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Investigating the Barriers to Oracy Proficiency Among Thai EFL Learners Through an Exploratory Factor Analysis

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***Abstract*—Oracy proficiency is important for EFL learners, but this skill poses great problems for Thai students. To fill this gap, the purpose of this study is to examine the barriers to oracy skills among Thai EFL learners. The sample consisted of 661 Thai EFL students who filled out a 32-item questionnaire intended to identify barriers to oracy skills. The data were analyzed through exploratory factor analysis (EFA), and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was 0.912, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant at 2345.423 ($p < 0.05$), indicating the appropriateness of factor analysis. Five main barriers to oracy skills were identified, which were listening processing challenges (LPC), accent and speech clarity (ASC), speaking anxiety barriers (SAB), speaking fluency difficulties (SFD), and grammar and comprehension gaps (GCG), with eigenvalues between 1.066 and 12.990 explaining 60.305% of the variance of the 32 variables. These findings illustrate the challenges faced by Thai EFL learners and highlight the need for them to have extensive exposure to authentic and level-appropriate listening and speaking materials, as well as the importance of an encouraging classroom atmosphere.**

***Index Terms*—oracy skills, barriers, exploratory factor analysis, EFL learners**

I. Introduction

The listening and speaking elements collectively referred to as oral proficiency are often considered among the primary skills of concern in second language learning in an EFL setting (Asmae & Sana, 2024; Tran et al., 2024). Oracy skills enable students to take part in classroom debates, group work, and real-world interactions, which are all necessary communicative activities (Newton & Nation, 2020). Speaking and listening skills also aid in the acquisition of other skills such as reading and writing by deepening learners' knowledge of vocabulary, pronunciation, and sentence structures. This is especially critical for Thai EFL learners, as advancing oracy skills increases levels of self-confidence in using English outside the classroom, thus enhancing their chances of academic success and employment in a globalized economy. Students with better oracy skills also often perform well in oral examinations and interviews, which are common assessment methods in universities and job applications.

Though oracy skills are an essential component of language learning, some learners remain incompetent in either speaking or listening activities in the English language (Aba Sha'ar & Boonsuk, 2021; Suwannasit, 2019; Tantiwich & Sinwongsuwat, 2021). These barriers pose challenges on learners' academic undertakings, engagement levels, and prospective employment opportunities. One such barrier is listening comprehension (Suwannasit, 2019). Learners, when in the presence of speech, are likely to suffer from cognitive overload, especially when the speech is rapid, there are many unknown vocabulary items, or when there are many speakers. Listening is an intricate act which comprises the coordination of many activities to succeed in comprehension. Given these factors, the specific barriers to oracy skills among Thai EFL learners remain unclear, as they are likely to encounter different challenges. Therefore, these issues need to be explored to clarify the factors leading to oracy problems.

To bridge this gap and uncover the hidden structure underlying these barriers to oral proficiency, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) provides a useful statistical technique (Sukserm, 2025). EFA is a subset of multivariate analysis wherein the aim is to classify observed variables into a smaller number of groups—factors—that account for the variances in some correlation matrix (Hair et al., 2018). In language research, this approach has the potential to ascertain hidden constructs to some degree because educators and researchers would be able to better understand the barriers to language learning. The relevance of EFA about Thai EFL learners is more applicable because their barriers to oracy skills might be different from those faced by learners within other cultures and languages. Thus, these gaps point to a need to investigate the barriers to oracy skills among Thai EFL learners.

II. Literature Review

Developing oral proficiency is often considered difficult because many EFL learners face several barriers that hinder their progress in achieving speaking and listening competence. One of the main barriers to acquiring oracy skills is a

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lack of listening comprehension skills (Suwannasit, 2019). According to Rost (2024), successful listening is a holistic task that involves bottom-up processes, such as recognizing sounds, and top-down processes, such as using background knowledge to derive meaning. If learners are weak in bottom-up or top-down skills, their listening comprehension is likely to fail. According to Field (2008), listening is a task in which learners have to work out the sounds of a language, identify the words, and grasp the meaning of the speech within minutes. Learners often have difficulty keeping up with speech that is fast, contains unfamiliar words, or is pronounced with an unfamiliar accent. Also, Goh and Vandergrift (2021) argue that attention and memory are equally important for comprehension. Most learners, while listening with the aim of understanding, struggle to comprehend meaning if too much is being said. Difficulties in listening comprehension frustrate learners and decrease their confidence in using the English language.

