


English for Specific Purposes Challenges in Speaking for Nursing Students: A Thematic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

As part of English for Specific Purposes, English for nursing students presents various challenges. The difficulties faced by students can affect their language proficiency. This study aims to investigate the challenges faced by nursing students regarding speaking skills in the context of ESP. By finding out the speaking challenges faced by the students, the teacher can provide appropriate teaching media and method to overcome the challenges. This study employs a qualitative approach with thematic analysis using instruments such as open-ended questionnaires and structured interviews. A total of 46 students participated in this research, with five selected as interview respondents. The results indicate that students face challenges in speaking, including linguistic challenges-such as problems with vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, and grammar- and psychological challenges including lack of confidence, anxiety, shyness, and fear of making mistakes in front of peers.

Keywords: *Challenges, Speaking, ESP, Nursing Students*

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INTRODUCTION

In the context of globalization, English proficiency has become an essential competency for healthcare professionals. It is no longer considered an additional skill, but a core requirement that significantly influences the quality of patient care and professional advancement (Sukisno & Saud, 2024). Proficiency in English enables healthcare workers to access the latest medical information and to communicate effectively with international colleagues and foreign patients (Moross et al., 2017). As a result, English language instruction within academic settings plays a vital role in preparing students for professional practice. Such instruction should be tailored to meet the specific needs of learners, a practice commonly known as English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

According to Basturkmen, ESP is not limited to teaching students how English is used in target environments; it also aims to develop learners' performance competencies. This includes not only linguistic knowledge but also a conceptual understanding relevant to their specific disciplines. Furthermore, ESP seeks to foster strategic competence by integrating language proficiency with subject-matter knowledge necessary for effective communication. Ultimately, Basturkmen emphasizes that a key objective of ESP is to support critical awareness, enabling students to understand and appropriately navigate the norms and communicative practices within their target professional contexts, thereby minimizing the risk of miscommunication or cultural misunderstanding (Sookhom, 2019).

English for nursing, as a part of ESP, aims to support English learning according to the needs of the learners (Poedjiastutie & Oliver, 2017) including prospective nurses. For nursing

students, especially for non-native students, limited proficiency in English hinders learning in the field of nursing, which can lead to lower academic performance (Alharbi & Yakout, 2018). Furthermore, nursing students need preparation to face real working environment in hospitals, where they need to communicate in English with health professionals and patients for some reasons. Moreover, considering the wide range of job opportunities for nurses to build their careers abroad (Fadliah & Sugirin, 2019; Muntasir & Nurviani, 2020), the extensive opportunities to develop a career in English-speaking countries make the mastery of English language skills extremely important.

Among the four primary language skills, speaking is particularly critical for nursing students to master. Proficiency in spoken English is essential not only for academic activities such as delivering presentations and completing projects, but also for professional purposes, including effective communication with patients, doctors, and other healthcare professionals in clinical settings (Badrov & Jurković, 2017; Haroen et al., 2024; U et al., 2021). In the healthcare context, communication is recognized as a fundamental clinical skill that must be systematically taught, learned, and practiced to prevent misunderstandings and ensure patient safety. This includes a wide range of communicative functions, such as engaging in small talk, comprehending instructions, delivering explanations, addressing patients' health concerns, and expressing empathy (Lu, 2018). Nevertheless, nursing students often encounter several challenges in developing their speaking skills, including difficulties with pronunciation, fluency, anxiety, hesitation, and low self-confidence, all of which can hinder successful communication (Apriliyanti & Nurhayati, 2024). Furthermore, fear of making mistakes frequently discourages students from participating in classroom speaking activities, thereby limiting opportunities for practice and constructive feedback from instructors (Alharbi & Yakout, 2018). These obstacles have a significant impact on the effectiveness of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instruction in nursing education.

