

DEVELOPING SPEAKING PROFICIENCY IN INDONESIAN EFL CLASSROOMS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Speaking is a fundamental skill in English language learning, yet it remains one of the most difficult to master for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners. This study explores the key challenges that hinder speaking proficiency in Indonesian EFL classrooms and identifies practical solutions to address these issues. Using qualitative methods, classroom observation, teacher interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis, the study reveals four major barriers: psychological factors such as anxiety and low confidence, instructional limitations including teacher-centered approaches and time constraints, limited exposure to authentic English input, and the absence of structured speaking assessments. The discussion connects these findings with recent pedagogical research from 2020 to 2025, emphasizing the need for affective support, communicative teaching methods, authentic language input, and formative speaking evaluation. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of speaking instruction in the Indonesian context and provides practical insights for educators and policymakers aiming to design effective, communicative EFL speaking programs. This study contributes not only to practical classroom strategies but also enriches the current understanding of affective and instructional barriers in EFL speaking development in Southeast Asia.

Key Words : EFL classroom, speaking proficiency, language anxiety, communicative language teaching, authentic input.

INTRODUCTION

Speaking is a central component of language proficiency and is often regarded as the most direct and practical mode of communication in a foreign language. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting, the ability to speak English fluently and accurately is essential not only for academic success but also for participation in global communication. Despite its importance, speaking remains one of the most challenging skills to develop for EFL learners. Many students' complete years of English instruction without gaining the confidence or competence needed to express themselves orally in real-life situations.

In Indonesia, this challenge is reflected in national and international assessments. According to the 2023 EF English Proficiency Index, Indonesia ranked 79th out of 113 countries, categorized under "low proficiency." Moreover, results from the Indonesian national school exams (UN) and TOEFL mock tests frequently show higher average scores in reading and listening compared to speaking. This discrepancy suggests a systemic

imbalance in language skill development, where oral communication receives less instructional emphasis and support.

The core issue lies in the persistent gap between learners' theoretical knowledge of the language and their actual ability to use it in spoken interaction. While grammar and vocabulary are often emphasized in EFL classrooms, speaking is frequently underrepresented in both teaching time and assessment. Students may perform well in written tests yet hesitate or struggle when required to speak. This imbalance reveals a significant gap between language learning goals and instructional practices.

Furthermore, previous research in the Indonesian context has largely focused on reading comprehension, writing accuracy, or grammar instruction, with relatively fewer studies exploring the challenges and pedagogical practices related to speaking. Given the increasing demand for oral English proficiency in academic and professional settings, this gap in the literature calls for urgent attention.

This article addresses that gap by exploring why speaking proficiency continues to be underdeveloped among EFL learners, even in systems that prioritize English education. The title "Developing Speaking Proficiency in the EFL Classroom: Challenges and Solutions" reflects the dual aim of this study: first, to highlight the specific challenges that hinder speaking development; and second, to present realistic and evidence-based strategies that teachers can implement to foster speaking fluency.

By focusing on the speaking skill specifically, this article contributes to a more balanced view of language competence and encourages educators to integrate more speaking-oriented activities in their instruction. In doing so, it supports the broader goal of equipping EFL learners with the communicative competence necessary for academic, professional, and social engagement in an English-speaking world.

METHOD OF THE RESEARCH

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the challenges faced by students and teachers in developing speaking proficiency in the EFL classroom, as well as to identify practical solutions implemented in instructional settings. The qualitative approach was selected due to its strength in capturing in-depth insights into participants' experiences, perceptions, and classroom practices related to speaking instruction.

The study was conducted in three secondary schools and one private university located in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. These institutions were purposively selected based on multiple criteria: (1) the presence of active English language programs, (2) demonstrated commitment to improving English instruction as reflected in participation in previous training or curriculum initiatives, and (3) logistical accessibility for sustained classroom observation and data collection. Additionally, the willingness of school

administrators and teachers to participate was considered to ensure ethical compliance and smooth research coordination.

The participants consisted of eight EFL teachers (five from secondary schools and three from the university) and thirty-two students, purposively selected from upper-level secondary classes and undergraduate English majors. All participants had at least two years of experience either teaching or learning English in formal academic settings, ensuring that they had substantial engagement with speaking activities in the classroom.

