Assessing Students' Perceptions of EFL Learners' Problems and Challenges in Speaking Skills

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Abstract. *Speaking is an essential skill for learners of any foreign language, and English is no exception. However, many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners experience significant challenges when it comes to speaking skills. This study aims to explore the views of students regarding the difficulties they face in speaking English and to identify potential solutions to these challenges. A case study method was employed, involving twenty-seven university students from Indonesia. The data were collected using questionnaires, which allowed the researchers to gather insights into students' perceptions and experiences with speaking English. The results revealed that the majority of participants, 71.6%, reported facing common difficulties such as the fear of making mistakes, fear of criticism, and general shyness. These emotional barriers significantly hindered their ability to speak confidently in class. Additionally, only 18.5% of the students actively participated in speaking activities during lessons, indicating a lack of engagement in oral communication. A significant number of students (96.3%) felt that they lacked sufficient knowledge of the subject matter, further impeding their ability to speak effectively. Moreover, 81.5% of the students admitted that they preferred to use their mother tongue, which they often spoke during English classes, as it was easier for them. These findings suggest that both emotional and knowledge-related issues play a crucial role in shaping the speaking abilities of EFL learners. The study highlights the need for targeted interventions that address both the emotional barriers and knowledge gaps in order to improve the speaking skills of EFL students.*

Keywords : EFL, Speaking Problem, Speaking Skill.

1. INTRODUCTION

English plays a central role as an international language, facilitating communication in fields including commerce, science and technology, and higher education. In the Indonesian education system, English is categorized as a foreign language and is mandated as a core subject for all students. Speaking is one of the most important language skills that learners must master to communicate effectively. According to Dewi, Kultsum, and Armadi (2016), speaking is essential for expressing ideas and sharing information. Leong and Ahmadi (2017) also emphasize that communication is needed to explain and convey messages. According to Nunan (1995), speaking encompasses the articulation of spoken language, expressing requests, and delivering oral presentations. In addition, Hughes (2002) characterizes fluency as the skill of delivering speech in a clear manner that holds the listener's attention. Hedge (2000) adds that fluency helps learners avoid misunderstandings by linking words, pronouncing sounds clearly, and using stress and intonation correctly.

Many learners, particularly Indonesian students studying English as a foreign language, encounter significant difficulties in speaking. Heriansyah (2012) states that Indonesian students still struggle with speaking English. Clarita and Hidayat (2020) confirm that many learners find it hard to use English confidently. Fluency is difficult to achieve because students need grammar, vocabulary, clear pronunciation, and confidence. Hinkel (2005) explains that communication problems arise when learners do not understand words or cannot express their ideas. Anxiety and lack of confidence also affect students' speaking.

Oxford (1990) notes that many students fear making mistakes and being criticized by peers. They may feel shy, anxious, nervous, or embarrassed (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). Students at Universitas Amikom Purwokerto still face these issues. Based on its matter, this study focuses on second-semester students at Universitas Amikom Purwokerto, investigating speaking problems titled "Assessing Students' Perceptions of EFL Learners' Problems in Speaking Skills."

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Difficulties in speaking among EFL learners can be classified into several main categories that frequently obstruct students' effective communication in the target language. Tang (1997) identifies inhibition as the primary issue, describing it as students' hesitation to speak publicly due to fear of errors or negative evaluation. This fear may stem from low self-confidence, anxiety, or the pressure to speak correctly in a language they have not yet mastered. As a result, students often choose to stay silent rather than risk embarrassment or negative evaluation from peers or teachers. Inhibition can be worsened by classroom environments that are not supportive or that emphasize accuracy over fluency.

The second issue is referred to as having nothing to say. This occurs when students lack ideas, vocabulary, or motivation to express themselves in English. They may feel that they do not have the language resources or relevant content to contribute to a conversation. Consequently, even when given the opportunity to speak, they choose to remain quiet. This situation is not always due to a lack of ability, but often a lack of confidence or fear of failure.

