



Barriers to English-Speaking Proficiency Among Indonesian EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the multifaceted challenges faced by EFL students in developing English-speaking proficiency within the Indonesian higher education context. Focusing on third-semester students at Universitas Negeri Gorontalo, the research identifies three major speaking problem categories: linguistic, psychological, and socio-environmental. Using a qualitative descriptive design and semi-structured interviews with 18 low-performing students, the study explores the underlying causes of their difficulties. Thematic analysis revealed interrelated issues such as limited vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation errors, speaking anxiety, low self-confidence, fear of judgment, lack of English exposure, peer discouragement, and teacher-centered instruction. These barriers often overlap and reinforce one another, creating a complex web that inhibits oral performance. The findings suggest that effective solutions require integrated pedagogical strategies that address not only linguistic competence but also students' emotional well-being and environmental support systems. Creating a safe and interactive classroom atmosphere, providing authentic opportunities for language use, and cultivating resilience are essential to helping learners overcome their fear and develop confidence in English communication.

INTRODUCTION

In today's interconnected global society, the ability to communicate effectively in English has emerged as an essential skill for academic, professional, and personal advancement. As the international lingua franca, English facilitates cross-cultural communication and plays a central role in global education, business, and diplomacy. Consequently, English proficiency, especially in speaking, is a significant benchmark for student success in many non-English-speaking countries, including Indonesia. Despite years of formal instruction, many students in Indonesian universities continue to struggle with developing fluent and confident English-speaking abilities, often hindering their academic performance and future opportunities.

Speaking is often considered the most complex and demanding of the four language skills (listening, reading, writing, and speaking). It requires not only mastery of vocabulary and grammar but also the ability to produce coherent utterances spontaneously and appropriately in real-time communication. Unlike reading and writing, speaking involves direct interaction and is highly susceptible to psychological factors such as anxiety, self-consciousness, and social pressure. The dynamic and immediate nature of oral communication often overwhelms EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners, particularly those with limited exposure to English-speaking environments. As a result, speaking remains a major hurdle for many students despite years of instruction and practice.

In the Indonesian context, the challenge is exacerbated by the limited use of English in daily life. Most students learn English in classroom settings where exposure is restricted to structured lessons and formal assessments. Outside the classroom, opportunities for speaking practice are minimal, leading to a lack of fluency and confidence. Additionally, traditional teacher-centered pedagogical approaches often do not foster communicative competence, leaving students ill-prepared for real-world interactions. The pressure to perform well academically, combined with limited practice and support, further intensifies students' difficulties in acquiring speaking skills.

Recent studies have highlighted various factors contributing to English-speaking difficulties among Indonesian EFL learners. For instance, Aulia et al. (2023) found that third-semester students at Muhammadiyah University of Makassar experienced significant speaking anxiety due to fear of negative evaluation and lack of confidence. Similarly, Yunus et al. (2023) reported that students at Muhammadiyah University of Kendari faced challenges such as mother tongue interference and insufficient preparation, leading to heightened anxiety during public speaking. Ajiza et al. (2024) also identified internal and external factors affecting students' anxiety levels in speaking classes across four Indonesian universities.

Despite these insights, there remains a gap in understanding the specific challenges faced by third-semester students who have completed foundational speaking courses. Previous research has not extensively explored how these students, having acquired basic speaking skills, continue to encounter obstacles in achieving fluency and confidence. This study aims to fill this gap by focusing on the English-speaking problems encountered by third-semester students of the

English Language Education Study Program (ELESP) at Universitas Negeri Gorontalo.

This research focuses on identifying and analyzing the English-speaking problems encountered by third-semester students of the English Language Education Study Program (ELESP) at Universitas Negeri Gorontalo. These students have completed foundational speaking courses, making them ideal subjects for exploring persistent challenges. By examining their experiences, the study aims to uncover not only the nature of these problems but also the underlying causes, offering insights into the multi-faceted obstacles faced by EFL learners. Understanding these challenges is essential for developing more effective teaching strategies that address both linguistic competence and learner confidence.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers about the real-world struggles students face in learning to speak English, particularly after completing initial speaking courses. By identifying specific linguistic, psychological, and socio-environmental issues, the findings can guide the development of targeted pedagogical interventions that bridge the gap between classroom instruction and practical speaking proficiency.

