Unpacking the Multidimensional Nature of EFL Speaking Difficulties: A Holistic Framework of Learner-Centered Needs

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Abstract: Speaking is a critical yet challenging skill for EFL learners due to its spontaneous nature, real-time processing, and high emotional demands. This study explores the individual challenges that students face in learning to speak English and how these affect their classroom participation and language development. The study aims to examine the challenges that students encounter while learning to speak English and how these challenges influence their classroom participation and language development. Drawing on key theories of communicative competence, the Affective Filter Hypothesis, and pragmatic competence, this research employed a qualitative descriptive design, including open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with 25 university students enrolled in a speaking class. Thematic analysis revealed five interrelated dimensions of difficulty: (1) linguistic challenges, especially vocabulary and grammar limitations; (2) psychological barriers, including anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and lack of confidence; (3) the impact of classroom environment and activity design on comfort and performance; (4) learners' topic preferences, where familiar and casual themes are favored over abstract or technical subjects; and (5) the importance of pedagogical support, such as collaborative tasks, smaller group settings, and constructive feedback. The findings underscore that speaking difficulties are not merely linguistic but are deeply influenced by affective and contextual factors. Students benefit most from interactive, low-pressure environments that allow gradual confidence-building. The study concludes by recommending a more student-centered approach to speaking instruction one that acknowledges individual learner differences, promotes meaningful interaction, and fosters both communicative competence and psychological readiness. These insights can guide teachers in designing more inclusive and engaging speaking classes that empower learners to participate actively and confidently.

Keywords: EFL speaking challenges, communicative competence, affective filter, classroom interaction, learner confidence.

■ INTRODUCTION

Speaking is one of the most essential yet challenging skills to master in learning a second or foreign language (Zhang et al., 2025). Unlike reading and writing, speaking demands real-time processing, immediate language retrieval, and the confidence to interact spontaneously. This makes it a cognitively and emotionally demanding skill, especially for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners who often feel pressured to produce accurate language under time constraints. Many learners struggle with core linguistic components such as fluency, vocabulary range, pronunciation accuracy, and grammatical control, all of which are necessary for clear and effective communication (Abadi, 2015; Azizi & Yusuf, 2024). When students struggle to generate ideas quickly, find the right words, or construct

well-formed sentences, their speech becomes hesitant, fragmented, or overly simplified.

Beyond linguistic factors, emotional and psychological barriers often play a more substantial role in shaping speaking performance. Feelings of anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and lack of confidence can prevent learners from speaking even when they possess adequate language knowledge. Research shows that anxiety can interfere with cognitive processing, limiting the ability to recall vocabulary or apply grammar rules in real time (Diana et al., 2024). Fear of negative evaluation, both from peers and teachers, further intensifies self-consciousness, causing learners to withdraw from interaction or avoid speaking tasks altogether. These affective barriers create a mental block that restricts natural communication and diminishes learners' willingness to participate.

These challenges not only hinder language development but also reduce students' willingness to communicate and actively engage in class discussions or oral tasks, as shown in studies indicating that speaking anxiety lowers participation rates (Riadil, 2020), fear of negative evaluation leads learners to remain silent even when they understand the material (Sumanto & Saharani, 2023), and low self-confidence significantly suppresses oral performance in classroom interactions (Widianingsih & Yulianto, 2023). Additional research further highlights that both psychological barriers and limited linguistic resources negatively affect students' readiness to speak and diminish their engagement in communicative tasks (Sjaifullah, 2019; Muslimin et al., 2022). Together, these studies confirm that internal and external challenges play a decisive role in shaping learners' willingness to communicate, ultimately restricting opportunities for meaningful oral practice and slowing the development of speaking proficiency.

In addition to internal factors, the external classroom environment including teaching methods, types of speaking activities, and peer dynamics also plays a significant role in shaping students' speaking experiences. While some learners may benefit from interactive group work or casual conversations, others may feel uncomfortable speaking in front of the whole class or being called on without preparation. Learners also differ in their motivation, preferences for certain activities, and the kind of support they need from teachers. Therefore, understanding the individual challenges that students encounter in learning to speak English is crucial for creating more effective, inclusive, and learner-centered speaking instruction. This study seeks to explore these personal experiences and barriers in depth to inform better pedagogical practices.

Building on the discussion above, this study examines the multifaceted challenges students face in developing their English-speaking skills in the classroom. The investigation focuses on five interrelated dimensions: (i) the linguistic aspects of speaking that learners perceive as most difficult, (ii) the psychological barriers that influence their willingness and confidence to speak, (iii) the role of classroom environment in shaping performance and comfort, (iv) learners' preferences for particular types of speaking activities, including those they enjoy or avoid, and the extent to which these preferences affect learning outcomes, and (v) the forms of pedagogical support and classroom conditions that students regard as most effective in fostering greater confidence. These dimensions are essential for capturing a holistic view of the challenges students encounter, as they reflect not only individual language proficiency but also the affective and contextual variables that mediate classroom communication.

This research proposes two research novelties. First, this study offers a comprehensive analytical framework by integrating five interrelated dimensions (linguistic challenges,

psychological barriers, classroom-environment factors, learners' topic preferences, and preferred pedagogical supports) to explain EFL learners' speaking difficulties. Unlike previous research that typically isolates one or two variables, this study provides a holistic, learner-centered perspective that more accurately captures the complex factors shaping willingness to communicate and speaking performance. The second, it introduces learners' topic preferences and perceived pedagogical supports as key determinants of speaking engagement, highlighting variables that have received limited attention in prior work. By demonstrating how familiar topics, collaborative tasks, small-group settings, and constructive feedback significantly enhance confidence and participation, the study contributes new practical insights for designing more effective and inclusive speaking instruction in EFL contexts.

The significance of investigating these factors lies in their strong theoretical grounding within second language acquisition (SLA) and communicative competence frameworks. Linguistic difficulties point to gaps in grammatical, lexical, and discourse competence (Canale & Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1972), while affective and psychological barriers resonate with Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis, which emphasizes how motivation, anxiety, and self-confidence regulate learners' performance. Similarly, classroom environment and activity design highlight the importance of interaction and context in pragmatic development (Bachman, 1990; Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993). By integrating students' perceptions of enjoyable and effective speaking practices, along with their preferred modes of feedback and support, this study underscores the need to align pedagogy with learners' cognitive, affective, and sociocultural realities. Such an approach not only provides insights into individual learner challenges but also informs the design of classroom practices

that promote both competence and confidence in speaking English.

This study examines the extent to which linguistic limitations, psychological barriers, and classroom environment conditions influence EFL learners' willingness to communicate during speaking activities. It investigates which factor exerts the strongest impact, with particular attention to psychological aspects such as anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and low self-confidence. The study also explores how limited vocabulary, grammatical difficulties, and pronunciation problems contribute to hesitation and reduced fluency. Additionally, it analyses how classroom dynamics, including teacher support, peer interaction, and activity design, shape learners' participation and how these factors interact to determine overall speaking success.

