

IS LEARNING TO SPEAKING ENGLISH DIFFICULT? AN EXPLORATION OF EFL STUDENTS' CHALLENGES, CONTRIBUTING FACTORS, AND STRATEGIES

Alif Rama Putra Septian¹, Febti Ismiatun², M. Faruq Ubaidillah³

^{1,2,3}*English Education Department, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education
Universitas Islam Malang, Malang 65144, Indonesia*

Abstract: This study explores the challenges, contributing factors, and strategies employed by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in speaking English. Recognizing the vital role of speaking in a globalized world, the research investigates the difficulties EFL learners face due to linguistic, psychological, and sociocultural factors. This study utilized a descriptive qualitative design and involved four sixth-semester EFL students from a private university in Malang, Indonesia. All the data were collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing for in-depth insights into participants' experiences. This study identified key challenges faced by EFL students in speaking English, notably anxiety, limited vocabulary, and pronunciation difficulties—often influenced by their native language. Despite these obstacles, students apply self-directed strategies such as using mobile apps, engaging with English through social media, and practicing via self-recordings and peer interactions. The findings emphasize the importance of consistent practice, supportive learning environments, and personalized instruction in enhancing speaking confidence and fluency. These insights offer practical guidance for educators in designing effective teaching approaches and for students in selecting suitable learning strategies.

Keywords: Speaking challenges, factors, EFL learners, language learning strategies, language anxiety.

INTRODUCTION

The ability to communicate in English has grown crucial in today's more globalized society, especially for those learning English as a foreign language (EFL). The most difficult of the four language skills—speaking, reading, writing, and listening—is frequently speaking. In Indonesia, where English is seen as a foreign language and is rarely spoken in everyday conversation, this is particularly true. Because of this, students who are attempting to communicate effectively in English face a variety of linguistic, psychological, and societal obstacles. Previous research has shown that students' confidence in speaking is a crucial component of successful language acquisition (Al-Nakhalah, 2016; Nascente, 2001; Nunan, 1999).

Various factors contribute to the difficulty of speaking in English, including anxiety (Nascente, 2001), fear of making mistakes (Sarnilawati et al., 2024), limited

vocabulary (Khan et al., 2018), and mother tongue interference (Muradi & Amarkhil, 2024; Palomargareta & Astutik, 2024). Students often struggle with knowing how to initiate, sustain, and appropriately conclude conversations. To overcome these obstacles, EFL students employ different strategies such as memory techniques, metacognitive planning, and social interaction, as identified by researchers like Oxford (2003), Wael et al. (2018), and Kelana et al. (2022). However, these strategies are not always used consistently or effectively, and some areas—such as the influence of mother language interference—remain undiscussed.

This study aims to investigate three key aspects of the EFL speaking experience among university students: the challenges they face, the factors contributing to those challenges, and the strategies they use to address them. Specifically, this research seeks to answer the following questions: (1) What are the main challenges encountered by EFL students in speaking English? (2) What factors contribute to the difficulties in developing speaking skills? and (3) What strategies do students employ to overcome these challenges? By exploring these questions, the study intends to provide insights that can inform more effective teaching practices and support student-centered learning approaches in EFL speaking instruction.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to explore the challenges, contributing factors, and learning strategies of EFL students in speaking English. As defined by Moleong (2010), descriptive qualitative research seeks to gain a deep understanding of individuals' behaviors, perceptions, motivations, and actions. This approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to uncover rich, contextualized insights into the students' experiences and personal strategies in learning to speak English.

The research was conducted at a private university in Malang, Indonesia, and involved four sixth-semester students—two males and two females—aged between 20 and 22. These participants were selected based on their high academic performance in speaking courses and were enrolled in an English Language Education program. Their inclusion aimed to provide insightful perspectives on the speaking difficulties they faced and the strategies they adopted. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for all participants. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for flexibility in probing deeper into students' experiences while still focusing on specific

core themes. The interviews were conducted in both Bahasa Indonesia and English to ensure clarity and participant comfort, with each session lasting approximately 30–40 minutes over two separate meetings within two weeks. To maintain the participant confidentiality, they have been informed with the inform consent and their name remains pseudonym.

