

STUDENTS' SPEAKING DIFFICULTIES AMONG SECOND-SEMESTER STUDENTS OF THE ENGLISH EDUCATION STUDY PROGRAMME AT NOMMENSEN HKBP UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

This research investigates the speaking difficulties faced by second-semester students of the English Education Research Program at Nommensen HKBP University. Using a descriptive qualitative method, the research identifies the types of difficulties students encounter, the contributing factors, and the proposed solutions. Data were collected through classroom observation and interviews with 10 students. The findings indicate that the main types of speaking difficulties include inhibition, nothing to say, low or uneven participation, and the use of the mother tongue, based on Ur Penny's framework. These issues are influenced by internal factors such as anxiety, lack of vocabulary, low self-confidence, and external factors including teaching methods and classroom environment. The analysis also reveals that students often rely on their native language due to discomfort with English. Solutions suggested include consistent practice, vocabulary enhancement, supportive teacher feedback, and promoting an English-only environment in class. This research is expected to provide useful insights for educators in designing more effective instructional strategies and improving students' communicative competence.

Keywords: Inhibition; Internal Factors; Speaking Difficulties; Speaking English

Abstrak

Penelitian ini menyelidiki kesulitan berbicara yang dihadapi oleh mahasiswa semester kedua Program Penelitian Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris di Universitas Nommensen HKBP. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif, penelitian ini mengidentifikasi jenis kesulitan yang dihadapi mahasiswa, faktor penyebabnya, dan solusi yang diusulkan. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi kelas dan wawancara dengan 10 mahasiswa. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa jenis utama kesulitan berbicara meliputi hambatan, tidak ada yang perlu dikatakan, partisipasi rendah atau tidak merata, dan penggunaan bahasa ibu, berdasarkan kerangka kerja Ur Penny. Masalah-masalah ini dipengaruhi oleh faktor internal seperti kecemasan, kurangnya kosakata, kepercayaan diri yang rendah, dan faktor eksternal termasuk metode pengajaran dan lingkungan kelas. Analisis ini juga mengungkapkan bahwa mahasiswa sering mengandalkan bahasa ibu mereka karena ketidaknyamanan dengan bahasa Inggris. Solusi yang disarankan meliputi latihan yang konsisten, peningkatan kosakata, umpan balik guru yang mendukung, dan mempromosikan lingkungan khusus bahasa Inggris di kelas. Penelitian ini diharapkan dapat memberikan wawasan yang berguna bagi para pendidik dalam merancang strategi pengajaran yang lebih efektif dan meningkatkan kompetensi komunikatif mahasiswa.

Kata Kunci: Hambatan; Faktor Internal; Kesulitan Berbicara; Berbicara Bahasa Inggris

INTRODUCTION

English speaking proficiency is a critical skill for students in English education programs, particularly for those who aim to become educators and professionals in an increasingly globalized world. As one of the core productive skills in language learning, speaking enables learners to express ideas, emotions, and arguments in real time, both in academic and real-life contexts. Mastery of speaking skills is not only fundamental for daily communication but also

significantly contributes to academic success, social interaction, and career advancement. Despite this importance, many students, especially those in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, continue to struggle with speaking fluently and confidently (Antaris & Omolu, 2019).

At the second semester level in the English Education Research Program at Nommensen HKBP University, speaking difficulties are notably prevalent. Observations have shown that students often hesitate or fail to express themselves in English during classroom activities. They frequently revert to using their native language, particularly when presenting or participating in discussions. This practice not only limits their exposure to English but also weakens their overall communicative competence (Dewi, Samsudin, & Nugraha, 2019). Instructors, in turn, tend to switch to Indonesian to ensure student comprehension, further reinforcing this cycle. These practices hinder the development of a fully immersive English-speaking environment, which is crucial for language acquisition (Rokhaniyah, 2019).

Several underlying causes have been identified as contributing to these difficulties. Penny (Herman, Purba, Sinurat, & Saputra, 2022) categorizes common speaking problems into four areas: inhibition, nothing to say, low or uneven participation, and the use of the mother tongue. These challenges stem from both psychological and linguistic factors. Psychological barriers include anxiety, fear of making mistakes, low self-confidence, shyness, and lack of motivation. Linguistic obstacles often involve limited vocabulary, poor grammar, pronunciation issues, and inadequate language input. These findings are supported by studies such as those by Juhana (Wood, Moxley, Tighe, & Wagner, 2018) which highlight the impact of psychological stressors and insufficient language skills on EFL learners' speaking performance.

