent with previous studies, the current results demonstrated that Chinese EFL learners at a Thai university generally have high levels of English speaking difficulties in English classrooms.

### *5.3 What do the Participants Think the Teacher could do to Help them Overcome Speaking Difficulties?*

As shown in the qualitative data, the semi-structured interview explored six students' opinions on how they perceive teachers could help them overcome speaking difficulties. Five suggestions were mentioned that for teachers to help students overcome their speaking difficulties, it is important for them to also teach pronunciation, teach vocabulary, offer more opportunities for English speaking, reduce criticism, and give positive feedback. For example, the interviewees reported that:

“Teachers can use a variety of teaching methods to teach vocabulary... For example, teachers can use English songs to assist teaching and use lyrics as an example to explain English vocabulary (...) so that students (...) consolidate (...) vocabulary” (Lisa).

“I think the class should be 100% in English communication. Let the students participate in the topic discussion, express their views in turn, and show their English speaking expressions to strengthen the students' class participation and oral ability” (John).

Several previous studies have also mentioned how teachers help students overcome English speaking difficulties. For example, Amoah & Yeboah (2021) stated that teachers should help create a conducive environment that will help reduce the feeling of problems or shyness; teachers should gather adequate strategies such as regular oral presentations or classroom debates to boost EFL learners speaking confidence; and by critically observing learners and giving mindful feedback, instructors will encourage learners to speak without fear or shame. The teacher should encourage students to join English debating clubs or societies and motivate them to spend time reading literature and learning grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. Thao & Nguyet (2019) recommended that teachers should allow students to talk about their English speaking difficulties, ask questions, and share good experiences or effective ways of learning English that they have tried. The teachers should make their sympathetic expressions clear to weak students so that they dare confide in them about their problems. Teachers should move around the class, talk to students to identify weak students and help them overcome their inferiority complex. Thanks to the teacher's encouragement, vulnerable students can feel more confident communicating with their peers in English. Furthermore, Leong & Ahmadi (2017) stated that teachers should give their learners enough time for speaking skills, help them overcome their timidity through friendly behaviors to make them feel comfortable when speaking, remind their learners not to worry about making mistakes, and give them true instructions and enough guidance. Teachers should give their learners more opportunities to speak English by using speaking tasks that help them speak and encouraging them to participate in speaking activities. In addition, teachers should know when and how to correct their learners' mistakes so that they are not afraid of making mistakes. Therefore, according to the previous findings, it was suggested that teachers should use different strategies to overcome the students' English speaking difficulties.

## 6. Conclusion

To conclude, linguistic, psychological, and learning environment factors affect students' English speaking difficulties. Linguistic factors, including insufficient vocabulary, weak sentence organization, talking intermittently, insufficient expressions, poor grammar, and inaccurate pronunciation, mainly contribute to difficulties in English speaking. Psychologically, fear of making mistakes, worries about not being understood, nervousness, lack of confidence, and peer pressure were the main psychological factors in English speaking difficulties. As for learning environment factors, students' English speaking difficulties were influenced by the poor learning environment, such as lack of opportunity for English conversation, lack of practice, poor support learning environment, lack of learning resources, and low participation in class. The results of this study also indicated that linguistic factors were the most influential factor for non-English major Chinese postgraduate students at a Thai university when speaking English. And the current study also found that the overall mean score of 85 non-English major Chinese postgraduate students at a Thai university who participated in the survey was 3.66 out of 5 in English speaking difficulties, which indicated that non-English major Chinese postgraduate students at a Thai university generally experienced a high level of English speaking difficulties. Furthermore, the results of how students perceive how teachers could help them overcome speaking difficulties revealed in the semi-structured interviews can be divided into five themes: teaching pronunciation, teaching vocabulary, offering more opportunities for English speaking, reducing criticism, and giving positive feedback.

## 7. Limitations and Recommendations of the Study

There are still some limitations to this research. First of all, the sample is limited, and participants in this study were limited to 85 students from one university only. Future studies may wish to increase the number of participants from different locations (e.g., south, east, and west). Secondly, future studies are needed to gain further insight into Chinese EFL learners' speaking difficulties. For example, future research may investigate the relationship between English speaking difficulties and other variables such as gender, educational background, age, attitude, working experience, and motivation.

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