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Unpacking the Challenges: An Exploration of EFL Students' Speaking Problems

Wariyati[1)], Yenita Br Sembiring[2)], Yugi Diraga Prawiyata[3)] Rohazlyn Rosly[4)], Heridayani[5)], Eisya Dalila[6)]

[1,3,6] Universitas Muslim Nusantara Al Washliyah, Indonesia
[2] Universitas Prima Indonesia, Indonesia
[4] Universitas Teknologi MARA Cawangan Kelantan, Malaysia
[5]Akademi Manajemen Informatika dan Komputer ITMI, Indonesia

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CORRESPONDENCE:
E-mail: wariyati@umnaw.ac.id

A B S T R A C T
Fluency in English speaking is a vital competence for English Language Education students because it supports both academic success and future professional performance. However, many students continue to encounter difficulties in achieving oral fluency due to various internal and external factors. This study aimed to identify and analyze the factors influencing students' challenges in speaking English fluently. The investigation focused on internal aspects such as anxiety and motivation, and external aspects including exposure to English and instructional methods. Employing a mixed-methods design, the research combined quantitative and qualitative data. A survey was administered to 56 English Language Education students to gather information about their experiences, challenges, and perceived barriers. The quantitative data were analyzed descriptively, while ten students were later interviewed to gain deeper insights into their perspectives. The results revealed that limited vocabulary, low confidence, speaking anxiety, and lack of English-speaking environments were the main obstacle affecting fluency. Most participants expressed a need for more supportive, practice-oriented learning conditions. These findings indicate that integrating interactive methods, authentic assessment, and non-threatening classroom environments can enhance students' speaking proficiency.

Introduction

English speaking proficiency is a fundamental skill for students in English departments, particularly for those preparing to become English language educators. Despite years of formal instruction, many students continue to struggle with speaking English fluently and confidently. These difficulties often stem from a combination of linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors that inhibit students' ability to express themselves effectively in oral communication. Fluent English-speaking ability is a critical skill for students enrolled in English Language Education programs. This skill is not only essential for academic success but also for preparing them for future careers as English language educators. In the current era of globalization, English serves as a primary medium of communication across various fields, making oral fluency increasingly vital. However, many students in English Education programs face difficulties in achieving spoken fluency. Preliminary observations and several previous studies have identified a range of contributing factors, including speaking anxiety, low motivation, limited exposure to the English language, and ineffective teaching methods.

English is a global language that plays a crucial role in daily life and across all levels of education. It is frequently used in various international settings, such as conferences, debates, and social interactions. Consequently, speaking proficiency in English has become an essential skill for learners, particularly for students in English Education programs. However, in practice, speaking is often one of the most challenging skills for students to master. Several factors contribute to this difficulty. One major issue is limited vocabulary acquisition. Without sufficient vocabulary, students struggle to express their ideas clearly and fluently. In addition, a weak grasp of grammar also hinders their ability to construct correct sentences, especially in spontaneous speaking situations. This often leads to hesitation or reluctance to speak due to fear of making mistakes.

Anxiety or lack of self-confidence also significantly affects speaking performance. Many students feel nervous about speaking in front of teachers or peers due to fear of criticism, ridicule, or error. This lack of confidence results in passive participation or minimal engagement during speaking classes. Other contributing factors include low classroom participation, unfamiliar or difficult discussion topics, and the habitual use of the mother tongue (Indonesian) when speaking. Some students even feel lost or unsure of what to say, either due to a lack of ideas or not knowing the appropriate vocabulary. Furthermore, limited speaking practice, challenging learning materials, and embarrassment in giving or receiving feedback exacerbate the difficulties in developing speaking skills. Speaking is, in fact, a vital skill, as most communication occurs orally. Therefore, it is important for educators to understand the obstacles faced by students in acquiring speaking skills in order to design effective instructional strategies, foster a supportive learning environment, and provide more opportunities for active speaking practice.

