

# An Analysis of Challenges Encountered by High School Delegates in International Conference

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## ABSTRACT

This research aimed to explore high school students' challenges in an international conference. The research employed a qualitative method with a case study approach. The participants in this research were four high school students who had presented in one international conference. The researcher used purposive sampling to select the appropriate participants based on the criteria. To obtain data, the researcher interviewed the participants. In analyzing the data, the researcher used thematic analysis. The results of this research indicated that high school students experienced some challenges when presenting their paper in an international conference that was held in Malaysia, which were divided into three themes: language barriers (lack of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation), psychological issues (lack of confidence and anxiety), and performance (lack of preparation). Despite the comprehensive exploration of the topic, this study has some limitations. Firstly, the research solely focused on the experiences of high school students at international conferences. Future studies could explore their experiences in national forums for comparison. Secondly, the study included a relatively small sample size of only four participants. Including more participants in future research could lead to a more nuanced understanding of the challenges faced.

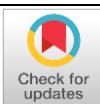
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## INTRODUCTION

Despite studying English from elementary to secondary school, Indonesian students, as EFL learners, often find it challenging. Among the four language skills, speaking skill is increasingly recognized as paramount for high school students today. Some senior high school students struggle to communicate effectively in English with their peers and teachers, underscoring a fundamental difficulty in practical English usage (Mukminin et al., 2015). On the other hand, public speaking has become a frequent and essential requirement during these formative years, playing a crucial role in various academic activities such as debates, class discussions, and presentations. Oral presentations, in particular, demand a unique set of skills, as presenters must articulate their ideas clearly and comprehensibly for the audience (Gebril & Ali, 2023).

The ability to effectively present and convey ideas is a vital skill for success in both professional and academic settings (Oliver et al., 2012), and even at the high school level, honing these skills offers significant benefits. By mastering spoken English and presentation skills, students gain valuable confidence and experience that will prepare them for future academic endeavors, including college interviews, extracurricular activities, academic presentations, and participation in conferences. However, the transition from classroom presentations to more formal academic settings, such as international conferences, can pose significant challenges for students. Moreover, some high school students struggle with

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lexical selection and grammatical uncertainties even in classroom oral presentations (Al Hosni, 2014). This difficulty is not confined to high school, as Annisa and Wariyati found that even oral presentations in a university classroom context remain a considerable challenge for students (Annisa & Wariyati, 2023).

To date, numerous studies have explored the challenges related to speaking skills in the classroom setting. Scholars like (Gebril & Ali, 2023; Hajar & Rahman, 2022; Rahmah et al., 2023) have contributed to this body of knowledge. However, a significant portion of this existing research, including two of the aforementioned studies, has primarily focused on the difficulties experienced by university students when giving oral presentations within a classroom context. The academic landscape, particularly regarding high school students' experiences, presents a notable gap. There is a scarce comprehensive investigation into the specific challenges encountered by high school students when presenting their ideas orally, especially in the more formal and demanding environment of an international conference.

This lack of focused research on high school students' challenges in such high-stakes international settings leaves an important area unexplored, preventing a full understanding of the unique pressures and difficulties they face. Therefore, to bridge this identified gap, this research aims to delve into the phenomenon of challenges faced by high school students when presenting at an international conference.

*Speaking*

Speaking is a type of communication and it is crucial to deliver the message effectively (Jones, 1989). Effective communication involves both what and how person communicate it. Speaking ability can be considered good when the speaker is able to convey his ideas clearly and be understood by the interlocutor. Speaking is oral skills that consist of producing system verbal sentence to convey meaning (Nunan, 2017). Furthermore, speaking is a crucial communication skill used in everyday life, both within educational settings and beyond (Guebba, 2021). The development of proficiency in any skill, including speaking, relies heavily on repeated practice. On the other hand, speaking as the act of building and conveying shared understanding through the use of both spoken language and non-verbal cues, applicable to diverse situations (Chaney, 1998).

In essence, speaking serves as the foundation for oral expression within a communicative interaction. Moreover, one of the fundamental abilities needed by everyone to engage and communicate with others is speaking (Rahmah et al., 2023; Syatriana & Afdaliah, 2020). It allows us to communicate in various ways, including discussions, speeches, debates, expressing arguments, casual conversations, storytelling, and even retelling past events. It's a dynamic and multifaceted way to communicate. Through conversation and interaction, speakers build understanding together. Furthermore, Haris (1974) stated that there are five components of speaking ability. Those are (1) pronunciation; (2) grammar; (3) vocabulary; (4) fluency; and (5) comprehension.