Through a qualitative approach, this study gathers in-depth data from student interviews to identify recurring themes and categorize them into linguistic, psychological, and socio-environmental issues. The findings are expected to inform educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers about the real-world struggles students face in learning to speak English. Ultimately, this research aspires to bridge the gap between classroom instruction and practical speaking proficiency by proposing pedagogical interventions that are responsive to the lived experiences of learners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Linguistic Challenges in English Speaking

Linguistic problems constitute one of the most immediate and observable barriers to English-speaking proficiency. These include difficulties related to vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and comprehension. EFL learners often find themselves unable to express thoughts due to a limited lexicon, leading to repetitive and simplistic speech. Grammar errors further impede clarity and coherence, making it challenging for students to construct meaningful sentences. Pronunciation problems, including inaccurate stress and intonation, contribute to misunderstandings and lower confidence, especially when interacting with fluent speakers. Comprehension issues also disrupt the flow of conversation, as students may misinterpret questions or fail to follow discourse patterns.

Scholars such as Franscy and Ramli (2021) have categorized these linguistic barriers into distinct components, emphasizing that vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and fluency are interdependent. A deficiency in one area often impacts the others, creating a cascading effect on overall speaking performance. For instance, a student with limited vocabulary may over-rely on filler words, struggle with fluency, and produce syntactically awkward

sentences. These linguistic gaps are often rooted in insufficient exposure to authentic English usage and a lack of meaningful communication practice. Addressing linguistic problems thus requires a holistic approach that integrates vocabulary enrichment, grammar instruction, pronunciation drills, and real-life speaking opportunities.

Psychological Factors in Speaking Anxiety

Psychological barriers, particularly anxiety and lack of confidence, play a crucial role in hindering students' ability to speak English. Speaking anxiety is a well-documented phenomenon among EFL learners and is often triggered by fear of making mistakes, negative evaluation, and peer judgment. Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1985) posits that emotional variables such as motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety significantly affect language acquisition. When learners feel anxious, their mental filters block language input and output, making it difficult to process and produce spoken language effectively. This anxiety is further amplified in classroom settings where students are expected to perform in front of peers and instructors.

Studies by Shen and Chiu (2019) and Juhana (2012) corroborate the idea that psychological factors often outweigh linguistic competence in determining speaking success. Even students with adequate grammar and vocabulary may falter in speaking tasks due to nervousness or low self-esteem. The fear of being laughed at or misunderstood creates a mental barrier that discourages participation and reduces practice opportunities. Consequently, building learner confidence and creating a supportive classroom environment are essential for reducing anxiety and encouraging active speaking engagement. Teachers must adopt empathetic approaches that normalize mistakes and foster resilience in language learners.

Socio-Environmental Influences on Speaking Proficiency

The environment in which language learning occurs greatly influences students' speaking abilities. Socio-environmental factors such as classroom dynamics, peer support, teacher attitudes, and exposure to English outside school shape learners' motivation and engagement. In Indonesian EFL contexts, where English is not used in daily interactions, the lack of immersion hinders the natural development of speaking skills. Without regular exposure to English conversations, students miss out on the chance to internalize language structures and practice spontaneous speech. This leads to a mechanical and hesitant speaking style that lacks fluency and authenticity.

Environmental challenges also include unsupportive classmates, rigid teaching styles, and a lack of extracurricular opportunities to use English. Research by Huwari (2019) and Shen & Chiu (2019) emphasizes that students often feel isolated or discouraged when their efforts to speak are not positively reinforced. Classroom environments that focus excessively on accuracy rather than communication may suppress students' willingness to experiment with language. Therefore, creating a more interactive and communicative learning atmosphere—including peer collaboration, speaking clubs, and multimedia engagement—is vital for improving EFL students' oral proficiency.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the speaking problems encountered by EFL students. The setting was the English Language Education Study Program at Universitas Negeri Gorontalo. The participants were 18 third-semester students selected through purposive sampling based on their low academic performance in speaking courses. These students had already completed three levels of speaking instruction, making them ideal informants for examining persistent challenges. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to share personal experiences while enabling the researcher to probe deeper into emerging themes. Interview questions were adapted from prior research by Huwari (2019) and Safitri (2021), and refined through pilot testing.

Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) model, was employed to interpret the interview data. This involved coding the transcripts, identifying patterns, and organizing the findings into major themes: linguistic, psychological, and socio-environmental problems. The approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of the specific difficulties faced by students and the underlying factors contributing to them. By grounding the analysis in participants' own words and perspectives, the study ensured that the findings reflect authentic learner experiences. This methodological framework supports a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted barriers that impede English-speaking development in an EFL context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study identified three major categories of problems that hinder students' English-speaking performance: linguistic, psychological, and socio-environmental. Thematic analysis of interview data with 18 third-semester students revealed several recurring patterns of difficulty under each category. These problems often overlapped and reinforced one another, forming a complex web of interrelated barriers. The following table presents a summary of the findings:

Table 1. Barriers to EFL Students' Speaking Proficiency

Category	Subthemes	Illustrative Issues
Linguistic Problems	- Lack of vocabulary - Pronunciation difficulties - Grammar and comprehension issues	Students feel "stuck" during speaking due to limited words; mispronunciations cause embarrassment and hesitation
Psychological Problems	- Anxiety - Lack of confidence - Fear of mistakes	Fear of being judged or laughed at; hesitation due to previous negative experiences and low self-perception

