

WHY DON'T THEY SPEAK ENGLISH? A PHENOMENON OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN FL CONTEXT

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Abstract

Despite completing speaking courses, many EFL students in Indonesian universities remain reluctant to speak English, indicating deeper psychological and environmental barriers that hinder their communication. This study explores the internal and external factors that inhibit students' willingness to speak English, as well as the strategies they use to overcome these barriers. The research employed a qualitative method with an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, focusing on three sixth-semester English Education students at a private university in Malang. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations, then analyzed thematically. Findings revealed that psychological barriers such as low self-confidence and self-comparison, along with environmental obstacles including fear of correction by lecturers and peer reactions, significantly affected students' speaking behavior. Nevertheless, students employed various strategies such as self-practice, note preparation, emotional regulation, and positive self-talk to navigate these challenges. These findings suggest that even advanced learners need emotional and social support to build confidence in speaking English. The study highlights the need for educators to foster a more empathetic and supportive classroom environment while encouraging personal strategies that enhance students' speaking performance. This research contributes valuable insights into the real-life experiences of EFL students and offers practical implications for language teaching in higher education.

Keywords: speaking anxiety, psychological barriers, environmental barriers, communication strategies

INTRODUCTION

English is an important international communication tool in various aspects of life, including education, work, and intercultural interaction (Seidlhofer, 2005). In Indonesia, English is taught from elementary school to university as part of the national curriculum. Students in the English Language Education program are specifically required to have speaking proficiency in English, both for academic and professional purposes. This speaking ability is a key indicator of language learning success as it is directly related to effective communication (Alifah et al., 2021). However, many students still struggle with using English orally, even after completing all speaking courses.

This phenomenon demonstrates that speaking ability is not solely determined by linguistic proficiency, but is also influenced by psychological and environmental factors. Horwitz et al. (1986) note that speaking anxiety is a significant obstacle for foreign language learners when

communicating. Students who feel anxious tend to avoid situations that require the use of spoken English. Additionally, education in Indonesia places greater emphasis on grammatical and theoretical aspects than on practical communication skills, which also contributes to this situation (Andriani et al., 2021).

Several studies have identified psychological factors that influence students' speaking ability, such as low self-confidence, fear of negative evaluation, and the habit of comparing oneself to more fluent peers (Febti Ismiatun et al., 2024; Sarnilawati & Azami, 2024). Another study by Chulee et al. (2023) revealed that past traumatic experiences, limited vocabulary, and the influence of the first language also contribute to EFL students' reluctance to speak. These factors indicate that even though students have completed formal language training, psychological barriers remain the primary obstacle to oral communication.

In addition to psychological barriers, environmental factors also play a crucial role. Students often feel afraid of being corrected directly by lecturers or feel embarrassed by their peers' reactions when speaking English (Yunus et al., 2023). An unsupportive learning environment, such as a classroom atmosphere lacking support from instructors and peers, can exacerbate anxiety and make students increasingly reluctant to attempt speaking (Bandura, 1986; Ordoñez et al., 2015). In social-cognitive theory, the interaction between personal factors, behavior, and the environment is the primary determinant of learning success.

However, most existing studies focus more on high school students (Ismiatun et al., 2024), first-semester university students (Normawati et al., 2023; Sarnilawati & Azami, 2024), or from the perspective of teachers (Purwati et al., 2023). Few studies have explored the experiences of final-year students, particularly those who have completed all speaking skills courses, such as Public Speaking or English Debate. Therefore, a gap exists in the literature that requires addressing through in-depth qualitative research.

The objective of this study is to explore in depth the psychological and environmental barriers faced by final-year students in the English Language Education program when speaking English, as well as the strategies they use to overcome these barriers. The focus is on students who have completed all speaking skills courses, assuming that they have sufficient experience to describe the challenges they face and how they overcome them.

This study is expected to make an important contribution to the development of theory and practice in teaching EFL. By exploring students' experiences from affective and social perspectives, this study enriches the literature on speaking anxiety and willingness to communicate in the context of higher education in Indonesia. The findings of this study can also serve as a reference for lecturers and curriculum designers to create a more supportive learning environment that encourages student participation in speaking activities. To address these research questions, this study was designed to respond to three main questions:

1. How do EFL students experience psychological barriers to speaking English?
2. How do they experience environmental barriers that affect their courage to speak?
3. What strategies do students use to overcome psychological and environmental barriers in the context of speaking English?

