

NAVIGATING SPEAKING CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF EFL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify the challenges English Education students face at the Universitas Islam Malang in speaking English and their strategies to overcome them. The research employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive orientation, utilising interviews with four students from the 2022 and 2023 batches. The data obtained were analysed using Miles and Huberman's data analysis model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion. The results show that students' main challenges in speaking English include limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, lack of self-confidence, and an unsupportive learning environment. Students often experience anxiety and fear of making mistakes when speaking. To overcome these challenges, students use various strategies such as speaking English with friends, family, and teachers, attending English language courses, watching English-speaking tutorials on platforms like YouTube, and expanding their vocabulary through language learning apps. They also work on building their confidence by speaking in front of a mirror and creating a comfortable learning environment. In conclusion, while students face various challenges in speaking English, they can overcome these obstacles by applying effective learning strategies. These findings can serve as a basis for developing more effective teaching methods to improve students' speaking skills.

Keywords: *EFL students, speaking challenges, English education, strategies, oral communication*

INTRODUCTION

Communication is giving and receiving information to one or more people. According to Saxena et al. (2022), communication is the process of conveying facts, information, and opinions from one person, location, or group to another. In communication, two individuals are involved: the person conveying and receiving the information. Speaking English can be difficult for students, especially if they lack strong English skills. Lack of confidence in using English is a significant problem for students. According to Darmi Kashinathan & Abdul Aziz, (2021) English has become a universal language in the fields of science and commerce. As a result, students will continue to use English as one of their languages.

This type of research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive orientation, centred on interview theory and written data analysis. The researchers used qualitative descriptive techniques because this study aimed to identify students' challenges in learning English speaking. Yunus et al (2023) The environment is not conducive to learning English because students are not motivated, accept poor learning methods, and are bullied if they speak English. Many factors increase WTC (Willingness to Communicate), such as class size, vocabulary, teacher behavior, classroom settings, anxiety about second language speaking tasks due to embarrassment/shyness, peer attitudes, and fear of making mistakes.

In a previous study conducted by Alam et al., (2022) using a mixed method, the willingness of students to communicate in English class was explored. Students' confidence in their ability to learn English will increase if they prioritize authentic learning over grammar-based instruction. A second previous study was also conducted by Chand, (2021) Using a qualitative approach to discuss the challenges faced by undergraduate students in Nepal when speaking English. This study identified several challenges, including linguistic, social, environmental, and personal issues, as well as causes such as classroom culture, teaching strategies, and the use of the mother tongue. Previous research was conducted by Francis et al., (2020) This study highlights the importance of English-speaking skills for personal and professional life.

Based on these findings, this study examines the extent of English-speaking comprehension among students majoring in English Education at the Universitas Islam Malang. This study seeks to identify EFL students' challenges when speaking English and the strategies they use to overcome them and improve their oral communication skills. This study investigates how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students face challenges when speaking English and how they overcome these difficulties.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach to better understand the real experiences of students who have difficulty speaking English. Qualitative research aims to understand human or social phenomena by reporting in-depth perspectives gathered from informants, conducting research in a natural environment, and producing comprehensive information and complex descriptions that can be expressed verbally. The researcher used descriptive qualitative methods because, in this study, understanding why students have difficulty speaking English is very important.

This research was conducted at the Universitas Islam Malang in the English Education Study Program, Department of Education. Four students from the 2022 and 2023 academic years participated in this study. They were selected using purposive sampling, considering their diverse backgrounds and experience in English in both national and international contexts.

table 1 1 participant information

No	Participants	Semester	Study Program	Reason for Selection
1	Participant 1	4	English Education	Selected because he previously studied abroad in Brunei Darussalam at Sekolah Menengah Sultan Muhammad Jamalul Alam with a C1 speaking grade.
2	Participant 2	4	English Education	Selected because he studied purely in Indonesia at SMAN 1 Grati, representing students without international experience.
3	Participant 3	6	English Education	Selected because she participated in a teaching internship (PKL) in Thailand, providing experience teaching English in an international setting.
4	Participant 4	6	English Education	Selected because she joined a student exchange program in Taiwan, contributing perspectives from intercultural communication.

The instruments in this study were interviews and documentation. Interviews were conducted with four students from the English Education Study Program at the Universitas Islam Malang, who were naturally selected due to their diverse backgrounds in English experience. Each participant was considered to represent a different level of exposure to English abroad.

Figure 1.2 Date and activity

No	Participants	Semester	Date	Activity
1.	Participant 1	4 th	18 July 2025	In-depth Interview
2.	Participant 2	4 th	18 July 2025	In-depth Interview
3.	Participant 3	6 th	25 July 2025	In-depth Interview
4.	Participant 4	6 th	30 July 2025	In-depth Interview

The data collection process for this study used primary and secondary data sources. The primary data were collected through student self-reports. This involved observing student interactions, experiences speaking English, and oral questions asked by the researcher. The primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews with four respondents from the 2022 and 2023 English Education students at Universitas Islam Malang.

