# CHALLENGES IN LEARNING SPEAKING SKILLS IN AN EFL CLASSROOM: A STUDY OF ENGLISH EDUCATION STUDENTS AT UNIVERSITAS PGRI SUMATERA BARAT

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**ABSTRACT**

This study aimed to investigate the challenges in learning speaking skills in an EFL classroom faced by English Education students at Universitas PGRI Sumatera Barat. The research employed a descriptive qualitative design involving 20 students selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews to explore linguistic, psychological, and instructional challenges in learning speaking skills. The findings revealed that students experienced significant difficulties related to limited vocabulary, grammatical inaccuracies, and pronunciation problems. Psychological factors such as fear of making mistakes and low self-confidence were also identified as major barriers to active participation in speaking activities. Moreover, instructional factors, particularly limited opportunities for communicative speaking practice, emerged as the most dominant challenge. The study concludes that addressing EFL speaking challenges requires an integrated instructional approach that promotes communicative activities, supports learners' affective needs, and enhances linguistic competence.

**Keywords :** *EFL Speaking Skills, Speaking Challenges, English Education Students, EFL Classroom*

**ABSTRAK**

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji tantangan dalam pembelajaran keterampilan berbicara bahasa Inggris di kelas EFL yang dihadapi oleh mahasiswa Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris di Universitas PGRI Sumatera Barat. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain deskriptif kualitatif dengan melibatkan 20 mahasiswa yang dipilih melalui teknik purposive sampling. Data dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner dan wawancara semi-terstruktur untuk mengungkap tantangan linguistik, psikologis, dan instruksional dalam pembelajaran berbicara. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa mengalami kesulitan dalam keterbatasan kosakata, ketidaktepatan tata bahasa, dan pelafalan. Faktor psikologis seperti rasa takut melakukan kesalahan dan rendahnya kepercayaan diri juga menjadi hambatan utama dalam partisipasi berbicara. Selain itu, faktor instruksional, khususnya terbatasnya kesempatan praktik berbicara secara komunikatif, menjadi tantangan yang paling dominan. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa penanganan tantangan pembelajaran berbicara bahasa Inggris memerlukan pendekatan pembelajaran terpadu yang menekankan aktivitas komunikatif, dukungan afektif, dan penguatan kompetensi linguistik mahasiswa.

**Kata Kunci :** *Keterampilan Berbicara EFL, Tantangan Berbicara, Mahasiswa Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, Kelas EFL*

## INTRODUCTION

Speaking is widely recognized as one of the most challenging skills for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Unlike receptive skills, speaking requires learners to produce language spontaneously while simultaneously managing linguistic accuracy, fluency, and appropriateness in real-time communication. Brown (2001) emphasizes that speaking is a complex skill involving pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, discourse competence, and sociolinguistic awareness, all of which must be integrated during oral interaction. Consequently, many EFL learners experience considerable difficulty in developing effective speaking competence.

In EFL classrooms, speaking instruction often faces various pedagogical and contextual challenges. Harmer (2007) and Siminto et al (2024) note that limited exposure to authentic English input significantly affects learners' speaking development, particularly in contexts where English is not used outside the classroom. This lack of meaningful communicative opportunities results in learners having insufficient practice, which in turn leads to low confidence and limited oral proficiency. Furthermore, Richards (2008) argues that speaking activities in many EFL settings are still dominated by controlled drills rather than communicative tasks, reducing learners' opportunities to engage in meaningful interaction.

Psychological factors also play a crucial role in shaping learners' speaking performance. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), Sari and Ningsih (2022) and Kamaruddin et al (2023) identify foreign language anxiety as a major barrier that hinders learners' willingness to speak in English. Fear of making mistakes, negative evaluation, and lack of self-confidence often discourage learners from participating actively in speaking activities. Similarly, Krashen's (1985) Affective Filter Hypothesis suggests that high anxiety and low motivation can block language input and negatively affect language acquisition, particularly in oral communication (Sari & Ningsih, 2023).

From the teacher's perspective, challenges in teaching speaking are closely related to instructional design and classroom management. Ur (2012), Bhutto, Jokhio, & Ahmad (2023) and Desta (2019) point out that managing large classes, varying proficiency levels, and limited instructional time often restrict teachers' ability to conduct effective speaking activities. Additionally, many teachers struggle to balance accuracy and fluency, leading to an overemphasis on grammatical correctness at the expense of communicative competence. As a result, students may become hesitant to speak freely due to constant correction and fear of errors.