■ **THEORETICAL REVIEW**

The process of acquiring speaking skills in a second or foreign language is complex and multifaceted, influenced by cognitive, linguistic, affective, and sociocultural factors. This theoretical review draws on key theories in second language acquisition (SLA), communicative competence, affective filter theory, and pragmatic competence to elucidate the individual challenges learners often face in speaking. Several studies have been conducted to date in relation to this study. Linguists focused on communicative competence highlighted that the core of speaking proficiency lies in communicative competence, which extends beyond grammatical knowledge to include sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. Many individual difficulties in speaking, such as choosing appropriate expressions, maintaining coherence, and managing communication breakdowns, reflect gaps in these sub-competencies (Elisathusilawani, 2023; Fauzan et al., 2024; Harahap et al., 2024;

Ratnasari, 2020). For instance, learners may possess grammatical accuracy but struggle with sociolinguistic appropriateness or fail to use repair strategies during communication breakdowns.

The process of acquiring speaking skills in a second or foreign language is complex and multifaceted, influenced by cognitive, linguistic, affective, and sociocultural factors. Recent studies emphasize that speaking proficiency emerges from the interaction of these dimensions, rather than from linguistic knowledge alone (Derakhshan & Fathi, 2024, 2025; J. Fathi & Behzadpoor, 2025). This theoretical review draws on key theories in second language acquisition (SLA), communicative competence, the affective filter hypothesis, and pragmatic competence to elucidate the individual challenges learners often face in speaking. Several studies have been conducted to date in relation to this study.

Linguists focusing on communicative competence highlight that the core of speaking proficiency extends beyond grammatical knowledge to include sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. Many individual difficulties in speaking such as choosing appropriate expressions, maintaining coherence, or managing breakdowns in communication reflect gaps in these sub-competencies (Elisathusilawani, 2023; Fauzan et al., 2024; Harahap et al., 2024; Ratnasari, 2020). For instance, learners may possess grammatical accuracy but struggle with sociolinguistic appropriateness or fail to use repair strategies during communication breakdowns, a challenge also observed in recent research on emotional intelligence and interactional ability (Muslimin et al., 2022; *Speaking Accuracy and Fluency…*, 2024).

In addition to linguistic and pragmatic demands, affective factors such as anxiety, enjoyment, and willingness to communicate play a decisive role in shaping speaking performance. High anxiety can block cognitive processing, while positive emotions enhance fluency and engagement (Lin et al., 2025). Studies grounded in positive psychology further reveal that enjoyment, grit, and learners' ideal L2-speaking self significantly predict oral proficiency and sustained participation in speaking tasks (Derakhshan & Fathi, 2024; Fathi & Behzadpoor, 2025). Sociocultural factors also contribute to oral development, as exposure to spoken input beyond the classroom and interactional opportunities influences pragmatic competence, motivation, and communicative confidence (Mislina, 2023).

The subsequent development in understanding the psychological dimension of speaking performance was proposed by Krashen (1982) in his Affective Filter Hypothesis. He posited that emotional variables, such as motivation, anxiety, and self-confidence, significantly influence language acquisition. In speaking, which is an immediate, embodied, and often public act, the affective filter becomes especially prominent because learners must simultaneously manage linguistic processing and social pressure. Recent studies reaffirm the continued relevance of Krashen's framework in contemporary contexts. Shuai (2025), for instance, illustrates how affective variables remain central even in technology-enhanced learning environments; his interdisciplinary review demonstrates that anxiety and fluctuating motivation can impede real-time oral performance despite advancements in AI-supported instruction. Similarly, Asterina et al. (2025) empirically show that high levels of language anxiety during academic speaking tasks lead learners to avoid participation, hesitate excessively, or rely on memorized expressions. These behaviours align directly with Krashen's argument that a heightened affective filter restricts the intake and internalization of linguistic input, thereby slowing the development of speaking fluency. Such findings support the claim that

emotional regulation, classroom climate, and learner confidence are not peripheral concerns but foundational determinants of success in spoken language acquisition.

A complementary challenge to speaking competence relates to the sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic demands of communication. Bachman (1990) and Kasper and Blum-Kulka (1993) introduced pragmatic competence as a crucial dimension of communicative ability, emphasizing the need to use language appropriately in social contexts. Pragmatic failures, such as mismanaging politeness, misunderstanding implicatures, or applying culturally inappropriate directness, often result in communication breakdowns even when grammatical accuracy is high. Recent literature reinforces this position. Sitorus et al. (2024), in a systematic review of pragmatic competence in SLA, highlight that those misunderstandings in spoken interaction frequently stem from insufficient awareness of contextual norms, sociocultural expectations, and the subtleties of turn-taking. Their review also shows that learners in intercultural settings face compounded challenges because pragmatic norms vary widely across languages and cultures, underscoring the importance of exposure and explicit instruction.

Together, affective and pragmatic perspectives offer a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges learners face in speaking. The affective filter shapes the learner's psychological readiness to speak, while pragmatic competence determines the appropriateness and social intelligibility of what is spoken. Integrating these dimensions allows educators to design interventions that build both confidence and contextual awareness; two pillars indispensable for developing effective, fluent, and culturally responsive speakers.

Recent developments in pragmatic competence research emphasize the centrality of contextual richness in fostering learners'

sociopragmatic awareness. Studies using augmented reality (AR) (Moghaddam, 2025) demonstrate that immersive environments enhance learners' ability to adjust their speech acts according to power, distance, and imposition, which are often abstract in conventional classrooms. Similarly, research on reflective teaching (M. J. Fathi et al., 2025) shows that when learners are guided to notice, evaluate, and reflect on pragmatic choices, they become more adept at aligning linguistic forms with social functions. These findings collectively underscore that pragmatic learning is not merely the acquisition of formulaic expressions but the development of sensitivity to contextually embedded communicative norms.

Further research on pragmatic competence focuses on the role of mediation in instruction and practice (Peng & Zhou, 2025). Social media platforms, while abundant in authentic interaction, do not automatically translate into pragmatic growth. Rather, learners benefit when participation is scaffolded by tasks that direct attention to politeness strategies, indirectness, and face management. Explicit and implicit instruction, when paired with reflection, also proves effective in strengthening pragmatic competence. This indicates that exposure alone is insufficient; learners must be guided through structured noticing, feedback, and practice to internalize sociopragmatic principles. In this sense, technology, reflection, and pedagogy converge to form an ecosystem in which learners engage not only with authentic input but also with conscious analysis of its social dimensions (Mokhtar et al., 2023).

The acquisition of speaking skills in a second or foreign language is shaped by cognitive, linguistic, affective, and sociocultural factors. Foundational theories stress that communicative competence involves not only grammar but also sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic abilities, while affective variables such as anxiety and

confidence strongly influence learners' fluency (Kamengko, 2024; Kullick, 2025; Lopez et al., 2021; Napitupulu et al., 2025). Pragmatic competence further plays a crucial role, as many difficulties arise from inappropriate language use rather than grammatical errors. Recent studies show that contextualized instruction, reflective teaching, and guided digital interaction effectively enhance pragmatic awareness, underscoring that speaking proficiency requires both linguistic mastery and sensitivity to context.

