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STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN SPEAKING CLASS

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Abstract: The objective of this research is to identify the primary factors contributing to students' difficulties and to understand how these factors manifest in both classroom participation and social contexts. The study employed a descriptive qualitative methodology, focusing on fourth-semester students of the English Education Program at Universitas Katolik Indonesia Santu Paulus Ruteng. The participants have completed the "Speaking for Argumentation and Debate" course. Data were collected through unstructured, open-ended interviews. The interview was conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to ensure participants could fully reflect on their lived experiences and emotional states during the course. The findings revealed that speaking difficulties are deeply rooted in psychological manifestations of anxiety rather than mere linguistic incompetence. This research provides significant theoretical contributions to the field of EFL anxiety and offers practical insights for educators to design more supportive, empathy-based teaching strategies.

Keywords: Speaking difficulties, language anxiety, descriptive qualitative, argumentation and debate, EFL students.

INTRODUCTION

Speaking is widely recognized as one of the most essential yet challenging skills to master in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). It requires not only linguistic competence but also sociolinguistic and strategic competence to communicate effectively in real-time (Zhang, 2009). As

highlighted by Putri, et al. (2020), factors such as low vocabulary mastery and the natural worry of speaking in front of a class are universal hurdles for students. Richard (2008) emphasizes that the ability to speak fluently in academic settings is a cornerstone of success, yet many students feel alienated from these "discourse communities." This struggle is particularly evident in Indonesian higher education, where, as J Indriyani, R Norawati, R Sayuri (2016) observes, students are often afraid to try because they must perform in front of their peers.

Despite the abundance of research on speaking difficulties, there remains a significant research gap regarding high-stakes environments like "Argumentation and Debate." While Parawangsa et al. (2024) has explored difficulties in academic speaking classes, there is a lack of qualitative exploration into how fourth-semester students retrospectively navigate these barriers. This study aims to fill that gap by focusing on the lived experiences of students at Universitas Katolik Indonesia Santu Paulus Ruteng, identifying primary obstacles while examining how external reactions and psychological factors shape overall academic performance.

Speaking proficiency is widely regarded as a primary indicator of language learning success; however, in reality, many students face complex challenges within the classroom. According to Melansari et al. (2025), various external and internal factors overlap in influencing students' speaking skills, ranging from the learning environment to demanding academic workloads. In the context of Indonesian higher education, these challenges are even more pronounced due to limited exposure to English outside of campus. H Agung et al. (2023) noted that the specific local context in Indonesia often creates unique pressures for students, where the need to appear linguistically competent frequently clashes with the fear of being judged by their social surroundings.

Previous research consistently demonstrates that speaking barriers are not merely technical but are also heavily influenced by psychological aspects. Juhana (2012) identifies that cognitive and affective factors are the primary triggers of language anxiety, which subsequently impacts low student participation in class. This fear is often rooted in a lack of self-confidence regarding basic abilities. Difficulties in identifying core linguistic aspects often leave students feeling unprepared to engage in deeper discussions (AbdulAziz & Elmahdi, 2024). This condition creates a vicious cycle where fear hinders practice, and the lack of practice further exacerbates their linguistic struggles. Moreover, Afisah (2015) studied Students' Difficulties in Speaking at The Tenth Grade of SMA Negeri 1 Sine. The study found several factors causing students' difficulties in speaking. To overcome these barriers, the role of the classroom atmosphere and teaching strategies becomes crucial. There is a very close relationship between student satisfaction in the classroom and their self-efficacy in speaking.

Despite these studies, the study on students' difficulties in speaking English in rural area is limited. Thus, this study aims to fill the gap by focusing on identifying the primary factors contributing to students' difficulties and to understand how these factors manifest in both classroom participation and social contexts. This study is essential to provide deeper insights into creating a more empathetic and effective learning space for students facing difficulties in speaking.

METHOD

Research Design and Participants

This study employed a descriptive qualitative methodology to gain an in-depth understanding of the psychological barriers and language anxiety experienced by EFL students. Descriptive qualitative research focuses on exploring phenomena in their natural setting through methods such as interviews and observations. By using this design, the researcher aimed to provide a "thick description" of the students' lived experiences without manipulating the variables.

The participants of this study consisted of five students from the English Education Program at Universitas Katolik Indonesia Santu Paulus Ruteng who were in their fourth semester. These participants were selected through purposive sampling because they had recently completed the "Speaking for Argumentation and Debate" course. This specific demographic was chosen because their successful completion of such a demanding subject provided them with sufficient lived experience to articulate the complexities of language anxiety and the long-term psychological impact of competitive speaking environments.

