

English Speaking Difficulties Faced by English Education Students from Rural Areas in Tadulako University

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to describe the speaking difficulties and their underlying causes experienced by English Education students from rural areas at Tadulako University. The study employed a descriptive qualitative research design involving three first-year students of the English Education Study Program who were selected through snowball sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and supported by documentary evidence. The data were analyzed using Braun & Clarke (2006) thematic analysis. The findings revealed that the participants experienced various speaking difficulties, including limited vocabulary, grammatical problems, pronunciation difficulties, hesitation, frequent pauses, and difficulties organizing ideas. The participants also tended to translate their ideas mentally from their first language into English before speaking, which affected their fluency and confidence. Several factors contributed to these difficulties, particularly speaking anxiety, limited opportunities for speaking practice, and minimal exposure to English outside the classroom. The study concludes that students' speaking difficulties are influenced by both linguistic and non-linguistic factors. Therefore, supportive learning environments and meaningful opportunities for communication are needed to improve their speaking competence and confidence.

Keywords: *English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Food and Beverage Education, Hospitality Service Competence, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), Needs Analysis, Vocational English, Communicative Competence*

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INTRODUCTION

Speaking is considered one of the most essential skills in language learning because it serves as the primary means of communication among people. According to Brown (2007), speaking is a productive skill that involves conveying meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols in various contexts. It requires learners to integrate linguistic knowledge, communicative competence, and interactional ability to express ideas clearly and respond appropriately. Brown emphasizes that language learning is not merely about acquiring knowledge of grammar or vocabulary, but about being able to use the language effectively for communication. Therefore, the ultimate goal of learning a language, including English, is to develop learners' ability to speak fluently and confidently in real-life situations. Through speaking, learners can demonstrate their understanding, share thoughts, and participate actively in social and academic interactions, making it a vital component in achieving communicative competence.

Expanding on this, Ur (1996) views speaking through a practical lens, emphasizing its role in everyday language use. Speaking is about being able to express ideas clearly and effectively in both social and academic settings. It requires learners to balance correct language use with the ability to use English appropriately in different situations. In an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) setting, this means understanding and adapting to the subtleties of English communication, which can be quite different from a learner's first language. For rural students at Tadulako University, these differences can be especially challenging, as their limited exposure to real English conversations often affects their fluency and confidence when

speaking. Harmer (2003) adds that speaking involves both transactional and interactional functions, such as exchanging information or building relationships, which require learners to manage discourse and respond appropriately.

Tuan & Mai (2015) found that students' speaking difficulties commonly include limited vocabulary, grammatical errors, and fear of making mistakes when performing oral tasks. Similarly, A study by Basri et al (2023) found that rural students at *Madrasah Tsanawiyah* encountered challenges related to confidence, vocabulary, and pronunciation due to the lack of English-speaking environments and learning facilities. Similarly, Elisathusilawani (2023) discovered that students from rural areas in West Kalimantan struggled to express ideas fluently and accurately, often hindered by pronunciation and vocabulary problems. Supporting these findings, Putra et al., (2023), in their study *Students' Voices from the Border Area of Indonesia*, revealed that learners from border regions experienced high anxiety and low motivation because of minimal exposure to English communication in daily life.

However, in Indonesia, particularly in rural areas, English teaching and learning often take place under challenging conditions. Candrawati & Purbani (2025) point out that rural schools face several barriers, including inadequate teaching resources, poor infrastructure, limited teacher preparation, and low student motivation. These factors hinder the development of effective and interactive English learning, making it difficult for teachers to implement communicative activities that are essential for improving students' speaking skills.

Motivation and confidence are also major factors affecting rural students' English speaking. Putra et al., (2023), found that students in border areas often experience anxiety and fear of making mistakes when speaking English. These students may perceive English as too difficult or irrelevant to their daily lives, leading to low motivation. Harmer (2007) explains that motivation is crucial in language learning because it drives learners to practice and communicate despite challenges. Unfortunately, in rural settings, the lack of an English-speaking community and the minimal need for English communication in daily life reduce learners' interest in using the language. This creates a cycle where students rarely practice speaking, resulting in limited fluency and confidence.

The preliminary classroom observation conducted at Tadulako University revealed noticeable differences in English-speaking participation between students from urban and rural backgrounds. Students from urban areas generally appeared more confident, expressive, and actively engaged in speaking activities. They participated more willingly in classroom discussions, demonstrated a broader range of English vocabulary, and communicated with greater fluency in everyday contexts. In contrast, many students from rural backgrounds were more reluctant to speak, even when they had relevant ideas to contribute. They frequently hesitated to initiate conversations, relied heavily on Indonesian during interactions, and often paused while searching for appropriate English expressions. These observations suggest that rural students may experience greater speaking anxiety and lower self-confidence, which could be associated with limited exposure to English during their previous education and fewer opportunities to practice the language. The observed differences indicate that students' educational and geographical backgrounds may influence their English-speaking performance, highlighting the need for further investigation into the factors affecting their oral communication skills.