To sum up, the process of acquiring speaking skills in a second or foreign language is not a linear progression but a dynamic interplay of linguistic knowledge, psychological readiness, and sociocultural awareness. While communicative competence provides the foundational framework for effective interaction, affective factors often determine whether learners can actualize their potential in real communicative settings. Pragmatic competence, meanwhile, highlights that speaking is as much about appropriateness and meaning negotiation as it is about accuracy and fluency. Emerging research demonstrates that technology-mediated contexts, reflective practices, and guided instruction offer powerful avenues to bridge gaps in learners' pragmatic and communicative abilities. Therefore, fostering speaking proficiency requires an integrated approach one that combines theoretical insights with innovative pedagogical practices to help learners not only master language forms but also engage meaningfully and confidently in diverse communicative situations (Novianti & Lestari, 2019; Octaberlina et al., 2022; Perwitasari, 2022; Riadil, 2020).

■ METHOD

Research Design and Procedures

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore and describe the individual challenges learners face in developing English-speaking skills. The research focused on students' personal experiences and reflections to gain in-depth insights into the factors influencing their performance in an EFL context.

Participants

The participants of this study were 25 undergraduate students enrolled in one of the four transactional speaking classes offered by the Faculty of Humanities at Jenderal Soedirman University during the 2024/2025 academic year. One class was selected randomly because the speaking proficiency levels across the four available classes were relatively comparable. The selected students represented a range of speaking abilities from low to high intermediate. Within the selected class, the participants represented diverse proficiency levels, ranging from low to high intermediate. This diversity was identified based on course placement records, lecturers' evaluations, and students' classroom performance in speaking activities. Including students with varying levels of speaking ability enabled the study to capture a wide range of experiences, challenges, and perceptions, thereby yielding richer, more varied qualitative data. To be included as respondents, participants had to meet three criteria: (1) be officially enrolled in an EFL speaking course, (2) voluntarily agree to participate and share their learning experiences, and (3) represent diverse proficiency levels to ensure variation in the data.

Instruments

Two primary instruments were used in this study:

Open-ended Questionnaire

The questionnaire contains items addressing fluency, pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary limitations, confidence, anxiety, and interactional experiences in classroom speaking

activities. It examines students' experiences with speaking English by exploring their learning preferences, classroom environment, emotional obstacles, general speaking issues, and linguistic challenges. In general, many students say that speaking English in class is difficult due to limited vocabulary, poor grammatical precision, poor pronunciation, and a lack of confidence. These challenges frequently lead to reluctance and decreased involvement in class discussions. Many students report that they have been in situations where they wanted to speak but ultimately decided to remain quiet, mainly because they were afraid of making mistakes, worried that their peers would disapprove, or did not have enough time to formulate suitable answers.

Students' speaking performance is also significantly influenced by emotional and psychological elements. Anxiety and uneasiness are common, especially during formal speaking events like presentations or when answering questions from the professor. When chatting with peers, students typically feel more confident than when interacting with native or highly skilled speakers, indicating that their readiness to communicate is influenced by perceived language competency and power dynamics. This disparity in confidence can impede spontaneous speech production due to concerns about accuracy and fluency, as well as a fear of being criticized.

The school setting further impacts students' speaking development. Although interactive exercises, such as role-plays, group discussions, and presentations, are usually seen as helpful for enhancing speaking abilities, their success depends on how at ease students feel while participating. Speaking in small groups is more comfortable for many pupils than speaking in front of the entire class. Factors that can enhance students' comfort and interest in oral activities include a supportive environment, constructive feedback, and less emphasis on correcting mistakes during initial speaking attempts.

From a linguistic standpoint, pupils consistently struggle with sentence formation, pronunciation, and fluency. Frequent pauses and reliance on the first language are common outcomes of difficulty structuring ideas into cohesive spoken phrases. Furthermore, some topics or language domains are considered more challenging to address in English, particularly those that are abstract, scholarly, or culturally foreign. These difficulties indicate deficiencies in language proficiency and limited exposure to a range of speaking situations.

Lastly, students' motivation and preferred learning methods affect how much they participate in speaking exercises. While they frequently avoid activities that call for individual performance, such as formal speeches, learners typically prefer interactive and collaborative speaking tasks that allow for peer support and shared responsibility. Students want additional practice opportunities, smaller discussion groups, and more formative feedback from instructors to improve their speaking confidence. These results emphasise the importance of creating speaking education that accounts for affective and contextual factors that shape students' oral communication, alongside language proficiency.

Semi-structured Interview Guide

The interview guide consisted of follow-up prompts derived from the questionnaire topics. It enabled the researcher to probe participants' experiences more deeply, clarify unclear responses, and explore personal narratives that contributed to understanding speaking difficulties.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to examine the data from both research instruments. To ensure consistency and clarity in the dataset, the interview data were first transcribed, and the questionnaire responses were then methodically organized. The researcher familiarized herself with the data and

identified initial trends in the participants' responses during this first phase.

The data were then coded and categorised into recurrent themes. These themes included students' general speaking experiences, emotional and psychological obstacles, the classroom setting, language difficulties, learning preferences, and motivation. The identification of significant data units and the examination of trends across many data sources were made possible by the coding procedure.

Lastly, the emerging themes were analysed to investigate their implications for pedagogical practice in speaking teaching and to explain how the highlighted issues appeared in students' English-speaking practices. This interpretive phase produced recommendations for more successful and encouraging speaking teaching as well as insights into the variables affecting students' speaking performance. This analytical approach ensured that the findings captured the complexity and depth of learners' subjective experiences while remaining grounded in their actual expressions.

Data validity in this study was ensured through several strategies appropriate to qualitative research. First, content validity was established by designing the questionnaire and interview guide based on established theoretical constructs related to EFL speaking challenges, including linguistic, psychological, and classroom-environment factors. Second, triangulation was applied by collecting data from two instruments: open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, to cross-check and confirm participants' responses. Third, member checking

was conducted by asking selected participants to clarify or confirm their interview responses to ensure accurate interpretation. These procedures helped ensure that the findings genuinely reflected learners' experiences and the research objectives.

Data reliability was maintained by ensuring consistency and transparency throughout data collection and analysis. The same questionnaire and interview guide were used for all participants, and interviews were conducted consistently using the same prompts. During analysis, a systematic coding process was applied, with themes developed based on recurring patterns across the dataset. To reduce researcher bias, coding decisions were documented and reviewed repeatedly during analysis. Detailed descriptions of procedures and analytical steps were provided to enable auditability, ensuring that the findings are dependable and replicable within similar EFL contexts.

