

## Speaking Difficulties in EFL Learners: A Descriptive Study of Linguistic and Psychological Issues

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### ABSTRACT

Speaking is one of the most essential yet challenging skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. This study aims to identify speaking difficulties experienced by EFL learners, focusing on linguistic, psychological, and learning-related issues. A quantitative descriptive research design was employed in this study. The participants were 16 undergraduate students from an English Department at a private university in Indonesia. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of 12 closed-ended items and analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages. The findings reveal that students experienced various speaking difficulties, with linguistic problems emerging as the most dominant factors. Vocabulary limitation was identified as the primary issue, reported by all participants, followed by difficulties in distinguishing similar sounds, sentence construction, forming expressions, comprehension, pronunciation, and intonation. In addition, psychological factors were also reported as barriers to students' speaking performance. Fear of making mistakes and lack of confidence were among the most prominent psychological issues, while anxiety and shyness were reported at lower levels. Furthermore, lack of motivation was found as an important learning-related factor affecting students' engagement in speaking activities. This study concludes that speaking difficulties in EFL learners are multifaceted, involving linguistic competence, psychological conditions, and learning-related factors. The findings suggest that effective speaking instruction should address both language proficiency and learners' affective needs to enhance speaking performance.

**Keywords** : Difficulties, EFL Learner, Linguistic, Psychological Issue, Speaking

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### INTRODUCTION

Speaking is widely regarded as one of the most essential yet complex skills in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Among the four fundamental language skills namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing, speaking plays a central role in enabling learners to communicate meaning effectively in real-life situations. Unlike receptive skills, speaking requires learners to actively produce language in real time, which involves not only linguistic competence but also cognitive processing and psychological readiness. As a result, many EFL learners encounter significant challenges in developing their speaking ability, even after years of formal instruction.

The complexity of speaking lies in its multidimensional nature. To speak effectively, learners must integrate several linguistic components, including vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and fluency. Vocabulary, for instance, is a fundamental element that determines learners' ability to express ideas. Without sufficient lexical resources, learners often struggle to convey meaning accurately and may experience frequent pauses or hesitation during communication. Nation (2011) argues that vocabulary knowledge is central to language use because it directly affects learners' ability to produce and comprehend spoken language. Similarly, grammar plays an important role in structuring meaningful sentences, while pronunciation ensures that speech is intelligible to listeners. Derwing and Munro (2015) emphasize that intelligibility, rather than native-like pronunciation, is the primary goal in spoken communication, highlighting the importance of clear articulation in EFL contexts.

Despite the importance of linguistic competence, many EFL learners continue to face difficulties in mastering these components. Previous studies have consistently reported that learners often have limited vocabulary, make grammatical errors, and struggle with pronunciation, which collectively hinder their speaking performance. These difficulties are particularly evident in EFL environments where exposure to English is limited, and opportunities for authentic communication are scarce. As a consequence, learners may lack confidence in their ability to speak, leading to reduced participation in classroom activities.

In addition to linguistic challenges, psychological factors have been identified as major contributors to speaking difficulties. One of the most extensively studied constructs in this area is foreign language anxiety. Horwitz, (Horwitz et al., 1986) introduced the concept of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA), which refers to a distinct type of anxiety associated with language learning contexts. This anxiety manifests in feelings of tension, apprehension, and fear of negative evaluation, particularly during speaking activities. Learners who experience high levels of anxiety are more likely to avoid speaking tasks and may exhibit lower levels of performance.

Subsequent research has further confirmed the significant impact of anxiety on language learning. Kondo & Ying-Ling (2004) argue that anxiety can interfere with cognitive processing, thereby reducing learners' ability to retrieve and use linguistic knowledge effectively. Similarly, (Dewaele & Macintyre, 2014) found that negative emotions such as anxiety can hinder learners' willingness to communicate, while positive emotions such as enjoyment can enhance engagement in language learning. These findings suggest that psychological factors are closely intertwined with linguistic competence and play a crucial role in shaping learners' speaking ability.

Another important psychological factor is self-confidence. Learners with low self-confidence often hesitate to speak due to fear of making mistakes or being judged by others. This fear is commonly associated with negative evaluation from peers or teachers, which can create a stressful learning environment. Cahya & Churnia (2026) found that many EFL learners experience anxiety when speaking in front of others, particularly in formal classroom settings. Similarly, Sukmawati et al. (2026) reported that students with higher levels of anxiety tend to have lower speaking proficiency and are less willing to participate in oral communication activities.