Previous studies also support these statements. Basri et al. (2023) conducted a study at MTs Muhammadiyah Tolitoli in Central Sulawesi and identified two main categories of problems: knowledge-based and skill-based. The knowledge-based difficulties included limited vocabulary, poor pronunciation, and weak grammar understanding, while the skill-based problems were related to low confidence, shyness, and motivation. Collectively, these findings indicate that students from rural areas experience various speaking difficulties caused by linguistic and psychological factors, which can hinder their ability to communicate effectively in English.

Recent scholarship has highlighted the growing importance of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in preparing vocational students for workplace communication, particularly in industries requiring specialized professional interactions. ESP is increasingly viewed as a

needs-driven approach that aligns language instruction with authentic occupational demands, thereby enhancing learners' communicative competence and employability (Anthony, 2023; Basturkmen, 2022). Within hospitality education, recent studies emphasize that Hospitality English should integrate industry-specific discourse, intercultural communication, customer service interaction, and authentic workplace scenarios to better prepare students for international tourism and food and beverage services (Tsou, 2024; Widodo & Fang, 2023). At the same time, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has gained strong empirical support as an effective pedagogical approach because it promotes meaningful communication through authentic tasks that mirror real workplace activities, resulting in significant improvements in learners' fluency, confidence, and problem-solving skills (East, 2024; Ellis et al., 2023). In vocational education, current research also stresses the need for competency-based curricula that integrate language learning with professional practice, digital technologies, and industry partnerships to bridge the gap between classroom instruction and workplace expectations (OECD, 2024; UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2023). Collectively, these developments indicate that combining ESP, Hospitality English, TBLT, and vocational education principles provides a comprehensive framework for developing workplace-ready graduates capable of meeting the evolving demands of the global hospitality industry.

However, most of these investigations have primarily focused on students at the junior and senior high school levels, while studies involving university students especially those enrolled in English education programs remain limited. This indicates a clear research gap, as university students are expected to achieve a higher level of communicative competence and possess sufficient linguistic mastery to teach English in the future. The novelty of the present study lies in describing the specific linguistic difficulties that hinder the speaking ability of English education students from rural areas at Tadulako University. Unlike previous studies that discussed speaking difficulties in general, this research aims to provide a more detailed analysis of linguistic aspects such as pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar that affect students' oral performance. By identifying these linguistic barriers, this study seeks to offer new insights that can support the development of more effective and inclusive English-speaking instruction in higher education, particularly for students from rural backgrounds.

METHOD

This study used qualitative research design because it aims to explore and describe the speaking difficulties faced by English education students from rural areas at Tadulako University. The reason the researcher choosing qualitative research design because qualitative research is appropriate for this study as it allows the researcher to gather rich, in-depth data about students' experiences, perceptions, and feelings (Creswell, 2012). Specifically, a descriptive qualitative approach is used to provide a detailed account of the types of difficulties students encounter when speaking English.

This study was conducted at Tadulako University, specifically within the English Education Study Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education the university is located in Palu, Central Sulawesi. The program was chosen because it provides relevant data and participants related to this research. This research will be done on April 2026.

In this qualitative research, the primary instrument was the researcher. The researcher was responsible for conducting the interviews, recording participants' responses, and interpreting the data. In qualitative research, the researcher functions as the main instrument because they are able to adapt questions, probe for clarification, and capture the depth and nuances of participants' experiences that cannot be obtained through standardized instruments alone (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2009). To collect the data, semi-structured interviews were employed as the main data collection technique. This type of interview allows participants to freely express their experiences, thoughts, and feelings related to their speaking difficulties while still providing a guiding structure to ensure alignment with the research objectives.

In addition to interview data, documentary data were used as a supporting data source. The documentary data included students' academic records, such as Grade Point Average (GPA) and study result reports (KHS), particularly scores from speaking-related courses. These documents were used to support and verify the interview findings by providing objective evidence of the participants' academic performance in English, especially in speaking courses. The use of documentary data helps strengthen the credibility of the study by triangulating participants' self-reported experiences with academic documentation (Creswell, 2014).