Previous studies have consistently shown that teaching speaking skills in EFL classrooms presents multifaceted challenges related to linguistic, psychological, and contextual factors. Brown (2001) and Richards (2008) argue that speaking requires the integration of several language components (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency), which must be processed simultaneously. This complexity often makes speaking the most difficult skill for EFL learners to master, particularly in contexts where English exposure is limited. As a result, learners tend to have insufficient opportunities to practice meaningful oral communication.

Psychological barriers have also been widely discussed in the literature as major obstacles to effective speaking instruction. Horwitz et al. (1986) highlight foreign language anxiety as a significant factor that inhibits learners' willingness to speak, especially due to fear of making mistakes and negative evaluation. Krashen's (1985) Affective Filter Hypothesis further supports this view, suggesting that high anxiety and low motivation can impede language acquisition (Franchisca et al, 2023). These affective factors often lead to passive classroom participation and reduced speaking performance.

From an instructional perspective, several scholars emphasize the challenges faced by teachers in implementing effective speaking activities. Ur (2012) and Harmer (2007) note that large class sizes, mixed proficiency levels, limited instructional time, and an overemphasis on accuracy-oriented teaching constrain communicative speaking practice. Consequently, speaking activities are frequently teacher-centered and lack authentic interaction. These findings indicate the need for more communicative, learner-centered approaches to address persistent challenges in EFL speaking instruction.

This study seeks to address the following research questions: *What challenges are commonly reported in teaching speaking skills in EFL classrooms?* and *What factors contribute to these challenges as identified in previous theoretical and empirical studies?* Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to systematically review and synthesize existing research on the challenges faced by teachers and learners in EFL speaking instruction, with particular attention to linguistic, psychological, and pedagogical factors, as well as the situation in Universitas PGRI Sumatera Barat. By analyzing relevant literature and findings, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of recurring issues in EFL speaking classrooms and to offer theoretical insights that may inform more effective speaking instruction practices.

Given these persistent challenges, numerous studies have explored different approaches to improve speaking instruction in EFL contexts. However, findings from previous research are often scattered across various theoretical and empirical works. Therefore, a comprehensive analysis is needed to synthesize existing studies and identify common challenges in teaching speaking skills, especially in Universitas PGRI Sumatera Barat. By reviewing relevant theories and empirical findings, this study aims to provide a clearer understanding of the obstacles faced in EFL speaking instruction and offer insights for more effective pedagogical practices.

## METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to investigate challenges in teaching and learning speaking skills in EFL classrooms. The research was conducted at Universitas PGRI Sumatera Barat, involving students from the English Education Study Program. The population of this study consisted of all undergraduate students enrolled in the English Education program, while the sample comprised 20 students, selected using purposive sampling. The participants were chosen based on their experience in taking speaking-related courses, ensuring that they had sufficient exposure to EFL speaking instruction (Gideon et al, 2023; Silaban et al, 2024).

The main research instrument was a questionnaire, designed to explore students' perceptions of challenges in learning speaking skills. The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended and open-ended items covering linguistic difficulties, psychological factors, and instructional issues in speaking classes. To support and enrich the data, semi-structured interviews were also conducted with several participants to gain deeper insights into their experiences and perspectives regarding speaking instruction. The instruments were adapted from relevant literature on EFL speaking challenges and reviewed to ensure content validity.

Data collection was carried out in two stages. First, the questionnaire was distributed to all 20 participants to obtain general data on common challenges encountered in speaking classes. Second, interviews were conducted with selected students to clarify and elaborate on questionnaire responses. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Questionnaire data were

summarized descriptively, while interview data were transcribed, coded, and categorized into major themes. These themes were then interpreted to identify dominant challenges in EFL speaking instruction and to draw conclusions relevant to improving speaking pedagogy.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Results

The results of this study reveal that English Education students at Universitas PGRI Sumatera Barat experience various challenges in learning speaking skills. Based on the questionnaire data, most students reported difficulties related to linguistic aspects, psychological factors, and instructional practices. These challenges were consistently highlighted in both questionnaire responses and interview data, indicating recurring issues in EFL speaking classrooms.