Another key obstacle is the anxiety that arises from speaking (Hutabarat & Simanjuntak, 2019; Suratin & Sribayak, 2025). Speaking anxiety is a common and serious problem for EFL learners and can significantly affect their self-expression and self-efficacy. As Horwitz et al. (1986) contend, foreign language anxiety is a type of anxiety learners experience when they are required and pressured to perform in a language in which they lack fluency. Such anxiety stems from the fear of making mistakes, being evaluated and found lacking, or a persistent sense of inferiority. Anxious students, especially those who are nervous about their pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary skills, tend to hesitate and do not even dare to speak (Hutabarat & Simanjuntak, 2019; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994).

In addition, oral language deficiency is one of the major challenges that requires the attention (Mohammed & Idris, 2020). Pronunciation problems can be numerous and complex, especially when students attempt to produce or use sounds or intonation patterns that do not exist in their mother tongue. Munro and Derwing (1995) state that failing to achieve certain levels of pronunciation can lead to reduced comprehensibility, which is the listener's ability to understand the speaker. Fluency in speech also is a challenging language skill, but it primarily involves the ability to express one's ideas spontaneously and without constraint. As Skehan (1998) states, learners achieve fluent speech when they can retrieve vocabulary and formulate grammatical sentences rapidly and without hindrance. Learners who frequently pause and spend more time blocked in thought or word retrieval are said to have problems with fluency.

The inability to command the grammar structures of a language also causes distinct oracy challenges for learners (Bango et al., 2023). The issue is further echoed by Ellis (2008) who observes the paradox of grammar being a cornerstone of a language's construction, yet for a considerable number of EFL speakers, accuracy and fluency compete with each one another. This results in anxiety or even absence of speech as learners' belief that they need to formulate grammatically correct utterances makes them feel embarrassment when attempting to communicate.

III. Methodology

A. Samples

The participants in the present study included 661 individuals who were recruited from a public university in Thailand. They were drawn as a sample using a random sampling method. Thirty-two variables were studied and as per the suggestion made by Hair et al. (2018), the number of respondents was 5–20 times the number of variables. To minimize the risk of an inadequate sample size, the study aimed to increase the target sample size by 10% as a buffer for anticipated missing data. This led to a target sample size of 704. Out of this, 661 responses were collected, yielding a response rate of 93.89%. This response rate is well above the 300 responses recommended by Tabachnick and Fidell (2019). Hence, the sample size was more than adequate.

B. Research Instrument

The study included the use of the questionnaire comprising 32 items aimed at identifying possible barriers to oracy skills for EFL learners. Such an instrument was articulated in various studies (e.g., Aba Sha'ar & Boonsuk, 2021; Afebri et al., 2019; Derakhshan et al., 2016; Dumlao, 2020; Hanifa, 2018; Khau & Huynh, 2022; Rost, 2024; Seraj et al., 2021; Suwannasit, 2019; Tantiwich & Sinwongsuwat, 2021). The participants' perceptions of the barriers were captured on a 4-point scale to reduce central tendency bias and to minimize central tendency bias (Plengkham et al., 2025). Surveys were translated into Thai to eliminate possible ambiguities in some statements. To maintain validity, three experts assessed all items with the Item-Objective Congruence Index (IOC), with scores ranging from 0.67 to 1.00. Prior to full implementation, a pilot study was conducted with 30 participants, and a Cronbach's alpha of 0.952 was obtained. This surpassed the accepted level of reliability set for social research (Sukserm, 2024).

