

Communication Barriers in Speaking: Challenges Faced by Indonesian EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

Speaking is widely acknowledged as one of the most complex language skills to acquire, particularly in the context of global interaction. Within the framework of Indonesia's independent curriculum policy, the implementation of English presents considerable challenges, as many learners struggle to utilize the language effectively for communication. This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to investigate the difficulties encountered by learners of English as a foreign language. The participants consisted of 120 first-year students enrolled in the English Education Study Program at Hamzanwadi University, distributed across four classes. Data collection involved students' self-recorded speaking videos and questionnaire responses. The findings reveal three predominant challenges: grammatical errors (50%), pronunciation difficulties (25%), and limited vocabulary (15%), with additional factors constituting less than 5%. These results aim to enhance understanding of speaking proficiency barriers in EFL contexts and offer practical recommendations for educators and curriculum developers seeking to improve instructional strategies and learner outcomes.

Keywords: *Speaking, Communication's Problem, EFL Learners*

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INTRODUCTION

Language is a fundamental means of communication and self-expression within human societies. It serves not only as a medium for exchanging ideas but also as a tool for constructing identity, articulating perspectives, and preserving cultural heritage. In multilingual contexts, however, disparities in language proficiency can pose serious challenges to interpersonal communication. This becomes particularly evident in educational settings, where effective verbal interaction plays a pivotal role in knowledge transmission and collaborative learning.

In Indonesia, where English is taught as a foreign language, speaking remains a considerable obstacle for many students. The challenges are compounded by the limited exposure to English outside formal classrooms and the perception that English is an exclusive or elite language. This perception contributes to anxiety, reduced motivation, and reluctance to use English orally, factors that inhibit the development of speaking proficiency.

To support the above statement, Sirbu (2015) states that language is essentially a means of communication among members of society. In cultural expression, language is a fundamental aspect. It is a tool that conveys traditions and values related to group identity. English is the international language of many fields, such as technology, business and science. Mastering English allows us to interact with people from all over the world. The Merdeka Curriculum has transformed education in Indonesia, by providing unlimited space and opportunities for learners including English language learners.

The Merdeka Curriculum, introduced to democratize learning and promote learner autonomy, has created new opportunities and expectations for EFL education in Indonesia. Nonetheless, implementing this curriculum has surfaced a range of difficulties, particularly in developing students' communicative competence. The complexity of teaching English

speaking skills within this policy framework is felt acutely by educators and learners alike, especially when the target language is rarely used in daily life.

This study investigates the speaking challenges faced by first-year students of the English Language Education Study Program at Hamzanwadi University. Drawing on classroom observations and learner-produced data, the research seeks to identify core barriers to speaking proficiency and explore the underlying causes. By situating the inquiry within the Speaking for General Communication course, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of EFL speaking difficulties and to offer pedagogical insights for enhancing speaking instruction in similar contexts.

Theoretically, the results of this study can make a positive contribution to the development of science, especially for English Language Education students at Hamzanwadi University. As well as contributing to teachers and institutions engaged in teaching education.

Practically, the results of this study can also be a consideration for lecturers to develop appropriate teaching methods, especially in speaking courses. Students can also take the right steps to prepare themselves to become English language learners, especially to become fluent speakers in communicating using English. The results of this study can also be useful for other researchers as a reference to encourage them to study more deeply related to English speaking ability for foreign speakers.

Among the four core language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—speaking is often regarded as the most demanding to master, especially for learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). Mastery of speaking skills is crucial for learners to engage meaningfully in global discourse and participate in academic, professional, and social interactions. As Nunan (1995) notes, speaking entails the ability to produce and interpret oral language in real time, often under communicative pressure. Dewi et al. (2016) similarly emphasize speaking as a foundational element for effective communication across varied contexts.

In English language learning, speaking is often a challenge for learners. Indonesia is one of the countries that implement English as a foreign language and English is used as a subject that must be studied by students. But in reality, many students still have difficulties in learning English, especially when it comes to the practical realm of communication.