The data collected were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's (1984) qualitative data analysis framework, which involves three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. In the first stage, the researcher filtered and organized relevant data from the interviews, eliminating unrelated information. Next, the selected data were displayed descriptively to outline emerging patterns related to students' speaking challenges, contributing factors, and coping strategies. Finally, the researcher drew conclusions and verified them with participants to ensure accuracy and credibility. This systematic process enabled the researcher to construct a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences and the effectiveness of their language learning strategies.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents and analyzes the results of interviews with four sixth-semester EFL students at a private university in Malang, Indonesia. Based from the interview, EFL student stated that speaking is not difficult for them. The findings are organized according to the three research questions: (1) the challenges faced by students in speaking English, (2) the contributing factors affecting their speaking performance, and (3) the strategies used to overcome these challenges. These findings are followed by a comprehensive discussion comparing them with existing literature.

Challenges in Speaking English

The first major challenge reported by all participants was anxiety, which manifested in different forms. Student 1 described feeling nervous when initiating English conversations, resulting in sudden loss of words. Student 2 often reverted to Bahasa when unsure of English vocabulary, while Student 4 experienced cognitive overload when switching between languages during his role as a tour guide. These findings highlight that anxiety is a significant barrier in speaking, aligning with studies by Nascente (2001), Salam et al. (2021), and Sarnilawati et al. (2024) which emphasized that anxiety often inhibits EFL students from communicating effectively.

A second common issue was limited vocabulary. Students 1 and 2 explicitly

stated that vocabulary was their greatest difficulty. Student 1 felt his vocabulary hindered communication, while Student 2 emphasized the difficulty of memorizing new words. These limitations restricted their ability to express ideas fluently and caused communication breakdowns. This is consistent with Yunus et al. (2023), who found that vocabulary deficiency reduces students' self-confidence and communicative competence.

Pronunciation difficulties also emerged as a significant challenge. Student 3 found specific consonant combinations such as D, S, T, and R difficult to pronounce, comparing them to tongue twisters. Student 1 struggled with distinguishing similar-sounding words like "walk," "work," and "wok." Student 4 mentioned tongue twisters as a general pronunciation obstacle. These difficulties reflect the importance of accurate pronunciation in communication and align with Purwanto (2019), who emphasized that mispronunciation can impede meaning and lead to misunderstandings.

Students also discussed specific situations that heightened their speaking difficulties. Student 1 struggled with academic presentations due to the need for formal language use. Student 2 found adapting to different speaking contexts—academic vs. social—challenging. Student 4 reported issues with public speaking confidence, while Student 3 felt comfortable in class presentations, viewing mistakes as learning opportunities. These responses illustrate how contextual factors and audience types influence speaking anxiety and performance.

Factor Affecting Speaking English

One noteworthy factor influencing pronunciation challenges was mother tongue interference. Students 1 and 2, who identified Javanese as their first language, observed its influence on their English pronunciation. Student 1 mentioned the “medok” accent causing pressure on certain consonants, while Student 2 noted altered pronunciation due to Javanese patterns. In contrast, Students 3 and 4, whose mother tongue was Bahasa Indonesia, reported minimal interference. These findings echo Muradi & Amarkhil (2024), who found that native language phonetics often disrupt English sound articulation.

Students also varied in their daily speaking practice intensity. Student 1 practiced 1–3 hours daily with peers from other universities, fostering both comfort and learning. Student 2 practiced 2–3 hours daily, while Student 3 integrated English into daily social media use. Student 4 spoke English only during free time, primarily by self-talk. This variation indicates differing levels of language exposure, which directly affect fluency

development.

Regarding teaching methods, participants described different strategies used by their lecturers. Student 1 experienced group discussions; Student 2 practiced conversation and reading aloud; and Students 3 and 4, who shared a class, experienced storytelling, picture describing, and debates. These communicative methods were generally seen as effective in enhancing speaking ability.

In terms of teaching method effectiveness, most students responded positively. Student 1 appreciated group presentations for reducing anxiety. Student 2 valued peer conversations but disliked reading aloud, which increased her anxiety. Student 3 praised the expressive potential of communicative tasks, and Student 4 felt these methods improved vocabulary and speaking fluency. This underscores the role of supportive classroom environments, echoing Richards (2006), who emphasized the teacher's role as a facilitator in creating safe spaces for language use.

When asked about their fear of making mistakes, all students acknowledged some degree of worry. Student 1 and 4 shared a fear of being misunderstood, which could disrupt the message. Student 2 admitted initial nervousness but gained confidence with practice. Student 3 consistently feared making mistakes, indicating persistent anxiety. These responses reinforce the psychological barriers that inhibit speaking, further validating earlier research on language learning anxiety.