Moreover, internal and external factors both play significant roles in shaping students' speaking abilities. Internal factors may include physical and psychological conditions such as illness, lack of confidence, anxiety, and low motivation. External influences encompass environmental and social conditions such as classroom atmosphere, teaching tools, peer pressure, and family background. According to Ahmadi (Aldbea, 2024) these factors together impact the students' ability to acquire and effectively use a second language, with emotional and intellectual readiness being essential components of learning success. The urgency of this issue is heightened by the fact that the English Education Research Program includes multiple speaking-based courses such as Interpersonal Speaking, Transactional Speaking, Public Speaking, and Speech and Debate. Despite this curricular emphasis, students in the second semester still exhibit poor speaking skills, indicating a misalignment between course objectives and learning outcomes. Given that the program currently holds a high level of accreditation, it becomes even more essential to ensure that students' speaking competencies reflect the standards expected of such an institution (Efthymiou & Zarifis, 2021).

Against this backdrop, the present research seeks to explore the specific difficulties faced by second-semester students in speaking English, identify the contributing internal and external factors, and examine the strategies students use to cope with these challenges. These insights are critical not only for improving pedagogical approaches but also for supporting institutional efforts to maintain academic excellence and produce graduates with strong communicative skills. Based on the background described, the research is guided by the following problem statements: (1) What are the types of difficulties experienced by second-

semester students in speaking English? (2) What are the internal and external factors contributing to these difficulties? (3) What solutions or strategies do students use to overcome their speaking challenges? (Buana & Ananda, 2022).

Accordingly, the research is designed with three main objectives: (1) to identify and describe the types of speaking difficulties faced by students, (2) to analyze the factors that contribute to these difficulties, and (3) to explore student-applied solutions or strategies that help overcome speaking obstacles. These objectives are interrelated and aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the speaking issues faced by university-level EFL learners. The significance of this research is both theoretical and practical (Jon, alfiani Fitri, & Purnama, 2022). Theoretically, the findings contribute to the literature on EFL speaking difficulties by providing empirical data within the context of higher education in Indonesia. The research supports existing theories related to language anxiety, motivation, and classroom interaction, and it offers new perspectives on how these factors manifest at the university level (Suhaimi, 2018). Practically, the research provides valuable insights for educators, students, and curriculum developers. Teachers can utilize the findings to design more engaging and supportive classroom activities, while students may better understand their own challenges and actively seek improvement. For academic programs, the research offers a foundation for refining course design and evaluation criteria (Simanihuruk, Silalahi, & Sihombing, 2021).

Although this research employs a qualitative descriptive approach, several assumptions or hypotheses can be proposed based on the literature and researcher's observation. First, it is assumed that second-semester students face significant psychological and linguistic barriers that hinder their ability to speak English fluently. Second, internal factors—such as fear of making mistakes, lack of vocabulary, and shyness—are expected to play a more prominent role than external ones. Third, it is assumed that students who engage in interactive speaking tasks, vocabulary-building, and structured speaking practice experience fewer speaking difficulties over time (Houn & Em, 2022). Achieve its aims, the research adopts a qualitative descriptive research design, which is appropriate for understanding real-life phenomena in depth. Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with selected students. Observations were conducted during a Transactional Speaking course to document natural classroom behavior and speaking interactions. Interviews provided insights into students' personal experiences, perceived difficulties, and self-developed strategies for overcoming those challenges (Ismayanti & Kholiq, 2020).

The data were analyzed using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldana model (2014), which involves three key steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. This interactive model allows for a systematic and recursive analysis of qualitative data, ensuring that interpretations are grounded in the evidence collected (Saeed Al-Sobhi & Preece, 2018). Transcripts from observations and interviews were coded and categorized according to emerging themes related to speaking difficulties, causal factors, and solutions. In conclusion, the persistent speaking difficulties faced by students in the English Education Research Program at Nommensen HKBP University highlight the need for a deeper investigation into the barriers hindering effective oral communication (Muliani, Norahmi, & Asi, 2022). This research addresses that need by examining the types of difficulties encountered, the contributing factors,

and the strategies students adopt to overcome them. The findings are expected to contribute meaningfully to the improvement of speaking instruction, the development of supportive learning environments, and the enhancement of English language proficiency among university students

METHOD

This research was conducted at Nommensen HKBP University in Medan, specifically involving second-semester students from the English Education Research Program. The research took place over a two-month period, from February to March 2025, during the Transactional Speaking course. This setting was chosen because it provided an authentic environment to observe and analyze students' English-speaking performance in real academic conditions. The research employed a qualitative descriptive approach. It aimed to provide a detailed and systematic understanding of the speaking difficulties encountered by students (Pérez-Esteban, Carrión-Martínez, & Ortiz Jiménez, 2023). This method is rational, as it is based on established theories in language learning; empirical, as it draws directly from real-world classroom interactions; and systematic, as it follows structured stages of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The research seeks to generate relevant, up-to-date findings that can enhance the understanding of English speaking challenges at the university level (Bigotte de Almeida, Queiruga-Dios, & Cáceres, 2020)..

