

EXPLORING ENGLISH SPEAKING DIFFICULTIES AMONG ENGLISH EDUCATION STUDENTS AT BUMI PERSADA UNIVERSITY: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

Speaking is one of the most important skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, yet many students still encounter difficulties in oral communication. This study aims to investigate the speaking difficulties experienced by English Education students at Bumi Persada University, identify the factors contributing to these difficulties, and explore possible strategies to overcome them. A qualitative descriptive research design was employed involving ten first-semester students selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and questionnaires. The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, including data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings revealed that students experienced several speaking difficulties, including limited vocabulary, inaccurate pronunciation, grammatical problems, low self-confidence, and speaking anxiety. These difficulties were influenced by both linguistic and non-linguistic factors, such as fear of making mistakes, lack of motivation, limited opportunities for speaking practice, teacher-centered instruction, insufficient lecturer feedback, and negative peer evaluation. To address these challenges, students suggested creating a supportive classroom environment, implementing interactive learning activities, increasing opportunities for speaking practice, and providing constructive feedback. The findings indicate that improving students' speaking ability requires not only stronger linguistic competence but also learner-centered teaching practices that foster confidence, motivation, and active participation. This study provides practical insights for English lecturers in designing more effective speaking instruction and contributes to a better understanding of speaking difficulties among Indonesian EFL university students.

Keywords: *Speaking difficulties; English speaking; EFL students; Speaking anxiety; Qualitative study*

INTRODUCTION

English has become the primary language of international communication and plays a significant role in education, business, technology, and professional development. Consequently, developing English communicative competence has become a major objective of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. Among the four language skills, speaking is considered the most challenging because it requires learners to integrate linguistic knowledge, communicative competence, and psychological readiness simultaneously (Brown, 2004; Harmer, 2007). Therefore, improving speaking proficiency remains a central goal of English language teaching.

Despite years of English instruction, many Indonesian EFL learners continue to experience difficulties in speaking English. Previous studies have consistently reported that learners struggle with limited vocabulary, inaccurate pronunciation, grammatical errors, low self-confidence, and speaking anxiety, all of which hinder effective oral communication (Horwitz et al., 1986; Ur, 1996; Nunan, 2003). More recent studies have also shown that inadequate opportunities for authentic communication, teacher-centered instruction, and limited classroom interaction further impede the development of speaking competence (Derakhshan & Fathi, 2023; Alaraj, 2024).

Preliminary observations conducted among first-semester English Education students at Bumi Persada University revealed similar problems. Many students were reluctant to participate in classroom

discussions and presentations, hesitated before expressing their ideas, relied on memorized expressions, and frequently switched to Indonesian. These observations indicate that students' speaking difficulties are influenced not only by linguistic limitations but also by psychological and instructional factors. Previous studies have primarily investigated the types of speaking difficulties experienced by secondary school students or general EFL learners. However, limited research has comprehensively examined the relationship between speaking difficulties, their underlying causes, and possible instructional solutions among English Education students in Aceh, particularly at Bumi Persada University. Addressing this gap is important because identifying these interrelated factors can provide practical implications for improving speaking instruction in higher education. While previous studies have generally focused on identifying the types of speaking difficulties experienced by Indonesian EFL learners, relatively few have examined how linguistic, psychological, and instructional factors interact simultaneously within the context of English Education students in Aceh. By exploring these interconnected factors through a qualitative perspective, this study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of students' speaking difficulties and offer practical implications for designing learner-centered speaking instruction in Indonesian higher education.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the speaking difficulties experienced by English Education students at Bumi Persada University, identify the factors contributing to these difficulties, and explore possible strategies to overcome them. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of effective speaking instruction and provide practical recommendations for lecturers and students in enhancing English oral communication skills.

LITERATURE REVIEW

a. Speaking Skill

Speaking is one of the productive language skills that enables learners to communicate ideas, feelings, and information effectively in real-life situations. Brown (2004) defines speaking as an interactive process of constructing meaning through producing, receiving, and processing information. Similarly, Harmer (2007) argues that successful speaking involves not only linguistic knowledge but also the ability to use language appropriately according to the communicative context.