The third challenge involves limited or inconsistent participation. During group discussions or classroom activities, it is often observed that a small number of students dominate the dialogue, whereas others remain inactive. Such disparity in involvement restricts equal chances for all students to engage in speaking practice. Factors contributing to this include personality differences, varying levels of proficiency, and classroom dynamics that may unintentionally favor more outspoken individuals.

Finally, mother-tongue usage is another common challenge. In many EFL classrooms, students tend to revert to their native language, especially when interacting with classmates who share the same linguistic background. Using the mother tongue is often more comfortable and efficient for them, especially when they struggle to find the right words or expressions in English. However, excessive use of the first language in English class can hinder students' exposure to and practice with the target language, ultimately slowing their speaking development. Understanding these problems is crucial for teachers and educators to create more effective speaking activities and supportive learning environments that encourage students to use English with greater confidence and competence.

Previous research has highlighted various factors that contribute to the speaking difficulties faced by EFL learners. For example, Shen (2019) found that the challenges experienced by students majoring in English can be categorized into two main aspects: linguistic and psychological. The linguistic problems include limitations in vocabulary, lack of grammatical accuracy, and issues with pronunciation. These aspects often prevent students from expressing their ideas clearly and fluently, making it difficult for them to participate actively in oral communication tasks. On the other hand, psychological problems refer to internal barriers such as the fear of making mistakes, shyness, anxiety, low self-confidence, and lack of motivation. These emotional and mental blocks often discourage students from taking part in speaking activities, especially in formal or peer-evaluated situations.

Supporting Shen's findings, Ariyanti (2016) emphasized that psychological factors play a significant role in hindering students' speaking performance. Her study revealed that anxiety, fear of being wrong, shyness, low motivation, and lack of self-esteem are common psychological obstacles that negatively impact students' willingness to speak.

Amoah and Yeboah (2021) found that Chinese EFL learners' speaking difficulties are primarily rooted in psychological factors such as anxiety, fear of mistakes, and fear of negative evaluation, with linguistic shortcomings (limited vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar) playing a secondary role. This aligns closely with Shen (2019) and Ariyanti (2016), reinforcing the dual categorization of speaking obstacles into linguistic and psychological domains. These issues can lead to avoidance behaviors, reduced classroom participation, and missed opportunities to practice and develop fluency.

Likewise, Fitriani, Apriliaswati, and Wardah (2015), in their research involving third-semester students from the English Study Program at FKIP Tanjungpura University Pontianak, found that psychological factors were the most significant issues impacting speaking performance. The results of their research further confirm that internal emotional conditions,

rather than purely linguistic competence, are often the primary causes of speaking difficulties among EFL learners. These findings collectively suggest that improving students' speaking skills requires addressing not only their knowledge of language structures but also their emotional readiness and confidence to communicate.

3. METHOD

The main objective of this research is to investigate and examine the different challenges faced by EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners in enhancing their speaking abilities, along with identifying the strategies they employ to address these difficulties. To achieve this goal, the researcher adopted a qualitative case study approach, aiming to gain a deep understanding of the underlying causes of speaking difficulties and the coping mechanisms employed by the students. As explained by Creswell (2012), qualitative research refers to a form of educational inquiry where the researcher collects and interprets data primarily derived from participants' perspectives, using broad and open-ended questions. This approach emphasizes rich, detailed descriptions of the participants' experiences and allows for subjective interpretation in uncovering emerging patterns or themes.

In this study, data were gathered through a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire items were designed to measure the frequency of students' experiences related to speaking problems, offering three response options for each statement: "frequently," "rarely," and "never." The questionnaire was distributed in digital format through a Google Form link, which was then accessed by second-year students enrolled at Universitas Amikom Purwokerto. This method enabled the researcher to efficiently gather data from a specific group of participants while maintaining accessibility and convenience for the students involved in the research.