Shyness and fear of making mistakes are also significant barriers to speaking. These factors often discourage learners from practicing speaking, which is essential for developing fluency. In many EFL contexts, students are reluctant to speak because they are afraid of being laughed at or criticized. This phenomenon is particularly common in environments where mistakes are perceived negatively rather than as part of the learning process. Consequently, learners may prefer to remain silent rather than risk making errors, which ultimately limits their opportunities for improvement.

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In addition to psychological factors, learning-related aspects such as motivation and exposure also influence speaking performance. Motivation is a key determinant of language learning success, as it drives learners to engage in practice and persist in overcoming difficulties. Learners with high motivation are more likely to take risks, participate in speaking activities, and seek opportunities to improve their skills. Conversely, learners with low motivation may show limited engagement and avoid challenging tasks. According to Dörnyei & Ushioda (2013) motivation is a dynamic factor that significantly affects learners' effort and achievement in language learning.

Furthermore, limited exposure to English in EFL contexts presents an additional challenge. Unlike learners in English-speaking countries, EFL learners often rely solely on classroom instruction for language input. This lack of exposure reduces opportunities for meaningful interaction and practice, which are essential for developing speaking proficiency. As a result, learners may struggle to transfer their linguistic knowledge into actual communication.

Although a considerable number of studies have investigated speaking difficulties in EFL contexts, many of them tend to focus on either linguistic or psychological factors in isolation. There is still a need for research that provides a comprehensive analysis of both aspects within a single framework. Such an approach is important because speaking difficulties are inherently multifaceted and cannot be fully understood without considering the interaction between linguistic competence and psychological conditions.

Moreover, previous studies have often employed qualitative approaches, which, while insightful, may lack generalizability. Therefore, there is a growing need for quantitative studies that can provide measurable and generalizable findings regarding speaking difficulties. A quantitative descriptive approach allows researchers to identify patterns and trends in learners' difficulties, offering empirical evidence that can inform pedagogical practices.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to identify speaking difficulties experienced by EFL learners by focusing on linguistic and psychological issues. By employing a quantitative descriptive design, this study seeks to examine the extent to which these difficulties are experienced by learners and to provide a clearer understanding of the dominant challenges in EFL speaking. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the existing literature on EFL speaking difficulties and provide practical implications for teachers in designing more effective speaking instruction. This study provides a contextual mapping of speaking difficulties in a small-scale Indonesian EFL setting using a purely quantitative descriptive approach, contributing to localized pedagogical understanding.

## **METHODS**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a quantitative descriptive research design to identify and describe speaking difficulties experienced by EFL learners. A descriptive approach was chosen because the study aimed to present factual data regarding students' difficulties without testing causal relationships between variables. Quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire and analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages. This design allows a systematic description of learners' speaking problems based on measurable data.

### **Participants**

The participants were 16 undergraduate students enrolled in an English Department at a private university in Indonesia. The participants were selected using total sampling, as all students in the targeted class were included in the study. These students were considered appropriate because they

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had taken several speaking-related courses and were expected to have experienced various challenges in speaking English.

### **Research Instrument**

The primary instrument used in this study was a questionnaire designed to identify students' speaking difficulties. The questionnaire consisted of 12 items in the form of closed-ended (Yes/No) questions. The items were developed based on established theoretical frameworks of speaking difficulties, with a particular focus on two main aspects, namely linguistic and psychological factors.

The linguistic aspect included several components such as vocabulary limitation, pronunciation difficulties, grammatical issues, as well as problems related to fluency and comprehension. These components were selected because they represent the fundamental elements required for effective oral communication in EFL contexts.

In addition, the psychological aspect encompassed factors such as anxiety, lack of confidence, fear of making mistakes, shyness, and motivation. These factors were considered important as they may influence students' willingness to participate in speaking activities and their overall speaking performance. Through these two dimensions, the questionnaire aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the various difficulties experienced by students in learning to speak English.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

The data were collected by administering the questionnaire directly to the participants. Before distributing the questionnaire, the researcher explained the purpose of the study and ensured that all participants understood the instructions clearly. The participants were asked to respond to each item honestly based on their actual experiences in learning speaking. The questionnaire was completed in one session, and all responses were collected immediately after completion to ensure data accuracy and completeness.

### **Data Analysis**

The data obtained from the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistical analysis. The responses were calculated in terms of frequency and percentage to determine the proportion of students experiencing each type of speaking difficulty.

The data were then categorized into three main groups namely Linguistic problems, psychological problems, Learning-related factors.