When examining the challenges associated with English speaking skills, a range of interrelated factors can be identified. Psychological problems—such as fear of making mistakes, hesitation, anxiety, and lack of confidence—often serve the most prominent obstacles faced by learners. In addition to these factors, linguistic difficulties also play a significant role. These include limited vocabulary, confusion in selecting appropriate lexical and grammatical structures, lack of fluency, poor oral presentation skills, and pronunciation issues. Environmental factors further contribute these challenges, particularly the limited exposure to authentic English conversations and insufficient opportunities for interactive classroom communication (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021; Chand, 2021; Shen & Chiu, 2019; Thao & Nguyet, 2019). In addition, Ur stated other contributing factors include learner inhibition and the interference of the first language or mother tongue (Indrianti, 2020). Moreover, pedagogical elements such as ineffective teaching strategies, curriculum design, institutional systems, and inadequate learning facilities also negatively affect students' ability to develop speaking competence (Apichat & Fatimah, 2022; Chand, 2021; Rababah, 2002). These challenges affect the complexity of acquiring speaking proficiency, particularly in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) contexts.

Many studies discuss psychological (personal) problems where anxiety is a major factor affecting speaking proficiency (Choi, 2016). Students with speaking anxiety can also have lack of pronunciation accuracy (Mamang et al., 2023). The feelings of anxiety experienced by students can lead to demotivation in learning English, whereas motivation is a fundamental element in achieving success in any field. Lack of motivation hinders learners from participating in practicing English in class (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021), which can result in less progress that subsequently diminishes their learning motivation (Kim, 2023). Several reasons may contribute to speaking anxiety, such as the instruction to speak in front of the class, fear of making pronunciation and grammatical errors, limited language knowledge and vocabulary, fear of embarrassment in front of peers, and fear of being ridiculed by peers (Motasham & Farnia, 2017; U et al., 2021). Additionally, a lack of practice may also lead students to experience speaking anxiety (Nova, 2024). Public speaking anxiety can impact students' personal, social, and academic abilities (Kalra & Siribud, 2020).

In terms of linguistic factors, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary are common factors encountered in speaking difficulties (Suryani et al., 2020). Language learning students often encounter challenges in pronunciation and intonation that hinder their fluency in speaking English (Aulia et al., 2025). Students struggle to pronounce certain words in English due to interference from their mother tongue and the accents they possess (Chulee et al., 2023; V, 2023). According to Ozkan, Bada, and Genc (Shen & Chiu, 2019), pronunciation plays a critical role in speaking proficiency due to the limited time available during speech production to recall words. Therefore, careful attention to pronunciation is essential in the process of developing effective speaking skills. Vocabulary is also important. Vocabulary learning serves as a fundamental component of English language acquisition. Vocabulary proficiency significantly influences the development of all language skills, including speaking (Wang et al., 2023).

Furthermore, phonology, syntax, and semantics also play a role in difficulties in speaking English (Indrianti, 2020). Besides psychological and linguistic factors, environmental and social factors also impact the success of speaking performance. Afshar and Asakereh added that the limited availability of laboratory facilities, restricted opportunities for speaking practice, social expectations, institutional and educational systems (such as large class sizes and curriculum) contribute to the speaking difficulties experienced by students (Al-Jamal & Al-Jamal, 2013; Indrianti, 2020; Kim, 2023). Furthermore, teachers, as part of the school, also play a role in the learning difficulties faced by students, beside the lack of learning facilities (Apichat & Fatimah, 2022).

Numerous studies have explored speaking challenges in learning English. A study of (Erydani et al., 2024) investigated speaking difficulties of ESP for economic students. It showed results as anxiety over making mistakes, a lack of exposure to English outside the classroom, and interactions with lecturers and classmates as the students' speaking difficulties. A study of (Indrianti, 2020) investigated oral communication difficulties at ESP class setting for business students which showed some difficulties including affective and cognitive factor. A study of (Inayah & Lisdawati, 2017) also explored about speaking difficulties but it was conducted in EFL program. A study investigated by (Apichat & Fatimah, 2022) also revealed students' speaking difficulties including pronunciation, motivation, vocabulary, grammar, fluency, shyness, and lack of self-confidence. Nevertheless, it was not conducted in ESP class setting. Given these gaps, the present study seeks to address the research questions: "What are nursing students' speaking difficulties when they have to speak English in ESP class?"

