


Factors Inhibiting English Speaking Skills among English Department Students at Tadulako University

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A B S T R A C T

Speaking is a crucial skill in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning; however, many students still face difficulties in developing this competence. This study aims to identify the factors inhibiting English speaking skills among students of the English Education Study Program at Tadulako University, addressing the limited empirical evidence on dominant barriers in this context. This research employed a mixed-method approach with a sequential explanatory design. Quantitative data were collected through a Likert-scale questionnaire administered to 50 third-semester students, while qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with six participants. The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, and the qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis. The findings indicate that students' speaking difficulties are influenced by both linguistic and psychological factors. Vocabulary limitation emerged as the most dominant factor, followed by anxiety and fear of making mistakes, which reduced students' confidence and willingness to speak. In contrast, environmental factors such as peer support were found to facilitate rather than hinder speaking development. These findings suggest that speaking difficulties result from the interaction of multiple factors. Therefore, improving speaking skills requires an integrated approach that focuses on vocabulary development, increased speaking practice, and a supportive learning environment.

Keywords: *Speaking Skills, Inhibiting Factors, Vocabulary Limitation, Speaking Anxiety, EFL Learners*

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INTRODUCTION

English is widely recognized as an international language that plays a crucial role in global communication across various fields such as education, technology, business, and diplomacy. Its status as a global lingua franca makes English an essential skill for individuals seeking access to international knowledge and opportunities. According to Crystal (2003), the global spread of English has positioned it as a dominant language for communication worldwide. Consequently, English is not only a subject in formal education but also a key competency required for academic and professional success.

In the Indonesian context, English is taught as a foreign language at different levels of education, from primary schools to universities. Despite its importance, many learners still encounter significant challenges in mastering English skills. These challenges are influenced by various factors, including linguistic limitations, psychological barriers, and environmental conditions (Muliana, 2021). As a result, students often struggle to achieve communicative competence, particularly in productive skills such as speaking.

Among the four language skills – listening, speaking, reading, and writing – speaking is often considered the most difficult to master. Speaking requires not only knowledge of vocabulary and grammar but also the ability to use language fluently and interactively in real-time communication. Brown (2007) emphasizes that speaking is a productive skill that involves complex processes, including linguistic and cognitive aspects. Furthermore, Richards (2008) states that speaking is the primary goal of language learning because it reflects learners' ability to use language for communication in real-life situations.

Several studies have highlighted that students' speaking difficulties are influenced by both linguistic and non-linguistic factors. Linguistic factors include limited vocabulary, poor pronunciation, and weak grammatical knowledge, which directly affect students' ability to express ideas clearly (Harmer, 2001). Without sufficient vocabulary, students may struggle to construct meaningful sentences and often rely on repetitive or simple expressions, which can hinder communication effectiveness.

In addition to linguistic challenges, psychological factors play a significant role in shaping students' speaking performance. Anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and lack of confidence are commonly reported barriers among English as a Foreign Language learners. Horwitz et al. (1986) explain that foreign language anxiety can reduce learners' willingness to participate in speaking activities and negatively affect their performance. Similarly, MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) argue that anxiety interferes with cognitive processing, making it difficult for learners to produce language effectively.

Environmental factors also contribute to students' speaking difficulties. Classroom atmosphere, teaching methods, and peer interaction can either facilitate or hinder students' willingness to communicate. Ur (1996) states that a supportive and interactive classroom environment encourages students to participate more actively in speaking activities. On the other hand, traditional teaching approaches that emphasize grammar and memorization may limit opportunities for meaningful communication practice.

Previous studies have investigated speaking difficulties in various contexts. For example, Heriansyah (2012) found that students' speaking problems include low confidence, limited vocabulary, and fear of making mistakes. Similarly, Zulfitri and Nurlaili (2020) identified multiple factors such as vocabulary limitation, mother tongue interference, and teaching methods as barriers to speaking performance. However, these studies were conducted in different institutional settings and did not specifically examine how various factors interact within the context of Tadulako University.

Based on preliminary observations conducted by the researcher, many students in the English Education Study Program at Tadulako University experience difficulties in speaking English. These include hesitation, anxiety, limited vocabulary, and lack of confidence during classroom interactions. Therefore, this study aims to identify and analyze the factors inhibiting students' speaking skills by considering the interaction between linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors. The findings are expected to provide insights for improving speaking instruction and creating a more supportive learning environment.

METHOD

Research Approach and Method

This study employed a mixed-method research design using a sequential explanatory approach. The use of this approach is important in guiding the research process, particularly in collecting and analyzing data systematically. In this study, quantitative data were collected first to identify general patterns related to factors inhibiting students' speaking skills, followed by qualitative data to provide deeper explanations of the findings. According to Creswell (2014), this approach allows researchers to combine numerical data with detailed participant perspectives to achieve a more comprehensive understanding.

This research applied a descriptive method within a mixed-method framework. The quantitative phase focused on identifying dominant factors affecting speaking skills, while the qualitative phase explored students' experiences and perceptions in depth. Through this approach, the researcher was able to examine how linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors interact in influencing students' speaking performance.