This categorization aimed to provide a clearer understanding of the dominant types of speaking difficulties experienced by students. The results were presented in tabular form and further interpreted descriptively to explain the patterns and trends observed in the data.

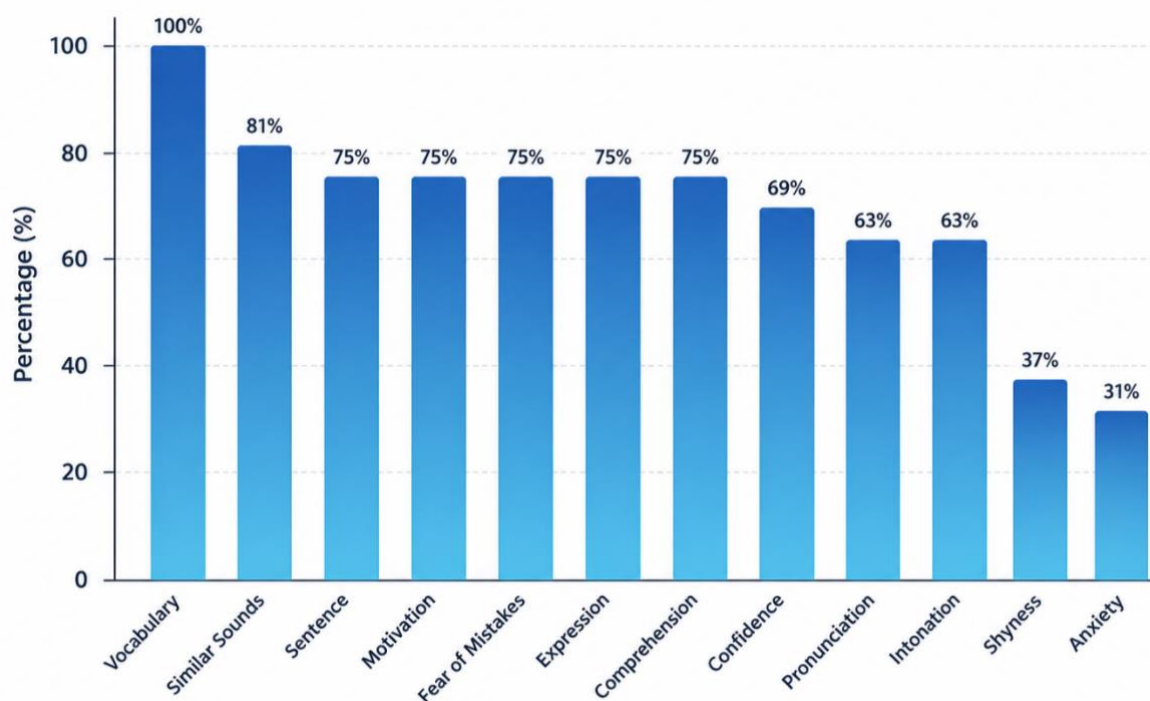
### **Ethical Considerations**

All participants voluntarily participated in this study. They were informed about the purpose of the research and assured that their responses would be kept confidential and used only for academic purposes. No personal identifying information was disclosed in the study to ensure participants' privacy.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Results

The results of this study were obtained from a questionnaire consisting of 12 items administered to 16 EFL learners. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequency and percentage. The findings reveal that students experience various speaking difficulties. The distribution of students' speaking difficulties is presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Students' Speaking Difficulties Based on Questionnaire Results

As shown in Figure 1, vocabulary limitation is the most dominant difficulty (100%), followed by difficulty in distinguishing similar sounds (81%). Several aspects such as expression formation, sentence construction, comprehension, fear of making mistakes, and lack of motivation also show high percentages (75%). Meanwhile, lack of confidence (69%) and pronunciation-related issues (63%) are moderately reported. In contrast, anxiety (31%) and shyness (37%) are the least reported difficulties among students. These findings indicate that students' speaking difficulties vary across different aspects, with linguistic problems appearing more prominent than psychological ones.

### 1. Linguistic Problems

The findings indicate that linguistic problems are the most dominant difficulties experienced by students. As shown in the questionnaire results, all students (100%) reported that lack of vocabulary is a major problem in learning speaking. This suggests that insufficient lexical knowledge significantly limits students' ability to express their ideas effectively.

In addition, a considerable number of students reported difficulties related to pronunciation and phonological awareness. About 63% of students agreed that incorrect pronunciation is one of the problems encountered in speaking. Furthermore, 81% of students indicated that they have difficulty distinguishing words with similar pronunciation, which may lead to misunderstanding in communication.