To gather rich and relevant data, the study used multiple data collection techniques, including:

- a. Semi-structured interviews: Conducted with all teacher participants to explore their perceptions of students' speaking difficulties, instructional strategies, and constraints they face in promoting speaking skills.
- b. Focus group discussions (FGDs): Held with student participants to elicit their experiences, challenges, and preferences in speaking activities.
- c. Classroom observations: Conducted in six EFL classes, two from each educational level (secondary and university), to examine actual teaching practices used to foster speaking, as well as student participation patterns. Each class was observed over three consecutive weeks, with two sessions per week, totaling approximately six hours of observation per class. A structured observation sheet was used to systematically document types of speaking activities, classroom interaction patterns, student responses, and teacher feedback.
- d. Document analysis: Involving lesson plans, speaking rubrics, and teaching materials to evaluate how speaking is formally integrated into the curriculum.

All interviews and discussions were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to ensure participants' comfort and clarity. Audio recordings were transcribed and translated into English for analysis.

The data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model: familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The researcher began by reading all transcripts multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding, followed by coding meaningful units related to speaking challenges and instructional strategies.

Emerging codes were grouped into broader themes, such as "psychological barriers," "instructional limitations," "use of technology," and "student engagement." Triangulation was applied across interview, observation, and document sources to ensure the credibility and validity of findings. Member checking was also conducted with selected participants to confirm the accuracy of the interpretations.

Before data collection, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their rights as voluntary participants. Written consent was obtained, and confidentiality was strictly maintained by using pseudonyms in the reporting of findings. The study adhered to ethical standards set by the faculty research committee.

FINDINGS

The analysis of data from multiple sources revealed four major challenges that hinder the development of speaking proficiency in the EFL classroom. These challenges and their sub-components are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Major Challenges That Hinder The Development Of Speaking Proficiency in the EFL classroom

No.	Main Theme	Sub-Themes
1	Psychological Barriers to Speaking	- Language anxiety- Fear of negative evaluation- Low confidence
2	Instructional Constraints and Teacher Practices	- Grammar-focused instruction- Limited speaking time- Teacher dominance
3	Limited Exposure to Authentic English Input	- Textbook-based materials- Lack of media integration- Irrelevant topics
4	Lack of Speaking Assessment and Feedback	- No rubrics- No feedback on performance- Subjective grading

These challenges are: (1) Psychological Barriers to Speaking, (2) Instructional Constraints and Teacher Practices, (3) Limited Exposure to Authentic English and Real Interaction, and (4) Lack of Integrative Speaking Assessment and Feedback. These findings are deeply interconnected and reflect systemic issues within EFL instructional settings. Each challenge is discussed in detail below.

Psychological Barriers to Speaking

One of the most persistent and impactful challenges identified in this study was the psychological barrier that inhibits students from speaking English confidently and freely. This barrier encompasses a range of affective factors, including language anxiety, fear of making mistakes, fear of negative evaluation, and low self-confidence.

“Many students hesitate even when they know the answer because they worry their pronunciation is not good enough.” (Teacher 3, Secondary School)

Classroom observations supported this, showing that students often stayed silent unless directly addressed, with hesitant and minimal responses. Teachers recognized these issues but lacked systematic strategies to manage student anxiety.

During focus group discussions, numerous students admitted that they often refrained from speaking English in class even when they understood the material or had ideas to share, simply because they were afraid of being ridiculed or judged.

A recurrent theme was the fear of embarrassment when making grammatical or pronunciation errors. One student explained, *"I know what I want to say, but I'm too afraid that my classmates will laugh if I say something wrong."* This fear created a climate of inhibition, especially in classrooms where peer competition was high or where students felt there was little emotional support. In some cases, students viewed speaking as a test rather than a communicative activity, which further heightened their stress and anxiety.

Classroom observations confirmed that many students chose to remain silent unless directly addressed by the teacher. Even then, their responses were usually short, rehearsed, or delivered with hesitation. Teachers acknowledged the existence of these psychological barriers, but many felt ill-equipped to address them. A few teachers tried to motivate students by encouraging participation, but these efforts were inconsistent and rarely included explicit strategies for reducing anxiety. As a result, the psychological burden on students persisted and severely limited their opportunity to practice speaking in a safe and supportive environment.

Instructional Constraints and Teacher Practices

The second major challenge observed was related to instructional limitations and teacher-centered classroom practices. Although most teachers acknowledged the importance of speaking in EFL learning, in practice, speaking activities were marginalized in favor of grammar instruction, reading comprehension, and test preparation. Teachers cited several structural constraints, such as large class sizes, rigid syllabi, and limited time, which made it difficult to allocate substantial attention to speaking.