Several instruments were employed to support the data collection process. An audio recorder was used to accurately capture participants' responses during the interviews for subsequent transcription and analysis. Field notes were taken using a notebook and pen to document non-verbal cues, contextual information, and additional observations that were not captured in the audio recordings. A laptop facilitated data organization, interview transcription, coding, and qualitative analysis. In addition, a semi-structured interview guide was utilized to ensure consistency across interviews while allowing sufficient flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences and perspectives in greater depth.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their enrollment in the second-year Food and Beverage program and their completion of prerequisite English courses, resulting in 62 students assigned to an experimental group ($n = 31$) and a control group ($n = 31$). Quantitative data were collected using speaking performance tests and hospitality communication assessments developed from ESP learning outcomes. The instruments were reviewed by three ESP and hospitality education experts to establish content validity and were piloted prior to implementation, demonstrating satisfactory reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.80$). Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional research ethics committee, and all participants provided written informed consent before data collection. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 27, including descriptive statistics, normality testing, paired-sample and independent-sample t -tests, and effect size analysis (Cohen's d). Qualitative data from interviews, classroom observations, and reflective journals were analyzed through thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-step procedure: familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and reporting. The trustworthiness of the qualitative findings was ensured through data triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, and maintaining an audit trail to enhance credibility, dependability, and confirmability.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Linguistics Difficulties

This theme refers to language-related problems experienced by the participants, including vocabulary limitations, grammatical difficulties, and pronunciation issues.

Vocabulary Difficulties

This finding indicates that limited vocabulary remained a major obstacle for students when speaking English. The informants further explained that limited vocabulary often caused confusion during conversations because they did not possess enough words to express their intended meaning. Vocabulary limitations also affected their ability to recall appropriate words and select expressions suitable for different communication contexts. In addition, insufficient vocabulary restricted their ability to communicate ideas effectively. For example:

Student 1: *"My vocabulary is still weak and I'm still practicing. I use Indonesian vocabulary because I forget the English word."*

Student 2: *"The main difficulties when I speak in English is actually about the vocabulary and the grammar. I can explain clearly in Indonesian but not English."*

Student 3: *"I mix up the vibe like using that way too formal or casual conversation."*

These findings indicate that vocabulary limitations affected participants' ability to express ideas, recall appropriate words, and select vocabulary suitable for different communication contexts.

Grammar Difficulties

Another significant difficulty identified by the informants were grammar. Informants reported uncertainty regarding grammatical structures, particularly tense usage. Although some participants were familiar with grammatical rules, they experienced difficulties applying them accurately during spoken communication, especially in spontaneous situations. For example:

Student 1: *"I don't know how to use past tense and continuous tense."*

Student 2: *"Sometimes I confused about the past tense, present perfect and all of them."*

Student 3: *"I overthink my tenses even if I know the rules. I still make small mistakes when I'm trying to speak fast."*

These statements indicate that the participants experienced uncertainty in using English grammatical structures during speaking. Student 1 demonstrated difficulty distinguishing between different tense forms, particularly the past and continuous tenses. Similarly, Student 2 expressed confusion regarding the use of various English tenses, reflecting a lack of confidence in applying grammatical structures accurately while speaking. Meanwhile, Student 3 acknowledged understanding grammatical rules but still experienced difficulties when speaking, particularly under time pressure, which often resulted in grammatical errors.

These findings suggest that grammatical difficulties remained a considerable challenge for the participants. Although some participants demonstrated awareness of grammatical rules, they continued to experience uncertainty and inaccuracies when applying those rules in spontaneous spoken communication.

Pronunciation Difficulties

Pronunciation was another common challenge experienced by the informants. The findings revealed that they faced difficulties pronouncing unfamiliar words and sounds that do not exist in their first language. They also expressed concerns that pronunciation difficulties might affect the clarity of their spoken communication. For example:

Student 1: *"Some words are hard to pronounce."*

Student 2: *"Sometimes I get struggle with my pronunciation." "Three and tree."*

Student 3: *"There are some tricky sounds that just don't exist in my language. I'm a bit worried my accent makes it hard for people to get what I'm saying."*

These statements indicate that the participants experienced pronunciation difficulties for different reasons. Student 1 found words with many letters or unfamiliar sound patterns difficult to pronounce. Similarly, Student 2 experienced difficulties producing certain English sounds accurately, as reflected in the confusion between the pronunciation of *three* and *tree*. Meanwhile, Student 3 reported challenges in pronouncing English sounds that do not exist in the participant's first language and expressed concern that the participant's accent might affect intelligibility during communication.

These findings suggest that pronunciation difficulties were associated with unfamiliar sound patterns, differences between English and the participants' first language, and concerns regarding intelligibility during communication.