Data Collection and Instruments

Data were collected through unstructured, open-ended interviews, observation and documentation. The unstructured interview was conducted to make the participants freely express their thoughts and emotional states without being constrained by rigid structures. To ensure clarity and allow participants to fully articulate deep-seated feelings and lived experiences, the interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, thereby removing any linguistic barriers during the data gathering process. There were five questions used for interview as follows: (1) What are the primary linguistic difficulties faced by students of the English Education Study Program at Unika Santu Paulus Ruteng in speaking classes? (2) Among limited vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, which factor most frequently causes hesitation during speech? (3) How do environmental reactions from lecturers and peers influence students' courage to continue speaking? (4) What psychological factors contribute most significantly to their reluctance

to speak? (5) How do these difficulties impact their overall academic performance in the speaking course?

To support data accuracy, a digital voice recorder was also used to ensure every verbal and non-verbal nuance, such as pauses or hesitations, was captured for further analysis. The use of a recording device allowed the researcher to remain fully present during the conversation, focusing on building rapport and observing the participants' body language. This combination of the researcher as a human instrument and the technical support of the interview guide ensured that the data gathered was both structured enough for analysis and flexible enough to capture unexpected insights.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a thematic analysis model, which involved organizing raw interview results into meaningful categories (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The process included carefully coding the transcriptions to identify recurring themes. This systematic process allowed the researchers to condense qualitative information into structured findings that directly addressed the factors contributing to speaking difficulties.

RESULTS

Primary Linguistic Barriers: Grammar and Vocabulary

The primary technical obstacles faced by English Education students at Unika Santu Paulus Ruteng are limited vocabulary and grammar mastery. These limitations create a "mental block" when students attempt to construct arguments in debate sessions. LVJ noted that her main issue is grammar, stating, *"I tend to overthink the formulas before speaking."* Similarly, MDL felt her struggles stemmed from *"a mix of grammar and limited vocabulary."* For most students, the double burden of processing grammatical rules while simultaneously searching for the right words leads to significant hesitation during their performance.

This indicates that students are still stuck in a "translation-based" thinking process where they try to translate Indonesian thoughts into English structures in real-time. The heavy focus on grammatical accuracy rather than communicative intent makes the speaking process feel like an exhausting mental exercise. As a result, the spontaneity required for a fast-paced debate is replaced by long pauses and fragmented sentences.

Communication Stoppage: Lexical Paralysis

The most critical findings suggest that limited vocabulary is the most frequent factor causing students to stop speaking mid-sentence. One participant explained that she often *"stops mid-sentence because I forget the English word for something"* (KF). Another participant also stated *"complex*

sentence structures in debate class are very difficult" (TFS), and expressed that she is afraid of using the wrong tenses. This phenomenon proves that lexical mastery is more decisive for fluency than other linguistic factors, as students feel verbally paralyzed when they cannot find specific terms for their ideas.

Furthermore, this lexical paralysis often leads to a complete loss of ideas, where students forget their entire argument because they are too focused on a single missing word. This "blanking out" creates a sense of helplessness that discourages students from trying again. When the flow of speech is repeatedly broken by a lack of words, the student's message becomes incoherent, making it difficult for the opponent or the adjudicator to follow their line of reasoning.

Environmental Influence: Social Support vs. Peer Pressure

The classroom environment plays a dual role as both a support system and a hindrance. The reactions of peers and lecturers determine a student's courage to take risks. One participant highlighted that *"peers who laugh at small mistakes are very discouraging for my mental state"* (MDL) while another participant stated, *"If my peers look too serious, I lose my nerve"* (LVJ). Furthermore, the lecturer's feedback style is crucial. This is stated by one participant; *"lecturers who interrupt to correct me immediately make me even more nervous"* (YPZ). This indicates that social acceptance and a relaxed atmosphere are key to a student's willingness to speak.

The findings suggest that the classroom culture at the university level still carries a high level of social judgment that silences anxious students. When the classroom is perceived as a "testing ground" rather than a "practice ground," students become hyper-aware of their audience. This highlights the need for a more collaborative environment where mistakes are seen as a natural part of learning rather than a reason for social embarrassment or immediate academic penalty.

Psychological Factors: Anxiety and Perfectionism

Anxiety and a lack of self-confidence are the root causes of student reluctance to participate. This anxiety manifests physically and mentally, paralyzing cognitive abilities. One participant stated *"excessive nervousness to the point where my hands shake when standing in front"* (YPZ), while another participant was trapped in acute perfectionism, stating, *"I am a perfectionist; if I am not sure it is correct, I won't say it"* (KF). Feelings of inferiority and the fear of being judged create a cycle of fear that prevents students from demonstrating their true competence.

