

STRUGGLING TO SPEAK: A CASE STUDY OF STUDENTS' BARRIERS IN ENGLISH PUBLIC SPEAKING

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Abstract

This study investigates the challenges students face in developing their English public speaking skills and identifies the factors that influence their performance. Using a descriptive qualitative approach and a case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations involving third-semester students of the English Education Study Program. The data were analyzed using an inductive approach through Miles and Huberman's interactive model. The findings reveal four major categories of challenges. Preparation-related difficulties emerged as students often lacked adequate rehearsal, resulting in disorganized delivery and low confidence. Linguistic barriers, including limited vocabulary, grammatical inaccuracy, pronunciation problems, and disrupted fluency, further affected their ability to express ideas clearly. Psychological factors such as anxiety, shyness, and fear of negative evaluation also played a crucial role in hindering performance. Additionally, environmental and social constraints, such as limited speaking opportunities and insufficient support from peers and lecturers, restricted students' development of speaking competence. Overall, the study highlights that students' public speaking challenges are multidimensional. It emphasizes the need for comprehensive instructional support that integrates preparation strategies, linguistic development, confidence-building techniques, and increased speaking practice.

Keywords: Students' Challenges, English Speaking Skill, Public Speaking Anxiety, Linguistic Barrier, Qualitative Study

INTRODUCTION

English holds a strategic position as an international language widely used in various fields of life. As a means of global communication, it serves as a link between individuals from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, facilitating the exchange of information, ideas, and collaboration between countries (Widiyanarti et al., 2024). According to Afrida (2021), research in education, English is often used as the language of instruction, especially at the higher education level, and is the key to accessing international scientific literature. In addition, mastery of English opens greater career opportunities, given the number of multinational companies and international organizations that require this ability as one of the main qualifications. Thus, English not only serves as a communication tool but also as an important instrument to increase mobility in social, academic, and professional fields at the global level.

The importance of learning English in countries where it is a second language continues to increase along with the dynamics of globalization, which demands adaptability in various sectors (Susyanto, 2022). In the world of education, English is often used as a medium of instruction for several subjects, especially at the tertiary

level, and is one of the main prerequisites for accessing various international academic resources. This contributes significantly to improving the quality of education and broadening students' horizons to global knowledge (Untari, 2024). On the other hand, in the context of development, mastery of English enables people to actively engage in global economic activities, such as international trade, tourism, and collaboration between countries (Sitakar et al., 2024). Therefore, English language proficiency is an important element for individuals and countries to increase competitiveness and strengthen their position in global competition (Sahnan, 2024).

Difficulty speaking in public in English is a significant challenge for learners, especially in non-native environments (Rafsanjani et al., 2022). This obstacle arises from linguistic aspects such as limited vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and fluency, which affect the clarity of message delivery (Patawari, 2020). Psychological factors, including anxiety, nervousness, and fear, are considered negative and exacerbate students' abilities in formal situations (Revianti & Anggoro, 2022). In addition, socio-cultural norms and gender roles can affect students' courage to speak in public. The lack of practice opportunities also makes it difficult for public speaking skills to develop optimally. Therefore, a supportive learning environment and adequate practice opportunities are needed so that students can improve their confidence and public speaking skills in English (Mardiana & Ahmad, 2021).

Students learning English as a second language often face a variety of major obstacles that can hinder the development of their speaking skills (Aini, 2021). One significant obstacle is the lack of an environment that supports the practice of actively using English (Agus, 2023). In the studies, Lima et al. (2025) and de Mello Avelino et al. (2024) in many cases, students only use English in class, while outside of class, their environment is dominated by the use of their native language, so opportunities to practice speaking are very limited. In addition, limited vocabulary is often an inhibiting factor that makes it difficult for students to convey ideas clearly and effectively. This deficiency also reduces their ability to respond to diverse communication situations with flexibility (Smith et al., 2018). Psychological factors, such as a lack of self-confidence, are also a significant obstacle. Many students feel afraid of making mistakes or worry about being negatively judged by listeners, which in turn reduces their motivation to speak actively (Al Fahmi et al., 2025).