In the majority of observed classes, speaking activities consisted of scripted dialogues, choral repetition, or oral reading from textbooks. Opportunities for spontaneous speaking, such as debates, role-plays, or student-led discussions, were rare. Even when speaking tasks were included in the lesson plan, they were often rushed or not given meaningful follow-up. One teacher noted, *"I want my students to talk more, but with 40 students and only 90 minutes, it's very difficult to give everyone a chance."*

A contributing factor to this issue was the lack of professional training in communicative language teaching. Many teachers expressed uncertainty

about how to implement interactive speaking tasks or assess speaking effectively. Consequently, they defaulted to traditional, teacher-dominated methods that offered minimal communicative value. This instructional rigidity significantly restricted students' opportunities to engage in meaningful, real-time language use, which is essential for developing speaking proficiency.

Limited Exposure to Authentic English and Real Interaction

A third key finding concerns the limited exposure students have to authentic English and meaningful interaction outside the classroom. Most students stated that their only significant contact with English occurred during formal lessons. Outside of school, they rarely encountered English media, native speakers, or opportunities to use English in real-world contexts. This lack of exposure undermined their ability to develop fluency, vocabulary richness, and pragmatic skills.

Observations and document analysis revealed that listening and speaking materials were predominantly textbook-based. Audio recordings, when used, were often slow, scripted, and lacked natural intonation or conversational features. Few teachers incorporated authentic materials such as interviews, vlogs, or podcasts. When asked why, teachers cited limited access to technology, lack of training in media integration, and unstable internet connections.

Students also expressed that the topics used in speaking classes felt disconnected from their daily lives. Tasks like "Describe your dream house" or "Talk about your favorite animal" did not align with the kinds of conversations they might encounter in real life or professional settings. This lack of relevance further reduced their motivation to engage meaningfully in speaking tasks. The absence of authentic input and interaction created a gap between classroom language and real-world language use, leaving students unprepared for spontaneous communication outside of academic contexts.

Lack of Integrative Speaking Assessment and Feedback

The fourth significant challenge identified was the absence of structured assessment and feedback mechanisms for speaking performance. In many schools and institutions, speaking was not formally evaluated, or it was only assessed in a superficial manner. Teachers often relied on impressionistic judgments based on class participation, which lacked consistency, transparency, and pedagogical value.

When asked about assessment practices, many teachers admitted they did not use standardized rubrics or provide clear criteria to students. Some avoided speaking tests altogether due to time constraints, large class sizes, or difficulty grading oral performance objectively. As a result, students received little to no constructive feedback on their speaking, making it difficult for them to understand their strengths and areas for improvement.

Students, in turn, expressed frustration about this lack of guidance. One student said, “*After I finish my presentation, the teacher just gives me a score, but I don’t know what I did right or wrong.*” This absence of formative feedback limits learning because students are unable to track their progress or set personal goals for improvement. Furthermore, without consistent feedback loops, even motivated students may struggle to refine their pronunciation, grammar, fluency, or coherence.

On the rare occasions where structured feedback was provided—through peer assessments or guided reflection—students showed higher engagement and improvement. However, these cases were exceptions rather than the norm. Overall, the lack of integrative assessment and feedback remains a critical issue that needs urgent attention if speaking is to be genuinely prioritized in the EFL curriculum.

Table 2 Summary of Challenges and Recommended Solutions

Challenges	Recommended Solutions
Psychological Barriers	Create safe classroom environments; encourage peer collaboration; use low-stress activities.
Instructional Constraints	Adopt small group discussions; incorporate communicative tasks; provide teacher training.
Limited Authentic Input	Use digital/audio materials; integrate real-life topics; promote media exposure.
Lack of Structured Assessment	Develop rubrics; provide formative feedback; utilize self and peer assessments.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive insight into the multifaceted challenges that hinder the development of speaking proficiency in the EFL classroom. These challenges—psychological barriers, instructional constraints, lack of exposure to authentic English, and inadequate speaking assessment—are deeply interconnected and reflect both pedagogical and contextual limitations in EFL teaching. This section discusses these findings in light of recent theories and empirical research (2020–2025), emphasizing their implications for teaching practices and curriculum development.

Psychological Barriers and Learner Affective Factors

The presence of psychological barriers such as language anxiety, low confidence, and fear of negative evaluation aligns with recent findings in second language acquisition. According to Zhang and Rahimi (2022), affective factors play a critical role in learners’ willingness to communicate (WTC), particularly in speaking tasks. High anxiety levels often lead students to avoid speaking, even when they have sufficient linguistic competence. The

findings from this study confirm that EFL learners' anxiety stems not only from internal doubts but also from the social environment of the classroom, which can be competitive and judgmental.