Speaking anxiety frequently arises from the fear of making mistakes and being negatively judged by others. This factor can significantly hinder students' speaking performance and lower their self-confidence. Motivation also plays a key role in language learning. Students with strong intrinsic motivation tend to be more successful in developing fluency than those who are driven by external factors. In addition, exposure to English is a crucial element. Students who are regularly exposed to English through media, daily conversations, and academic environments have greater opportunities to improve their speaking proficiency. Furthermore, the teaching methods employed in English language instruction can greatly influence learning outcomes. Interactive and communicative approaches are generally more effective in enhancing speaking skills than traditional methods that focus solely on grammar and translation. To address and better understand these issues, a comprehensive study is needed to investigate the various factors contributing to students' inability to speak English fluently.

There are several things can be developed as the research question who drive researcher to find further finding about the basic foundation of students problems in Speaking English. There are: the factors that influence the inability of English Education students to speak English fluently, students' level of speaking anxiety affect their English speaking proficien, motivation contributes to English speaking ability among English Education students, exposure to the English language affect students' speaking fluency, and the current teaching methods effective in improving students' English speaking skills.

English speaking proficiency has long been regarded as a key skill in English language learning, particularly in English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts. However, despite its significance, many learners continue to face significant challenges in developing speaking skills. A study conducted in Malaysia highlights that ESL learners often struggle with issues such as low motivation, lack of self-confidence, speaking

anxiety, and limited vocabulary, all of which hinder their ability to communicate effectively in English. These barriers not only affect their academic performance but also limit their ability to engage in real-world communication, which is essential for both personal and professional development. Critical skill for students in English departments, particularly for those preparing to become English language educators. Despite years of formal instruction, many students still have difficulties speaking English fluently and confidently. These difficulties often result from a combination of linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors that make it hard for students to communicate effectively in speaking.

The importance of addressing these challenges is underscored by the study's conclusion that effective teaching strategies, including the use of Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) and the creation of a supportive, non-threatening classroom environment, can help overcome these barriers. The study suggests that educators and policymakers should prioritize speaking skills in English language instruction to ensure that learners have sufficient opportunities to build their speaking proficiency. Moreover, providing learners with authentic activities and materials, as well as platforms for practice like online communication media, can help students gain confidence and improve their speaking abilities.

In many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, speaking is regarded as the most challenging of the four language skills. Students frequently report issues such as lack of vocabulary, poor pronunciation, fear of making mistakes, and anxiety when speaking in front of others. These challenges not only affect their academic performance but also hinder their future professional development. Understanding the specific problems faced by students in speaking English is crucial for developing effective teaching strategies and support systems. This study aims to explore the common speaking difficulties experienced by students in the English department and to investigate the underlying causes behind these challenges. By identifying these issues, educators and curriculum designers can better address students' needs and foster more engaging and supportive speaking environments.

English speaking proficiency is widely recognized as a core competency for students in English departments, particularly those who are preparing for careers as educators, translators, or global professionals. The ability to communicate fluently and accurately in English not only reflects students' mastery of the language but also plays a crucial role in their academic success and future employability. Despite its importance, speaking remains one of the most challenging language skills for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners. Numerous studies have investigated the speaking difficulties faced by university students, identifying persistent problems such as limited vocabulary, poor grammar, incorrect pronunciation, low self-confidence, and high levels of speaking anxiety (Al Hosni, 2014; Tuan & Mai, 2015). Recent research, validates and extends this pattern. For example, the study by Tridinanti (2022) found that among Indonesian undergraduate EFL students, self-confidence had a significant positive correlation with speaking achievement, whereas apeaking anxiety did not show a significant correlation with achievement (Tridinanti, 2022). In other recent investigation, Melvina, Autila, and Asmija (2024) reported that for EFL university students in Indonesia, anxiety, shyness, low confidence and fear of making mistakes were significant psychological barriers to speaking proficiency (Melvina et al., 2024).