4. DISCUSSION AND RESULT

A total of twenty-seven EFL students from Universitas Amikom Purwokerto took part in this study by filling out the previously distributed questionnaire. The following table presents a detailed summary of their responses, categorized based on the identified aspects of speaking difficulties.

a. Inhibition

Table 1. The outcome of Inhibition

Speaking Problem	Intensity	
	Frequently	**RarelyNever**
Concern about committing errors	70.4%	25.9%3.7%
Worry about being criticism	74.1%	14.8%11.1%
Feeling shy	70.4%	18.5%11.1%

The data collected from the questionnaire indicate that students face considerable difficulties related to all dimensions of inhibition when speaking English as a foreign language. One of the most prominent issues concerns the fear of making mistakes. A substantial proportion of respondents, approximately 96.3%, indicated that they frequently experience anxiety or hesitation due to the possibility of making errors while speaking in English. This finding suggests that the fear of being incorrect significantly hinders their willingness to participate in oral communication. On the other hand, only a small fraction of respondents, around 3.7%, reported that they have never encountered this issue, implying that such fear is a common and persistent challenge among the majority of EFL learners.

Another notable factor contributing to students' inhibition is the concern about receiving criticism from others. The results show that 74.1% of participants are afraid that they will be judged or criticized when speaking English in front of others. This type of anxiety can negatively impact their self-confidence and discourage them from engaging in classroom discussions or other speaking activities. In contrast, only 11.1% of the respondents claimed to be confident enough to handle criticism without it affecting their performance, while 14.8% stated that they experience this fear only occasionally.

The final aspect of inhibition identified in the data is the feeling of shyness. A total of 70.4% of students admitted that they often feel shy when required to speak in English, which further prevents them from practicing and improving their speaking skills. Meanwhile, 18.5% of respondents reported that they sometimes feel shy, depending on the context or situation, and only 11.1% of the students expressed that they feel comfortable and confident when speaking in English. These findings collectively suggest that emotional and psychological factors play a critical role in shaping students' speaking performance.

b. Nothing to say

Table 2. The outcome of Nothing to Say

Speaking Problem	Intensity		
	Frequently	**Rarely**	**Never**
Lacked topical knowledge	40.7%	55.6%	3.7%
Don't have motivation	18.5%	66.7%	14.8%

As presented in Table 2, the data indicate that students encounter challenges in all dimensions related to the issue of "having nothing to say" during English speaking activities. A significant majority of respondents, approximately 96.3%, reported that their lack of subject knowledge often prevents them from contributing meaningfully in conversations or classroom discussions conducted in English. This suggests that insufficient content knowledge remains a major barrier to effective oral communication. In contrast, only 3.7% of participants stated that they have never experienced this issue, highlighting its prevalence among the learners.

Another key aspect contributing to the problem is students' level of motivation to speak English. Based on the results, 18.5% of respondents admitted that they do not feel motivated to engage in speaking activities using the English language. Meanwhile, 14.8% of the students expressed a consistent motivation to improve and master their English speaking skills. Interestingly, 66.7% of respondents reported that their motivation to speak English fluctuates depending on various factors such as topic familiarity, classroom atmosphere, or personal confidence. These findings underscore the critical role of both cognitive readiness and affective factors, such as motivation, in shaping students' ability and willingness to communicate orally in English.

c. Low or Uneven Participation

Table 3. The outcome of Low or Uneven Participation

Speaking Problem	Intensity		
	Frequently	**Rarely**	**Never**
Low and uneven participation	18.5%	77.8%	3.7%

Based on the findings obtained from the questionnaire, it can be seen that a significant proportion of students, approximately 77.8%, reported that they rarely participate in classroom speaking activities. This suggests that the majority of students tend to be passive during speaking sessions and are not actively involved in discussions or oral interactions in English. Such limited participation may be influenced by a variety

of factors, including low confidence, fear of making mistakes, lack of motivation, or limited vocabulary.