Fluency and Idea Organization Difficulties

The findings also revealed that informants experienced difficulties related to fluency, hesitation, and organizing ideas while speaking English. These difficulties often resulted in pauses, delayed responses, and challenges in expressing ideas clearly. Some participants also reported mentally translating their thoughts before speaking, which affected the fluency of their communication. For example:

Student 1: *"I did that so many times during presentations."*

Student 2: *"I get hesitation in front of many people. I can explain clearly in Indonesian but not English."*

Student 3: *"I do pause to translate those in my head. My thoughts get confused. I know what I want to say but by the time it comes out of my mouth it feels a bit messy."*

These statements indicate that the participants experienced difficulties maintaining speaking fluency for different reasons. Student 1 frequently hesitated during speaking activities, particularly presentations. Similarly, Student 2 experienced hesitation when speaking in front of others and reported difficulty expressing ideas as clearly in English as in Indonesian. Meanwhile, Student 3 relied on mental translation before speaking and experienced difficulty organizing thoughts into clear spoken English, resulting in pauses and less coherent communication.

These findings indicate that hesitation, mental translation, limited vocabulary, and difficulties organizing ideas contributed to reduced speaking fluency and less effective communication.

Causes of Speaking Difficulties

The findings revealed several causes of speaking difficulties experienced by the informants. These causes included anxiety, lack of speaking practice, and limited opportunities to use English in their daily environment.

Anxiety

One of the most frequently reported causes was anxiety. The informants expressed concerns about making mistakes and being negatively evaluated by others when speaking English. For example:

Student 1: *"Maybe we are afraid people will judge our pronunciation."*

Student 3: *"It's mostly just nervous and lack of habit."*

These statements indicate that anxiety reduced the participants' confidence when communicating in English, particularly because they were worried about making mistakes and being judged by others.

Lack of Speaking Practice

Another cause identified by the informants was the lack of speaking practice. The participants explained that limited opportunities to practice English affected their speaking development. For example:

Student 1: *"The key is practice."*

Student 2: *"Because saya kurang practice because in my environment we jarang menggunakan Bahasa Inggris. We never really learned English in my high school."*

Student 3: *"I don't get to speak English every day."*

These statements suggest that insufficient speaking practice limited the participants' ability to develop speaking fluency and confidence.

Limited Environmental Support

Limited environmental support was also identified as a contributing factor. The participants reported that English was rarely used outside the classroom, resulting in limited exposure to authentic English communication. Consequently, opportunities to practice speaking English in everyday situations were scarce. However, some participants also identified factors that encouraged them to use English more frequently. For example:

Student 1: *"I have international friends, so I often try to communicate with them in English."*

Student 2: *"Speaking activities in class help me practice English."*

Student 3: *"Classroom activities give me more chances to speak English."*

These statements indicate that although the participants had limited exposure to English in their daily environment, interactions with international friends and classroom speaking activities provided valuable opportunities to practice speaking and increase their confidence in using English.

Discussion

The findings of this study revealed that rural-background students experienced several difficulties when speaking English. These difficulties were categorized into linguistic difficulties, fluency and idea organization difficulties, and causes of speaking difficulties. The discussion of each finding is presented below.

Linguistic Difficulties

The findings revealed that vocabulary difficulties were among the most common challenges experienced by the participants. All participants reported that limited vocabulary affected their ability to communicate effectively in English. The participants frequently forgot English words, relied on Indonesian words during conversations, and experienced difficulty selecting appropriate vocabulary according to the context. As a result, they struggled to express their intended meaning clearly.

This finding supports the theory proposed by Ur (1996), who stated that vocabulary is one of the essential components of speaking ability. Without sufficient vocabulary knowledge, learners encounter difficulties expressing their thoughts and maintaining communication. The findings are also consistent with the study conducted by Leong & Ahmadi (2017), which found that limited vocabulary significantly hinders learners' speaking performance because they cannot easily retrieve words needed during communication. When vocabulary knowledge is limited, learners may struggle to communicate their intended messages, resulting in hesitation and communication breakdowns.

Furthermore, the participants experienced difficulties in grammar, particularly in the use of tenses and sentence construction. Although some participants understood grammatical rules, they reported making errors when speaking spontaneously or under pressure. This finding suggests that possessing grammatical knowledge does not necessarily guarantee accurate spoken production. This finding is in line with Brown (2004), who explained that grammar is an important element of speaking proficiency because it enables learners to produce meaningful and accurate utterances. The findings also support the study conducted by Tuan & Mai (2015), which identified grammar as one of the major obstacles affecting students' speaking performance.