C. Data Collection & Data Analysis

In order to maximize the response rate, the online version of the questionnaire was made available. The data collection took place over a three-month period during the first semester of the 2024 academic year. Ethical approval was granted by the Ethical Review Board for Research with Human Subjects (IRB No. 214/67). Furthermore, barrier analysis regarding oracy skills to EFL learners was approached using Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA). For factor extraction, Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was conducted and retained components with eigenvalues ≥ 1 and a minimum of 60% cumulative variance (Hair et al., 2018; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). In addition, the varimax orthogonal factor rotation method was used to retain factor separability. Communality values (h^2) above 0.5 were deemed as acceptable.

IV. FINDINGS

TABLE 1
KMO AND BARTLETT'S TEST

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.912
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	2345.423
	df	496
	Sig.	< .001*

$p < .05$*

The KMO values confirmed the sample was suitable for factor analysis as it was above the threshold limit of 0.6 (Kaiser, 1974), recovering the Bartlett test of sphericity which produced a chi-square of 2345.423 (df = 496, $p < .001$). In other words, the correlation matrix was not an identity matrix, and relations existed among the variables (Bartlett, 1950). Therefore, the dataset was suitable for the exploratory factor analysis (EFA). The results of the EFA focusing on the total variance explained by the different components of the data were presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2
TOTAL VARIANCE EXPLAINED

	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
Component	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	12.990	40.595	40.595	12.990	40.595	40.595	5.192	16.224	16.224
2	2.354	7.357	47.952	2.354	7.357	47.952	4.400	13.751	29.976
3	1.657	5.179	53.131	1.657	5.179	53.131	4.100	12.813	42.789
4	1.230	3.842	56.973	1.230	3.842	56.973	4.031	12.596	55.385
5	1.066	3.332	60.305	1.066	3.332	60.305	1.574	4.920	60.305
6	.989	3.091	63.396						
7	.941	2.941	66.337						
8	.872	2.724	69.061						
….	….	….	….						
….	….	….	….						
31	.145	.453	99.616						
32	.123	.384	100.000						

Components with eigenvalues higher than 1 were considered, and five components met this criterion. The first component had a particularly strong eigenvalue of 12.990, which contributed 16.224% of total variance. In aggregate, these five components accounted for 60.305% of the total variance, which was higher than the generally accepted 60% mark (Hair et al., 2018; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019), confirming their usability for factor analysis.

Table 3 below presents the matrix of components from the Principal Component Analysis (PCA) applying the varimax orthogonal rotation technique. This table shows the factor loadings of each of the items on the five components which were identified and rotated.

TABLE 3
ROTATED COMPONENT MATRIX

Variables	Component				
	1	2	3	4	5
Barrier 1: Listening Processing Challenges (LPC)					
I can't recognize the main points in an English conversation.	.783				
I feel discomfort when listening to English in a formal or academic setting.	.755				
I can't follow conversations that switch between formal and informal language.	.716				
I cannot easily recognize sounds and intonation patterns in English sentences.	.622				
I can't concentrate when listening to longer English speeches.	.605				
I cannot understand English speakers due to my limited vocabulary.	.570				
I cannot follow conversations with complex English vocabulary.	.547				
I can't think directly in English and often translate from my native language first.	.513				
I can't practice listening to English in different contexts frequently.	.495				
Barrier 2: Accent and Speech Clarity (ASC)					
I can't fully understand speech when I'm confronted with unfamiliar accents.		.783			
I can't clearly distinguish words and sentences in unfamiliar accents.		.748			
I can't understand speakers who don't speak English clearly.		.687			
I find it hard to understand informal speech or colloquial expressions in English.		.622			
I can't follow English speech well when it's spoken quickly.		.601			
I can't understand speakers with different foreign accents well.		.580			
I can't interpret the meaning of unknown words I've never heard before.		.421			
Barrier 3: Speaking Anxiety Barriers (SAB)					
I often mispronounce words, and it lowers my confidence when speaking.			.769		
I can't speak English due to worrying about grammatical errors.			.743		
I can't stop thinking too much about grammar, which interrupts my flow of speech.			.711		
I can't speak English due to worrying that I'll choose the wrong word.			.619		
I am not confident when speaking due to anxiety or nervousness.			.605		
I'm not sure if I pronounce words accurately.			.603		
I often feel forced or hesitant when speaking.			.395		
Barrier 4: Speaking Fluency Difficulties (SFD)					
I can't think of words during a conversation, which causes me to pause or stumble.				.745	
I can't use a wide range of vocabulary effectively in my speech.				.596	
It's not easy for me to find the right words when speaking.				.579	
I can't form complex or long sentences confidently.				.571	
I can't speak English naturally.				.565	
I can't connect sentences smoothly when speaking.				.560	
I don't get enough practice because I find it hard to join in English conversations.				.553	
Barrier 5: Grammar and Comprehension Gaps (GCG)					
I often make grammatical errors or verb tense errors.					.695
I sometimes get lost if I miss a few words in a conversation.					.547