■ **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

The table presents the research findings in relation to the following questions: (i) which linguistic aspects of speaking learners consider most challenging, (ii) what emotional or psychological barriers affect their willingness and confidence to speak, (iii) how the classroom environment influences their performance and sense of comfort, (iv) learners' preferences for specific speaking activities both those they enjoy and those they tend to avoid and how these preferences impact learning outcomes, and (v) the types of pedagogical support and classroom conditions students view as most effective in building their confidence.

Table 1. Features and result

No	Features	Result
1	The aspects of speaking English that students find most difficult	The most difficult aspects of speaking English in class are vocabulary, grammar, and confidence.
2	The psychological barriers affect their willingness or confidence	Students feel nervous or anxious when speaking English, especially in situations that put them under

		pressure, such as presentations or direct/individual conversations with teachers.
3	The classroom environments that influence students' speaking performance and comfort levels	Classroom activities such as group discussions, role-plays, and presentations significantly help students improve their English-speaking skills.
4	The topics of speaking activities that students enjoy or avoid, and how these preferences impact their learning	There are specific topics and types of vocabulary that students find difficult to talk about in English, especially those that involve technical, academic, or abstract content, such as topics like politics, economics, law, or technology (scientific concepts). When the topic is familiar or casual, like hobbies, jobs, or daily routines, students feel more confident.
5	The support or classroom conditions that students believe would help them speak more confidently in English	Students enjoy interactive, collaborative, and relaxed speaking activities, such as group discussions, role-plays, casual conversations, games, and debates. To speak English more confidently in class, they believe a combination of more practice time, smaller group settings, and teacher-provided constructive feedback will support their speaking abilities.

The main characteristics and conclusions regarding students' experiences and difficulties speaking English in class are presented in Table 1. The findings indicate that the most challenging aspects of speaking English are vocabulary, grammar, and confidence. These challenges point to more serious issues with communicative ability, even when kids may show a minimum level of grammatical accuracy. In particular, learners often struggle with managing communication breakdowns during interactions, selecting appropriate language, and maintaining coherence in extended conversations. According to earlier research, these challenges reflect deficiencies in discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic sub-competencies (Ratnasari, 2020; Elisathusilawani, 2023; Fauzan et al., 2024; Harahap et al., 2024). This research supports the idea that speaking skill goes beyond grammatical knowledge and necessitate the capacity to utilise language effectively and strategically in real-time communication.

It has also been demonstrated that psychological obstacles significantly affect students' confidence and willingness to speak English. According to the table, students often feel anxious and tense, particularly in high-stress situations such as oral presentations or face-to-face meetings with teachers. These results are consistent with studies showing that affective factors, particularly anxiety, can limit learners' access to linguistic resources and impede cognitive processing during speaking tasks (Muslimin et al., 2022; Speaking Accuracy and Fluency..., 2024). Due to emotional limitations, learners may possess sufficient language knowledge yet be unable to utilize it effectively. On the other hand, it has been demonstrated that enjoyment, self-assurance, and readiness to communicate improve speaking performance, fluency, and interactional skills (Lin et al., 2025).

The classroom setting further reinforces the relationship between the cognitive and emotive aspects of speaking. Although interactive exercises, such as role-plays, group debates, and presentations, are thought to enhance speaking abilities, their efficacy depends on a supportive, anxiety-free learning environment. Learners can

experiment with language use, negotiate meaning, and employ repair tactics when communication breaks down in a classroom environment that promotes collaboration and reduces the fear of negative evaluation. This validates theoretical viewpoints that highlight how cognitive, linguistic, affective, and social aspects influence the development of speaking abilities in a second or foreign language (Kamengko, 2024; Kullick, 2025; Lopez et al., 2021; Napitupulu et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the results show that students' speaking performance is significantly influenced by their familiarity with the subject. Due to a lack of language and conceptual understanding, learners often avoid or struggle with technical, intellectual, or abstract subjects, such as politics, economics, law, or technology. These challenges frequently lead to less coherence and greater hesitation, which exacerbates worry. On the other hand, students can speak more confidently and smoothly when discussing common and daily issues, indicating that pragmatic and discourse competence develop more effectively when learners can draw on prior knowledge and contextual understanding. This emphasises the need for pragmatic competence, as many speaking issues stem from improper language use rather than just grammatical mistakes.

Lastly, students clearly prefer interactive, cooperative, and laid-back speaking activities for classroom support and instructional conditions. Group talks, role-plays, games, and casual conversations are considered less intimidating and more engaging, while additional practice time, smaller group settings, and constructive teacher feedback are viewed as crucial for improving speaking confidence. These findings are consistent with recent studies showing that contextualized education, reflective teaching approaches, and guided (including digital) engagement can significantly boost learners' pragmatic awareness and interactional competence. Overall, the findings underscore the importance of effective speaking instruction in promoting the long-term development of speaking proficiency by addressing affective control, sociocultural sensitivity, and linguistic competence.
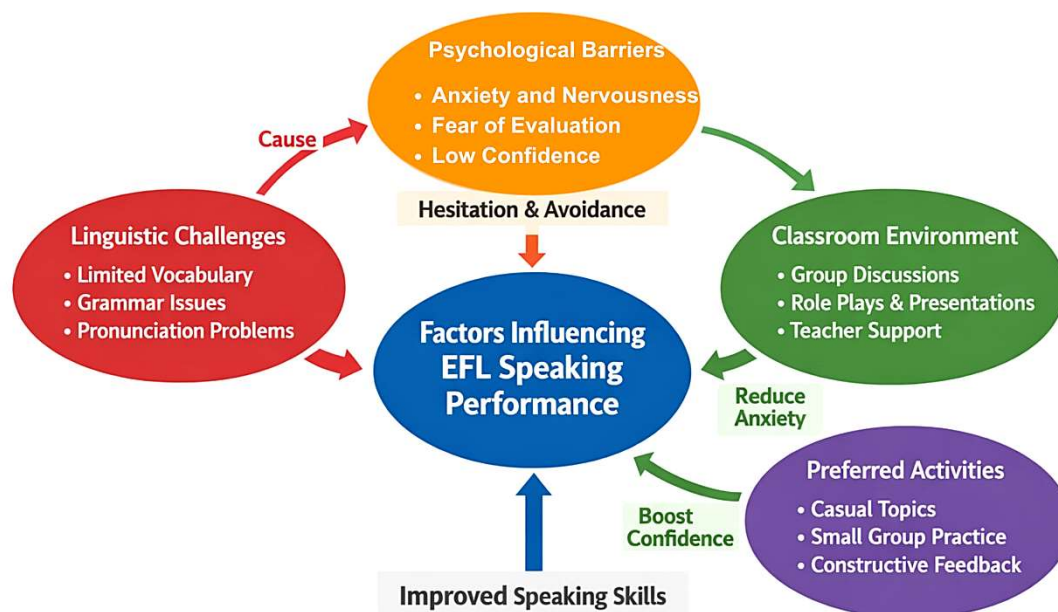