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, speaking competence requires the integration of several language components, including pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension (Brown, 2004). These components are interrelated and determine learners' communicative competence. Students who possess adequate linguistic knowledge but lack confidence or communicative practice may still experience difficulties in expressing their ideas orally.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emphasizes that speaking instruction should encourage meaningful interaction rather than memorization of language forms (Richards, 2006). Therefore, speaking activities should provide learners with authentic opportunities to negotiate meaning, exchange ideas, and develop communicative competence.

b. Speaking Difficulties in EFL Contexts

Speaking English is widely recognized as one of the most difficult skills for EFL learners. Previous studies have consistently reported that students experience various linguistic and psychological barriers when communicating orally. According to Ur (1996), common speaking problems include inhibition, lack of ideas, low participation, and excessive use of the mother tongue during classroom interaction.

Brown (2004) further explains that speaking difficulties may arise from several aspects, including pronunciation problems, limited vocabulary, grammatical inaccuracies, reduced fluency, and difficulties in maintaining interaction. In addition to linguistic factors, affective factors also play an important role. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) introduced the concept of Foreign Language Anxiety, suggesting that fear of making mistakes, negative evaluation, and communication apprehension significantly reduce learners' willingness to speak English.

Recent studies also indicate that limited exposure to authentic English communication, insufficient classroom interaction, and teacher-centered instruction contribute to students' speaking difficulties (Derakhshan et al., 2021; Zhang, 2023). Consequently, improving speaking ability requires attention to both language competence and learning environment.

c. Factors Influencing Students' Speaking Difficulties

Students' speaking difficulties are generally influenced by linguistic, psychological, and instructional factors. Linguistic factors include inadequate vocabulary, weak grammatical knowledge, incorrect pronunciation, and limited fluency (Brown, 2004). These limitations prevent learners from expressing ideas accurately and confidently.

Psychological factors involve speaking anxiety, fear of making mistakes, low self-confidence, and lack of motivation (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre, 2007). Students who experience anxiety tend to avoid oral participation despite possessing sufficient language knowledge. Instructional factors are equally important. Richards (2006) emphasizes that speaking competence develops through frequent communicative practice. However, when classroom instruction relies primarily on textbook dialogues and teacher-centered activities, students receive limited opportunities to practice spontaneous communication. Therefore, effective speaking instruction should integrate meaningful interaction, collaborative learning, and supportive classroom environments to encourage learners' active participation.

Based on these theoretical perspectives, this study investigates the speaking difficulties experienced by English Education students at Bumi Persada University, the factors contributing to those difficulties, and possible strategies for overcoming them.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to investigate the speaking difficulties experienced by English Education students at Bumi Persada University, the factors contributing to those difficulties, and possible strategies for overcoming them. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it enables researchers to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and opinions in their natural context (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Tracy, 2020).

The participants of this study were ten first-semester students from the English Education Study Program at Bumi Persada University. They were selected using purposive sampling because they met the research criteria and were considered capable of providing rich information related to the research objectives (Lodico et al., 2021). The participants were selected because they were first-semester English Education students who had completed introductory speaking classes and were willing to share their learning experiences. The sample size was considered sufficient because qualitative research prioritizes information richness rather than statistical representativeness, and data saturation was achieved after interviewing the tenth participant. All participants voluntarily participated in this study. Prior to data

collection, informed consent was obtained, and participants' identities were kept confidential. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and a questionnaire consisting of fifteen open-ended and close-ended questions. Classroom observations were conducted during four speaking classes throughout one semester to capture students' natural speaking performance. Observation focused on pronunciation, fluency, classroom participation, interaction and code switching.

Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain in-depth information regarding the students' perceived speaking difficulties and their underlying causes. The questionnaire primarily served as a supplementary qualitative instrument to support triangulation rather than statistical analysis. The questionnaire mainly contained open-ended questions designed to support data triangulation, while several close-ended items were included to identify the frequency of students' perceived speaking difficulties. The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, data triangulation was conducted by comparing the results obtained from observations, interviews, and questionnaires. Each interview lasted approximately 20–30 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' permission before being transcribed for analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

a. Students' Speaking Difficulties

The findings from classroom observations, interviews, and questionnaires consistently revealed that English Education students at Bumi Persada University experienced several difficulties in speaking English. The most frequently reported problems were inaccurate pronunciation, limited vocabulary, grammatical errors, lack of confidence, and fear of making mistakes. During classroom presentations, many students hesitated before speaking, frequently switched to Indonesian, and relied on memorized expressions rather than spontaneous communication. These observations indicate that students still encounter both linguistic and psychological barriers when speaking English.