Socio-Environmental Problems	- Limited exposure to English - Peer discouragement - Rigid teaching practices	No practice outside class; unsupportive classmates; instructors focus on correction rather than communication
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Linguistic Problems

The findings revealed that all participants encountered linguistic challenges that negatively impacted their English-speaking performance. Students frequently mentioned having an insufficient vocabulary, making it difficult for them to express their ideas clearly and coherently. This lack of vocabulary forced them to use repetitive or generic words, which limited their ability to communicate effectively. For example, one student admitted to being “stuck” during conversations because they didn’t know the appropriate English words to use. This problem was particularly evident during oral presentations and impromptu speaking tasks.

Pronunciation errors also emerged as a significant concern for participants. Students noted their difficulty in pronouncing unfamiliar English words, which led to misunderstandings and embarrassment. Several mentioned that their pronunciation problems stemmed from a lack of exposure to native speakers and minimal practice with authentic listening materials. Inaccurate pronunciation, especially of consonants and stress patterns, made students hesitant to participate in speaking activities, fearing judgment from peers and instructors. This hesitancy often reinforced a cycle of avoidance and reduced practice.

Grammatical mistakes further complicated students’ speaking abilities. Participants admitted struggling with verb tenses, sentence structure, and word order during oral communication. Many shared that they often second-guessed their grammar mid-sentence, which disrupted fluency and led to fragmented speech. Comprehension problems also affected communication, with students citing difficulties in understanding questions posed in English, especially when spoken quickly. This misunderstanding often caused delays in response and loss of confidence, emphasizing the interconnectivity of linguistic challenges in the speaking process.

Psychological Problems

Anxiety was the most commonly reported psychological barrier among participants. Nearly all students expressed feelings of nervousness and fear when required to speak English, especially in formal academic contexts. They attributed their anxiety to a fear of making mistakes and being ridiculed by peers. One student described feeling intense pressure whenever called upon to speak, likening the experience to being placed on stage without preparation. This heightened anxiety created a mental block that made it difficult for students to access the language knowledge they had acquired.

Lack of confidence was another recurring issue. Participants often questioned their own abilities and perceived themselves as less competent than their peers. This self-doubt discouraged them from volunteering in class or engaging in spontaneous conversations. Even when students knew what they

wanted to say, they hesitated or chose to remain silent out of fear of negative evaluation. Some mentioned that their lack of confidence stemmed from previous negative experiences, such as being corrected harshly or laughed at when attempting to speak English.

The fear of making mistakes compounded both anxiety and low confidence levels. Students frequently expressed that they avoided speaking because they did not want to “sound wrong” or use incorrect grammar. This perfectionist attitude hindered their willingness to take risks and engage in communicative practice. In addition to fear, some students also cited shyness and introversion as factors that made speaking in public particularly difficult. Overall, the psychological issues experienced by students formed a substantial barrier to their progress in developing spoken English proficiency.

Socio-Environmental Problems

Socio-environmental issues also played a significant role in hindering students’ speaking development. Many students reported a lack of English exposure outside the classroom. They stated that English was rarely spoken in their households or communities, leaving classroom instruction as their only source of input. This limited exposure hindered their ability to internalize English expressions and structures. As one student explained, “I only use English in class, and outside, I don’t have anyone to talk to in English.” This absence of immersive language practice significantly affected fluency and confidence.

Another commonly reported issue was the lack of peer support and a discouraging classroom environment. Students mentioned that some classmates were not supportive during speaking activities and would mock or ignore their efforts. This negative peer pressure created an atmosphere of fear and reluctance, where students were unwilling to take risks. Several participants recounted incidents where classmates laughed at their pronunciation or grammatical errors, further reinforcing their speaking anxiety. In such a climate, students found it difficult to build the courage to participate actively.

Participants also identified teacher-related factors as contributing to their challenges. Some noted that instructors focused too heavily on grammar correction and gave limited positive feedback. Others felt that the teaching style was overly rigid, with few opportunities for interactive speaking practice. A few students mentioned that being frequently interrupted or corrected during speaking tasks made them feel self-conscious and discouraged. These instructional practices, while well-intentioned, inadvertently suppressed learners’ motivation and made the classroom a less safe space for oral language development.

The findings of this study underscore the intricate interplay between linguistic, psychological, and socio-environmental barriers in shaping EFL learners’ speaking proficiency. Consistent with Franscy and Ramli (2021), linguistic challenges such as limited vocabulary, poor pronunciation, and grammar-related difficulties emerged as primary obstacles among the participants. These linguistic deficits not only disrupted fluency and coherence but also contributed to reduced confidence and communication breakdowns. The students’ difficulties in retrieving appropriate vocabulary, managing tenses, and applying correct pronunciation demonstrate that these components are

interdependent and require simultaneous pedagogical attention. A holistic instructional approach that integrates vocabulary-building, grammar reinforcement, and authentic pronunciation practice is thus essential.