FINDINGS

Challenges Faced by EFL Students When Speaking English

Interviews with students from the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education at the Universitas Islam Malang are necessary to gain a comprehensive understanding of the difficulties they face when speaking English. The results of these interviews reveal several challenges students face, which will be explained in detail in the following section. What challenges do EFL students face when speaking English? (1) Limited language use (2) Lack of English vocabulary (3) Lack of student confidence (4) An environment that is not conducive to learning English (5) Difficulties in learning English pronunciation.

These findings explain that students learning English as an EFL face several difficulties in speaking English. These include limited vocabulary, low confidence, fear of failure, and limited access to native English speakers in context. These barriers can hinder their ability to communicate effectively and assertively in the real world. In response to the above challenges, students use various tactics to overcome them. These tactics range from focusing on vocabulary acquisition and speaking skills practice to utilising language learning applications, collaborating with peers and teachers, and creating an environment where taking risks to speak and receiving constructive feedback can occur. Recognising these issues and how to overcome them is essential for English learners to receive better and more effective language training.

Language is an essential tool for human communication and information exchange. According to WW Souba (2016), difficulties in understanding a language, the inability to grasp reality as a whole, and our natural tendency to only hear what fits our current frame of reference contribute to limitations. However, due to their language limitations, students experience difficulties in speaking and expressing their ideas. According to (2024), students face significant limitations in their speaking abilities due to a lack of confidence, fear of making mistakes, and limited vocabulary. These factors hinder them from producing fluent and structured speech in English.

Many EFL learners experience difficulties in speaking English due to a limited vocabulary repertoire, which hinders their ability to express themselves effectively and participate in conversations. This obstacle often causes hesitation and frustration, as learners struggle to find the right words to convey their intended meaning (Andhara & Alfian, 2023). Vocabulary deficiencies not only affect fluency but also hinder comprehension, making it difficult for learners to follow conversations and understand nuanced expressions (Al Hosni, 2014)

Confidence plays an important role in language acquisition. EFL students often struggle with confidence when speaking English, which stems from a fear of making mistakes and being judged by others (Ayiz, A., & Tauchid, A., 2025). These concerns can lead to increased anxiety and self-doubt, resulting in a reluctance to participate actively in communication exercises and hindering their ability to articulate thoughts and ideas spontaneously (Jiménez Rodríguez et al., 2024). Fear of negative evaluation can be debilitating, causing students to avoid speaking. Overcoming this lack of confidence is essential for EFL learners to develop speaking skills and achieve fluency (Jiménez Rodríguez et al., 2024).

The environment influences EFL learners' ability to communicate and interact in English. A conducive and effective learning environment can accelerate the acquisition of speaking skills in English for EFL learners. Students whose classes are not welcoming will face a long and challenging road if they want to learn how to communicate successfully in the environment. The environment influences people by offering them experiences within it.

Irsani et al., (2023) Thus, these experiences will influence a person's learning. EFL Learners in a good learning environment can learn to speak English faster than those in a poor environment. According to the source, difficult pronunciation is the final challenge in speaking English.

Pronunciation errors can disrupt the communication process. As explained by Gilakjani et al., (2012) Pronunciation errors are the most serious errors that disrupt communication among EFL/ESL learners, not vocabulary or grammar. To communicate effectively, EFL learners can focus on developing their pronunciation. Incorrect or inaccurate pronunciation can lead to serious misunderstandings.

Strategies Used by EFL Students

Strategies used by EFL students in their studies to overcome difficulties when speaking English: (1) Speaking English with friends, siblings, or teachers. (2) Taking English courses. (3) Watching English-speaking tutorials from movies or supporting applications like YouTube and TikTok. (4) Expanding vocabulary using supporting applications such as Duolingo or Grammarly (5) Trying to be confident when speaking English (6) Creating a quiet learning environment to focus more on learning to speak English (7) To improve pronunciation, EFL students can read long sentences repeatedly.