Students were also asked about their confidence during class presentations. Student 1 needed to pause and re-read material to manage anxiety, while Student 2 overcame initial nervousness through preparation. Student 3's performance depended on her mood and preparation level. Student 4, despite strong skills, lacked self-confidence when speaking publicly. These findings further highlight the role of emotional readiness and preparation in speaking performance.

Strategies Use in Speaking English

As for speaking strategies, students reported using varied techniques. Student 1 used Duolingo to improve vocabulary and pronunciation. Student 2 incorporated English into daily life by listening to music and reading English novels. Student 3 used grammar-checking apps and practiced reading aloud from social media. Student 4 recorded and replayed his speech to self-assess, although he found this method uncomfortable.

Most students agreed that their strategies were effective. Student 1 appreciated Duolingo's gamified features, while Student 2 found daily exposure helpful in improving

vocabulary. Student 3's method allowed learning through immersion. Student 4, however, felt self-recording was ineffective, as it reduced his confidence. This variation shows that strategy effectiveness is tied to personal learning styles and preferences.

Lastly, students identified practices they believed would help intensify their speaking improvement. Student 1 suggested more self-talk and peer communication, and joining English communities. Student 2 aimed to build confidence through frequent practice. Student 3 planned to speak more often with peers, while Student 4 preferred practicing alone to increase fluency. These responses suggest a shared belief in the value of consistent practice and peer interaction.

In summary, the research found that the dominant speaking challenges among EFL students were anxiety, limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, and grammar complexity. Mother tongue interference was a key contributing factor, particularly for students from Javanese-speaking backgrounds. Students employed a variety of strategies, including mobile apps, self-talk, and media immersion, which were generally seen as effective. The findings emphasize the importance of supportive teaching methods, regular practice, and emotional readiness in developing speaking proficiency in an EFL context.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The current findings are believed to benefit both theoretical and practical aspects. Theoretically, it is expected that the findings of this research can complete the previous studies, especially about the challenges, factors, and strategies in speaking English for EFL Students, and it gives more information on how to deal with such challenges. Practically, the researcher expects that the findings of this research can inform difficulties or challenges faced by EFL students so that the students and teachers know the challenges, factors, and how to overcome the problems.

Based on the findings and analysis, this study concludes that EFL students encounter multiple challenges in developing their English-speaking skills. The primary difficulties include psychological barriers such as anxiety, limitations in vocabulary, and pronunciation issues. Anxiety emerged as the most prominent obstacle, often stemming from fear of making mistakes or being judged, which inhibits students from engaging in speaking activities. This anxiety not only lowers participation but also hinders practice, ultimately impeding their progress in speaking fluently.

In addition to anxiety, vocabulary limitation was another major challenge faced by

the participants. Their inability to recall appropriate words or phrases made it difficult to express ideas clearly, leading to frustration and reduced confidence. Pronunciation problems, often caused by mother tongue interference, particularly among students whose native language is Javanese, also affected their speaking clarity and effectiveness. These combined challenges underscore the need for both individual effort and institutional support in improving EFL students' spoken English.

To address these issues, English teachers are encouraged to adopt varied and personalized teaching strategies. Teachers should recognize the specific contexts and emotional factors contributing to students' struggles and provide anxiety-reducing classroom activities, vocabulary-building exercises, and pronunciation-focused practices. By fostering a supportive and encouraging learning environment, educators can help students overcome their barriers and enhance their confidence and communication skills in English.

Students, on the other hand, should take an active role in managing their learning by identifying effective methods that suit their individual needs. Practicing regularly, incorporating English into daily routines, and experimenting with different strategies—such as using mobile apps or joining English-speaking communities—can support long-term language improvement. They should remain adaptable and seek guidance from instructors when current methods are no longer effective.

Future researchers are advised to expand this study by exploring perspectives from English teachers to gain a more comprehensive understanding of classroom dynamics and teaching effectiveness. Additionally, research could be conducted across different educational levels or in public university contexts to compare findings. Investigating other language production skills, such as writing, may also provide valuable insights. It is important to note that the findings of this study cannot be generalized, as the sample size was limited and all participants came from the same university and department. Future studies should consider recruiting a larger and more diverse sample from various educational institutions to ensure broader applicability and deeper insights into EFL learning challenges and strategies.

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