It is unfortunate that the above principle contradicts the reality on the ground where many English language learners face difficulties. Learning to speak English is not as easy as speaking your first language, especially for Indonesian students who use English as a second and foreign language.

Several studies on this subject have been conducted including by Nadya Khoirunnisa (2022). The research conducted was about students' perceptions, namely identifying problems faced by learners of English as a foreign language, especially when communicating using English. The result of the study is that foreign language learners face problems in speaking English. A total of 71.6% of students faced problems in terms of worrying about making mistakes, worrying about being criticized, and feeling embarrassed. Then, only 18.5% frequently participated in their classes. 96.3% of students lack knowledge of the subject and only 14.8% of students are motivated to master English. Furthermore, 81.5% of students agree that their mother tongue is easier and they speak in their mother tongue during English classes.

After reviewing the previous research above, this study also examines similar things, namely the difficulties faced by foreign language learners, especially in speaking. In addition, the researcher also wants to know the factors that cause such difficulties to occur. The researcher is a lecturer in Speaking for General Communication courses for first year students in the English Language Education Study Program, Faculty of Language Arts and Humanities, Hamzanwadi University. Therefore the subject of this study focuses on first year students who take Speaking for General Communication courses.

Previous research has extensively explored the challenges faced by foreign language learners, particularly in areas such as vocabulary acquisition and grammatical competence. However, there remains a significant gap in understanding the specific difficulties learners

face in speaking, a skill that demands not only linguistic knowledge but also confidence and spontaneity. Addressing this gap, the present study focuses on identifying the speaking challenges encountered by first-year students enrolled in the Speaking for General Communication course at the English Language Education Study Program, Faculty of Language Arts and Humanities, Hamzanwadi University. As a lecturer in this course, the researcher aims to delve deeper into the factors contributing to these challenges and explore effective strategies to overcome them. By situating the research within this context, the study seeks to provide targeted insights to enhance the teaching and learning process of speaking skills in foreign language education.

METHOD

This study is included in the descriptive qualitative method, chosen for its suitability in exploring complex phenomena in natural settings without the constraints of numerical analysis. Especially for first-year English Education students at the Faculty of Language Arts and Humanities (FBSH), Hamzanwadi University. Students were asked to create a speaking product in the form of an individual video recording. The questionnaire was distributed to first semester students of the English Department of Hamzanwadi University and took approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. The results of the speaking products and questionnaires were identified, classified, described and concluded by the team researchers. The research flow can be seen in the following figure:

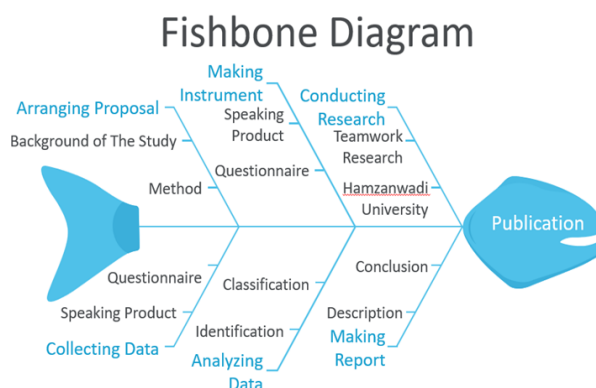


Figure 1. Fishbone Diagram

The diagram contributes to identify key steps. By including stages like arranging the proposal, making the instrument, conducting research, collecting data, analyzing data, and making the report, so it effectively maps out the entire sequence of the research process. In this study, it utilized thematic analysis as the primary qualitative approach to explore and interpret the collected data. This method was chosen for its flexibility and ability to uncover recurring patterns and themes within participants' responses.