Furthermore, in the specific Asian EFL context of China and Indonesia, the study by Mahmudah, Hastowohadi, & Rakerda (2023) found that limited exposure to English input, negative attitudes towards accent and dialect, and motivational issues were primary

obstacles to speaking fluency (Mahmudah et al., 2023). Likewise, Agustina, Permana, and Anggraini (2024) reported that Indonesia EFL learners frequently utilize cognitive learning strategies to overcome both linguistic (e.g., vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation) and non-linguistic (e.g., anxiety, low confidence, lack of motivation) challenges in speaking (Agustina et. Al., 2024). Interestingly, although various teaching strategies and classroom innovations have been introduced over the years, the same problems continue to surface year after year. This indicates that the issue is not merely pedagogical but also deeply rooted in psychological and contextual factors.

In real classroom settings, it is common to find English department students who perform well in written assignments yet struggle significantly when asked to speak in English. Even at the higher levels of study, many students hesitate to participate in oral discussions, deliver presentations, or engage in impromptu speaking activities. This recurring phenomenon has become almost cyclical each academic year, new cohorts of students exhibit similar symptoms of speaking apprehension and linguistic insecurity, regardless of prior learning or curriculum updates.

This raises a critical question: **Why do speaking problems persist among English department students despite extensive exposure to the language and the abundance of research-based interventions?** This study seeks to explore this question by examining the speaking difficulties encountered by students in an English department at a private university in Indonesia. It aims to uncover not only the surface-level challenges but also the underlying factors both internal and external that contribute to students' inability to speak English fluently. Speaking is widely recognized as a fundamental component of English language proficiency, particularly in the context of English as a Second Language (ESL). Despite its crucial role in communicative competence, a persistent number of learners continue to encounter significant difficulties in acquiring effective speaking skills. Recent research conducted in Malaysia underscores these challenges, revealing that ESL students often struggle with psychological barriers such as low motivation, limited self-confidence, anxiety, inhibition, and restricted vocabulary knowledge. These obstacles substantially hinder their ability to speak fluently and interact confidently in English.

Moreover, the study emphasizes the necessity for educators and policymakers to place greater emphasis on developing speaking competencies within the English curriculum. The integration of innovative instructional strategies such as Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL), the use of authentic learning materials, and the provision of supportive, non-threatening learning environments has been identified as instrumental in fostering oral proficiency. Furthermore, asynchronous online communication platforms are suggested as effective mediums for enabling students, particularly those with lower speaking proficiency, to practice and enhance their skills without the pressure often associated with real-time interaction. By gaining deeper insights into these persistent issues, this study hopes to contribute to the growing body of research on EFL speaking challenges and provide practical recommendations for educators, curriculum developers, and policy makers in designing more effective speaking-focused interventions.

1. Speaking Anxiety in EFL Contexts

Speaking anxiety is a common psychological barrier that significantly affects students' oral performance in English. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) describe language anxiety as a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning

process. Many EFL learners experience a fear of negative evaluation, fear of making mistakes, and self-consciousness when speaking in front of peers and instructors (Tanveer, 2007). This anxiety often results in students avoiding speaking opportunities altogether, thus hindering their language development. Research by Liu and Jackson (2008) found that students with higher levels of speaking anxiety tend to participate less in class discussions and show lower speaking proficiency over time.

2. Lack of Speaking Practice

Another major factor contributing to students' difficulties in speaking English is the lack of consistent and meaningful practice. According to Ur (1996), speaking is the most difficult skill because it requires learners to produce language in real time, which demands not only grammatical and lexical knowledge but also fluency and confidence. However, in many EFL classrooms, speaking practice is often limited due to large class sizes, time constraints, and an overemphasis on reading and writing skills (Richards, 2008). Without sufficient exposure to authentic speaking activities, students struggle to develop automaticity and spontaneity in communication, leading to poor speaking performance despite theoretical knowledge.

3. Sociocultural Factors

Sociocultural influences also play a vital role in shaping students' willingness and ability to speak English. In many Asian contexts, including Indonesia, cultural norms such as avoiding confrontation, saving face, and showing deference to authority may discourage students from speaking openly or making mistakes in front of others (Wahyuni, 2013). Moreover, students' limited exposure to English outside the classroom further restricts their opportunities to engage in authentic speaking interactions. The lack of an English-speaking environment at home, in their community, or even on campus, reinforces a passive learning habit that centers more on grammar and memorization than on communication (Kramsch, 1993).