V. DISCUSSION

The results of this study reveal the barriers to oracy skills among Thai EFL learners. There were five main barriers: listening processing challenges (LPC), accent and speech clarity (ASC), speaking anxiety barriers (SAB), speaking fluency difficulties (SFD), and grammar and comprehension gaps (GCG).

A. Listening Processing Challenges (LPC)

This group reflects a range of problems that are likely to be related because of the difficulty associated with understanding the cognitive processes that go with listening to and understanding language in real-time. The items that loaded onto this factor, "*I can't recognize the main points in an English conversation*" and "*I can't concentrate when listening to longer English speeches*," suggest a common underlying problem involving attention capture, information, and processing auditory inputs during active listening, which entails many tasks. These problems are likely to occur together because attentive listening comprehension usually requires the performance of several activities such as sound recognition, dividing attention, and constructing meaning (Bango et al., 2023; Field, 2008; Suwannasit, 2019).

It could be argued that the classification of these comprehension problems stems from cognitive load theory (Sweller, 1994), which posits that learners may struggle with processing if they encounter unfamiliar language input or when information storage and manipulation tasks in the working memory are needed. It seems reasonable to assume that learners' limited processing capacity may hinder their ability to identify salient emerging ideas and sustain comprehension throughout the discourse. Goh and Vandergrift (2021) also offer support for this when providing an explanatory model for listening comprehension that consists of input recognition and bottom-up processing of sound and word decoding as well as top-down knowledge application to an interpreted meaning. Significant disruptions to any of these processes would likely lead to an inability to understand salient information shared in the discourse or a failure to maintain attention to the input.

The grouping of these barriers into a single factor may also reflect the interdependence between attention and comprehension in listening. Attention is considered one of the vital components determining the success of any listening activity (Rost, 2024). While performing complex or lengthy listening tasks, learners are likely to experience

attention lapses, and their ability to identify the main ideas or properly follow the chain of a conversation is bound to deteriorate (Tantiwich & Sinwongsuwat, 2021). This could explain why problems with identifying the key points and maintaining attention tend to emerge together and within the same factor. In addition, learners' language skills might shape their perception of these problems. Listeners that are less proficient may spend more mental energy on individual words which means that there is much less available for higher level processes like summarizing or capturing central ideas (Goh, 2000). Therefore, basic listening process difficulties may lead to more advanced comprehension breakdowns, and these explanations further support why these items should be placed together under a single construct.

B. Accent and Speech Clarity (ASC)

This group represents a cluster of barriers that are closely connected because they all relate to the perception and decoding of unfamiliar or unclear spoken input. Items such as "*I can't fully understand speech when I'm confronted with unfamiliar accents*" and "*I can't clearly distinguish words and sentences in unfamiliar accents*" seem to collectively reflect the perceptual difficulties learners often experience when listening to non-standard pronunciation, rapid speech, or speakers with diverse linguistic backgrounds. These challenges are likely to co-occur because successful listening relies heavily on a listener's ability to match phonological input to their existing mental representations of language (Bango et al., 2023; Field, 2008; van der Feest & Fikkert, 2015). This aligns with Munro and Derwing's (1995) findings, which suggest that unfamiliar accents take longer to process and require greater cognitive resources, especially among second language speakers. Struggles understanding accents, difficulties distinguishing words, and issues with processing speech clearly all appear to stem from a breakdown in the perception of phonological stimuli and thus seem to be related.