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Tindall, 2009). This method was chosen to explore in depth how individuals experienced and interpreted specific phenomena, in this case, psychological and environmental barriers in speaking English, and how students managed to overcome them. Rather than measuring language ability, this study aimed to gain insights into personal perspectives and emotional responses.

Participants

The participants were three sixth-semester students enrolled in the English Education Department at a private university in Malang, Indonesia. All participants had completed core speaking courses, including Public Speaking and English Debate. A purposive sampling strategy was applied to ensure the selection of individuals with rich and relevant experiences related to the research focus (Creswell, 2008). To identify suitable participants, the researcher initially asked several final-semester students informally whether they had encountered speaking difficulties and had used any strategies to cope with them. Based on their responses and peer recommendations, three students who met the criteria were selected.

Instruments

Two main instruments were used in this study: semi-structured interviews and classroom observation sheets. The interview protocol was adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) by Horwitz et al. (1986) particularly focusing on speaking anxiety components such as fear of making mistakes, fear of judgment, and reluctance to speak. The researcher also developed several context-specific questions, which were validated through consultation with an expert in English language teaching.

The observation sheet was designed to capture specific classroom behaviors relevant to the research focus, such as visible signs of anxiety, participation patterns, peer interaction, and coping strategies used during English-speaking tasks.

Data Collection

Data collection was carried out through individual semi-structured interviews and a single classroom observation. Interviews were conducted privately and in Indonesian to ensure participant comfort and clarity. Each session lasted approximately 20 to 50 minutes and was audio-recorded with prior consent. Manual notes were also taken to highlight key points during the interview. Although each participant was interviewed only once, they agreed to provide additional clarification via WhatsApp if necessary.

The classroom observation specifically targeted the three participants during their English for Specific Purposes (ESP) class, which included group discussions, presentations, and Q&A sessions. The researcher observed participant behaviors such as hesitation, avoidance, emotional responses, and the use of preparation strategies. Observation notes were recorded using the structured sheet described earlier.

Data Analysis

Interview data were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase process by Braun and Clarke (2006). A deductive coding approach was applied, aligned with the study's research questions. Data were grouped into three primary themes: psychological barriers, environmental barriers, and coping strategies. Each theme was reviewed to ensure internal coherence and relevance to the participants' lived experiences. Observation data were triangulated with interview findings to enhance validity and interpretive depth.

Trustworthiness

To ensure credibility, member checking was conducted by sharing interview transcripts with participants for verification. Triangulation between interview and observation data was used to increase the confirmability and trustworthiness of the findings.

FINDINGS

Psychological Barriers in Speaking English

Students encountered two major psychological challenges that hindered their oral participation: a lack of confidence and comparing themselves with others. The following table summarizes the themes and related strategies.

Table 1 Summary of psychological barriers and strategies

Psychological barriers	
Barriers	Strategies
Lack of confidence	• Writing key points before speaking. • Self-practice at home • Using short/safe sentences • Breathing and calming techniques
Comparing oneself with others	• Seeking help from more fluent friends. • Positive self-talk • Turning comparison into motivation • Imitating friends' language use

The most dominant psychological barrier was lack of confidence, often triggered by fear of making mistakes in pronunciation or grammar. William described this anxiety:

"I feel insecure because I'm afraid my pronunciation doesn't match the sentence structure. Sometimes, my pronunciation is unstructured. Maybe because it's difficult, or I don't know the vocabulary."

This quote shows that William feels insecure because he is worried that his pronunciation is incorrect and does not fit the sentence structure. This uncertainty is also influenced by his limited vocabulary.

Similarly, Ricky said:

"I feel inferior when I want to say something but don't know what to say, so in the end, my friend answers instead."

Ricky feels inferior because he has difficulty constructing sentences when he wants to speak. This confusion ultimately causes him to remain silent and let his friends answer instead.

Firmansyah expressed his nervousness, especially during spontaneous speaking tasks:

"Actually, I feel quite nervous, especially when I'm asked to speak in front without any preparation."

Firmansyah revealed that he feels very nervous when asked to speak suddenly without preparation, which shows anxiety in unstructured speaking situations.

The tendency to compare oneself to more fluent peers was another internal challenge. William shared:

"My friends are better than me. I feel insecure when I see them already fluent in speaking English. But at the same time, I learn more on how I can be like them. I try asking my friend who I think is more competent than me."

William felt less confident when he saw his friends speaking English more fluently. However, he tried to use this feeling as motivation to learn from his more proficient friends.

Despite feeling inferior, both Ricky and Firmansyah turned the comparison into motivation:

"Since my friends are already ahead of me, I feel more excited to learn from them. It's fun to study with them." (Ricky).