4. Interconnection of Factors

These three factors speaking anxiety, lack of practice, and sociocultural influences often interact in complex ways, reinforcing each other and creating a cycle of speaking difficulty. For example, students who rarely practice speaking English may feel more anxious and less confident, while cultural values may prevent them from seeking speaking opportunities altogether. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of speaking problems must go beyond surface-level analysis and address the intertwined nature of psychological, pedagogical, and social dimensions in the EFL context.

5. Authentic Assessment in Speaking Skills

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, authentic assessment has been identified as an effective approach to improving students' speaking skills. A study published in the *Journey: Journal of English Language and Pedagogy* highlights that authentic assessments allow students to engage in speaking tasks that reflect real-life communication scenarios, thereby increasing their motivation and confidence in using English orally (Wahyuni, 2022). This type of assessment also helps instructors identify specific speaking challenges faced by students, such as pronunciation issues, lack of fluency, and inappropriate vocabulary use.

6. The Influence of Teaching Strategies on Speaking Proficiency

Teaching strategies adopted by instructors have a significant impact on the development of students' speaking skills. According to research in the same journal, the implementation of methods like Problem-Based Learning (PBL) encourages students to be more active in speaking and to engage in critical thinking while using English (Fitria & Sari, 2021). This strategy fosters a learning environment that is both challenging and supportive, enabling students to overcome fear and anxiety associated with speaking tasks.

Research Method

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors affecting students' English-speaking proficiency. The primary aim was to identify internal and external factors contributing to speaking difficulties among English Language Education students at a private university in Medan.

The participants in this study were 56 students enrolled in the English Language Education program. They were selected using convenience sampling, targeting students from various academic years who voluntarily responded to the survey distributed via Google Forms. The quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire design to measure students' perceptions and experiences regarding their speaking abilities. The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended questions focusing on variables such as:

1. Frequency of English usage in daily life and academic context
2. Levels of speaking anxiety and self confidence
3. Motivation to speak English
4. How the environment gave an effect to the speaking ability
5. Perceptions of teaching methods.

The data collection process was conducted in two stages: Quantitative: The questionnaire was distributed online and responses were collected from 56 participants. The data were then tabulated and analyzed using descriptive statistical methods, including frequency counts and percentages, to identify prevalent issues in students' speaking experiences. Qualitative: Following the survey, 10 students were selected for in-depth interviews based on varied levels of self-reported speaking proficiency and anxiety. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format to explore personal experiences, strategies used to overcome challenges, and perceptions about classroom environments.

Quantitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed using Microsoft Excel to produce descriptive statistics that illustrate trends in students' speaking difficulties. These statistics provided insights into the prevalence of factors such as pronunciation issues, vocabulary limitations, and anxiety levels. The qualitative interview responses were analyzed thematically to support and enrich the quantitative findings. Themes such as fear of judgment, lack of speaking opportunities, preference for non-threatening environments, and self-practice habits emerged from the analysis and helped contextualize the statistical data.

Result and Discussion

Result

The findings from this study reveal that students at the university level continue to face significant challenges in developing their English-speaking skills, with the majority of participants self-identifying as having lower to medium proficiency. Many of these difficulties appear to have existed for years, dating back to junior high school, or even earlier. The most commonly cited reasons for these speaking problems include a limited vocabulary, lack of confidence, fear of making mistakes, and the absence of an English-speaking environment. Students frequently mentioned that their surroundings, including peers and even institutional settings, rarely support the use of English outside the classroom, making it difficult for them to practice regularly or feel motivated to improve.

Additionally, around 85% of respondents acknowledged having trouble with pronunciation, particularly with unfamiliar words or specific sounds that are not commonly used in their native language. The infrequent use of English in daily interactions further exacerbates the issue, as students rarely get the opportunity to speak unless required in a classroom context. Several students noted that even when motivated, they often found themselves surrounded by peers who were equally hesitant or unwilling to speak in English, creating a cycle of silence and mutual reluctance. Interestingly, when asked about whom they would prefer to speak English with, most students mentioned lecturers, trusted friends, or even themselves, indicating a strong desire for non-judgmental environments where they feel safe to make mistakes.