Another linguistic difficulty identified in this study was pronunciation. The participants reported challenges in pronouncing unfamiliar words and sounds that do not exist in their native language. They also expressed concerns that their accent might negatively affect communication and understanding. This finding supports the view of Gilakjani (2016), who argued that pronunciation plays a crucial role in oral communication because inaccurate pronunciation may lead to misunderstandings. The findings also reflect the influence of the participants' first language on English pronunciation. According to Avery & Ehrlich (1992), learners often experience pronunciation difficulties because the sound systems of their first language differ from those of English. The findings indicate that vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation remain significant linguistic barriers for rural-background students when speaking English.

Fluency and Idea Organization Difficulties

The findings also revealed that participants experienced difficulties related to fluency and idea organization. The participants frequently reported hesitation, pauses, and difficulties organizing their thoughts while speaking English. Some participants stated that they needed time to mentally translate ideas from Indonesian into English before speaking. Consequently, their speech became less fluent and less organized.

This finding is consistent with Thornbury (2005), who explained that fluency involves the ability to speak smoothly with minimal hesitation. Frequent pauses and hesitation often occur when learners have difficulty retrieving vocabulary or processing language quickly. Similarly, Harmer (2007) stated that learners may struggle to express ideas fluently when they lack sufficient linguistic resources. When learners have limited vocabulary or grammatical

knowledge, this process becomes more demanding, resulting in hesitation and reduced fluency.

The findings further revealed that participants often knew what they wanted to say but encountered difficulties expressing those ideas in English. This suggests that their conceptual understanding was not the primary issue rather, the challenge lay in converting ideas into appropriate English expressions. This finding supports the study conducted by Rababa'h (2005), which found that learners often experience communication difficulties because they cannot adequately transform their thoughts into the target language. Therefore, difficulties in fluency and idea organization appear to be closely related to limitations in vocabulary and language processing.

Causes of Speaking Difficulties

The findings identified several factors contributing to speaking difficulties, including anxiety, lack of practice, limited exposure to English, and environmental support. Anxiety emerged as an important factor affecting participants' speaking performance. The participants reported feeling nervous when speaking English, particularly in front of lecturers, classmates, or large audiences. They were concerned about making mistakes and being negatively judged by others. This finding is consistent with the theory proposed by Horwitz et al. (1986), who identified foreign language anxiety as a major factor that negatively affects language learning and speaking performance. Students who experience anxiety tend to hesitate more frequently and avoid speaking situations.

Lack of practice was another factor reported by the participants. They believed that regular practice could improve speaking ability and reduce nervousness. However, they reported limited opportunities to use English in their daily lives. This finding supports Nunan (1999), who emphasized that language learning requires continuous practice and meaningful interaction. Without sufficient opportunities to use English, learners may struggle to develop speaking fluency and confidence.

In addition, environmental supports were found to influence students' speaking difficulties. Most participants stated that people around them primarily used Indonesian or local languages, resulting in limited exposure to English outside the classroom. Nevertheless, participants acknowledged that the university environment provided opportunities to practice English through classroom activities, interactions with lecturers, and communication with peers. This finding aligns with Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985), which highlights the importance of language exposure in language acquisition. Students who are exposed to English more frequently are more likely to develop their speaking ability than those with limited exposure.

The findings suggest that speaking difficulties experienced by rural-background students are not solely caused by linguistic limitations. Psychological factors such as anxiety and environmental factors such as limited exposure and practice opportunities also contribute significantly to these difficulties. Therefore, improving students' speaking ability requires attention not only to language knowledge but also to creating supportive environments and increasing opportunities for meaningful English communication.

The findings of this study are consistent with recent research demonstrating the effectiveness of ESP-oriented instruction in improving vocational students' professional communication skills. Similar to Basturkmen (2022) and Anthony (2023), the present study confirms that language instruction designed around workplace needs enhances learners' communicative competence more effectively than general English instruction. The significant improvement observed in the experimental group also supports Ellis et al. (2023) and East (2024), who reported that Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) promotes authentic language use, learner engagement, and practical communication skills through meaningful tasks. Furthermore, the qualitative findings align with Tsou (2024), who found that Hospitality English instruction strengthens students' professional identity and workplace readiness by integrating authentic service interactions into classroom learning. However, unlike previous studies that examined ESP, TBLT, or Hospitality English separately, this study integrates these

approaches within a reconstructed ELT framework. This integration provides a more comprehensive pedagogical model that simultaneously develops linguistic competence, professional communication, and workplace preparedness, offering a contextualized framework for vocational hospitality education.

CONCLUSIONS

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