*Presenting in Conference*

A presentation is an activity in which someone demonstrate, describe, or explain something to a group of people. Presentation skill is one of the skills that students must have when they want to present something in front of public. By honing this skill, students can significantly improve their ability to communicate and engage audiences (Widyastuti & Mahaputri, 2018). Students' presentations can serve many purposes in class (Chivers & Shoolbred, 2007). These include convincing others of an idea, teaching classmates new skills, explaining concepts, sharing information, and even being graded by the teacher.

On the other hand, conferences defined the students who share a passion for a specific area of study (Chanwimalueang et al., 2016). These gatherings, often organized by universities, professional societies, or associations, serve as a meeting point for scholars, researchers, and professionals from a particular academic discipline or field. A conference is an academic meeting that includes public speaking. Presenting at an academic conference permits researchers to exhibit or show their results or findings to a committee (Li et al., 2025). However, there are some of the challenges that high school students may encounter in presenting in an international conference such as psychological issues (Abrar et al., 2024;

### Previous Studies

In this previous study, there are some studies that discuss topics related to this research. There are some researchers also conducted research topics related to challenges in presenting in a international conference. The first researcher is (Rahmah et al., 2023)which their study entitled "Presenting in International Conference: An Interview Study on the Students' Public Speaking Anxiety". The study employed qualitative design. The aim of study was to examine English students experiences who have presented in an international conference and how they were able to control their anxiety.

Moreover, the subjects were students and alumni majoring in English education in the universities in Banjarmasin. Among these participants, there were some attended the international conference offline and some were online. The results of this study were several participants felt anxious, worried, and there were some participants who said they did not feel worry at all. Moreover, they controlled these challenges by practicing continuously, reading a lot of literatures, having a good preparation, reading the key points, and believing in their abilities.

Another related study was from (Gebril & Ali, 2023) entitled "Difficulties Faced by Students in Oral Presentation in Classroom Interaction". This study explored the challenges faced by third-year English students at El-Mergib University (2021-2022) during oral presentations. Using a qualitative approach and a questionnaire (25 statements), it identified student difficulties for instance, lack of confidence, subject understanding, and time management. Observations further supported these findings. The study highlights the need for strategies to address these presentation anxieties and difficulties.

Another documented study investigated speaking difficulties in high school students on Buru Island which the titled "High School Students' Difficulties in English Speaking Skills of Namlea, Buru Island". The researchers of this study were (Hajar & Rahman, 2022). It employed a qualitative approach using interviews and observations to identify challenges such as limited vocabulary, pronunciation issues, and grammar struggles. The research also explored factors contributing to these difficulties, including student mindsets, motivation, and lack of language practice opportunities.

The previous studies above have provided information about students' challenges in giving oral presentation, specifically doing a presentation in an international conference. However, there is no specific previous study that discuss about challenges experienced by high school students when presenting in international conference. These findings suggest a need for further investigation. Shifting the research focus and subject could allow for a more in-depth exploration of the phenomenon, potentially leading to the identification of new data that enriches the understanding of this field.

## METHOD

### Research Design

The aim of this study is intended to elicit the challenges experienced by high schools students when presenting their paper in international conference. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the issue, the researcher utilized qualitative with a case study approach. The reason in choosing this research design is because it focuses on how participants experience events from their perceptions (Willig, 2013). Moreover, qualitative research delves into how people understand and experience social issues, focusing on the meanings they attach to these problems (Creswell, 2007).

On the other hand, case study is an approach that is very suitable for focus research that has not been thoroughly investigated (Merriam, 1998). Therefore, it was decided that a qualitative with case study approach would be suitable to use in this particular study since it enabled the researchers to give accurate, thorough, and authentic information regarding the challenges experienced by high school students when presenting in international conference.

### Participants



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In selecting the participants, the researcher utilized purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling method often used in qualitative research (Creswell, 2007). In this approach, the researcher selects participants or research sites that directly align with her study's purpose.