METHOD

Respondents

This study employs random sampling method to collect the data. The setting of this research is in a nursing department of a private health science institute in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. This study involved a total of 50 second-semester nursing students enrolled in the English for Nursing: Intermediate course, distributed across classes A and B. The teacher asked all of the students to fill out the open-ended questionnaire about their challenges in learning speaking. Of the 50 questionnaires administered, four were deemed invalid and subsequently excluded from the analysis, resulting in 46 valid responses. From these participants, five students were selected for follow-up interviews, based on their performance – specifically, those with the highest and lowest grades – to provide diverse perspectives on the issues being studied.

Instruments

This study utilized both primary and secondary sources of data. The primary data were collected through open-ended questionnaires and structured interviews. Responses obtained from participants were systematically categorized for analysis. The secondary data comprised relevant literature, including journal articles, academic books, and other scholarly resources that support the theoretical and contextual framework of this research. The following section presents the interview questions administered to the selected respondents.

Table 1. Question content for interview

Question Content	
1.	Students' perception on speaking ability.
2.	Students' challenges in speaking in the classroom
3.	Students' perception on their anxiety in speaking English.
4.	The most challenging parts of speaking (pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, etc)
5.	Students' experience in understanding their classmates' English speaking.
6.	Students' perceptions on the teaching method in facilitating speaking skill.
7.	Opportunities for students to speak English inside or outside of classroom.

Procedures

This research employed a qualitative design, using a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. A total of 50 students were invited to complete an open-ended questionnaire aimed at identifying the difficulties they encounter in developing English speaking skills. The questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms, and participants responded to the prompts in written form. The collected responses were then coded, categorized, and interpreted thematically.

In addition to the questionnaire, the researcher conducted structured interviews with five selected participants to obtain supplementary data. The interview questions were sent to the respondents through the WhatsApp platform, which was chosen for its accessibility and familiarity among both researchers and participants. For convenience, all five respondents opted to provide written responses rather than voice recordings. The interview data were subsequently subjected to coding and thematic analysis. Findings from both the questionnaires and interviews were triangulated and integrated into the discussion to enhance the validity and depth of the study.

Data analysis

Data analysis in this research involved thematic analysis, including familiarizing the data, generating initial codes of the data, searching for themes, reviewing and defining themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researchers familiarized themselves with the data by reading and re-reading to identify initial patterns. Then, the researchers generated initial codes by providing labels to significant features across the data set. The researchers grouped these codes to form potential themes. In the reviewing phase, the researchers merged or modified themes to ensure that the themes represented the data. The next step was that the researchers wrote a detailed analysis to connect the findings to the research question, which was supported by relevant theories.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Students' Challenges in Learning Speaking

From the respondents' responses, it is revealed that students face two primary categories of challenges in learning English speaking skills: linguistic and psychological difficulties. Linguistic challenges identified include issues with pronunciation, limited vocabulary, and lack of fluency. In parallel, psychological problems such as anxiety and low self-confidence were also commonly reported. Those factors played a significant role in hindering students' oral communication performance. The respondents' responses can be seen as follows.

Problems with pronunciation

Most students reported that pronunciation is their greatest challenge due to the variations in the way words are pronounced in English and some of English vocabularies have similar pronunciations.

".... It's just that I still need to learn how to pronounce English well and correctly.... I would like to know, for example, if the letter "C" is at the beginning of the word/sentence, then how to pronounce that, and if it is located in the middle or at the end of the sentence, then how to pronounce that" (R6)

"My difficulty is to speak English sentences, and to speak (English) with almost the same pronunciation." (R7)

"(I find it difficult) to distinguish English vocabulary that may be almost the same in pronunciation" (R27)

"The language is difficult to pronounce which makes it confusing and the writing is different from the way it is pronounced." (R40)

"Perhaps I still find it difficult with the pronunciation in speaking because in English pronunciation, there isn't just one way of pronouncing it; for example, there is British English and American English, and the pronunciation of both is different...." (R43)

Problems with vocabulary

The students assumed that lack of vocabulary knowledge (including lack of health vocabulary) is the reason of their speaking problems.