**Table 1. Students' Perceived Challenges in Learning Speaking Skills (n = 20)**

| No | Category of Challenges | Indicators | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Linguistic Factors | Limited vocabulary | 75 |
| | | Grammatical difficulties | 70 |
| | | Pronunciation problems | 65 |
| 2 | Psychological Factors | Fear of making mistakes | 80 |
| | | Low self-confidence | 75 |
| | | Speaking anxiety | 70 |
| 3 | Instructional Factors | Limited speaking practice | 85 |
| | | Teacher-centered activities | 70 |
| | | Lack of communicative tasks | 75 |

Source: analyzed, 2026

From a linguistic perspective, the majority of students identified limited vocabulary and grammatical accuracy as their main obstacles in speaking English. Many participants stated that they often struggled to express ideas due to insufficient vocabulary and uncertainty about correct sentence structures. This finding aligns with Brown (2001), who emphasizes that speaking requires the simultaneous control of multiple language components, making it particularly demanding for EFL learners. Pronunciation difficulties were also reported, especially in producing unfamiliar sounds, which affected students' confidence during oral communication.

Psychological factors emerged as another significant challenge. The data showed that fear of making mistakes and low self-confidence frequently hindered students from actively participating in speaking activities. Several students admitted feeling anxious when asked to speak in front of the class, worrying about negative evaluation from peers and lecturers. This result supports the findings of Horwitz et al. (1986), who identify foreign language anxiety as a major barrier to speaking performance. In line with Krashen's (1985) Affective Filter Hypothesis, high anxiety levels appeared to reduce students' willingness to communicate and negatively impact their speaking development.

In terms of instructional factors, students reported that limited opportunities for authentic speaking practice contributed to their difficulties. Speaking activities were often perceived as textbook-based and focused more on accuracy than fluency. As a result, students felt they lacked sufficient exposure to communicative tasks such as discussions, role plays, or presentations. This

finding is consistent with Harmer (2007) and Ur (2012), who argue that teacher-centered instruction and an overemphasis on correctness may restrict meaningful interaction in EFL classrooms. Overall, the results indicate that challenges in learning speaking skills are multidimensional, requiring pedagogical approaches that address linguistic competence, psychological readiness, and communicative practice simultaneously.

**Discussions**

The findings of this study indicate that challenges in learning speaking skills among English Education students are multidimensional, encompassing linguistic, psychological, and instructional factors. Linguistic difficulties, particularly limited vocabulary, grammatical inaccuracy, and pronunciation problems, were frequently reported by the participants. These findings support Brown's (2001), Oprandy (1994), and Broady (2004) view that speaking is a complex skill requiring the simultaneous control of multiple language components. When learners lack adequate linguistic resources, their ability to express ideas orally becomes limited, which may negatively affect fluency and accuracy in spoken communication.

Psychological factors were also found to significantly influence students' speaking performance. Fear of making mistakes and low self-confidence emerged as prominent barriers that reduced students' willingness to speak in English (Ahsan, Asgher, & Hussain, 2020; Nety & Nurhaeni, 2020). This result is consistent with Horwitz et al. (1986), who emphasize that foreign language anxiety can inhibit learners' oral participation. In line with Krashen's (1985) Affective Filter Hypothesis, high anxiety levels may prevent learners from fully engaging in speaking activities, even when they possess sufficient linguistic knowledge. Therefore, addressing affective factors is essential in creating a supportive speaking environment.

Instructional factors appeared to be the most dominant challenges, particularly the limited opportunities for authentic speaking practice. The findings suggest that speaking activities were often teacher-centered and focused more on accuracy than communicative use. This supports Harmer (2007), Ur (2012) and Muranoy (2000), who argue that an overemphasis on form-focused instruction can restrict meaningful interaction in EFL classrooms. These results imply that EFL speaking instruction should incorporate more communicative and student-centered activities to enhance learners' confidence, fluency, and overall speaking competence.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that English Education students at Universitas PGRI Sumatera Barat face various challenges in learning speaking skills in EFL classrooms. These challenges are primarily related to linguistic limitations, psychological barriers, and instructional practices. Linguistic difficulties such as limited vocabulary, grammatical inaccuracies, and pronunciation problems hinder students' ability to express ideas fluently. Psychological factors, particularly fear of making mistakes and low self-confidence, further reduce students' willingness to participate in speaking activities. In addition, instructional factors, including limited opportunities for authentic and communicative speaking practice, were identified as the most dominant challenges. Overall, the findings suggest that improving EFL speaking instruction requires an integrated approach that addresses both learners' language competence and affective factors, as well as the implementation of more communicative and student-centered teaching strategies. Future research is recommended to explore instructional models that effectively promote speaking practice and reduce learners' anxiety in EFL contexts.

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