The research focused on three main objectives: identifying the types of speaking difficulties students face, exploring the internal and external factors influencing those difficulties, and examining the strategies used by students to overcome them. The primary data sources consisted of 20 students purposively selected from a class of 56. The criteria for selection included student willingness and active participation in speaking-related classroom activities. Data collection techniques included classroom observation and semi-structured interviews. Two observation sessions were conducted during regular classroom meetings. The researcher recorded the sessions using a smartphone to ensure accuracy and minimize disruption (Pasaribu, Herman, & Hutahaean, 2020). Observational data focused on how students expressed themselves in English, the frequency of native language use, hesitation, and participation levels. These sessions were transcribed for analysis. In addition to observation, five students were interviewed individually. Interviews aimed to explore students' self-perceived challenges, emotional and psychological experiences, and their personal strategies to manage speaking difficulties. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded to identify emerging themes.

The data analysis followed the interactive model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (Oktorianisarry, Yulitriana, Nova, & Norahmi, 2023), which includes three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. In the reduction phase, transcribed data from observations and interviews were coded and categorized based on the main research questions. These codes were grouped into themes such as psychological barriers, linguistic limitations, and coping strategies. The display phase involved organizing data into thematic matrices for comparison. Finally, conclusions were drawn by interpreting patterns that emerged across participants. To support analysis, basic tools such as a recording device (smartphone), a laptop

for transcription, and printed coding sheets were used. Although no software or mathematical modeling was applied due to the qualitative nature of the research, frequency counts were used to indicate recurring issues such as use of the mother tongue or signs of inhibition (Chaker & Jarraya, 2021).

The research procedures began with preparation, including obtaining permissions, selecting participants, and designing observation and interview instruments. Data collection was conducted in the classroom and through interviews. After transcription and coding, all data were systematically analyzed to produce meaningful conclusions. This methodology was designed to ensure reliability and validity through triangulation of data sources and clear, systematic procedures. It reflects the scientific characteristics of language education research and is expected to offer valuable insights into how speaking difficulties affect university EFL learners and what strategies may be used to address them (Nasution & Sukmawati, 2019).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings based on the data obtained through classroom observations and student interviews, conducted with second-semester students of the English Education Research Program at Nommensen HKBP University. The discussion is organized according to the research questions and interpreted using relevant theoretical frameworks from Penny (1996), Ahmadi (2008), and Harmer (Fatimah, Santiana, & Saputra, 2019).

Types of Speaking Difficulties

The first objective of this research was to identify the types of speaking difficulties experienced by students. Based on classroom observations during speaking sessions, 30 utterances indicating speaking difficulties were analyzed and classified into four categories: inhibition, nothing to say, mother tongue use, and low or uneven participation (Saragih & Gultom, 2022).

Table 1. Frequency Types of Speaking Difficulties

| No | Type of Difficulty | Frequency | Percentage |
|-------|-----------------------------|-----------|------------|
| 1. | Inhibition | 12 | 40% |
| 2 | Nothing to Say | 10 | 33% |
| 3 | Mother Tongue Use | 6 | 20% |
| 4 | Low or Uneven Participation | 2 | 7% |
| Total | | 30 | 100% |

The dominant issue was inhibition, seen in students' hesitation, overuse of fillers (e.g., "uhh," "umm"), and failure to maintain eye contact. This condition often stemmed from low confidence and anxiety, especially when asked to speak without preparation. Nothing to say (33%) was reflected in students' silence during tasks or confusion when formulating responses. Mother tongue use occurred in 20% of cases, when students translated directly from Indonesian or Bataknese into English. Only 7% of the issues involved low or uneven participation, which generally affected quieter students in group work. These findings support Penny's (Riadil, 2020) argument that psychological factors like fear and inhibition are primary

barriers to speaking in foreign language classrooms. They also correspond with Fitri (Nurhalimah, Husna, & Hidayat, 2020) who reported similar types of speaking challenges in an EFL context. Overall, the types of speaking difficulties experienced by students indicate a complex interplay of psychological hesitation, linguistic limitations, and classroom dynamics. These findings suggest that interventions must be multifaceted to effectively address the range of challenges faced by learners. Addressing each type of difficulty requires both pedagogical strategies and psychological support to foster a more inclusive and productive speaking environment.

Contributing Factors to Speaking Difficulties

The second objective was to determine what internal and external factors contributed to these difficulties. Interview data revealed that most challenges stemmed from internal factors, particularly linguistic limitations and psychological issues, with a smaller percentage affected by external classroom conditions.