Figure 1. The thematic map of interrelated factors influencing EFL students' speaking performance

The thematic map illustrates the interrelated factors influencing EFL students' speaking performance by showing how linguistic, psychological, and classroom-related dimensions interact dynamically. Linguistic challenges, including limited vocabulary, grammatical difficulties, and pronunciation problems, appear as the primary source of difficulty. These limitations often trigger psychological barriers such as anxiety, nervousness, fear of negative evaluation, and low confidence. When students feel unsure about their language resources, they tend to hesitate, avoid speaking, or withdraw from participation, especially in high-pressure situations like presentations or direct interaction with teachers. Psychological barriers, in turn, strongly mediate students' willingness to communicate and serve as a central filter, determining whether linguistic knowledge can be effectively used. The diagram also highlights the role of the classroom environment in either alleviating or intensifying these barriers. Supportive classroom practices, including group discussions, role plays, and constructive teacher feedback, help reduce anxiety and create a safer space for oral communication. Additionally, preferred activities and familiar or casual topics, such as daily routines or hobbies, boost students' confidence and encourage more active participation. Overall, the diagram emphasizes that speaking success does not depend solely on linguistic competence. Instead, it emerges from the interaction between language ability, emotional readiness, and contextual support, suggesting that effective speaking instruction should address all three dimensions simultaneously.

The credibility of this thematic analysis is strengthened by systematic, transparent analytical procedures. Themes represented in the thematic map were derived inductively from repeated patterns across questionnaire responses and interview data, ensuring they are grounded in participants' authentic expressions rather than in the researcher's assumptions. Data triangulation between open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews enhanced analytical rigor by allowing cross-verification of emerging themes. Consistent coding procedures and careful theme refinement ensured coherence and internal consistency across categories. Furthermore, the thematic relationships illustrated in the diagram align with established theoretical frameworks in EFL speaking and affective factors, reinforcing the analytical validity. Together, these procedures ensure that the thematic map provides a qualified, trustworthy, and credible representation of learners' speaking experiences.
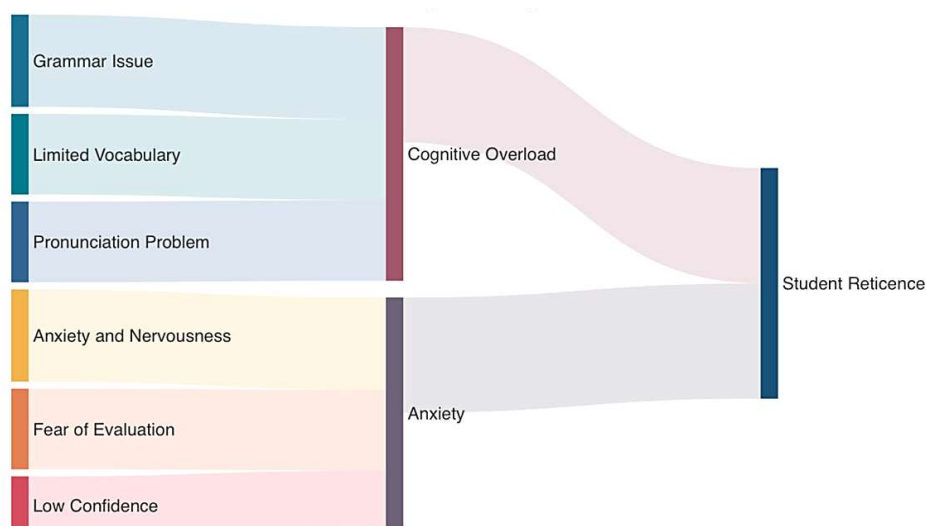

Figure 2. The sankey diagram

The interrelated factors that cause student hesitation in English-speaking classrooms are depicted in the Sankey diagram. Linguistic limitations, such as poor grammar, a limited vocabulary, and pronunciation concerns, combine to produce cognitive overload, which is the total amount of mental work required to handle both language form and meaning at the same time. Simultaneously, affective factors, such as anxiety and uneasiness, low confidence, and fear of evaluation, are combined to produce elevated anxiety. Together, these two key processes, cognitive overload and anxiety, lead to student reluctance, which manifests as decreased engagement or quiet during speaking exercises. The picture supports the idea that speaking challenges are both cognitively and affectively mediated, showing that student reluctance is not the product of a single issue but arises from the interaction between language demands and psychological strain.

A further elaboration is presented in the next part to show how individual challenges affect speaking class and how these challenges can be addressed in the design of a more engaging speaking environment. The discussion highlights the specific difficulties that learners face, such as limited vocabulary, lack of fluency, pronunciation issues, or anxiety about making mistakes, and how these obstacles influence their overall participation and confidence. It also explores how psychological factors, such as fear of negative evaluation, low self-esteem, or reluctance to speak in front of peers, can create barriers to effective communication. By examining these individual struggles, the study provides insights into how teachers can adapt their classroom practices, not only to reduce learners' discomfort but also to foster active involvement (Rizkon et al., 2023; Saragih et al., 2024). For example, incorporating interactive activities such as role-plays, debates, and small-group discussions can help reduce pressure on individual students while fostering a supportive, collaborative atmosphere. Likewise, designing tasks that are meaningful and relevant to students' daily experiences can enhance their motivation and willingness to take risks in speaking. In this way, the challenges that often hinder learning are not ignored but rather transformed into opportunities for more dynamic, student-centered, and engaging speaking classes.

The Most Challenging Aspect of Speaking

The most difficult aspects of speaking English in class are vocabulary, grammar, and confidence. These three elements are deeply interconnected and often influence one another in complex ways. For many learners, speaking English in a classroom setting is perceived as a demanding and high-pressure task because it requires the simultaneous coordination of linguistic knowledge, cognitive processing, and emotional control. When any of these aspects falter, such as forgetting a word, making a grammatical mistake, or feeling anxious, communication becomes disrupted. As a result, even students with adequate English proficiency often struggle to express ideas effectively in real-time interaction.

Vocabulary is widely regarded as one of the most persistent challenges. In many speaking situations, learners find it difficult to recall the appropriate English words at the right moment, even when they know the equivalent term in their first language. This phenomenon, sometimes referred to as a "lexical gap" or a "tip-of-the-tongue" problem, limits active participation in discussions. When the necessary vocabulary cannot be retrieved quickly, speakers tend to pause, hesitate, or replace precise words with vague expressions such as "thing," "something," or "that one." These circumlocutions may convey meaning to some extent, but they limit accuracy and reduce communicative richness. As a result, fluency and confidence are negatively affected. One clear example of this condition occurs when a student wants to say: *"The government should*

subsidize public transportation to reduce pollution." However, because the word "subsidize" cannot be retrieved at the moment of speaking, the learner instead produces *"The government should… uh… give money to public transportation so people use it more.* In this case, the speaker knows the concept in their first language but experiences a lexical gap in English. The pause and hesitation reflect a tip-of-the-tongue problem, and the use of a vague paraphrase ("give money") reduces precision and formality. Although the message is still understandable, the lack of accurate vocabulary affects fluency, confidence, and the overall quality of the spoken response.