Rachmawati (2025) revealed in her research that many challenges are faced by English language learners in improving their speaking skills. One of the main obstacles identified is the lack of an environment that supports the practice of actively speaking English, especially in areas where the use of English in daily life is very limited. Alfin and Pangastuti (2020) show that a lack of vocabulary and difficulty in pronouncing words correctly are often factors that hinder speaking fluency. In addition, psychological aspects, such as fear of making mistakes, low levels of self-confidence, and anxiety when speaking in public, are also often cited as significant inhibitors (Purnamasari, 2020).

Identification of research gaps regarding barriers to English public speaking among students shows that studies integrating psychological, linguistic, and pedagogical factors are still very limited. Psychological barriers such as anxiety, low self-confidence, and fear of negative judgment have been shown to reduce student engagement in speaking activities (Aprilia & Santoso, 2024). From a linguistic perspective, pronunciation errors, grammar mistakes, and limited vocabulary are major obstacles to effective communication (Noori & Asir, 2024). Pedagogical factors such as teaching methods that lack communication skills and a lack of opportunities to practice in real contexts also slow down the development of speaking skills (Camaño López et al., 2025). However, longitudinal studies assessing the long-term effectiveness of learning interventions are still rare. Therefore, further research needs to develop more comprehensive and innovative learning programs to continuously improve students' public speaking skills.

This study aims to provide a clear understanding of the specific challenges students face in developing their English speaking skills, particularly in the context of public speaking. The research focuses on examining difficulties related to students' preparation, such as inadequate readiness that affects their confidence; linguistic barriers, including limited vocabulary, grammatical concerns, pronunciation problems, and disrupted fluency; psychological factors such as anxiety, shyness, and fear of negative evaluation; as well as environmental constraints, including limited opportunities to practice and insufficient support from peers and lecturers. By concentrating on these key areas, each of which emerged strongly in the findings, the study seeks to explain the main factors that influence students' speaking performance and to formulate more targeted strategies for improving their competence.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach with a case study method to describe in depth the various obstacles experienced by students in learning English, particularly in speaking skills. The research focused on third-semester students of the English Education Study Program at the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Muhammadiyah University Mataram, involving 15 participants selected through purposive sampling based on the criteria of actively participating in speaking classes, having public speaking experience in an academic context, and being willing to participate in the research. This study has obtained approval from the study program, and all participants signed an informed consent form as a form of compliance with research ethics. Data were collected through direct observation and semi-structured interviews to obtain a comprehensive picture of the internal and external obstacles faced by students. Furthermore, the data were analyzed using inductive analysis techniques by applying a gradual coding process (open, axial, and selective coding) to identify the main themes related to speaking barriers. Data validity was maintained through source triangulation, member checking, and audit trails to ensure the credibility and

traceability of the analysis process. With this procedure, the study is expected to produce valid and scientifically accountable findings.

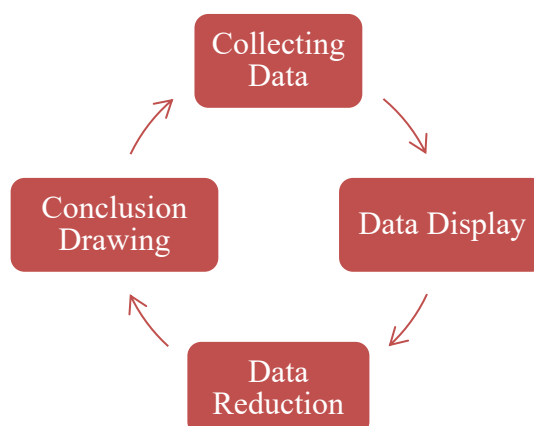


Figure 1. Components of Miles and Huberman's data analysis

The research involved observations conducted in the classroom environment and in informal learning activities to directly observe situations related to students' ability to speak English. Interviews were conducted using a list of open-ended questions to explore the experiences, challenges, and strategies applied by students in speaking English. The open-ended question format was chosen because it allows participants to answer in more detail so that the answers can authentically reflect their views, experiences, and feelings. Interviews can provide deeper insights into the various aspects influencing students' English speaking ability. Data analysis in this study began with a verbatim transcription of all interviews and audio recordings obtained from observations. This step ensures that all participants' information is documented entirely and accurately.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Based on the research findings obtained through interviews and observations, several obstacles and challenges faced in learning public speaking in the third-semester English Education study program at the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Muhammadiyah Mataram, were identified. The results showed that students in public speaking activities faced various challenges.