Problems understanding rapid speech, as well as with the use of informal language, may result from listeners having difficulties when speech does not stay within standard boundaries of rate, formality, and pronunciation (Rost, 2024). A fast speech rate can hinder the parsing of sound sequences in words, while colloquial language may involve reduction, ellipsis, or idioms that contrast sharply with the formal speech taught in class (Newton & Nation, 2020). Since these speech characteristics often overlap in conversational contexts, especially in multi-accented and informal styles, it is not surprising that learners perceive them as components of a single listening problem. What is more, less proficient listeners often rely more heavily on bottom-up processing (Field, 2008), meaning they depend on clear phonological and lexical cues to decode speech. When these cues are obscured by accentual variations or rapid delivery, comprehension seems to falter, further linking the items in this factor.

C. Speaking Anxiety Barriers (SAB)

As speaking-related anxiety impacts the cognitive and affective cycles of language production, these types of barriers tend to group together (Aba Sha'ar & Boonsuk, 2021; Afebri et al., 2019; Hanifa, 2018; Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Young, 1990). Horwitz et al. (1986) framed foreign language anxiety (FLA) as a distinct form of anxiety related to the lack of fluency and confidence while using the language. These perceptions of inadequacy can negatively affect fluency and coherence. Studies show that anxious speakers exhibit speech disfluencies and more frequent pauses when their self-confidence is low. Self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997) helps to partially, if not fully, explain this phenomenon. Speaking self-efficacy is likely to be low and often stems from an inability to achieve successful communication in a foreign language. It could be said that concerns about anxiety-inducing factors such as pronunciation, anxiety itself, and the difficulty of the foreign language will accompany the foreign language learner. Research indicates that students with lower oral self-efficacy tend to report higher anxiety and greater difficulty with foreign language communication (Hutabarat & Simanjuntak, 2019; Suratin & Sribayak, 2025; Woodrow, 2006). These barriers, especially anxiety-related ones, may reflect the evaluative pressure of performing complex formal or academic oral language tasks. When performing a speaking task, a student may perceive it as a situation in which their abilities are being assessed, bringing the possibility of shame or fear of negative judgment (Young, 1990).

D. Speaking Fluency Difficulties (SFD)

Statements such as "*I can't think of words during a conversation, which causes me to pause or stumble*," or "*I can't connect sentences smoothly when speaking*," suggest that these issues are likely the result of an interruption in word retrieval, phrase construction, and continuous spoken production (Tantiwich & Sinwongsuwat, 2021). These problems appear to be interrelated because fluency is often defined as the effortless production of speech in appropriate rhythm and intonation, with only minimal hesitation and well-placed pauses. If learners face difficulties in one component, such as rapid word retrieval, it may set off a chain of problems that further interfere with the generation of sentences and the smooth progression of speech.

It can be assumed that a more intricate sentence structure can create additional merging difficulties which bind these challenges. Learners who feel less confident about producing complex or longer sentences tend to focus on accuracy rather than fluency, resulting in halting, fragmented speech (Bango et al., 2023; Skehan, 2009; Thornbury, 2005). That is likely why items related to the difficulty of forming complex sentences and the inability to connect sentences smoothly are contained within the same factor. Learners who lack sufficient grammatical resources to produce different types of sentences may be able to formulate ideas if given sufficient time, but when it comes to execution in real time, especially in spontaneous speech, that is much more difficult. Likewise, these outlined fluency problems may be made

worse due to limited vocabulary. Skehan (1998) argued that such learners overly depend on a small, familiar set of words, which makes expressing more sophisticated thoughts harder and slows down speech. This corresponds with the items in this group such as "*I can't use a wide range of vocabulary effectively in my speech*". In the absence of variety in language, learners tend to pause frequently to search for the right words, disrupting the seamless flow of speech.