In alignment with Krashen's (1985) Affective Filter Hypothesis, psychological factors such as speaking anxiety, low self-confidence, and fear of negative evaluation significantly interfered with students' ability to speak English. As observed in the interviews, students often experienced mental blocks and hesitation during speaking tasks, especially when being evaluated or corrected. These findings are supported by Juhana (2012) and Ajiza et al. (2024), who argue that anxiety and fear of mistakes are key affective filters that inhibit oral performance. Creating a psychologically safe classroom environment, where students feel free to make errors without judgment, is therefore fundamental to promoting speaking fluency.

The fear of making mistakes was especially impactful, often leading to avoidance behaviors such as refusing to speak in front of others. This perfectionism, though stemming from a desire to speak correctly, inadvertently reduced opportunities for authentic practice and spontaneous speech. Safitri (2021) and Yunus et al. (2023) similarly found that speaking anxiety among Indonesian EFL learners often stems from the fear of being mocked or misunderstood. The emphasis placed by some instructors on accuracy over fluency may unintentionally reinforce this fear. Therefore, pedagogical shifts toward meaning-focused communication, peer collaboration, and fluency-driven speaking tasks are needed to support risk-taking and oral confidence.

Socio-environmental challenges further complicated students' speaking development. As reported in this study, limited exposure to English outside the classroom and negative peer interactions were recurring themes. These findings are in line with Huwari (2019), who identified that the absence of immersive English environments contributes to stagnation in oral language skills. In this study, students shared that English was rarely used at home or in social spaces, leaving them with minimal input and output opportunities. Moreover, discouraging classroom climates—such as classmates laughing at mistakes or instructors frequently interrupting speaking tasks—undermined motivation. To counter these conditions, a communicative ecosystem that includes extracurricular speaking clubs, digital media exposure, and constructive peer engagement must be fostered.

Overall, the evidence suggests that resolving English-speaking difficulties among EFL learners requires an integrated approach. Teachers must go beyond textbook instruction to incorporate emotional support, student-centered pedagogy, and environmental adaptation. As Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasize in qualitative research, the lived experiences of learners must inform the development of responsive teaching strategies. Addressing only the linguistic domain is insufficient; efforts must also nurture students' psychological readiness and provide safe, collaborative spaces for practicing language. Future interventions should continue to prioritize learners' voices to design more meaningful and empowering English-speaking experiences.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study has explored the multifaceted barriers that hinder English-speaking proficiency among EFL students at Universitas Negeri Gorontalo. The findings reveal that students face linguistic difficulties such as insufficient vocabulary, grammar issues, and poor pronunciation; psychological challenges like anxiety, low confidence, and fear of judgment; as well as socio-environmental problems including limited exposure, lack of peer support, and rigid teaching styles. These problems do not exist in isolation but intersect to form a complex web of obstacles that inhibit students from speaking English fluently and confidently. Understanding the root causes behind these challenges is essential for crafting effective educational responses that promote genuine language acquisition.

To address these issues holistically, educators must implement strategies that target all three dimensions identified in this study. Language instruction should be accompanied by activities that build self-esteem, reduce anxiety, and encourage peer collaboration. Teachers should foster a safe, inclusive environment where students feel free to experiment with language without fear of ridicule. Additionally, providing opportunities for authentic language use outside the classroom can help reinforce classroom learning and build fluency. By adopting an integrated approach that considers linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors, English language programs can more effectively equip students with the tools and confidence needed to communicate successfully in English.

FUTHER STUDY

Like all qualitative research, this study is not without limitations. It focused exclusively on a relatively small group of third-semester students from a single university in Indonesia who were identified as struggling with speaking performance. While the findings provide valuable insights into the linguistic, psychological, and socio-environmental barriers faced by these learners, they may not fully represent the experiences of EFL students from different academic levels, institutions, or regions. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data through interviews, though rich and personal, may be subject to bias or selective memory. Future studies are encouraged to expand the scope by including a more diverse participant pool across various universities or educational levels, such as high school students or more advanced learners. Longitudinal research designs could also offer a deeper understanding of how these speaking challenges evolve over time and respond to different pedagogical interventions. Moreover, integrating classroom observations or teacher perspectives could provide a more comprehensive view of the teaching-learning dynamic. Investigating the effectiveness of specific instructional strategies—such as peer-assisted speaking tasks, anxiety-reduction techniques, or technology-enhanced language practice—would further contribute to developing evidence-based approaches that address the multifaceted nature of speaking difficulties among EFL learners.

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