Respondents

The study involved a purposive sample of EFL learners from diverse backgrounds, ensuring a range of experiences and challenges are represented. The population was all first-year students of the English education study program, Faculty of Language Arts and Humanities FBSH, Hamzanwadi University. They were students who took speaking for general communication class. There were four classes, namely class A, B, C and D. Each class had 30 students so that the total participants were 120 students. In accordance with Arikunto (2012) if the population is less than 100 people, the total sample is taken as a whole, but if the population is greater than 100 people, 10-15% or 20-25% of the population can be taken. So, the sample of the study was 25% which was 30 students. 25% of the students were chosen with the consideration that the research population consisted of four classes, each of which had different student dynamics and backgrounds. Taking 25% of the overall population ensures that the variety of experiences, challenges and characteristics that arise in each class can be fairly represented. This is very important to get a complete picture of the condition of English learning in the study program. The participant selection in this study was convenience-based.

Although the study used a purposive sampling approach; choosing first-year students enrolled in the speaking for general communication class to ensure that participants met a specific criterion. There were 12 men or represented about 40% of the total sample. while there were 18 women who represented about 60% of the total sample.

Instruments

The researchers used 2 types of instruments, namely asking students to make topical self-video recording based on lecture material. The video recording was then identified to find out the speaking problems faced by students. The video data were analyzed through structured coding categories which focus on key elements of spoken communication such as fluency and pronunciation, lexical and grammatical. The classification of problems identified is based on the theory of H. Douglas Brown (2000) who states in his book entitled Principles of Language Learning and Teaching that he outlines six main aspects of language learning, namely: grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, and task. The second instrument was a questionnaire with an open-ended response type, which was to find out the factors of speaking problems experienced by students. The responses were grouped into themes using qualitative data analysis methods such as linguistic challenges, psychological factors, environmental influences, and instructional aspects. In order to make the questionnaire is clear, reliable, and effective the researcher applied pilot testing.

Procedures

After collecting data from questionnaires and video recordings, the first step was to read through the responses carefully and identify common patterns. To organize the information, certain phrases were highlighted and labeled with codes, short keywords that capture the main issue students mentioned. For example:

"I get nervous when speaking." → *Speaking Anxiety*

"I always struggle with grammar." → *Grammar Issues*

"My pronunciation is not clear." → *Pronunciation Challenges*

Once individual codes were created, they were organized into larger themes that represent common challenges faced by students. Themes provide a broader perspective on the issues reported. Some examples:

Theme	Example Responses
Speaking Anxiety	"I get nervous and hesitate when speaking."
Grammar Issues	"I'm afraid of making mistakes in sentence structure."
Pronunciation Challenges	"People don't always understand me because I mispronounce words."
Limited Vocabulary	"I don't know enough words to say what I want."

To make sure the coding was consistent and reliable, more than one researcher was involved in reviewing the data. Each researcher coded the responses separately, then compared their results. When there were differences in interpretation, they discussed and adjusted the coding until they reached an agreement.

Data Analysis

The present researchers used two types of instruments to collect data. First, asking students to make topical speaking video recordings. The topics were in accordance with the topics of Speaking for General Communication class among others introducing selves and others, describing a memorable experience, comparison etc. The results of this data were then grouped based on Brown's theory (2000). This was done to find out the types of speaking difficulties faced by students. Second by using an open-ended questionnaire to find out the causes of difficulties faced by students.

In analyzing the data, the present researchers applied Thematic Analysis to explore students' speaking problems which involved several systematic stages. Initially, data is collected through questionnaire and video recordings, followed by thorough familiarization with the data through transcription and repeated reading. Next, the present researchers generated initial codes by identifying significant phrases related to speaking difficulties. These codes were then collated into broader themes such as "Grammar Issues" or "Pronunciation Challenges." Each theme was reviewed and refined to ensure it accurately represents the data.

The final stage involved defining and naming these themes, followed by a detailed interpretation of how these themes address the research questions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

Based on the results of the study, it was found that there are three main speaking problems faced by learners of English as a foreign language, especially first-year English Language Education students at the Faculty of Language Arts and Humanities (FBSH), Hamzanwadi University. The three problems are grammar problems, pronunciation problems and vocabulary limitations. There were also some other problems such as fluency and comprehension but only a few percent of the total participants.