Data Types and Sources

The data in this study consisted of both quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data were obtained from students' responses to a structured questionnaire, while qualitative data were collected from semi-structured interviews. The use of these two types of data enabled the researcher to gain both general and in-depth insights into the research problem.

The data sources were divided into primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained directly from third-semester students of the English Education Study Program at Tadulako University, who served as the main participants in this study. Secondary data were derived from supporting documents, such as academic references, previous studies, and relevant literature related to speaking skills and inhibiting factors in English as a Foreign Language learning.

Data Collection Techniques

Data collection techniques refer to the methods used by the researcher to gather relevant information. In this study, two main techniques were employed: questionnaire and interview.

First, the questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data. It consisted of 12 closed-ended items measured using a Likert scale ranging from “Always” (5) to “Never” (1). The questionnaire aimed to identify factors such as anxiety, self-confidence, vocabulary limitation, classroom environment, teaching methods, and peer influence. This instrument provided a general overview of students’ speaking difficulties and allowed the researcher to determine the dominant inhibiting factors.

Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect qualitative data. The interviews involved six selected participants chosen based on their questionnaire responses. The purpose of the interviews was to explore students’ experiences, perceptions, and challenges in speaking English more deeply. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed flexibility for follow-up questions, enabling the researcher to obtain richer and more detailed data.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data analysis in this study was conducted in two stages: quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Each response from the questionnaire was scored based on the Likert scale, and the mean score for each item was calculated using the formula:

$$M = \frac{\sum X}{N}$$

The mean scores were then categorized into three levels: low (1.00–2.33), moderate (2.34–3.66), and high (3.67–5.00). This analysis was used to identify the level and dominance of factors inhibiting students’ speaking skills.

Qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis involved several steps, including transcribing the data, coding important statements, grouping codes into themes, and interpreting the results. The identified themes included vocabulary limitation, anxiety, lack of practice, and peer support. These themes were used to explain and support the quantitative findings.

Data Validity Techniques

To ensure the validity and credibility of the data, this study applied triangulation techniques. Triangulation was used to verify the consistency and accuracy of the data by comparing information obtained from different sources and methods.

First, method triangulation was conducted by comparing data obtained from questionnaires and interviews. This helped ensure that the findings were consistent across different data collection techniques.

Second, source triangulation was applied by comparing responses from different participants. This allowed the researcher to confirm whether similar patterns and themes emerged from multiple respondents.

Finally, data integration was carried out by combining quantitative and qualitative findings. This process ensured that the statistical results were supported and explained by participants’ experiences, thereby strengthening the overall validity of the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The quantitative data were obtained from a questionnaire consisting of 12 items distributed to 50 students. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine the mean score of each item. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Mean Scores of Questionnaire Items

| No | Item | Mean Score | Category |
|----|------|------------|----------|
| 1 | Q1 | 3.36 | Moderate |
| 2 | Q2 | 3.75 | High |
| 3 | Q3 | 3.49 | Moderate |
| 4 | Q4 | 3.00 | Moderate |
| 5 | Q5 | 3.25 | Moderate |
| 6 | Q6 | 3.92 | High |
| 7 | Q7 | 2.57 | Moderate |
| 8 | Q8 | 2.45 | Moderate |
| 9 | Q9 | 1.87 | Low |
| 10 | Q10 | 3.04 | Moderate |
| 11 | Q11 | 2.42 | Moderate |
| 12 | Q12 | 2.98 | Moderate |

Based on Table 1, the highest mean score was found in item Q6 ($M = 3.92$), which falls into the high category. This indicates that vocabulary limitation is the most dominant factor inhibiting students' speaking skills. Meanwhile, the lowest mean score was found in item Q9 ($M = 1.87$), categorized as low, suggesting that peer influence is not considered a significant barrier.

Most items fall into the moderate category, indicating that students experience a considerable level of difficulty in speaking English, particularly related to anxiety, confidence, and classroom conditions.

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with six selected participants. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, resulting in four main themes:

Vocabulary Limitation

Students reported that limited vocabulary was the main obstacle in speaking. They often understood what they wanted to say but were unable to express it due to lack of appropriate words. Many participants experienced "blank moments" during speaking activities.

Speaking Anxiety

Students expressed feelings of nervousness and fear of making mistakes. This anxiety reduced their confidence and caused hesitation during speaking tasks.

Lack of Practice

Students stated that they rarely used English outside the classroom. Limited exposure and practice made it difficult for them to develop fluency and confidence.