Matthew A. Kraft (2012). EFL students can communicate with friends, siblings, parents, and teachers in their environment. Communication can help EFL students practice speaking various languages, such as English. According to research journals, effective communication is the most effective method for improving academic skills. In addition, the language used by teachers in the classroom, or teacher talk, can significantly impact the success of their interactions with students. (Hustiana in Fikri, Dewi, and Suarnajaya: 2014)

Learning English outside of formal education is very important for EFL students. Kampung Inggris in Pare can be a recommended place for EFL students' English courses. According to Sherly Marliasari (2019), English courses aim to improve students' English skills and help them understand lessons according to their learning needs. EFL students get more practice speaking English, one way being by expanding their

vocabulary. Adding new vocabulary using supporting applications such as Duolingo or Grammarly, Duolingo is an application that motivates beginners to continue making progress in learning foreign languages. (Lisa Irwit Santi, 2023) The features and exercises in the Duolingo app are designed to expand vocabulary and practice writing, listening, reading, and speaking. The features available in the Duolingo app can help EFL students practice independently to improve their fluency in speaking English. Students participate in activities that include reading English texts, watching English movies, talking with classmates, listening to English music, and practising solo in front of a mirror to improve their speaking skills. (Sholeha et al., 2023)

Feeling nervous and lacking confidence is something that everyone has experienced at some point. A lack of confidence can make daily life difficult and hinder effective communication, making it hard to get the information you need. Confidence can be built gradually, for example, by practicing speaking alone, speaking with close friends, and finally developing the ability to communicate with many people. Confidence increases when students consistently practice English and make mistakes, because they learn from those experiences. Experience is the best teacher to help someone grow beyond their previous self. EFL students who make mistakes when communicating in English need not be afraid, as it is natural to improve over time.

As explained by Arianto et al (2023) confidence can help students speak English fluently during the learning process, both in group discussions and presentations in front of the class. In addition, creating a quiet learning environment can help EFL students focus more on learning to speak English effectively.

As explained by Agus Salim (2016) Language teaching that focuses on teaching appropriate student behaviour, creating a safe and consistent environment that allows all students to succeed academically, and managing positive learning in the classroom and environment. EFL students who have a good learning environment can make learning more effective. EFL students learning English can benefit from a calm and relaxed atmosphere. According to Gunawan & Nurbianta, (2020) students learn better in groups because humans are essentially social creatures. When they work together, they build their knowledge. A good learning environment, such as one surrounded by supportive friends who are also learning to speak English, can be facilitated by skilled teachers and supported by facilities such as special study rooms or libraries.

Watching English tutorials from movies or using supporting applications such as YouTube and TikTok can be a strategy to improve English pronunciation. As explained by Fauzi et al., (2023) for learners, various types of information and conversations on social media that transcend geographical boundaries can be effective learning tools for practising English. EFL students can watch and try tutorials on pronouncing English correctly from supporting applications. It is recommended that this exercise be done every day to speed up the pronunciation process.

In addition, EFL students can read sections repeatedly to familiarise themselves with English pronunciation. According to Faridah (2024), the repetition method is the most effective approach to improving English pronunciation for foreign learners. EFL students can start by reading English books, watching English subtitles, reading English newspapers or journals, or other texts that use English. In addition to improving pronunciation when speaking English, this strategy can help EFL students expand their vocabulary.

DISSCUSION

The findings align with prior research highlighting that linguistic limitations, psychological barriers, and environmental factors significantly influence EFL students' oral performance. Limited vocabulary and weak pronunciation restricted students' ability to communicate fluently. Hosni, (2014) (Andhara & Alfian, 2023) Anxiety and lack of confidence, consistent with Ayiz & Tauchid, (2025) They were found to be major inhibitors, often rooted in fear of making mistakes or negative peer evaluation.

The learning environment also played a decisive role. Supportive peers and teachers fostered students' motivation and participation, whereas minimal feedback or unsympathetic classroom climates reduced engagement. This supports the notion that an encouraging, low-anxiety atmosphere enhances speaking willingness (Irsani et al., 2023).

Students' strategies reflected autonomous learning behavior, emphasizing practice, exposure, and self-regulation. The frequent use of digital tools and online resources shows a positive adaptation to modern learning contexts. (Azizah & Mardiana, 2024) Furthermore, repetitive reading and pronunciation (Djuhari & Faridah, 2024) They were effective in improving articulation. These practices resonate with communicative and socio-cognitive approaches to language learning, where interaction and reflection promote fluency and accuracy.

Overall, students demonstrated strong resilience and adaptability, despite facing common EFL challenges. Their strategies reveal that sustained exposure, practice, and motivation are crucial for overcoming linguistic and psychological barriers.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study concludes that EFL students at Universitas Islam Malang experience interconnected vocabulary, pronunciation, self-confidence, and learning environment challenges. However, they progressively enhance their speaking proficiency through conscious strategies ranging from active practice and digital tools to confidence-building techniques.

The research highlights that effective English-speaking development relies on linguistic competence, emotional resilience, and environmental support. Students' success in speaking English emerges from their ability to adapt, practice continuously, and build self-confidence through meaningful communication experiences.

Future studies are encouraged to explore institutional interventions such as structured peer-speaking programs, pronunciation clinics, and anxiety-reduction workshops to further assist EFL learners in achieving communicative competence.

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Malang, 21 Oktober 2024

Advisor 1,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Imam Wahyudi", is displayed on a light gray rectangular background.

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