The study's purpose was to explore the challenges faced by high school students when presenting at international conferences. The researcher initially planned to recruit 10 high school students, a target chosen to ensure a rich and diverse set of perspectives often sought in qualitative case study research for achieving comprehensive understanding. To select participants relevant to the research purpose, the researcher established a set of inclusive criteria, including (1) Participants must be active high school students at the time of the study; (2) Participants must have experience presenting at an international conference; (3) Participants must voluntarily agree to take part in the research.

The recruitment process began by requesting a list of high school student presenters from the committee of the "Youth Leaders Exchange and Conference 2024" held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in April 2024. This request was made via a formal email to the conference secretariat, outlining the research's purpose and assuring confidentiality. Upon receiving the list, the researcher individually contacted the 10 prospective participants through WhatsApp. The initial WhatsApp clearly explained the study's aim, the nature of participation (a one-on-one interview), the estimated interview duration, and confirmed their right to withdraw at any time. A single follow-up WhatsApp was sent one week later to those who did not initially respond.

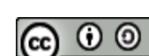
From the 10 prospective participants contacted, the researcher eventually managed to secure four participants who met the criteria and voluntarily agreed to be interviewed. The remaining six prospective participants declined primarily due to scheduling conflicts and academic commitments. Among these four participants, three were males and one was female. Two participants were in tenth grade, and the other two were in eleventh grade. Interviews with these participants ranged from 10 to 20 minutes in length. In detail, the pseudonyms and demographic information for each participant were: S1 (eleventh grade, male), S2 (eleventh grade, male), S3 (tenth grade, female), and S4 (tenth grade, male). The researcher also had an agreement with participants that all data they shared and their identity will be confidential.

#### *Instruments*

To obtain the empirical data, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews guided by interview protocol. This approach allowed the researchers to delve deeper by asking follow-up questions, seeking clarification, and even confirming responses. This flexibility in questioning ultimately led to more robust data. Furthermore, the researcher was able to analyze non-verbal cues such as laughter, silence, or even intuitive hunches during interviews. However, it is crucial to prioritize participant confidentiality. While these cues may offer valuable insights for thematic analysis, researcher should focus on what participants explicitly share and avoid interpreting confidential information that may not be consciously revealed (Lewis et al., 2003).

Before the interview started, to confirm voluntary participation, the researcher obtained signed informed consent forms from all participants. Apart from some challenges in managing the interview schedules, the process of interviews was running well generally. The entire interview process was recorded through devices used researcher's laptop. All participants conducted it online via Zoom. The duration of each interview was about 10-20 minutes. During the interview, participants were offered the flexibility to answer questions in either Indonesian or English. Using the participants' preferred language was one way to encourage them to share their experiences more freely. It could also help the researcher to obtain richer data from the participants. On the other hand, this study employed an interview protocol to ensure consistent and well-structured questioning throughout the interview process. Moreover, the protocol facilitated prompting participants to delve deeper into their responses, ultimately leading to more comprehensive data collection.

#### *Data Analysis Procedures*



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In analyzing the data, the researcher utilized thematic analysis proposed by (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This analysis technique focuses on identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes within the data. In detail, the process of the analysis started with familiarizing with the data by repeatedly listening to interview recordings. To gain a deeper understanding, the researcher transcribed the audio and reviewed it carefully. Even, the researcher needed to study the data multiple times.

Thenceforth, the researcher was identifying and highlighting frequently occurring words and phrases that held potential themes. Following the previous step, a critical review phase ensured the validity of the identified themes. Then, the researcher defined and named the themes. In this process, the researcher's supervisor plays a crucial role in this phase, providing guidance and feedback. In the final phase, the researcher wrote the findings and discussions for the report. The phases can be seen in the following figure.

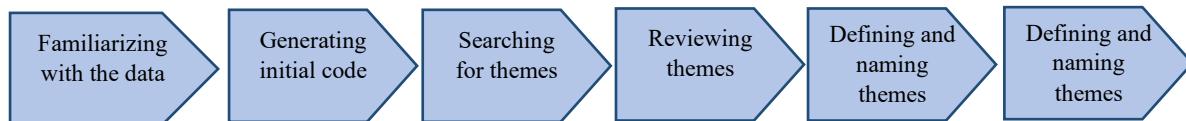


Figure 1. the phases of Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis (2006)

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Findings

This study aimed to explore high school students' challenges when they were presenting paper in an international conference.