Table 1. Categories of Student Barriers in English Public Speaking

No	Theme	Sub-Findings	Description of Obstacles
1.	Preparation-Related Challenges	Lack of material planning	Students have difficulty structuring ideas and organizing the content of speeches.

		Poor preparation of time management	Preparations were made close to the presentation day, so the results were not optimal.
		Inability to practice independently	Students rarely practice at home due to a lack of practice strategies.
2.	Linguistic Barriers	Limited vocabulary	Penguasaan vocabulary terbatas, menghambat kelancaran penyampaian pesan.
		grammatical errors	The sentence structure is inconsistent, which affects clarity.
		Inaccurate pronunciation	Pronunciation errors affect audience comprehension.
3.	Psychological Factors	Feelings of anxiety and nervousness	High anxiety arises when speaking in front of the class.
		Low self-confidence	Not confident in English language skills.
		Afraid of being judged negatively	Fear of being ridiculed or criticized by peers.
4.	Environmental / Social Support Constraints	Minimal environmental support	Lack of motivation or support from peers and family.
		Limited practical opportunities	The campus environment rarely provides public speaking practice spaces.
		Limitations in learning facilities	The media and practice space do not support interactive speaking activities.

Based on Table 1, the results of interviews and observations identified four main categories of obstacles for students in learning public speaking, namely Preparation-Related Challenges, Linguistic Barriers, Psychological Factors, and Environmental/Social Support Constraints. Students still experience difficulties in adequately preparing speeches, including material preparation and independent practice. From a linguistic perspective, limited vocabulary, poor pronunciation, and

grammatical errors hinder fluency. Psychological factors such as anxiety and low self-confidence also affect students' performance in public. In addition, limited environmental support, opportunities for authentic practice, and learning feedback further hinder the process of developing speaking skills. These findings indicate that public speaking obstacles are multidimensional, requiring more integrated pedagogical interventions.

Preparation-related Challenges

The findings of this study indicate that inadequate preparation is one of the most dominant factors influencing students' English public speaking performance. Many students reported feeling unprepared when facing speaking tasks, which affected their ability to organize ideas and maintain fluency. The lack of structured rehearsal also contributed to difficulties in retaining information and delivering material coherently. This condition shows that preparation is not only a technical requirement but also a psychological foundation that affects confidence and performance stability.

Interview data further support this issue. Several participants admitted that they frequently delayed their preparation or did not allocate sufficient time to review the material. Students described,

"I often feel very nervous before presentations because I do not have the opportunity to study the material in depth" (Student 1).

"I often postpone my preparation and end up relying on improvisation, which makes me even more nervous" (Student 2).

These statements demonstrate that procrastination, insufficient study time, and lack of familiarity with the topic contribute to high anxiety, limited idea organization, and reduced clarity in speaking.

The observation results align with the interview findings. During presentations, many students were seen reading directly from notes, avoiding eye contact, or pausing frequently to recall what they wanted to say. These behaviors reflect insufficient preparation and an overreliance on written material due to low confidence in their mastery of the content. Observations also showed that unprepared students tended to appear tense and hesitant, which negatively affected audience engagement and reduced the communicative quality of their presentations. Overall, both interview and observation data confirm that inadequate preparation is a major barrier to effective public speaking.

Linguistic Barriers

Linguistic limitations also emerged as a significant challenge for students when performing public speaking tasks. Many students struggled to produce grammatically correct sentences, retrieve appropriate vocabulary, and maintain accuracy in pronunciation. These linguistic gaps often disrupted the flow of their speech and led to

hesitation or loss of focus. The presence of linguistic difficulties indicates that language competence remains a central issue that affects students' ability to express ideas clearly and fluently in English.

Interview data show that students experience considerable anxiety about linguistic correctness and vocabulary retrieval. One student stated,

"I am afraid if I get my grammar wrong because I am worried the audience will think I am incompetent" (Student 3).