Modern language pedagogy increasingly recognizes the importance of creating a low-affective filter environment (Krashen, 2020), where learners feel emotionally safe and valued. Teachers are encouraged to use positive reinforcement, peer collaboration, and non-threatening speaking activities to build learners' self-confidence. Furthermore, recent classroom-based interventions show that incorporating mindfulness techniques and peer support structures can significantly reduce speaking anxiety (Liu et al., 2023). These strategies are essential in helping students transition from passive listeners to active speakers in the classroom.

Instructional Limitations and Teacher-Centered Approaches

The instructional constraints reported, such as time limitations, large class sizes, and reliance on traditional methods, are consistent with the challenges described in numerous recent studies. Farid and Al-Mamun (2021) emphasize that EFL classrooms in many developing countries still heavily favor teacher-centered instruction, where speaking activities are sidelined due to exam-oriented curricula. This situation is further exacerbated by the lack of professional development opportunities for teachers to enhance their communicative teaching skills.

The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) framework, which has long been promoted for its emphasis on meaningful interaction, requires constant adaptation in large, under-resourced classrooms. According to Rahmah and Chen (2024), adaptation can be achieved through small-group tasks, student-led discussions, and technology-assisted instruction, even in overcrowded classrooms. Teachers must also move away from grammar-heavy instruction and provide space for spontaneous language use, which reflects real communicative intent. In this regard, fostering a student-centered approach that emphasizes learner autonomy and interaction is a critical step toward developing oral fluency.

Limited Exposure to Authentic English

Another major finding was the limited access to authentic English input, which severely restricted students' ability to engage in real-life conversations. This issue is well-documented in recent literature. Shrestha and Mukundan (2023) argue that without regular exposure to natural language use through media, digital content, or social interaction, EFL learners struggle to internalize pragmatic and sociolinguistic aspects of language. Listening to native speakers through authentic media provides learners with input that reflects real speed, accents, idiomatic expressions, and discourse patterns.

The Input Hypothesis, refined through recent empirical testing, supports the notion that frequent exposure to comprehensible yet challenging input is essential for language development (Krashen & Lee, 2021). The integration of digital tools such as English-language YouTube channels, podcasts, and conversation platforms (e.g., Speaky, Tandem) has shown significant benefits in building learners' speaking competence, especially when combined with reflective tasks (Nguyen & Widodo, 2022). For classrooms with limited internet access, curated offline content such as recorded interviews or dialogues can still offer valuable exposure to authentic language use.

Lack of Speaking Assessment and Feedback

The absence of an integrative speaking assessment remains a central challenge in many EFL contexts. As shown in this study, most teachers relied on general impressions rather than structured rubrics, leaving students without meaningful feedback. This is consistent with findings by Chik and Xu (2020), who found that speaking is often marginalized in both assessment policies and classroom practices. Effective speaking instruction must include formative assessment strategies that provide learners with timely, actionable feedback.

Recent research encourages the use of analytic speaking rubrics that assess pronunciation, fluency, coherence, and interaction (Marwan & Harsono, 2023). Moreover, the adoption of peer assessment and self-assessment frameworks has proven effective in engaging learners in metacognitive reflection, leading to greater speaking improvement (Taher & Yusof, 2022). Feedback should not only highlight errors but also reinforce what students do well, creating a balanced perspective on their performance. Integrating digital assessment tools (e.g., Flipgrid, VoiceThread) also allows for more dynamic, personalized evaluation and feedback, enhancing students' speaking experience and tracking progress over time.

CONCLUSION

The development of speaking proficiency in the EFL classroom remains one of the most complex yet essential aspects of language learning. This study has revealed that speaking skills are hindered by four interrelated challenges: psychological barriers, instructional limitations, lack of authentic exposure, and inadequate assessment. These findings demonstrate that while students may possess foundational linguistic knowledge, their ability to express themselves in spoken English is often constrained by affective, pedagogical, and contextual factors.

Speaking proficiency does not develop in isolation; it requires a supportive learning environment, meaningful interaction, and consistent feedback. Unfortunately, traditional classroom structures and exam-driven instruction often marginalize speaking activities. Without deliberate and

sustained efforts to foster a communicative environment, students will continue to struggle with fluency, confidence, and real-world language use.

Therefore, the findings of this study underscore the urgent need to reconceptualize EFL speaking instruction. It is not enough to include speaking as a part of the curriculum; it must be central to it. Teachers, institutions, and policy-makers must collaboratively adopt strategies that empower learners to speak with confidence and competence.

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