#### *High School Students' Challenges in Presenting Paper in an International Conference*

Based on the data analysis, the researcher identified three main themes of high school students' challenges in presenting at international conference, 1) language barriers (lack of vocabularies, grammar, pronunciation); 2) psychological issues (lack of confidence and anxiety); 3) performance (lack of preparation). The following table displays the themes and sub-themes of high school students' challenges in presenting at international conference.

Table 1. Themes and sub-themes of high school students' challenges

|                                  | Theme(s)             | Sub-theme(s)  |
|----------------------------------|----------------------|---|
| High school students' challenges | Language barriers    | 1) Lack of vocabularies<br>2) Grammar<br>3) Pronunciation |
|                                  | Psychological issues | 1) Lack of confidence<br>2) Anxiety                       |
|                                  | Performance          | 1) Lack of preparation                                    |

#### *Language Barriers*

The first theme that emerged from the data obtained by researcher was language barriers. Language barriers are significant obstacles faced by presenters which is in the case is the high school students during international conference. These barriers can hinder effective communication, limit the exchange of ideas, and ultimately diminish the overall experience. There are three sub-themes found in this theme. The first sub-theme was lack of vocabularies. Two participants indicated that this challenge posed a significant obstacle for them when presenting at international conferences.

To illustrate, in the interview, S1 acknowledged that their limited vocabulary hindered the fluency of his presentation. He specifically said, "It's not running very well because I'm struggling when speaking. I'm worry about my vocabularies...". This statement highlighted the internal struggle he experienced due to an insufficient lexicon, which forced him to hesitate, search for appropriate words, and ultimately disrupted the natural flow of his speech. Similarly, S2 shared his problem about grammar. He noted "Grammar is the most difficult aspect for me". Furthermore, S2 also stated that "I'm always thinking about whether the grammar is correct or not". It showed that grammar was one of serious problems that can hinder high school students in presenting paper at international conference. These individual

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experiences collectively demonstrated how fundamental language skills, if not adequately mastered, it became major obstacles in high-stakes public speaking environments.

On the other hand, pronunciation was also another prevalent issue for high school students in presenting in an international conference. Two of four participants noted this challenge in their interviews. S3 asserted that pronunciation is one of her challenges in international conference. She stated, "When I realize I have mispronounced a word, I sometimes go blank and then continue after a while". The sudden realization of an error led to a momentary mental block, disrupting the speaker's train of thought and fluency. Such interruptions not only affect the speaker's confidence but also momentarily disengage the audience. Based on the data found, it is evident that difficulties with pronunciation can serve as a considerable obstacle for high school students, hindering their ability to deliver a smooth, confident, and impactful presentation in an international conference.

*Psychological Issues*

The second emerged theme from the data obtained was psychological issues. A psychological issue refers to a mental health condition that affects an individual's emotional, cognitive, or behavioral well-being. Regarding this challenge, we found two sub-themes. The first sub-theme was lack of confidence. In this sub-theme, there was only one participant who mentioned this challenge. A male in eleventh grade, S1, elucidated that "I am an introvert person. I do not have a confidence to speak in front of many people". The interview findings highlight the potential influence of lack of confidence on the presentation experience within international conferences. Aside from lack of confidence, the data showed that anxiety was also one of the challenges that can hinder the high school students when they were presenting.

In this sub-theme, there were three participants that explicitly mentioned this psychological issue during the interview process. During his interview, S1 mentioned that he struggles to feel calm when presenting in front of an audience, which causes him to speak very quickly. He said, "When I am feeling anxious, without I am realized I will speak too fast". It demonstrates how anxiety can manifest as an uncontrolled physiological response, leading to rapid speech that might impair clarity and comprehension for the audience.

Slightly different with previous participant, S3 also shared her story. She stated that "I believe my performance was not good because I tried to memorize everything and avoid looking at the screen. However, when I was about to start speaking, I became extremely nervous. So, I looked at the screen, and all my memorization was wasted," vividly illustrates the overwhelming power of anxiety. This experience emphasizes that anxiety is able to make the presenters forget what they have carefully prepared, leading them to feel their performance was poor. These data indicated that lack of confidence and anxiety become challenges that affected the process of presentation in an international conference.