In terms of efforts to improve their speaking skills, students reported strategies such as watching English-language films or YouTube videos, listening to native speakers, translating sentences before speaking, or engaging in self-practice like talking to themselves in front of a mirror. While these self-driven methods show promise, the overall sense from the responses is that the campus and classroom settings do not yet offer sufficient speaking opportunities or motivation. Many students expressed a clear preference for more practical, conversation-based teaching methods over theoretical approaches, emphasizing the need for immersive English zones or mandatory use of English in and outside of class. They also hoped for greater encouragement and personalized attention from their instructors, along with a learning atmosphere that fosters participation without fear of judgment.

Reflecting on their past learning, several students admitted that they would have taken their speaking development more seriously if they had known how important it would be, wishing they had been more consistent, confident, and disciplined in their efforts. Ultimately, the data suggest that while students are aware of their limitations and are willing to improve, they require both internal motivation and external support to truly overcome their speaking difficulties. A more supportive and immersive English-speaking environment, combined with empathetic teaching strategies and consistent practice, could significantly enhance students' confidence and fluency

Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce previous literature on the multifaceted nature of speaking difficulties among EFL students. One of the most prominent themes that emerged was the strong influence of speaking anxiety on students' performance. Consistent with Horwitz et al. (1986) and Tanveer (2007), many students expressed fear of making mistakes and being judged, which led to avoidance behaviors and reluctance

to engage in speaking activities. The data also support Liu and Jackson's (2008) findings that high anxiety levels correlate with low participation in class.

Additionally, lack of speaking practice and exposure continues to be a major barrier. Despite students spending years in English education, real-life speaking opportunities remain scarce, particularly outside the classroom. This aligns with Ur (1996) and Richards (2008), who argue that insufficient authentic speaking tasks result in limited fluency development. The classroom environment still appears to prioritize passive learning modes, such as reading and writing, over active verbal interaction.

Interestingly, student motivation surfaced as both a challenge and a potential enabler. While intrinsic motivation was visible in students' self-driven strategies—such as watching English content and speaking in front of mirrors—their external learning environment did not always reinforce these efforts. The study by Wahyuni (2022) highlighted the effectiveness of authentic assessment, which seems to be underutilized in the current context. Similarly, methods like Problem-Based Learning (Fitria & Sari, 2021) that can actively engage students in speaking activities were not widely mentioned by participants, indicating a potential gap in pedagogical practice.

Moreover, sociocultural influences in the Indonesian context continue to play a role in students' reluctance to speak, echoing Wahyuni (2013). Social norms such as avoiding embarrassment and maintaining harmony often discourage students from speaking up, especially when their language skills are not yet fluent. This adds another layer of complexity to the anxiety and confidence issues already discussed.

The interconnection among anxiety, limited exposure, and cultural norms creates a self-perpetuating cycle of poor speaking outcomes. Students with high anxiety and low confidence avoid speaking opportunities, resulting in minimal practice and exposure, which in turn reinforces their anxiety and fear of judgment. Breaking this cycle requires systemic changes in how speaking skills are prioritized and cultivated in both classroom instruction and academic environments.

Conclusion

This study has shed light on the persistent and interrelated challenges faced by English Language Education students in developing speaking proficiency. The core issues identified include high levels of speaking anxiety, limited vocabulary, lack of confidence, minimal exposure to real-life speaking scenarios, and insufficient support from academic environments. While students display a willingness to improve through self-initiated practices, these efforts are often undermined by a lack of institutional encouragement and structured opportunities for authentic speaking practice. The findings underscore the need for a holistic and student-centered approach to language instruction. Educators should adopt interactive teaching methods, promote non-threatening classroom environments, and incorporate authentic assessment techniques that reflect real-world communication. Institutions should also foster English-speaking environments beyond the classroom, perhaps through English zones, speaking clubs, or peer mentoring systems.

Ultimately, improving students' speaking proficiency is not only a matter of individual effort but also of pedagogical innovation and institutional support. With intentional strategies that address both internal and external barriers, English Language Education programs can better equip their students with the communicative skills necessary for academic and professional success.

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