"(When I am given) some examples, it still appears enjoyable and easy, but when working on the questions, it feels somewhat difficult, perhaps due to a lack of vocabulary knowledge in English." (R20)

"...my difficulty lies in translating and reading English." (R34)

"My difficulty in speaking English, particularly in pronunciation, may be due to a lack of vocabulary that I master and insufficient practice when speaking in English." (R38)

"...Additionally, I believe the vocabulary is still somewhat unfamiliar because it pertains to health topics rather than everyday vocabulary." (R43)

Problems with fluency

Other linguistic problems are related to fluency. The students assumed that they find it difficult to express their ideas when speaking. They have problems to arrange the English sentences properly during speaking. It may be due to lack of speaking practice.

"Sometimes I find it difficult to express my thoughts and ideas fluently. Also, the limitations in vocabulary and expressions, fear and lack of confidence in using English in daily life, contribute to this problem." (R1)

"Sometimes I struggle to express my thoughts and ideas fluently. " (R3)

"Sometimes I face limitations in vocabulary and expression. I struggle in speaking English, and I also prefer to practice speaking directly, as it is easier to apply in practice. However, I truly enjoy learning English." (R23)

"My difficulties in speaking English, particularly in pronunciation, may be due to the lack of vocabulary I have and insufficient practice when speaking in English. " (R38)

"I find it challenging because I lack confidence in my pronunciation, and at times I am confused about how to arrange the sentences correctly." (R42)

Psychological problems

Students reported that they were anxious and nervous when speaking English. They are difficult to express their ideas. The students are also worried about making mistakes while speaking English.

"Sometimes I find it difficult to express my thoughts and ideas fluently. Also, the limitations in vocabulary and expressions, fear and lack of confidence in using English in daily life, contribute to this problem." (R1)

"... sometimes when I am about to answer in English, I still feel afraid of making mistakes and I am not fluent (in speaking English) yet. Having memorization helps a lot.... I hope I can become fluent in English and continue learning until I can travel abroad." (R4)

"First, the feeling of nervousness and lack of confidence when speaking in front of friends or teacher, especially when worried about making mistakes. Second, difficulties in pronunciation and intonation that sometimes make it hard for others to understand what is being said." (R33)

The answer also shows that students feel insecure when asked to speak English, one of which is speaking in front of other friends.

"(My difficulty is) the lack of courage to practice the correct pronunciation of English in front of friends, and it is hard to understand the meaning of words/sentences in English." (R14)

"My difficulty is that I am not fluent in English and I lack confidence when speaking in English." (R35)

Meanwhile, the results of the interviews revealed several additional factors contributing to the difficulties experienced by students in developing their speaking skills. The following section presents a summary of the key findings derived from the interview data related to speaking challenges.

Table 2. Interview Summary of Students' Challenges in Speaking

Question content	RI.A	RI.B	RI.C	RI.D	RI.E
1 Students' perception on their speaking ability	-Lack of vocabulary -Less confidence	-Ability: lower-intermediate -Difficult in long and spontaneous speech. -Needs long time to think before speaking	-Ability: fairly good -Lack of vocabulary	-Ability: Improved	-Ability: intermediate-higher -Understanding lessons in class
2 Students' challenges in speaking in the classroom	-Less confidence	-Lack of vocabulary -Lack of idea -Fear to make mistakes -Lack of practice	-Finding unfamiliar words	-Pronunciation	-Less confidence leading to be forgetful and difficult to speak
3 Students' perception on their anxiety in speaking English	-Fear of others' perception -Lack of confidence	-Feel anxious to speak in front of others	-Less confidence in front of others who are more capable in English	-Feel nervous when speaking in front of others	-Shyness due to making mistakes during speaking
4 The most challenging parts of speaking (pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, etc)	-Vocabulary -Grammar -Fluency and anxiety	-Pronunciation -Fluency -Vocabulary -Lack of idea of confidence	-Grammar (in high school, the teacher was too quick to teach grammar)	-Fluency -Pronunciation	-Pronunciation
5 Students' experience in understanding English speaking	-Understand others' speaking -Lack of vocabulary	-Difficult to understand someone's words -Fear of misunderstanding	-Understand when friends using simple language	-Not understand when other people speak (in English)	-Not understand how to pronounce the words correctly and it leads to miscommunication
6 Students' perceptions on the teaching method and peers practicing in facilitating speaking skill	-Teaching method applied is helpful -Peers practicing is helpful	-Teaching method with many exercises and practice is helpful	-Teaching method is helpful	-Teaching method is helpful to improve pronunciation	-Teaching method and materials are helpful in learning
7 Opportunities for students to speak English inside or outside of classroom	-The opportunity is sufficient	-The opportunity is insufficient -Need more practicing	-The opportunity is sufficient	-The opportunity is sufficient	-The opportunity is sufficient -A lot of practice in classroom