Grammatical and structural issues also emerged as important challenges. Approximately 75% of students stated that they have difficulty forming correct expressions in English and composing

sentences during conversations. Similarly, 75% of students reported problems in understanding spoken language, which indicates that comprehension difficulties also contribute to speaking problems.

Moreover, 63% of students admitted that they are unable to imitate native-like features such as intonation, stress, and rhythm. This finding highlights that prosodic features of speech remain a challenge for many learners.

Overall, these results demonstrate that students still struggle with fundamental linguistic components, including vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and fluency, which are essential for effective spoken communication.

## **2. Psychological Problems**

In addition to linguistic difficulties, psychological factors were also found to significantly influence students' speaking performance. The results show that 69% of students reported lack of confidence as one of the major problems in speaking. This indicates that many students feel insecure when expressing their ideas in English.

Furthermore, 75% of students agreed that fear of making mistakes contributes to their speaking difficulties. This fear may prevent students from participating actively in speaking activities, as they tend to avoid situations where they might make errors.

Interestingly, only 31% of students reported anxiety as a problem, while 69% indicated that they do not experience anxiety. Similarly, 37% of students reported shyness as a contributing factor, whereas 63% did not consider it a major issue. These findings suggest that although psychological factors are present, not all students experience them at the same level.

Nevertheless, fear of making mistakes and lack of confidence remain the most prominent psychological barriers that hinder students' speaking performance.

## **3. Learning-Related Factors**

The findings also reveal that learning-related factors contribute to speaking difficulties. A total of 75% of students reported that lack of motivation is one of the problems encountered in learning speaking. This suggests that students' engagement and willingness to practice speaking may influence their performance.

In addition, although not explicitly measured in the questionnaire, the data imply that limited exposure to English and lack of practice may also contribute to students' speaking difficulties. Students who rarely use English in daily communication may find it difficult to develop fluency and confidence.

Overall, the results indicate that speaking difficulties among EFL learners are influenced by multiple factors. Linguistic problems, particularly lack of vocabulary, are the most dominant challenges. Psychological factors, especially fear of making mistakes and lack of confidence, also play a significant role. In addition, lack of motivation further contributes to students' difficulties in speaking.

These findings highlight that speaking difficulties are multifaceted and require comprehensive strategies that address both linguistic competence and psychological readiness.

## **Discussion**

### **1. Linguistic Challenges in EFL Speaking**

The results of this study show that linguistic issues, especially vocabulary limitation were the most frequently reported speaking difficulty (100%). This aligns with research showing that limited vocabulary constrains learners' ability to construct coherent utterances and choose appropriate words in communicative contexts (Abrar et al., 2024). Vocabulary knowledge is crucial for speaking proficiency because it supports lexical access and fluency (Hartini & Suri Ardini, 2024).

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In addition, pronunciation and phonological issues were frequently reported, especially difficulty in distinguishing similar sounds (81%) and producing accurate phonetic forms (63%). Adara & Rahmanto (2025) argue that intelligibility is a central component of spoken language competence, and limited phonological awareness hinders clarity in communication. Recent research further suggests that phonological perception and production difficulties remain prevalent among EFL learners due to limited exposure and practice opportunities (Aprilianto et al., 2023; Wariyati et al., 2025).

Furthermore, grammatical and structural challenges reported in this study (75% for sentence construction and expression formation) support the view that morphosyntactic competence plays a key role in developing communicative ability (Ellis, 2004). These findings resonate with contemporary studies showing that learners with stronger grammatical and lexical skills tend to demonstrate higher speaking performance (Masrul & Erliana, 2024; Wariyati et al., 2025).

## **2. Psychological Barriers: Anxiety, Confidence, and Affective Factors**

Psychological barriers such as fear of making mistakes (75%) and lack of confidence (69%) were prominent in this study. The affective filter hypothesis Wang et al. (2024) suggests that negative emotional states like anxiety can block language intake and production. This is supported by recent findings showing that foreign language speaking anxiety is associated with fear of judgment and low self-efficacy (Dewaele & Macintyre, 2014; Horwitz et al., 1986).

Contemporary studies confirm that anxiety negatively correlates with learners' willingness to communicate (Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004). More specifically, research in the past three years reports that speaking anxiety decreases oral participation and increases hesitation among EFL learners (Paraguas, 2025). These studies indicate that affective factors remain significant barriers in both classroom and online speaking environments (Sukmawati et al., 2026).