Peer Support

Interestingly, most students reported that their classmates were supportive. Peers did not judge mistakes but instead encouraged participation, which helped reduce anxiety.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The integration of both data sets provides a clearer understanding of the factors inhibiting speaking skills. (1) The high mean score of Q6 is supported by interview findings, where students consistently mentioned vocabulary limitation as their main problem. (2) The low mean score of Q9 is confirmed by qualitative data showing that peer support actually facilitates learning rather than inhibiting it. (3) Psychological factors such as anxiety (Q2, Q3) are also supported by students' statements about fear and nervousness. This integration strengthens the validity of the findings, as both numerical data and personal experiences point to the same conclusions.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that students' speaking difficulties are influenced by the interaction of linguistic and psychological factors, rather than by a single

isolated variable. Among these factors, vocabulary limitation emerges as the most dominant barrier, as indicated by both quantitative and qualitative results. Students frequently reported that they understood the ideas they wanted to convey but were unable to express them effectively due to insufficient vocabulary. This finding highlights a gap between receptive and productive language skills, where learners may comprehend input but struggle to produce meaningful output.

This result is consistent with the argument proposed by H. Douglas Brown (2007), who emphasizes that vocabulary mastery is a fundamental component of speaking ability, as it enables learners to construct meaningful utterances. Similarly, Jeremy Harmer (2001) states that limited vocabulary restricts learners' ability to communicate ideas clearly and fluently, often leading to hesitation and repetition. In this study, students' tendency to repeat simple words or switch to their first language further confirms the critical role of vocabulary in speaking performance.

Furthermore, the findings can be interpreted through the lens of communicative competence theory. According to Michael Canale and Merrill Swain (1980), grammatical competence, which includes vocabulary knowledge, is essential for effective communication. When learners lack sufficient linguistic resources, they are unable to construct coherent and accurate utterances, which ultimately affects their overall communicative competence. This theoretical perspective supports the conclusion that vocabulary limitation is not merely a surface-level issue but a fundamental barrier to speaking development.

In addition to linguistic factors, psychological variables such as anxiety and fear of making mistakes were found to significantly influence students' speaking performance. Many participants reported experiencing nervousness, hesitation, and "blank moments" when speaking English. These findings align with the concept of foreign language anxiety proposed by Elaine K. Horwitz et al. (1986), who argue that anxiety can negatively affect learners' willingness to communicate and reduce their speaking performance. Learners who are anxious tend to avoid speaking situations, produce shorter utterances, and exhibit lower fluency.

Moreover, the findings are supported by Peter D. MacIntyre and Robert C. Gardner (1991), who state that anxiety interferes with cognitive processing during language production. In the context of this study, students' "blank moments" can be interpreted as a result of cognitive overload, where anxiety disrupts the retrieval of linguistic knowledge. This indicates that speaking difficulties are not solely caused by a lack of knowledge but also by affective factors that hinder performance.

Interestingly, this study also reveals a strong interconnection between linguistic and psychological factors. Students with limited vocabulary tend to feel more anxious because they are unsure how to express their ideas. This anxiety, in turn, reduces their confidence and willingness to participate in speaking activities. This cyclical relationship suggests that linguistic deficiencies and psychological barriers reinforce each other, creating a continuous obstacle to speaking development. Such findings support the affective filter hypothesis proposed by Stephen Krashen (1985), which explains that high levels of anxiety and low confidence can block language acquisition and production.

On the other hand, the study found that environmental factors, particularly peer support, do not act as barriers but rather as facilitating elements. The low mean score for peer-related items indicates that students generally perceive their classmates as supportive. This finding is in line with Penny Ur (1996), who argues that a supportive classroom environment encourages active participation and reduces anxiety. Students who feel accepted and encouraged are more likely to take risks in speaking, which is essential for language development.

The positive role of peer support also suggests that social interaction can enhance students' willingness to communicate. When students receive encouragement and constructive feedback from peers, they become more confident and motivated to participate in speaking activities. This aligns with the concept of willingness to communicate, which

emphasizes the importance of social and situational factors in determining learners' readiness to speak.

Overall, the findings of this study highlight the need for an integrated approach to improving students' speaking skills. Focusing solely on linguistic aspects, such as vocabulary instruction, is not sufficient. Instead, educators should also address psychological barriers by creating a low-anxiety learning environment and encouraging active participation. In addition, providing more opportunities for meaningful speaking practice can help students develop both their linguistic competence and confidence.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the existing literature by demonstrating that speaking difficulties among English as a Foreign Language learners are multifaceted and interconnected. Linguistic limitations, particularly vocabulary deficiency, serve as the primary barrier, while psychological factors such as anxiety further exacerbate the problem. However, supportive environmental conditions, especially peer interaction, can play a significant role in facilitating speaking development. Therefore, effective speaking instruction should adopt a holistic approach that integrates linguistic, psychological, and social dimensions of language learning.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that students' difficulties in speaking English are influenced by the interaction of linguistic and psychological factors, with vocabulary limitation identified as the most dominant barrier. Students often struggle to express their ideas due to insufficient vocabulary, limited practice opportunities, and lack of exposure to English. In addition, psychological factors such as anxiety and fear of making mistakes significantly reduce students' confidence and willingness to participate in speaking activities. However, environmental factors, particularly peer support, are not perceived as obstacles but instead contribute positively by creating a supportive learning atmosphere. Therefore, improving students' speaking skills requires an integrated approach that not only enhances vocabulary mastery but also reduces anxiety and provides more opportunities for meaningful speaking practice in a supportive environment.

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