"When I forget the word I want to use, I immediately feel panic and find it difficult to continue" (Student 4).

These testimonies highlight the cognitive pressure students experience when trying to monitor grammar, recall vocabulary, and maintain fluency simultaneously. Students' focus is divided between forming correct sentences and managing anxiety, resulting in frequent speech disruptions.

Observation data further illustrate these linguistic barriers in practice. Many students paused mid-sentence to self-correct grammatical mistakes or search for words, leading to noticeable breaks in their fluency. Other students mispronounced key vocabulary and attempted to correct themselves during the presentation, which disrupted the flow of information. These behaviors indicate that students have not yet developed automaticity in language production, making public speaking a cognitively demanding task. The combination of interview and observation findings demonstrates that linguistic limitations significantly hinder students' speaking performance.

Psychological Factors

Psychological barriers were also found to significantly affect students' ability to speak effectively in public. Many students reported experiencing anxiety, shyness, and fear of being judged by their peers, which reduced their confidence and disrupted their performance. Emotional discomfort often manifests as difficulty starting a speech, losing focus mid-presentation, or feeling overwhelmed by the presence of an audience. These findings emphasize that public speaking is not merely a linguistic activity but also an emotional and psychological challenge.

Interview data clearly show the depth of students' psychological struggles. One student admitted, *"I always feel anxious before speaking in front of the class for fear that the audience will laugh at my mistakes" (Student 5)*. Another shared, *"Even though I have practiced before, I always feel nervous when I start public speaking" (Student 6)*. These statements reveal that psychological pressure persists even when students have prepared, indicating strong fear of negative evaluation and a lack of self-confidence. The interview results show that emotional barriers can overshadow students' cognitive readiness.

Observation data reinforce this finding. During presentations, many students demonstrated visible signs of psychological discomfort, such as avoiding eye contact, fidgeting with their hands, or showing stiffness in posture. Some students struggled to maintain a steady voice or frequently shifted their weight, reflecting high levels of tension. These behaviors indicate that anxiety not only affects internal emotions but also translates into noticeable performance difficulties. The alignment between interview and observation data confirms that psychological factors play a central role in limiting students' speaking effectiveness.

Environmental / Social Support Constraints

Environmental factors and social support were identified as additional barriers that affect students' speaking performance. Many students reported that opportunities to practice speaking in English were limited, both inside and outside the classroom. Without regular exposure to speaking activities, students lacked the chance to build confidence, develop fluency, or receive constructive feedback essential for improvement. This condition suggests that the learning environment plays a major role in shaping students' speaking abilities.

Interview data highlight the lack of practice opportunities and insufficient encouragement from peers and lecturers. One student noted, *"We rarely get serious speaking practice in class, so I am not used to the pressure of public speaking"* (Student 7). Another commented, *"I would like to get more support from friends and lecturers, especially when I make mistakes so I can be more confident"* (Student 8). These responses indicate that students feel unsupported and lack the reinforcement needed to build speaking competence. Limited exposure decreases their motivation and prevents them from developing speaking skills consistently.

Observation data confirm that speaking activities were not regularly incorporated into classroom practice. In many sessions, only a small number of students actively participated, while others remained passive. Peer interaction was also minimal, and feedback tended to be focused more on pointing out errors rather than providing constructive suggestions. Such an environment restricts students from engaging in meaningful speaking practice and limits their opportunities to grow. Both interview and observation findings show that environmental and social support constraints significantly contribute to students' speaking difficulties.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that students' difficulties in English public speaking are influenced by an interplay of preparation-related challenges, linguistic limitations, psychological barriers, and environmental constraints. Insufficient preparation emerged as one of the most dominant factors affecting speaking performance. This aligns with recent studies emphasizing that preparation is a key determinant of speaking confidence and performance quality, as it allows learners to

organize ideas, reduce anxiety, and anticipate potential communication difficulties (Zega, 2025). Students in this study frequently reported procrastination and inadequate rehearsal time, leading to disorganized delivery and lack of fluency. These results support the notion that systematic and consistent preparation is essential for effective oral communication in academic settings.