To get a clearer picture of the research findings can be seen in the following Table:

Table 1 Key Factors Affecting Students' Speaking Performance

Challenge Type	Percentage of Students Affected	Description
Grammar Challenges	50%	Errors in sentence structure, tense, and syntax were most frequently observed.
Pronunciation Challenges	25%	Students struggled with accurate pronunciation, affecting intelligibility.
Vocabulary Limitations	15%	Insufficient vocabulary made it difficult to express ideas effectively.
Comprehension Challenges	5%	Difficulty understanding questions or prompts during speaking tasks.
Fluency Challenges	3%	Pauses, hesitations, and lack of flow in speech production.
Task Challenges	2%	Trouble interpreting the task instructions or objectives.

From the analysis of the speaking products in the form of videos, it was found that the average grammar score was between the range of 1 and 3 at 50% where most participants showed errors in grammar with a score of 1 but what was conveyed was still understandable. Some of the participants scored 2 with basic grammar mastery. And very few participants scored 3. Some examples of grammatical error performed by students where they said "she goes to library everyday" rather than saying "she goes to the library everyday". It should be "my friend likes to speak English", but they said "my friend like to speak English". "Yesterday I go to the market", this should be "yesterday I went to the market", etc.

Meanwhile, the pronunciation aspect has the highest score of 3 where pronunciation errors that occur do not affect the interlocutor's understanding of what is conveyed. Pronunciation has a percentage of 25%. In addition to grammar and pronunciation, vocabulary limitations are the third problem with a percentage of 15%. There are several other problems such as comprehension 5%, fluency 3% and task only 2%. Some students performed mispronunciation of consonant sounds such as "think" pronounced as "tink", they have difficulty with /θ/ sound. "very" pronounced as "bery". Another problem was incorrect vowel sound such "sit" pronounced as "seat", etc.

Apart from the speaking products, a questionnaire was also used to obtain data on the causes of speaking problems. The results of the questionnaire showed that the factors causing speaking problems faced by first-year English Language Education students at the Faculty of Language Arts and Humanities (FBSH), Hamzanwadi University in order were the fear of making mistakes as much as 47%, shyness or lack of confidence as much as 33%, and environmental factors or the absence of interlocutors as much as 20%. The Percentages derived from qualitative coding in which the reserachers categorized responses and calculated the proportion of students whose statements matched each theme.

Discussion

Based on the information presented above, the researchers need to explain several things as the answers to the questions of the study. The first question was related to the problems faced by learners of English as a foreign language, especially for first year students of the

A significant body of research indicates that vocabulary deficiency is one of the most pressing issues among students learning to speak English. The findings from Seli (2023) and Heriansyah (2012) confirm that a limited vocabulary repertoire negatively impacts students' ability to engage in fluent communication. However, this challenge extends beyond simple word retrieval, it restricts students' ability to formulate coherent and expressive speech, reinforcing a cycle of hesitation and avoidance in speaking tasks (Alruzzi et al., 2022). Rather than merely limiting speech content, inadequate vocabulary influences confidence and self-perception, as students feel constrained in their ability to participate meaningfully. This suggests that addressing vocabulary learning strategies must go beyond rote memorization, instead emphasizing contextual and communicative use of new words in real-world settings to reduce anxiety and improve fluency.

The results of the speaking test highlight grammar as the most significant challenge, accounting for 50% of the issues identified. While grammar is undeniably a fundamental component of language proficiency, this finding raises concerns about pedagogical emphasis in EFL instruction. Leong and Masoumeh (2017) argue that an overemphasis on grammatical accuracy can overshadow the equally crucial skill of spontaneous spoken interaction, creating learners who focus more on correctness than fluency. This perspective aligns with psychological theories of language anxiety (Derakhshan et al., 2016), which suggest that students' fear of making grammatical errors can inhibit their willingness to engage in conversations. The interaction between grammatical concerns and psychological barriers indicates a need for more communicative-based learning approaches, where grammar is reinforced through meaningful dialogue rather than isolated rule instruction. This shift would encourage students to see mistakes as a natural part of learning rather than an obstacle that prevents participation.