About the respondents' perceptions on their speaking ability, they provided different perceptions. Some of them perceived they were in lower-intermediate level and higher

intermediate level. However, some others perceived that they were still lower particularly in vocabulary.

"My speaking skill is weak, especially in understanding English vocabulary, and I don't feel confident when speaking English." (RI.A)

"Now, my English-speaking ability is still at a lower-intermediate level. I often struggle when I have to speak at length or spontaneously. I also tend to take a long time to think before speaking." (RI.B)

"My English-speaking ability is fairly good, but I find it difficult to memorize vocabulary." (RI.C)

Related to students' challenges in speaking, the respondents provided that dominant challenges of speaking are as lack of confidence, fear to make mistakes, lack of practice, lack of vocabulary and pronunciation, and lack of practice. From their perceptions, psychological problems seem to be their dominant factors. The students still felt anxious to speak in front of others which lead them to feel shy and nervous. The nervousness and shyness may cause them make mistakes during speaking.

"My challenge and difficulty is that I don't feel confident when speaking English. I don't believe in myself and I'm too afraid – my mind keeps thinking that people will judge me." (RI.A)

"Sometimes I feel nervous and scared, especially when I have to speak in class and my classmates are watching." (RI.D)

"My challenge is with confidence, because when I'm not confident, I forget what to say, and it becomes harder to express myself in English. Sometimes, when I say something wrong or not quite right, I feel embarrassed." (RI.E)

For linguistic problems, lack of vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and fluency hinder their speaking performance. Lack of idea may also be the problems. One respondent reported that one reason of the grammar difficulty was due to the ineffective method used by her high school teacher.

"The most difficult parts for me are fluency and vocabulary. I often stop because I don't know the right words and need time to form sentences. Pronunciation also sometimes makes me feel less confident." (RI.B)

"The hardest part is grammar, because when I was in high school, my English teacher explained things too quickly" (RI.C)

"Maybe pronunciation is the hardest part, because we have to learn how to speak with the correct pronunciation." (RI.E)

When the students were required to practice speaking with others (in conversation), most of the students found it difficult to understand others due to their lack of English knowledge including vocabulary and pronunciation. It leads to fear of making mistakes. The respondent understood others when they use simple English words.

"In English class, I can still understand my speaking partner and the friends around me. But sometimes, I don't understand some words because of my limited vocabulary, so I always try to look them up to expand my knowledge." (RI.A)

"I once had difficulty communicating with a friend in English. During group discussions, when my friend spoke quickly, I couldn't catch the meaning. In the end, I just smiled and didn't respond actively because I was afraid of misunderstanding." (RI.B)

"I understand my friends when they speak using simple English words" (RI.C)

"I also had trouble communicating with a friend in English. During a dialogue activity, I didn't know the meaning of some words, and my pronunciation was not correct, so I made mistakes and found it difficult." (RI.E)

Related to the questions of the teaching method and materials used in the ESP classroom, most of the respondents reported that they perceived the teaching method and materials provided by their teachers were helpful in learning.

"The teaching method and my classmates really support and help me little by little because in class we learn from the basics together. My classmates are also much nicer than I expected, even though I still feel a bit unsure of myself."(RI.A)

"The teaching method is very helpful. We usually get presentation assignments and lots of practice to improve our pronunciation." (RI.B)

"It's really helpful because we are also provided with a module book, which supports the learning process." (RI.E)

Four of the respondents also reported that the opportunities given by their teachers were sufficient, only one who reported that she needed more opportunities to practice speaking.