Although anxiety (31%) and shyness (37%) were less frequently reported than fear of mistakes or lack of confidence, they nonetheless reflect the affective dimension of speaking. Individual differences in affective traits, such as introversion or trait anxiety can shape learners' participation patterns (Chandra Agustin & Dewanti Laksmi, 2021).

## **3. Motivation and Learning-Related Factors**

The result showing that lack of motivation was reported by 75% of participants indicates that motivation is critical for speaking engagement. According to Dörnyei & Ushioda (2013), learners with strong motivation are more likely to persevere and practice speaking. Recent research supports this, showing that high motivation correlates with frequent oral participation and better speaking performance (Adara & Rahmanto, 2025; Fauzan et al., 2024).

Limited exposure to English outside the classroom was not directly measured in this study, but research suggests that learners with richer exposure to comprehensible input and output opportunities through media, community interaction, or immersion programs tend to develop better speaking skills (Baharman et al., 2026; Horwitz et al., 1986). Therefore, future research should explicitly measure contextual exposure as a variable impacting speaking competence.

## **4. Interplay Between Linguistic and Affective Factors**

The descriptive association between linguistic problems and psychological barriers suggests that learners with stronger lexical and grammatical knowledge may feel more confident and less anxious in speaking tasks. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978) asserts that social interaction and confidence development are mutually reinforcing. Supporting this, recent studies find that learners with higher self-efficacy tend to take risks in speaking, which in turn accelerates skill improvement (Wintang Widodo et al., 2024).

## 5. Pedagogical and Contextual Implications

These findings suggest that speaking instruction should not only focus on developing linguistic competence but also on enhancing learners' affective readiness. From a competence perspective, focused vocabulary instruction delivered through thematic and task-based activities can significantly improve lexical retrieval and fluency in speech production (Nation, 2011). This indicates that vocabulary learning is more effective when embedded in meaningful communicative contexts rather than being taught in isolation.

In addition, pronunciation training and the development of phonological awareness, when integrated into interactive speaking tasks, contribute to improved intelligibility in learners' spoken output (Wang et al., 2024). This highlights the importance of connecting form-focused instruction with real communicative practice to ensure clearer and more comprehensible speech.

On the affective dimension, supportive teaching strategies such as providing positive feedback on errors, encouraging peer collaboration, and designing low-anxiety speaking activities can effectively reduce learners' speaking anxiety while fostering confidence (Horwitz et al., 1986; Irvine, 2020). Such emotional support plays a crucial role in creating a safe learning environment where students feel more willing to take risks in speaking.

Furthermore, motivation-enhancing strategies, including setting personalized learning goals, designing real-world task-based activities, and offering authentic communication opportunities, can increase learners' engagement and active participation (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013). Overall, these findings emphasize that effective speaking instruction requires a balanced integration of cognitive-linguistic development and affective support to optimize learners' speaking performance.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to identify speaking difficulties experienced by EFL learners from linguistic, psychological, and learning-related perspectives using a quantitative descriptive approach. The findings show that students face multiple speaking challenges, with linguistic problems, particularly vocabulary limitation, being the most frequently reported. Pronunciation, grammatical competence, sentence construction, and comprehension were also identified as barriers, highlighting ongoing challenges in foundational language components. Psychological factors such as fear of making mistakes and lack of confidence were also observed, while anxiety and shyness were less frequently reported. Learning-related factors, particularly lack of motivation, were found to influence students' engagement in speaking activities, and although limited exposure to English outside the classroom was not directly measured, it may have affected opportunities for practice and fluency development.

Pedagogically, the findings suggest that EFL instruction should adopt an integrated approach that addresses all aspects of speaking development in a cohesive manner. Instruction should focus on strengthening learners' vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammatical skills while simultaneously fostering a supportive classroom environment that reduces fear, enhances confidence, and encourages risk-taking. In addition, teachers should provide opportunities and activities that sustain motivation and enable meaningful practice, allowing learners to gradually apply their linguistic knowledge in real communicative contexts.

Despite these insights, the study has several limitations. The research relied on a small sample of 16 participants, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Data were collected through self-reported questionnaires, which can be influenced by individual perception and response bias. Some relevant factors, such as exposure to English outside the classroom, classroom interaction patterns, and instructional strategies, were not directly measured, and their potential impact on speaking

performance remains unexplored. Future research is recommended to employ larger sample sizes and mixed-methods or longitudinal designs to gain deeper insights into how linguistic competence, psychological readiness, and environmental factors interact to shape EFL learners' speaking abilities.

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