This perfectionism acts as a silent barrier that is often mistaken for a lack of knowledge. In reality, students may have a deep understanding of the debate topic, but their internal "critic" prevents them from expressing it. The

physical symptoms, such as shaking and sweating, further drain their energy, leaving them mentally exhausted after only a few minutes of speaking. This confirms that the battle in a speaking class is often fought within the student's own mind before they even utter a single word.

Academic Impact and Learning Motivation

Linguistic and psychological barriers have a direct negative impact on academic achievement and long-term motivation. Since grades in a debate course are heavily weighted toward active participation, those who remain silent out of fear see a decline in their scores. *"I rarely get active participation points, so my final grade is just average"* (KF). Beyond grades, the mental burden leads to decreased motivation; One participant remarked that *"my grades dropped compared to the previous semester because this debate class is mentally heavier"* (TFS). Ultimately, mental well-being is shown to be inseparable from academic success.

Consequently, the persistent feeling of failure in speaking tasks can lead to a long-term aversion to the English language itself. When students perceive that their hard work in understanding the material is not reflected in their grades due to their anxiety, they begin to lose interest in the English Education Program. This burnout indicates that academic success in speaking courses is not just about linguistic intelligence, but also about the emotional resilience required to handle high-pressure academic demands.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that linguistic barriers, particularly grammar and vocabulary, serve as the primary technical hurdles. This study identified a significant struggle with overthinking grammatical "formulas," which created a mental block. This aligns with the findings of Nakhalah (2016), who identified that identification of difficulties often covers core linguistic aspects that hinder fluency. Furthermore, Rahmawati & Putri, (2023) argue that limited vocabulary mastery is a fundamental factor that makes students worry when performing. Ambawani, et al. (2025) also confirms that these factors are central to the lack of speaking skills among university students. Consequently, it can be concluded that a lack of grammatical automaticity and lexical depth is a precursor to speaking paralysis.

The phenomenon of "lexical paralysis" emerged as a critical finding, where students stop speaking mid-sentence. The study revealed that the inability to find specific English words led to communication breakdowns. This mirrors the research by Hidayati, et al. (2021), which found that many speaking difficulties are rooted in a lack of linguistic resources that are often neglected in the classroom. Similarly, AbdulAziz & Elmahdi (2024) suggest that students believe more active participation could overcome these gaps,

yet the initial lack of vocabulary prevents that very participation. Tracing the circumstances of these difficulties is vital to finding ways to motivate learners to overcome them (Agustina, et al. (2026). Therefore, vocabulary deficiency is the primary trigger for the "lexical paralysis" that halts oral performance.

The role of the lecturer's feedback style surfaced as a significant external factor. The participant expressed that being interrupted for immediate correction made her feel more nervous. This aligns the study conducted by Haidara (2016) stating that the process of adapting to new learning concepts in speaking classes can add additional problems if not managed well by the lecturer. Teachers face significant challenges in helping students speak when the students' difficulties are centered on academic-heavy contexts (Hasibuan, 2025). Thus, the timing and tone of pedagogical feedback are essential in managing the psychological comfort of EFL students during oral tasks.

Psychological factors, specifically anxiety and perfectionism, were identified as the root causes of reluctance. Perfectionism prevented the students from speaking. This relates to the study by Haidara (2016), which identifies cognitive and affective factors as the primary generators of anxiety in EFL speaking. Agung et al. (2023) further confirm that these psychological factors contribute significantly to the feeling of "freezing" during oral performance. The fear of making mistakes is a self-imposed barrier that often outweighs the student's actual linguistic intelligence (Nunan, 2003).

The impact of these barriers on academic performance is both direct and measurable. Silence resulted in lower participation points, leading to a final grade that did not reflect students understanding. Isabella, et al. (2026) highlight a clear relationship between student satisfaction, self-efficacy, and speaking achievement. When students experience the "speaking difficulties, their participation drops, which systematically disadvantages them in grading. Therefore, psychological barriers create an "achievement gap" that punishes anxious students despite their academic efforts.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the difficulties faced by fourth-semester students in the "Speaking for Argumentation and Debate" class at Universitas Katolik Indonesia Santu Paulus Ruteng are a complex. While limited vocabulary and grammar create the technical foundation for these hurdles, it is the "language anxiety" fueled by perfectionism and the fear of negative evaluation that truly paralyzes student performance. The social environment, including peer reactions and lecturer feedback styles, acts as a significant external catalyst that can either mitigate or exacerbate this anxiety.

The findings demonstrate that these challenges have a tangible negative

impact on students' academic achievement and long-term motivation. To address this, it is recommended that educators adopt more empathy-based teaching strategies, such as providing delayed feedback and fostering a non-judgmental classroom atmosphere. By shifting the focus from purely linguistic accuracy to psychological resilience, institutions can help students overcome their hesitations.

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