"There are still few opportunities, only during presentations or group discussions. I feel that's not enough because speaking needs regular practice to get used to it."(RI.B)

"I often get the chance to speak English during presentations or when reading assignments." (RI.C)

"In English class, the opportunities are quite enough." (RI.D)

"It's (the opportunity) enough because the teacher gives a lot of time for practicing with friends." (RI.E)

Discussion

Findings from both the questionnaire and interviews indicate that students encounter significant challenges in speaking skills, particularly within the context of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classes. The linguistic difficulties include problems with pronunciation, limited vocabulary, and lack of fluency. It is in line with the findings of (Apriliyanti & Nurhayati, 2024; Suryani et al., 2020). Students often struggle to determine the correct pronunciation of words due to the large number of English vocabulary items that share similar pronunciation. Furthermore, pronunciation difficulties may also be related to language interference and accent differences between the students' native language and English (V, 2023). This is especially concerning, as pronunciation is widely recognized as a crucial component of English speaking proficiency (Ozkan, Bada, and Genc in Shen & Chiu, 2019).

Moreover, a lack of vocabulary hinders the improvement of students' speaking skills. Research findings indicate that students face difficulties in memorizing vocabulary. In fact, mastery of vocabulary is fundamental to mastering a foreign language, including the proficiency in speaking skills as stated by (Wang et al., 2023). With the limited vocabulary that students possess, it impacts their fluency in speaking English. Students will struggle to express the ideas they wish to convey in English. They will also find it challenging to structure their thoughts according to correct and proper English syntax, in accordance with (Indrianti, 2020).

Difficulty in expressing oneself may be caused by limited time for practicing English outside the classroom, which contributes to their lack of familiarity and fluency in the language (Thao & Nguyet, 2019). Additionally, students often require extended processing time before they are able to articulate their thoughts in English, which further hinders spontaneous communication. In practice, when communicating English with other students, they face challenges in understanding what others are saying, which ultimately leads to misunderstandings. These challenges can be traced back to insufficient linguistic competence, as highlighted by (Chand, 2021).

In addition to linguistic factors, students also face difficulties in the form of psychological problems when speaking English (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021). Psychological factors pose significant challenges for many students. Both questionnaires and interviews indicate that students experience a lack of self-confidence, anxiety, nervousness, and shyness when required to speak in English in front of their classmates. Students are worried about their classmates' perceptions of their speaking abilities and embarrassing themselves in front of their peers. This is in line with (Motasham & Farnia, 2017; U et al., 2021). A lack of self-confidence is influenced by insufficient linguistic skills, including pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. The limited vocabulary and lack of practice contribute to the difficulties

experienced in psychological aspects (Nova, 2024). With such concerns, nervousness, and self-doubt, students become increasingly afraid of making mistakes and even forget what they intend to say, which can adversely affect their English proficiency (Choi, 2016; Kalra & Siribud, 2020; Mamang et al., 2023).

Regarding the factor of environmental difficulties, based on the students' responses during the interviews, it was found that students believe that the teaching methods and materials used in the classroom provide sufficient opportunities for them to practice English. The students also felt that the teaching methods were very helpful in improving their English proficiency, thus indicating that the teaching methods and materials are not factors contributing to the difficulties faced by students in speaking. Moreover, students also engaged in practice with their peers outside the classroom several times to enhance their speaking skills. Therefore, in this study, the results from the questionnaires and interviews do not indicate any environmental difficulties faced by students in the ESP class.

CONCLUSIONS

The conclusion of this research states that nursing students faced speaking challenges as linguistic challenges including a lack of vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, and grammar, and psychological challenges including a lack of confidence, anxiety, shyness, and fear of making mistakes in front of classmates. Both challenges are interrelated. Meanwhile, the research findings do not indicate any environmental challenges such as teaching method supported by the students' perception that the teacher provided sufficient opportunities for them to practice. By understanding the speaking challenges faced by students within the ESP context, it is recommended that teachers can provide more interactive and applicable teaching methods or materials to enhance students' skill.

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