The interview data further confirmed these findings. Most participants stated that pronunciation and grammar were the most challenging aspects of speaking. One participant commented, *"I am afraid of pronouncing English words incorrectly because my classmates may laugh at me."* Another participant explained that limited vocabulary often prevented them from expressing their ideas fluently. The questionnaire results also supported these findings, indicating that the majority of respondents agreed that grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation remained major obstacles during speaking activities.

Table 1. Students' Speaking Difficulties Identified in the Study

Speaking Difficulties	Frequency (n=10)	Data Sources
Pronunciation problems	9	Observation, Interview
Limited vocabulary	8	Observation, Interview, Questionnaire
Low self-confidence	8	Interview, Observation
Grammar	7	Interview, Questionnaire

Speaking Difficulties	Frequency (n=10)	Data Sources
problems		
Speaking anxiety	9	Interview, Questionnaire

These findings are consistent with Brown (2004), who argues that speaking competence depends on pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. Likewise, Ur (1996) identifies inhibition, limited ideas, and mother-tongue dependence as common speaking problems among EFL learners. These findings are also consistent with Franscy and Ramli (2022), who reported that Indonesian EFL learners commonly experience pronunciation difficulties, limited vocabulary, and grammatical inaccuracies that impede oral communication. Similar to the present study, these linguistic limitations were closely associated with reduced confidence and a lower willingness to participate in classroom speaking activities. The consistency between the two studies indicates that linguistic competence and psychological readiness are mutually reinforcing; inadequate language resources often increase learners' hesitation and communication anxiety, thereby limiting opportunities for meaningful oral interaction. Therefore, the findings suggest that speaking proficiency develops through the interaction of linguistic competence, emotional readiness, and continuous communicative practice, all of which should be addressed simultaneously in EFL instruction.

b. Factors Causing Students' Speaking Difficulties

The findings indicate that students' speaking difficulties were influenced by three major factors: linguistic, psychological, and instructional factors. Linguistic factors included inadequate vocabulary, weak grammatical knowledge, and pronunciation difficulties. These limitations reduced students' ability to communicate their ideas accurately and confidently. Psychological factors were equally dominant. Most participants reported feeling anxious, shy, and afraid of making mistakes when speaking English in front of their classmates. Such anxiety discouraged them from participating actively in classroom discussions. Instructional factors also contributed to students' difficulties. Classroom observations showed that speaking activities were still dominated by textbook exercises and teacher explanations, while opportunities for authentic communication were relatively limited. Several students suggested that more interactive learning activities should be implemented to increase their motivation.

Table 2. Factors Contributing to Students' Speaking Difficulties

Category	Categ	Findings	Supporting Data
Linguistic	Lingu	Vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation	Interview, Questionnaire
Psychological	Psych	Anxiety, fear of mistakes	Interview
Instructional	Instru	Limited speaking practice	Observation

These findings support Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), who explain that foreign language anxiety significantly influences students' oral performance. They also support Richards (2006), who emphasizes that communicative interaction is essential for developing speaking competence. Similar findings were also reported by Abrar et al. (2024), who found that limited vocabulary and speaking anxiety remained the dominant obstacles faced by Indonesian EFL learners. Likewise, Sari et al. (2022) reported that students' lack of confidence reduced classroom participation. Similarly, Fachrunnisa and Nuraeni (2022) reported that Indonesian EFL students frequently encounter classroom speaking interaction problems due to anxiety, limited vocabulary, and fear of making grammatical mistakes. These factors discourage students from actively participating in classroom communication, which corresponds closely with the present findings. The agreement between these studies highlights that speaking difficulties are multidimensional and arise from the interaction of linguistic competence, emotional factors, and classroom learning experiences. Therefore, improving students' speaking performance requires instructional approaches that simultaneously address language proficiency and learners' emotional well-being. Taken together, these findings reinforce the view that effective speaking instruction should address linguistic competence, emotional readiness, and meaningful classroom interaction simultaneously.

c. Strategies to Overcome Students' Speaking Difficulties

Based on the interview results, students suggested several strategies to improve their speaking ability. They expected lecturers to create a supportive classroom atmosphere where mistakes are accepted as part of the learning process. Students also recommended using interactive learning activities such as games, pair work, role plays, group discussions, and speaking presentations to increase participation and confidence.