Despite feeling left behind, Ricky saw his friends as a source of encouragement and enjoyed learning with them.

"Yes, I still feel insecure. But I try to keep up with them. I'm still making an effort." (Firmansyah).

Firmansyah also realized his lack of confidence, but he continued to try to catch up and keep learning.

These psychological tendencies were also observable during classroom activities. All three participants showed signs of nervousness: they often hesitated, spoke in a low voice, avoided eye contact, and used filler sounds such as "uh" or "umm." Occasionally, they mixed English with

Indonesian and showed anxious gestures like fidgeting with pens. In one session, William stopped speaking and smiled nervously after mispronouncing a word, confirming his self-reported lack of confidence.

Environmental Barriers in Speaking English

In addition to internal factors, the participants encountered external obstacles in the classroom environment. Two main themes emerged: fear of being corrected by lecturers and social pressure from peers.

Table 2 Summary of environmental barriers and strategies

Environmental barriers	
Barriers	Strategies
Fear of being corrected directly by lecturers	• Using “safe” sentences • Mental preparation before class • Taking notes before speaking to minimize errors
Social reactions from peers	• Self-study • Emotional regulation • Seeking support from close friends

William described how the lecturer's correction made him feel embarrassed:

“I felt embarrassed because of my mistake. Even though the lecturer was right to correct me, I still felt very inferior. But I have to be brave and try not to repeat the same mistake.”

This quote shows that William felt embarrassed and inferior after being corrected by the lecturer in front of the class, even though he realized that the correction was well-intentioned. This indicates the psychological pressure that arose from interacting with the lecturer.

Ricky's strategy was to avoid difficult structures:

“Yes, I'm afraid. So, I try to say safe sentences. Even if they're not grammatically correct, at least they're safe.”

Ricky chose a strategy of using simple and “safe” sentences to avoid mistakes, even though he was aware that the structure was not necessarily grammatically correct.

Regarding peer reactions, William recalled:

“Once, I mispronounced a word, and some of my friends giggled. Not loud laughter, but just a little chuckle.”

William remembers an experience when he mispronounced a word and his friends chuckled. Although it wasn't loud, the reaction still made him feel uncomfortable and became a barrier to speaking.

Firmansyah also said:

“Yes, I was afraid of being laughed at. It happened, especially in the early semesters. When I mispronounced something, they would giggle a bit, even if not out loud.”

Firmansyah also experienced a similar situation in his first semester, where he was afraid of being laughed at if he made a mistake, and indeed, some of his friends reacted with laughter, albeit quietly.

These observations were reinforced during classroom sessions. While the lecturer consistently encouraged English use and provided feedback, they also corrected students directly in front of peers, which seemed to affect students' confidence. Although no students were openly mocked, brief chuckles could be heard when someone made mistakes. The participants often chose to remain silent, use Indonesian, or look down when speaking, supporting their reports of discomfort and pressure from both teacher and peer interactions.

Students' Strategies to Overcome Speaking Barriers

Despite the barriers they faced, the students employed several strategies to cope with psychological and environmental difficulties. These strategies were grouped into three categories: preparation, self-study, and emotional regulation.

William shared how he used preparation as a strategy:

"I write down the main points I want to say... before I explain, I prepare the key points first."

William prepares key points before speaking as a form of anticipation so that he does not lose his train of thought when explaining. This strategy helps him feel more confident when he has to convey his ideas.

Ricky described his practice habit:

"Usually, I just scream around in my room, singing. Singing English songs."

Ricky uses singing in English as a form of informal practice. It is a fun way for him to practice pronunciation and fluency.

Firmansyah incorporated English into daily life:

"Sometimes I try to speak English in my daily activities. For example, 'I wanna eat'."

Firmansyah tries to get used to using English in his daily activities. Although simple, this shows a consistent effort to improve his speaking skills.

William also practiced by watching movies and speaking alone:

"I talk to myself, sometimes I sing or give a speech alone in my room. It helps me practice speaking. I also watch English movies to learn pronunciation and new vocabulary."

In addition to singing, William also practices by talking to himself and watching English-language films. He uses entertainment media as a means of learning vocabulary and pronunciation independently.

To regulate emotions, Firmansyah used calming techniques:

"I try to take a deep breath to calm myself down first. So I can be more focused and relaxed."

Firmansyah uses breathing techniques to control his nervousness. This strategy helps him feel calmer and more focused before speaking.

"I keep telling myself: it's okay, it's okay, it's okay."