Linguistic limitations were also found to significantly hinder students' ability to perform well in public speaking. Difficulties in grammar, vocabulary retrieval, pronunciation, and fluency coincide with findings from earlier research showing that linguistic competence is foundational for successful speaking performance (Fadhilah, 2022). Students' fear of making grammatical mistakes and forgetting vocabulary reflects the cognitive burden experienced during real-time language production, which is commonly observed among second language learners (Purnamasari, 2020). Observational data from this study indicated frequent hesitations and self-corrections, confirming that linguistic insecurity undermines speaking fluency and disrupts overall message clarity. These results reinforce the understanding that strengthening linguistic competence is essential for alleviating speaking-related anxiety and enhancing communicative effectiveness.

Psychological factors, such as anxiety, shyness, and fear of negative evaluation, were shown to exert a strong influence on students' speaking performance. These findings align with recent studies indicating that anxiety remains one of the most significant barriers in second language speaking, often leading to avoidance behavior, cognitive distortions, and diminished performance quality (Palupi et al., 2022). Students' feelings of embarrassment and nervousness, even when adequately prepared, suggest that emotional factors operate independently of linguistic readiness. Previous research has highlighted that speaking anxiety can manifest through physical symptoms, disrupted concentration, and reduced willingness to participate—patterns also observed in the present study (Rengganawati, 2024). Therefore, psychological interventions and confidence-building strategies should be integrated into speaking instruction to help learners regulate affective responses.

Environmental and social support constraints further contributed to students' challenges in developing their English-speaking abilities. Participants reported limited speaking opportunities, insufficient classroom practice, and a lack of constructive feedback, conditions that align with studies emphasizing the importance of supportive learning environments for oral skill development (Rafsanjani et al., 2022). Research shows that frequent interaction, peer collaboration, and teacher scaffolding significantly enhance learners' willingness to communicate and support the internalization of speaking strategies (Revianti & Anggoro, 2022). The findings of this study indicate that without structured and meaningful opportunities to practice, students struggle to build confidence and fluency, highlighting the essential role of institutional and instructional support in facilitating speaking development.

Overall, the interaction of preparation-related, linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors illustrates that students' speaking challenges cannot be addressed in isolation. Recent literature recommends adopting a holistic pedagogical approach that integrates language development, affective support, and environmental structuring to optimize speaking performance (Peng, 2024). The findings of this study reinforce this view by demonstrating that successful speaking competence requires not only improved linguistic proficiency but also enhanced emotional regulation, increased practice opportunities, and stronger academic support. Therefore, addressing students' speaking difficulties requires multidimensional interventions that simultaneously target cognitive, linguistic, psychological, and contextual dimensions of learning.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal that students' challenges in English public speaking arise from the interaction of four major factors: inadequate preparation, linguistic limitations, psychological barriers, and environmental or social support constraints. The interview and observation data consistently show that insufficient preparation leads to disorganized speech, reduced fluency, and low confidence, while linguistic difficulties such as limited vocabulary, grammatical inaccuracy, and pronunciation issues further disrupt students' ability to express ideas clearly. Psychological factors, including anxiety, shyness, and fear of negative evaluation, also play a significant role in inhibiting performance, often manifesting through visible nervous behaviors and cognitive blocks. In addition, limited opportunities to practice and insufficient support from peers and lecturers further restrict students' ability to build speaking competence. These findings emphasize that public speaking difficulties among students are multidimensional and cannot be understood through a single factor alone.

Based on these findings, several recommendations can be made to support the development of students' speaking skills. First, students need to be guided to implement consistent preparation strategies, such as early topic review, structured rehearsal, and time management planning. Second, targeted language support especially in vocabulary building, grammar reinforcement, pronunciation training, and fluency practice is essential to strengthen linguistic competence. Third, speaking instruction should integrate confidence-building activities and anxiety management techniques, such as relaxation strategies, peer encouragement, and supportive feedback. Finally, academic institutions and instructors should provide more structured opportunities for speaking practice and cultivate a learning environment that encourages active participation and peer collaboration. By addressing these four dimensions coherently, students can develop stronger confidence and perform more effectively in English public speaking contexts.

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