*Performance*

The data gathered from the interview process showed that performance specifically in lack of preparation for presentation turned out to be another sub-theme in this research. Three participants affirmed that lack of preparation was one of the reasons that can hinder the process of presentation in international conference. For instance, S4 said that "the night before the conference, they unexpectedly changed the things I planned to show in my presentation. All the work I had done beforehand meant nothing, and I had to start over from scratch." His story highlights unexpected events completely wiped out all his previous hard work. It forced S4 to frantically prepare again under intense pressure. Such a sudden change left no time to practice or get used to the new material, directly leading to a lack of readiness.

Another participant, S1 asserted that "The lack of preparation made me more feel anxious because I only practiced the night before conference. Therefore, I was stuttering when presenting my paper". This proves that a rushed or incomplete preparation process can make psychological problems worse, directly harming how well someone speaks. During the interview, S2 also stated the same thing as previous participant by saying "I feel so nervous because the lack of preparation". Based on the data indicated that lack of



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preparation was a crucial obstacle that participants experienced during their presentation in international conference. Whether it was due to last-minute changes, not enough time, or simply insufficient practice, not being ready consistently led to increased anxiety, disrupted their flow, and made their overall presentation less effective.

### Discussion

The purposes of this study were to explore high school students' challenges in presenting their paper in international conference. This study was guided by one research question: 1) what challenges do high school students' experienced in an international conference? The result of data analysis indicated that there were three themes and six sub-themes, including 1) language barriers; 2) psychological issue; 3) performance.

The first challenge is language barriers. Where dominant languages such as English can disadvantage the presenters or in this case is high school students of international conference from non-English speaking backgrounds (Mazrui, 1986). It can limit their ability to present their work effectively and gain recognition for their contributions. This theme is most prominently characterized by its focus on the use of grammar. The pressure to speak grammatically while presenting proved challenging for two participants, hindering their ability to deliver a smooth and natural presentation.

This finding aligns with previous research (Rohmawati et al., 2022; Sahara et al., 2021) that identified grammar as a significant hurdle during presentations. These studies further detail the specific challenges, such as participants struggling to maintain fluency while constructing grammatically correct sentences or feeling anxious about making grammatical errors. The emphasis on grammatical perfection can potentially limit the effectiveness of the presentation by diverting attention from the content and hindering the students' ability to connect with the audience on a deeper level.

The second challenge that researcher found is psychological issues. The findings in this theme presented that lack of confidence and anxiety can hinder the process of presentation in international conference. Anxiety is one of the factors most often mentioned by the participants. Anxiety encompasses a range of negative emotions, including unease, fear, worry, nervousness, and apprehension. The researcher found that anxiety caused participants to stutter and sometimes forget what they wanted to say during their presentations (Horwitz et al., 1986). The findings of this research turned out to support (Abrar et al., 2024). Feeling anxiety can create such a strong feeling of being overwhelmed that students are rendered speechless, even though they have the ability to express themselves. This data indicated that anxiety is one of the most problem encountered by high school students in an international conference.

The third identified challenge is performance. The sub-theme found in this study is lack of preparation. Based on the interviews, a lack of preparation can hinder high school students from effectively conveying their ideas during presentations at international events. Additionally, this challenge can also prevent participants from giving their best performances, especially in larger forums such as international conferences. The finding of the research is in line with the research by (Liu & Li, 2016). They found that a lack of experience and inadequate preparation can hinder effective communication and limit the overall impact of the presentation. Furthermore, without adequate preparation, the high school students as presenters risk losing their audience's attention, failing to effectively convey their message, and ultimately missing out on the potential benefits of participating in an international forum.

### CONCLUSIONS

The researcher in this study explored the challenges experienced by high school students in an international conference. Based on the data findings, high school students' challenges in presenting paper in international conference are language barriers (lack of vocabularies, grammar, pronunciation), psychological issues (lack of confidence and anxiety), and performance (lack of preparation). Despite the comprehensive exploration of

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the topic, this study has some limitations. Firstly, the research solely focused on the experiences of high school students at international conferences. Future studies could explore their experiences in national forums for comparison. Secondly, the study included a relatively small sample size of only four participants. Including more participants in future research could lead to a more nuanced understanding of the challenges faced.

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