The lack of vocabulary also shapes learners' topic preferences and willingness to engage. Many students report avoiding specific topics, particularly those in academic or abstract subjects such as politics, science, or economics, because they fear lacking the specialized vocabulary needed to discuss them effectively. Consequently, conversations often remain limited to familiar, everyday subjects like hobbies or routines. Furthermore, learners may become dependent on memorized expressions or formulaic phrases, which hinders their ability to speak creatively or spontaneously. This challenge highlights the essential role of vocabulary development in oral proficiency. Without a sufficiently broad and active lexicon, even grammatically competent learners may struggle to communicate ideas clearly and confidently.

Grammar presents another significant barrier to effective speaking. English grammar is often perceived as complex and inconsistent, particularly for speakers of languages with simpler or more regular structures. The most frequently reported difficulties include verb tense, subject-verb agreement, prepositions, and sentence structure. During speaking activities, there is rarely enough time to consciously apply grammatical rules, leading to hesitation and self-correction mid-sentence. Learners might start speaking but then stop abruptly while deciding which tense or structure to use. This focus on accuracy interrupts the natural flow of communication and can cause frustration.

The anxiety surrounding grammatical correctness also contributes to reduced participation. Many students are reluctant to speak unless they are certain their sentence will be grammatically correct. However, this perfectionist attitude paradoxically prevents improvement, as spoken fluency develops through trial and error and feedback rather than avoidance. Moreover, English differs from Indonesian in several structural aspects, such as the use of auxiliary verbs, inflectional endings, and strict word order, which often confuse. These structural contrasts make spontaneous English production more difficult, as learners must mentally translate or reorganize their ideas before speaking. As a result, conversation speed decreases, and opportunities for interaction may be missed. One of the respondents claims, "I am still confused when I should use terrifying or terrified in a construction; if I make a wrong choice, my friend will laugh at me because my sentence will be ridiculous." A problem with the past and present particles will arise in a speaking class.

Among the three factors, confidence has been identified as perhaps the most influential. Even learners with sufficient vocabulary and grammatical knowledge often find their performance inhibited by nervousness, self-doubt, or anxiety (Sjaifullah, 2019). Fear of making mistakes and being negatively evaluated by classmates or lecturers creates a psychological barrier that suppresses participation. This anxiety is heightened in situations where speaking tasks are public or evaluative, such as presentations or class discussions, because attention is focused on the speaker. Students worry about being corrected harshly or laughed at, which can lead

to avoidance behavior and silence. One of the respondents stated the following: "Sometimes in class, I'm afraid to speak because I'm afraid of making mistakes and then being laughed at by my friends. The feeling of embarrassment doesn't go away, even though a week has passed since the class.

Feelings of inadequacy are further intensified when students compare themselves with peers who appear more fluent or confident. Such comparisons can create a sense of inferiority and reinforce the belief that one's English is "not good enough." Additionally, learners sometimes experience pressure to approximate native-like pronunciation or accent, believing that this is the standard of success. This misconception adds unnecessary tension and distracts from the more important goal of achieving intelligibility and communicative effectiveness. When students focus excessively on accent imitation, their attention shifts away from message delivery, resulting in slower, more hesitant speech.

The interaction among these three elements: vocabulary, grammar, and confidence, creates a cycle of difficulty. Limited vocabulary can reduce confidence, while low confidence discourages practice, preventing vocabulary expansion. Similarly, excessive concern about grammar accuracy leads to hesitation, undermining fluency and further weakening confidence. Breaking this cycle requires both pedagogical and psychological strategies that address linguistic competence and emotional readiness simultaneously.

To overcome these challenges, consistent practice in supportive environments is essential. Speaking tasks should emphasize communication rather than perfection, allowing students to express themselves freely without fear of immediate correction. Teachers play a crucial role in fostering a safe, encouraging classroom climate where mistakes are viewed as natural and necessary steps in language development. Positive

feedback, peer support, and gradual exposure to public speaking opportunities can strengthen learners' belief in their own abilities. One of the students highlighted that she is Okay when she is corrected in front of her friends, as long as it is done jokingly, not in a stressful situation. When the feedback is uttered jokingly, she can respond with a smile or even laugh with her friends. "I am Ok being corrected in front of my friends as I can smile, even laugh, together with them, but when the feedback is given in a stressful way… Owh Owh, big No".

Furthermore, structured vocabulary enrichment through reading, topic-based discussions, and contextualized exercises can expand learners' lexical range and facilitate spontaneous expression. Grammar instruction, meanwhile, should be integrated with communicative practice rather than taught in isolation, so that accuracy develops alongside fluency. Over time, as students experience more successful speaking interactions, their confidence grows, and their anxiety diminishes.

In summary, speaking English in the classroom is hindered by three interrelated obstacles: limited vocabulary, complex grammar, and low confidence. These challenges do not operate independently but reinforce one another, making oral communication difficult. Addressing them requires a balance between linguistic development and affective support. Through regular practice, constructive feedback, and a tolerant learning environment, students can gradually overcome fear, improve proficiency, and achieve greater confidence in expressing themselves in English.

Psychological Barriers Affect Students' Willingness and Confidence

Several situations in class have occurred in which participation was intended, but silence was ultimately chosen. These moments often occurred during interactive sessions such as discussions,

debates, or spontaneous question-and-answer activities, when the motivation to contribute was present but confidence failed to follow through. A particularly memorable instance occurred during a discussion session, when a clear idea had already formed in my mind, including the exact sentence I would have spoken. However, just before raising a hand, a sudden wave of self-doubt emerged. Questions rushed through the mind: "What if my grammar is wrong? What if my pronunciation is incorrect? What if everyone laughs?" The internal dialogue intensified, and within seconds, the decision to remain silent replaced the initial enthusiasm to participate. The idea that once seemed clear and relevant slowly faded, leaving only regret and frustration.

The primary factor preventing participation in these situations was identified as a lack of self-confidence, particularly regarding the accuracy and appropriateness of spoken English. The hesitation was not due to a lack of understanding of the discussion topic; in fact, the content was often well comprehended. Rather, it stemmed from a deep-seated fear of making mistakes, especially grammatical or pronunciation errors. This fear created a psychological barrier that limited verbal expression even when thoughts were already organized internally. Feelings of linguistic inadequacy were frequent, as the speaker often compared personal proficiency with that of peers who appeared more fluent or articulate. The possibility of being judged either by classmates or by the lecturer further amplified the anxiety.