Furthermore, participants emphasized the importance of constructive feedback from lecturers. Rather than focusing only on grammatical errors, lecturers should encourage students to express their ideas freely before providing corrective feedback. Such an approach may reduce speaking anxiety while promoting communicative confidence. These findings are consistent with recent studies emphasizing the importance of supportive learning environments and positive teacher-student interaction in improving students' speaking performance. Derakhshan and Fathi (2023) argue that teacher immediacy and constructive feedback significantly enhance learners' willingness to communicate and classroom engagement by reducing anxiety and increasing confidence. Likewise, Alaraj (2024) found that interactive instructional strategies, including pair work, role plays, and collaborative speaking activities, effectively help EFL learners overcome speaking difficulties while promoting active participation. Similarly, Utami et al. (2025) reported that providing frequent speaking opportunities in a supportive classroom atmosphere enables English Education students to gradually improve their confidence, fluency, and communicative competence. These findings suggest that improving speaking ability requires not only linguistic development but also pedagogical practices that encourage active participation, reduce anxiety, and create meaningful opportunities for authentic communication. The convergence between the present findings and recent studies indicates that effective speaking instruction should integrate communicative practice, emotional support, and continuous teacher feedback as complementary components rather than treating them as separate instructional strategies.

Table 3. Strategies Suggested by Participants

Strategy	Description	Expected Outcome
Role play	Interactive speaking	Increase fluency
Pair work	Collaborative activities	Reduce anxiety
Constructive feedback	Positive correction	Improve confidence

These findings are consistent with the principles of Communicative Language Teaching proposed by Richards (2006), which emphasize meaningful interaction, authentic communication, and learner participation. Similarly, Nation and Newton (2009) argue that frequent communicative practice in supportive classroom environments enhances students' speaking fluency and confidence. These findings are also in line with Derakhshan and Fathi (2023), who emphasize that positive teacher immediacy and constructive feedback strengthen learners' willingness to communicate and classroom engagement. Likewise, Alaraj (2024) highlights that interactive speaking activities such as role plays and collaborative learning effectively reduce speaking anxiety, while Utami et al. (2025) report that supportive classroom environments and regular speaking practice significantly improve students' confidence and oral communication skills. Therefore, improving students' speaking ability requires not only strengthening linguistic competence but also creating positive learning environments that encourage active oral communication. This study has several limitations. It involved only ten first-semester students from one university, limiting the transferability of the findings. Future studies may involve larger samples and multiple institutions.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the speaking difficulties experienced by English Education students at Bumi Persada University, the factors contributing to those difficulties, and possible strategies to overcome them. The findings revealed that students encountered several major speaking difficulties, including inaccurate pronunciation, limited vocabulary, grammatical problems, lack of confidence, and fear of making mistakes. These difficulties reduced students' willingness to participate actively in English-speaking activities.

The findings further demonstrated that students' speaking difficulties were shaped by the interaction of linguistic, psychological, and instructional factors. Limited language proficiency, speaking anxiety, low self-confidence, insufficient opportunities for authentic communication, and limited corrective feedback from lecturers emerged as the major contributing factors.

To address these challenges, participants recommended creating a more supportive classroom environment, implementing interactive learning activities such as games, role plays, and group discussions, and providing constructive feedback to encourage active participation. These strategies are expected to enhance students' confidence, motivation, and overall speaking performance.

Unlike previous studies that mainly identified the types of speaking difficulties, this study demonstrates that linguistic, psychological, and instructional factors interact simultaneously in shaping

students' speaking performance. This integrated perspective contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of EFL speaking difficulties and provides practical guidance for designing learner-centered speaking instruction in Indonesian higher education, particularly within the context of Aceh.

Despite these contributions, this study involved only ten first-semester students from a single university, limiting the transferability of the findings. Future research is recommended to involve larger and more diverse samples across different higher education institutions and to examine the effectiveness of specific instructional interventions in improving EFL students' speaking proficiency.

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