Meanwhile, a small percentage of students, specifically 3.7%, indicated that they never participate in class at all. This complete lack of participation raises concern, as it may reflect deeper challenges such as high speaking anxiety, severe lack of self-efficacy, or a strong preference to remain silent due to discomfort with the language. On the other hand, only 18.5% of respondents reported that they frequently participate in classroom speaking activities. This minority represents students who are possibly more confident, better prepared linguistically, or more motivated to improve their speaking skills. The contrast between the high percentage of students who rarely participate and the small number who do so regularly highlights the uneven distribution of student involvement in speaking tasks, which may contribute to unequal learning opportunities and outcomes within the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning environment.

d. Mother Tongue Use

Table 4. The outcome of Mother Tongue Use

Speaking Problem	Intensity		
	Frequently	**Rarely**	**Never**
The students resort to using their mother tongue.	77.8%	17.2%	5%
The students perceive their mother tongue as more accessible.	85.2%	14.8%	0%

The findings reveal that the majority of students, around 77.8%, often rely on their mother tongue during English classes. Conversely, a minority of approximately 5% reported that they never use their native language in English learning activities. Additionally, a significant proportion of respondents 85.2% perceive their mother tongue as easier to use than English. Notably, none of the students perceived English to be easier than their first language. These findings highlight the strong preference among learners to rely on their native language as a means of communication in the classroom, which may reflect their comfort level and familiarity with the mother tongue, as well as the challenges they face in fully immersing themselves in English.

Based on the information presented, several important points can be drawn about the speaking problems faced by EFL learners. First, inhibition remains a major issue that needs more attention. Many students feel worried about making mistakes in grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary when speaking English. They also fear being judged or criticized by their classmates, which makes them hesitant to speak. The data show that

many students share these concerns, which suggests they feel insecure about their speaking abilities, even though most of them are at similar levels. This corresponds with Penny Tang's (1997) theory, which describes inhibition as encompassing fear of making mistakes, fear of criticism, and shyness in speaking English.

Second, many learners face the problem of having nothing to say. Most participants reported that they sometimes feel unmotivated to speak and have limited understanding of the topics being discussed. When students feel they do not know enough about the subject, they often stay silent, listen to others, and avoid expressing their own ideas. This agrees with Tang's (1997) view that students tend to stay quiet when the topic is unfamiliar or when they do not feel motivated to speak.

Third, many students have problems with low and uneven participation during class discussions. This means that some students speak a lot while others hardly speak at all. This situation matches Tang's (1997) explanation that limited chances to speak may cause a few students to dominate the conversation, leaving others silent.

Finally, the use of the mother tongue in English classes is still common. The findings show that only 5% of students never use their native language during English lessons. Most students prefer to use their mother tongue because they find it easier and more natural than English. None of the students thought English was easier than their first language. This reflects the challenges EFL learners face due to limited vocabulary, lack of topic knowledge, and less experience using English. In contrast, the mother tongue is familiar to them since childhood and is used every day, making it more comfortable to use.

5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

The results of this study reveal that EFL students encounter multiple challenges in speaking English, particularly related to fear of making mistakes, concern about criticism, and limited mastery of grammar, vocabulary, and fluency. These issues contribute to low active participation in class and a tendency to rely on their mother tongue during learning activities. Psychological factors, especially lack of self-confidence, play a significant role in hindering students' speaking abilities. Therefore, it is important for students to build greater courage and consistently practice speaking, while educators should foster a supportive learning environment that encourages active use of English and reduces dependence on the native language.

This study is limited by the relatively small sample size drawn from a single university, which restricts the generalizability of the results. Future research is recommended to include participants from multiple institutions and employ mixed methods to obtain a more comprehensive understanding. Additionally, further studies could explore effective teaching strategies aimed at enhancing students' confidence and participation in English speaking skills.

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