A related source of insecurity was the fear of social judgment and ridicule. In some peer groups, speaking English in class is sometimes perceived as showing off or as overly confident, leading to teasing remarks such as *"sok Inggris"* or *"belagu."* Even if made humorously, such comments can have lasting emotional effects, creating a sense of exclusion or embarrassment. Research has shown that negative peer reactions

significantly influence students' willingness to communicate (Sumanto & Saharani, 2023; Widianingsih & Yulianto, 2023). Consequently, the anticipation of ridicule or harsh correction often outweighs the desire to participate. The learner, therefore, chooses silence as a form of self-protection, avoiding the risk of humiliation even at the cost of losing valuable speaking practice.

Apart from psychological barriers, technical challenges also contributed to the tendency toward silence. These included moments of hesitation caused by difficulty recalling vocabulary, forgetting an English equivalent for an Indonesian word, or struggling to arrange ideas into coherent sentences quickly enough. In spontaneous discussions, language retrieval must happen almost instantaneously; when the right word fails to come to mind, anxiety increases, and the opportunity to contribute often passes. Several times, readiness to speak was felt, but by the time the idea was linguistically prepared, the discussion had already moved on to another topic. This lag between thought and verbal expression resulted in feelings of inadequacy and frustration. On other occasions, silence was chosen because it was believed that others could express the same idea more effectively, reinforcing the perception of personal inferiority in language competence. One example of this condition can be seen in a classroom discussion about environmental issues. A student wants to contribute the idea *"Deforestation causes flooding*, but struggles to recall the English word **"deforestation."** While searching for the word, the student hesitates and silently translates from Indonesian (*penebangan hutan*). By the time the student attempts to speak using a less precise phrase such as *"when trees are… cut too much"* another classmate has already responded, and the discussion has shifted to a different point. As a result, the student remains silent, feeling that the moment to speak has passed and that their contribution would now sound awkward or

repetitive. This experience reinforces the student's frustration and the belief that others can express ideas more clearly, leading the student to withdraw from subsequent discussions.

Silence was also intentionally chosen in more sensitive or emotionally charged discussions. For example, when topics related to culture, gender, or personal values emerged, hesitation was felt not because of language limitations but because of uncertainty about how to articulate opinions appropriately in English without causing misunderstanding or offending others. The lack of pragmatic confidence created another layer of difficulty. The awareness that cross-cultural communication involves subtle differences in tone, politeness, and implication made participation feel risky. In such situations, the decision to remain silent was guided by caution rather than fear, reflecting a desire to maintain harmony and avoid potential miscommunication.

These experiences collectively highlight that silence in classroom speaking activities is multifaceted, involving not only linguistic but also psychological, social, and cultural factors. The fear of errors interacts with the desire for social acceptance; limitations in technical vocabulary intersect with anxiety about evaluation. Together, these elements form a complex web of constraints that hinder active participation even when the intention to speak is strong. In such moments, silence does not necessarily signify passivity or disinterest; rather, it often represents an internal struggle between willingness and fear, a conflict between knowledge and confidence.

Recognizing these factors has led to a more conscious effort to overcome barriers to speaking participation. Several strategies are being pursued. First, deliberate attempts are made to strengthen self-confidence by shifting the mindset from perfectionism to progress. Instead of viewing mistakes as failures, they are reframed as an essential part of the learning process. Each grammatical slip or mispronunciation is treated as a learning opportunity that advances proficiency. Second, efforts are directed toward expanding vocabulary and expressions through reading, listening, and exposure to authentic English media, thereby reducing the hesitation caused by lexical gaps. Third, gradual participation is practiced, starting with small contributions such as short comments, agreeing, or adding simple points, before progressing to longer turns in discussion.

Finally, support from both peers and lecturers is crucial. Encouragement, empathetic feedback, and a non-judgmental classroom atmosphere are vital in helping learners rebuild their speaking confidence. Over time, through consistent exposure and psychological resilience, silence can be gradually replaced with participation, and participation with fluency. In sum, while silence during classroom activities is influenced by multiple interconnected factors, such as fear of making errors, limited vocabulary, social judgment, and low self-confidence, it also serves as a meaningful indicator of the inner challenges learners face in second-language communication. Understanding and addressing these barriers marks the first step toward creating classrooms that are not only linguistically enriching but also emotionally supportive spaces for language growth.

The Classroom's Activities to Improve Students' Competence

Classroom activities such as group discussions, role plays, and presentations are widely recognized as highly beneficial for improving English-speaking skills (Khasanah et al., 2024; Muslimin et al., 2022). These communicative activities provide students with opportunities to practice speaking in interactive, contextual, and purposeful ways, offering a more dynamic approach than the traditional focus on grammar and vocabulary exercises in textbooks. Rather than learning language as an abstract

system of rules, students engage in real-time communication, which promotes fluency, spontaneity, and confidence. Such activities also align with communicative language teaching principles, which prioritize meaningful interaction and the use of language for authentic purposes.

In group discussions, learners develop the ability to express thoughts coherently, organize arguments logically, and respond to others' opinions in real time. These interactions train learners to think in English and adapt their language use to the conversational flow. Listening to peers' ideas also exposes students to diverse linguistic patterns, idiomatic expressions, and perspectives, enriching both comprehension and production skills. Moreover, students report that discussions help them overcome hesitation and practice negotiation strategies such as asking for clarification, agreeing or disagreeing politely, and elaborating on points, which are essential for effective communication. Although Indonesian is occasionally used for efficiency or clarification, code-switching does not hinder progress. Instead, it serves as a bridge that facilitates understanding and keeps learners engaged while gradually increasing their English use. Through exposure to new vocabulary and sentence structures introduced by classmates, students continue to expand their linguistic repertoire even within bilingual interactions. When the discussion turned to apologizing, a student forgot the English word for 'embarrassed'. He spontaneously said 'Even though it might be difficult, he should apologize for *membuat malu* his family'. His peers understand his intention; even one of the students used the right word, and the discussion continues without any problems with the vocabulary.

Role plays, in particular, are perceived as especially effective and enjoyable because they simulate real-life communicative situations in an imaginative and engaging manner. Through role-play, learners are encouraged to step into different social or professional contexts, such as ordering food, conducting interviews, negotiating business deals, or handling customer service interactions, which allow them to apply English in settings that mirror authentic use. This situational practice enhances pragmatic competence, as students must adjust their tone, register, and politeness strategies according to the assigned role. In addition, pronunciation, intonation, and body language are naturally practiced as students attempt to convey emotions appropriate to the scenario. Emotional involvement in role-play helps learners internalize language beyond its literal meaning as they experience how expressions convey feelings, attitudes, and intentions.

Based on responses from 25 participants, the perceived effectiveness of role-play shows a context-specific yet consistent pattern rather than a generalizable claim. In this small sample, most learners reported that role-play was engaging and helpful because it simulated real-life communicative situations, allowing them to apply English in meaningful contexts such as service encounters and professional interactions. Although limited in scale, the findings indicate that role-play supports pragmatic competence by encouraging learners to adjust their register, politeness, and emotional expression. The convergence of responses among the 25 respondents suggests that emotionally engaging, situational speaking activities can meaningfully enhance communicative confidence and pragmatic awareness in EFL classrooms.