Table 2. Frequency of Contributing Factors

| No | Factor Type | Sub-Factor | Frequency | Percentage |
|-------|--------------------------|------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| 1. | Internal – Linguistic | Limited Vocabulary | 3 | 37.5% |
| 2 | Internal – Psychological | Anxiety or Fear of Mistakes | 2 | 25% |
| 3 | Internal – Cognitive | Poor Speaking Skills | 1 | 12.5% |
| 4 | External – Social | Peer Pressure | 1 | 12.5% |
| 5 | External – Classroom | Lack of English Use in Class | 1 | 12.5% |
| Total | | | 8 | 100% |

Most students reported that limited vocabulary (37.5%) was a major barrier, affecting fluency and confidence. Anxiety (25%) was also common, often related to fear of making grammatical errors. These psychological blocks made them reluctant to participate orally. External factors such as peer pressure and lack of English immersion in the classroom were mentioned by some students, though less frequently. These findings affirm Ahmadi's (Houn & Em, 2022) framework, which identifies internal barriers as more influential than external ones in foreign language acquisition.

Strategies to Overcome Speaking Difficulties

The third objective was to identify student strategies to cope with these difficulties. The interviews revealed four primary strategies that students employed independently or through classroom activities.

Table 3. Student Strategies to Overcome Difficulties

| No | Strategy Type | Frequency | Percentage |
|----|-----------------------------|-----------|------------|
| 1. | Preparation Before Speaking | 4 | 33.3% |
| 2 | Teacher-Required Speaking | 4 | 33.3% |
| 3 | Repetition and Practice | 2 | 16.7% |
| 4 | Group Discussion | 2 | 16.7% |
| | Total | 12 | 100% |

Students reported that preparing before speaking (33.3%) helped reduce anxiety and improve word recall. They also benefitted from mandatory English use during class activities, which pushed them to overcome hesitation. Less common but still helpful were repetition and memorization practices, as well as group discussions that provided peer support and reduced fear of mistakes. These strategies align with Harmer's (Putri & Refnaldi, 2020) recommendation for structured and repetitive speaking activities, as well as Hosni's (Fidriani, Entika Fani Prastikawa, & AB Prabowo Kusumo Adi, 2021) findings that peer collaboration can reduce psychological stress in speaking tasks.

Interpretation and Implications

The findings clearly answer all three research questions:

1. The main types of speaking difficulties are inhibition, lack of ideas, native language reliance, and uneven participation.
2. The most significant contributing factors are internal, especially limited vocabulary and speaking anxiety, though classroom dynamics and peer influence also play a role.
3. Students apply strategies such as preparation, forced participation, repetition, and group discussions to improve their speaking skills.

These results suggest that EFL speaking instruction at the tertiary level should address both linguistic and psychological readiness (Saeed Al-Sobhi & Preece, 2018). Teachers are encouraged to integrate vocabulary-building exercises, supportive group tasks, and positive error-tolerant environments to reduce inhibition and foster student confidence (Khansir, Dehkordi, & Mirzaei, 2021). Enforcing English use in class while offering preparatory and scaffolding activities may further enhance oral fluency

CONCLUSION

This research investigates the speaking difficulties experienced by second-semester students of the English Education Research Program at Nommensen HKBP University. Using a descriptive qualitative method, the researcher collected data through classroom observations and interviews with 20 students. The research aimed to identify the types of difficulties encountered, analyze the contributing factors, and explore possible strategies to overcome these challenges. Based on Penny Ur's theoretical framework (1996), the findings indicate that students face four dominant issues in speaking English: inhibition, nothing to say, low or uneven participation, and reliance on their mother tongue. These challenges are caused by both internal

and external factors. Internal factors include psychological barriers such as fear of making mistakes, shyness, anxiety, lack of motivation, poor pronunciation, and limited vocabulary. External factors involve the classroom environment, teaching methods, lack of exposure to English, and minimal encouragement from lecturers to use English during classroom activities.

The research revealed that students often resort to speaking in their native language during presentations and discussions due to fear of judgment and insufficient vocabulary. Moreover, the absence of consistent English usage by lecturers contributes to students' low confidence and participation. To address these issues, the students proposed solutions such as increasing speaking practice, enriching vocabulary, engaging in small group discussions, and receiving encouragement to reduce mother tongue usage. The researcher recommends that English lecturers apply more supportive teaching strategies, including maximizing student talk time, fostering a safe learning environment, and modeling effective English usage. Additionally, the research underscores the importance of aligning classroom instruction with students' speaking needs, particularly in courses such as Interpersonal Speaking, Public Speaking, and Debate. The results of this research contribute to improving speaking instruction within English education programs, offering insights for curriculum designers, educators, and future researchers. Ultimately, strengthening speaking skills among students not only enhances academic performance but also prepares them for professional communication demands in real-world contexts

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