The different types of tensions, combined with the necessity of adaptive contingencies in any speech context, may also disrupt the coherence of the communicative situation. Segalowitz (2010) describes the complexities of speech in relation to the pace of articulation and the cognitive aspects of fluent speech across temporal intervals. Within clusters, many finer and more fundamental elements will differ from person to person. Some people, due to deficiencies in retention may speak at an unnaturally slow rate of speech, while others, due to difficulty connecting the elements of a line of speech tend to insert pauses more.

E. Grammar and Comprehension Gaps (GCG)

This includes two distinct but closely related issues in oracy: the purpose of a participant comprehending discourse segments and grammatical slips in oracy. The former concerns listening problems, while the latter refers to a type of breakdown in comprehension. Both issues derive from a more persistent problem: grasping the real-time segmentation and amalgamation of the more intricate constituents of phonology and language. The rationale for grouping these phenomena under one constituent factor stems from the presence of this underlying reason.

Moreover, a learner in the interlanguage phase, as cited in Ellis (2008), can be described as someone who has an incomplete or surface-level understanding of the mental grammar blueprint. As a result, while they may succeed in formulating grammar in a linear manner and articulating it, they are unable to do so without making errors at various levels. These errors negatively affect fluency and place a high strain on the learner's mental grammar. Many important ideas may go unexpressed, further increasing the communication gap. A similar phenomenon occurs in spoken language comprehension, especially when learners lose continuity of speech because a word or two is missing. Rost (2024) describes listeners who tend to actively listen as engaging in mental grammar processing of the heard words at the level of phrases and sentences, and even beyond, to more distant levels, thus deriving whole meaning even with inadequate information. Learners with lower levels of grammatical competence tend to struggle more with reconstructing meaning when information is only partially available. The absence of one or two crucial words may disrupt comprehension, especially when listeners lacking sufficient grammar are unable to perform necessary substitution operations.

The connection between these speaking and listening problems becomes clearer when considering the limitations of working memory. Skehan (1998) notes that in cases of form-meaning disintegration among learners with limited working memory, either the form or the meaning component is often completely overlooked. When too much cognitive capacity is devoted to monitoring grammaticality during speech production, much less capacity is available for adapting to changes in understanding during real-time listening. This issue may help explain why learners who have grammar problems in speech production also struggle to recover from comprehension failures while listening. Thus, the problems of grammar production and comprehension within the same time span are functions of the same underlying processing difficulty, where the balance of attention is compromised.

VI. Conclusion

The present study aimed to examine the barriers to oracy proficiency of Thai EFL learners, and the key findings show five main barriers, including 1) listening processing challenges (LPC), 2) accent and speech clarity (ASC), 3) speaking anxiety barriers (SAB), 4) speaking fluency difficulties (SFD), and 5) grammar and comprehension gaps (GCG).

One implication is that teaching professionals need to recognize that oracy problems should be addressed differently in instruction, rather than using a single broad approach. For example, learners with LPC barriers may need more practice in listening, summarizing, and identifying main ideas. Meanwhile, learners with ASC barriers may need greater exposure to more authentic, more complex, and more naturally rapid interactions with diverging accents. This type of refinement narrows down a teacher's focus from broad speaking and listening pedagogy issues to the intricate difficulties learners encounter within each classroom.

However, one of the limitations is the study's exclusive focus on Thai EFL learners. That is, barriers to English attainment are certainly influenced by their local schooling, social attitudes toward English, and English activities. The lack of exposure to immersive English environments in Thailand is likely to have a considerable impact on the level of listening and speaking anxiety in low English immersion contexts. Therefore, the findings reported may not be applicable to learners in other EFL contexts, especially those who have greater exposure to English. Therefore, findings validated through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) may demonstrate higher convergence for EFL learners in more varied contexts. Additionally, this research considers barriers that are relatively static within a certain time frame; future studies would benefit from examining how barriers shift over time. Such longitudinal research should aim to determine whether certain barriers adapt with increasing proficiency or remain static and therefore require targeted modification strategies. This type of research may enhance the design of proficiency-matched oracy support programs that optimally address specific stages in the language learning continuum.

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