He also engages in positive self-talk to convince himself that mistakes are not fatal. This is a form of self-reinforcement to reduce anxiety.

William focused on self-improvement:

"I try to focus on improving myself, not comparing myself to others... If I don't try, I won't grow."

William tries to shift his focus from comparing himself to others to focusing on his personal development. This demonstrates a reflective attitude and a growth mindset in facing challenges.

Ricky showed persistence:

"If I panic like that, well, I just finish it to the end."

Despite feeling panicked, Ricky chooses to continue what he has started. This shows perseverance and his desire not to give up even under pressure.

These strategies were also evident during classroom observations. William was seen checking his phone for key points before his turn to speak. Ricky occasionally consulted his friend quietly before answering questions. Firmansyah, despite signs of nervousness, completed his presentation and answered questions without giving up. These behaviors support the interview data and confirm students' attempts to manage speaking anxiety through personal and social strategies.

DISCUSSION

This study explored the psychological and environmental barriers that hinder students from speaking English in an EFL context, as well as the strategies they used to overcome these barriers. The findings reveal that students' reluctance to speak is not simply caused by a lack of competence, but rather by a complex interaction of internal and external challenges, confirming the concern highlighted in the introduction of this study.

Psychologically, students struggled with low confidence and the tendency to compare themselves to more fluent peers. These findings align with Dörnyei and Scott (1997) concept of affective factors, particularly language anxiety and self-image issues, which can significantly hinder students' willingness to communicate. In this study, students' anxiety stemmed from fear of making mistakes in grammar and pronunciation, leading to hesitation and silence. The behavior observed in class, such as a low voice, lack of eye contact, or nervous gestures, reflects the internal discomfort that students described in the interviews. This is consistent with Horwitz et al. (1986), who identified communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation as major components of foreign language anxiety. However, unlike some earlier studies that described anxiety as entirely debilitating, this research found that students still tried to fight back, especially when they were motivated by observing successful peers. This supports by Bandura, (1986) view that social modeling can influence self-efficacy.

In addition to psychological barriers, environmental conditions also shaped students' speaking behavior. Despite the teacher's supportive attitude, direct correction in front of the class and subtle peer reactions like small laughter were perceived as emotionally unsafe. This finding resonates with Chulee et al. (2023), who found that EFL learners often hold back from speaking due to fear of embarrassment in classroom settings. Interestingly, while mockery was not explicit, the perceived tension and social pressure still had a silencing effect. The fact that students felt more comfortable using Indonesian even in English classes reflects what Purwati et al. (2023) describe as a learning culture that prioritizes correctness over communication.

Nevertheless, the students demonstrated agency in coping with these challenges. They developed personal strategies such as writing key points, rehearsing alone, using English in daily life, and regulating their emotions. These strategies align with the concept of self-regulated learning Schunk and Zimmerman, (2000), where learners take conscious control of their cognitive and emotional processes. For example, William's habit of watching English movies and practicing alone reflects metacognitive awareness, while Firmansyah's deep-breathing technique is an emotional regulation strategy. These findings also support Ismiatun et al. (2024), who emphasized that self-developed techniques play a vital role in helping students handle speaking anxiety.

Overall, this study reinforces the importance of addressing both the affective and contextual dimensions of speaking anxiety. While structural support from teachers is essential, it must be accompanied by efforts to create psychologically safe environments. More importantly, students' internal motivation and strategic behavior must be nurtured to build their confidence and willingness to communicate. By understanding students' lived experiences, teachers and curriculum designers can better support speaking development in EFL classrooms

CONCLUSION

This study explores the psychological and environmental barriers experienced by EFL students in speaking English, along with the strategies they use to overcome these challenges. The findings show that internal factors such as lack of confidence and negative self-comparison significantly inhibit students' willingness to speak. In addition, environmental factors including fear of correction by lecturers and unfavorable reactions from peers also contribute to students' anxiety in classroom interactions. These barriers create a tense atmosphere that reduces student

participation and comfort during speaking tasks. Despite these challenges, students demonstrate resilience by reflecting on their limitations and striving to improve themselves.

To overcome their difficulties, students used various strategies such as preparation, self-practice, using English in daily life, and regulating emotions through self-talk and breathing techniques. These actions illustrate how students took control of their learning and emotional responses, showing a strong sense of learning. This research highlights the importance of not only creating a supportive classroom environment but also encouraging students to take responsibility for their learning. Understanding students' real-life experiences can help teachers and institutions design more effective approaches to promote speaking development in an EFL context.

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