Pronunciation issues, affecting 25% of students, present another critical challenge that intersects with fluency and intelligibility. Annisa & Wariyati (2023) highlight that difficulties in pronunciation often stem from limited exposure to authentic spoken English, resulting in misinterpretation of phonological rules and difficulty distinguishing similar sounds. However, the impact of pronunciation errors extends beyond intelligibility, it can also contribute to students' reluctance to speak publicly due to perceived judgment from peers (Isaacs, 2018). The evolution of pronunciation teaching from accent reduction to intelligibility-focused instruction suggests that students should be encouraged to prioritize clear and effective communication rather than achieving native-like pronunciation. This shift in pedagogical emphasis could mitigate the negative psychological effects associated with pronunciation struggles and build students' confidence in speaking contexts.

While vocabulary accounts for 15% of the challenges identified, its role in speaking proficiency is more profound than numerical representation suggests. Vocabulary knowledge is not just about knowing individual words but about understanding how words interact in phrases, sentences, and discourse (Tsamratulaeni, 2023). The lack of awareness of collocational properties and syntactic relationships contributes to unnatural sentence structures and hesitation (Danilina & Shabunina, 2020). Alemi & Tayebi (2011) suggest that effective vocabulary acquisition strategies must integrate contextual learning, meaning students should engage with words in dynamic communicative tasks rather than relying solely on isolated memorization. The relatively lower percentage assigned to vocabulary problems does not negate their significant impact on fluency, as seen in the tendency of students with limited vocabulary to avoid complex sentence constructions, rely on fillers, or repeat basic phrases.

Comprehension (5%), fluency (3%), and task-related challenges (2%) contribute to speaking difficulties in less pronounced but still structurally significant ways. Comprehension issues often arise due to deficiencies in vocabulary and grammar, making it difficult for students to process spoken input and formulate responses (Wright & Cervetti, 2016). Fluency concerns, though numerically small, are deeply tied to students' ability to transition between ideas smoothly, a process affected by both linguistic knowledge and psychological barriers

(Derakhshan et al., 2016). Task-related difficulties, such as limited structured speaking opportunities (Jiang et al., 2021), suggest that the absence of consistent, interactive speaking practice significantly hampers students' oral skill development. These findings emphasize the importance of integrated language learning environments, where students receive exposure to realistic conversations and scaffolded opportunities to practice speaking rather than relying solely on grammar-based learning.

The psychological and contextual barriers underlying these challenges – fear of making mistakes (47%), shyness or lack of confidence (33%), and environmental factors (20%) – suggest that linguistic difficulties are deeply interconnected with affective factors. The fear of making mistakes often paralyzes learners, preventing them from actively engaging in speaking tasks (Leong & Masoumeh, 2017). Moreover, the evaluative nature of classroom interactions exacerbates hesitation, making students more focused on avoiding errors than on improving fluency (Derakhshan et al., 2016). To directly address these psychological barriers, structured strategies such as confidence-building role-playing, peer-assisted learning, and visualization exercises (where students mentally rehearse speaking successfully before actual engagement) can significantly reduce anxiety. Additionally, mindfulness techniques, including relaxation exercises before speaking tasks, can help students manage their nervousness and encourage a more comfortable speaking experience.

The findings suggest that an integrative approach to language instruction is needed to address the interplay of linguistic, psychological, and contextual factors affecting students' speaking proficiency. Rather than isolating grammar, pronunciation, or vocabulary as separate concerns, instruction should adopt holistic strategies that promote confidence, encourage risk-taking in communication, and provide structured opportunities for real-time spoken interaction. Future interventions should prioritize fluency-building tasks alongside grammatical accuracy, while also considering the affective dimensions that significantly shape language learning experiences. By fostering a supportive learning environment, gradually increasing speaking exposure, and integrating psychological strategies, EFL students can develop not only their linguistic skills but also the confidence to use English effectively in various contexts.

Beyond individual linguistic challenges, the structure and dynamics of the classroom environment significantly shape students' ability to develop speaking skills. Classroom interaction, whether through peer discussions, instructor feedback, or structured speaking exercises, creates opportunities for authentic language use while simultaneously affecting students' confidence and motivation.

A key factor influencing speaking proficiency is the nature of interaction in the classroom. Studies suggest that environments where students actively engage in peer communication foster greater fluency and risk-taking in speech (Leong & Masoumeh, 2017). However, in classrooms where interactions are limited to teacher-student exchanges, students may struggle with real-time spoken interaction due to a lack of peer engagement and spontaneous language use. Incorporating collaborative speaking tasks; such as pair discussions, small group debates, and simulated real-world conversations, helps bridge this gap, ensuring that students not only practice structured dialogue but also gain experience in spontaneous communication.

Finally, environmental accessibility plays a role in speaking proficiency. Students who lack opportunities to converse outside the classroom; whether due to cultural barriers, limited access to native speakers, or a lack of interactive language activities, face difficulties sustaining fluency and pronunciation improvements. Encouraging language-rich classroom settings (such as discussion-based lessons, immersive speaking practices, and exposure to authentic spoken content) can compensate for the absence of real-world English interaction.

CONCLUSIONS

The research conducted reveals key findings regarding the multifaceted nature of speaking challenges experienced by first-year English Education students at Hamzanwadi

University. Through topical video recordings and questionnaires, the study identifies three primary categories of difficulty: psychological, linguistic, and environmental.

Psychologically, students experience anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and embarrassment—factors that inhibit participation in speaking activities. These findings support previous research showing that psychological difficulties reduce learner engagement (Nurilahi & Suhartono, 2022; Shalihah et al., 2022; Harahap, 2023). To overcome these barriers, educators are encouraged to prioritize emotional well-being through supportive classroom atmospheres. Non-evaluative speaking exercises, peer collaboration such as role-playing, and positive reinforcement techniques—emphasizing progress rather than errors, can foster confidence and reduce fear.

Linguistic factors also present significant obstacles. Many students struggle with inadequate vocabulary, limited grammar knowledge, and pronunciation problems, consistent with the findings of Tantri et al. (2023) and Wahyuningsih & Afandi (2020). The lack of structured speaking practice opportunities further compounds these difficulties (Anggrarini, 2022; Lativi, 2023). To address this, educators should integrate context-based vocabulary learning and promote grammar instruction within authentic dialogues. Pronunciation can be enhanced through listening exercises and shadowing techniques designed to build phonological awareness.

Environmental challenges include limited access to meaningful speaking opportunities during classroom activities. The lack of consistent, structured oral practice hinders students' development of communicative competence. This is supported by Younes & Albalawi (2016) and Wahyuningsih & Afandi (2020), who emphasize the impact of classroom dynamics on oral performance. Suggested strategies include daily implementation of debates, simulated discussions, and presentations, as well as formative feedback mechanisms that encourage fluency without punitive correction.

Taken together, these findings underscore the urgent need for curriculum reform. The current emphasis on grammar-based instruction should shift towards communicative, task-based approaches. Curriculum designers are advised to incorporate multi-modal resources such as video analysis, peer feedback sessions, and student speech recordings to create immersive and practical learning experiences.

In conclusion, by integrating psychological support, targeted linguistic instruction, and interactive classroom environments, educators, particularly those within the English Language Education Study Program at the Faculty of Language Arts and Humanities (FBSH), Hamzanwadi University, can substantially improve students' speaking performance. Future research should explore targeted intervention strategies to boost learners' confidence, fluency, and motivation in speaking English.

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