While challenges can arise, especially when students are asked to portray characters or emotions that differ from their own personalities, such experiences nonetheless promote flexibility, expressiveness, and empathy in communication. Learners begin to understand how language operates within various interpersonal contexts and how subtle shifts in tone or phrasing can alter meaning. Many students note that, with repeated participation, they become more comfortable improvising, experimenting with new expressions,

and taking risks in speaking, all of which contribute to long-term fluency and communicative confidence.

Presentations, on the other hand, are often perceived as more formal and demanding. Yet they remain among the most effective classroom activities for developing public speaking competence and academic communication skills. Preparing for a presentation requires students to carefully plan the structure of their talk, select appropriate vocabulary, and practice pronunciation and pacing. This preparation stage fosters a deeper understanding of both linguistic accuracy and organizational clarity. During delivery, students learn to maintain eye contact, use gestures effectively, manage audience engagement, and address all the important aspects of oral communication. Although many students initially experience anxiety or nervousness when all attention is directed toward them, repeated exposure to such tasks gradually reduces fear and builds self-assurance. Over time, learners report noticeable improvements in fluency, coherence, and the ability to articulate complex ideas under pressure.

In addition to enhancing individual speaking proficiency, these interactive activities contribute significantly to peer learning (Lokollo & Mali, 2024; Sari, 2025). Students benefit not only from teacher feedback but also from peer corrections and observations. When learners listen to classmates, they subconsciously analyze language use, pronunciation, and delivery techniques, which can later influence their own performance. This reciprocal process transforms the classroom into a collaborative learning environment, where students learn from each other's strengths and challenges. Moreover, receiving feedback from peers often feels less intimidating than correction from the teacher, promoting a more open and supportive learning atmosphere.

The social and affective dimensions of these activities are equally important. Group-based speaking tasks tend to reduce anxiety by distributing responsibility among participants and fostering a sense of community. Learners feel safer taking linguistic risks, experimenting with new expressions, or making mistakes without fear of harsh evaluation. This supportive environment enhances motivation, engagement, and willingness to communicate. These factors are widely recognized as key predictors of language learning success.

Overall, classroom speaking activities such as group discussions, role plays, and presentations are perceived as essential components of English language development because they integrate linguistic, cognitive, and social aspects of communication. They provide authentic opportunities for learners to use English meaningfully, build confidence in real-time interaction, and internalize vocabulary and structures through repeated use. As students collaborate, observe, and perform, they experience language as a living, functional system rather than a static set of rules. In this way, classroom speaking activities not only improve fluency but also nurture critical thinking, cooperation, and self-expression, which are skills that are indispensable for effective communication in both academic and real-world contexts.

The Most Exciting Topic in Speaking

Certain topics and types of vocabulary are often perceived as difficult to discuss in English, particularly those related to technical, academic, or abstract content. When subjects such as politics, economics, law, science, or technology are introduced, students often report increased hesitation and self-doubt. These domains require specialized, formal, and conceptually dense vocabulary that differs significantly from the language of everyday communication. Because such terminology is rarely encountered in casual conversations, learners have limited opportunities to hear, use, or internalize these expressions in

authentic contexts. Consequently, when required to discuss these topics, they often struggle to construct accurate sentences, select appropriate lexical items, or maintain fluency. The cognitive demands of simultaneously recalling unfamiliar vocabulary and organizing ideas in a second language often lead to speech disfluencies, incomplete sentences, or the avoidance of complex structures.

From the perspective of Cognitive Load Theory (CLT), learners' difficulties in discussing technical, academic, or abstract topics in English stem from excessive demands on limited working memory. CLT holds that performance is constrained when multiple complex processes must be managed simultaneously. When addressing domains such as politics, economics, law, science, or technology, learners face high intrinsic cognitive load due to conceptual complexity, abstract reasoning, specialized vocabulary, and unfamiliar discourse structures. Simultaneously, extraneous cognitive load increases as learners consciously search for appropriate lexical items, apply grammatical rules, and monitor accuracy in real time. Because technical vocabulary is rarely automatized through everyday interaction, lexical retrieval remains effortful, reducing resources available for planning and fluency. This overload often results in hesitation, pauses, self-correction, and incomplete utterances. Moreover, limited germane cognitive load indicates underdeveloped discourse schemas for academic English. Without well-formed schemas, learners rely on controlled processing rather than automatic language use, which further hinders fluent speech in cognitively demanding contexts (Sweller et al., 2011).

Another difficulty arises from the formal linguistic style that academic or professional topics demand. In English, discussions of political or economic issues often require hedging expressions, cautious argumentation, and abstract reasoning, all of which differ from the conversational norms familiar to most learners. Because of limited familiarity with this type of discourse, students may find it challenging to express opinions precisely or persuasively. They might understand the topic conceptually but lack the linguistic tools to articulate nuanced positions. As a result, their speech can sound oversimplified or fragmented, reflecting the limitations imposed by insufficient mastery of topic-specific vocabulary and grammatical structures.

Academic discussions are also particularly challenging, especially in fields such as translation theory, literary analysis, linguistics, or scientific concepts. One student stated, "When we discuss linguistics or translation theory, I know the idea in Indonesian, but I don't know the English technical terms, so I prefer to stay silent because I'm afraid of using the wrong words." The other added, "Academic topics are difficult for me because the vocabulary is very specific and formal. I don't usually use these words in daily conversation, so when I have to explain literary analysis in English, I feel confused and not confident to speak." These areas rely heavily on technical terms that are rarely used outside academic settings. Even students with strong theoretical understanding in their native language often encounter retrieval problems when attempting to find the corresponding English words. For example, a student who can explain *"pergeseran makna"* or *"makna konotatif"* fluently in Indonesian may hesitate when trying to express "semantic shift" or "connotative meaning" in English. This gap between conceptual knowledge and linguistic expression highlights the ongoing struggle many learners face: knowing what to say but not how to say it appropriately in English.

Such situations often lead to communication breakdowns, hesitation, or prolonged pauses during speech. Learners may start a sentence confidently but then stop midway while searching for the right word. Others may revert to

Indonesian terms or paraphrase extensively, which can disrupt the flow of communication and affect overall confidence. In some cases, speakers abandon attempts to explain altogether, especially when they feel that their explanations might sound unclear or inaccurate. This phenomenon is not only linguistic but also psychological, reflecting anxiety about being misunderstood or judged for linguistic inadequacy.

A similar difficulty arises when discussing personal or emotional topics. Although feelings and intentions may be clear internally, learners often struggle to find the appropriate English expressions to convey them naturally. This difficulty arises because emotional language is deeply connected to one's cultural and linguistic background. In many cases, thoughts are still processed in Indonesian before being mentally translated into English, resulting in expressions that may sound awkward, literal, or unnatural. For example, a learner may wish to express empathy, embarrassment, or disappointment, but cannot immediately find the English equivalent that captures the exact emotional nuance. Consequently, they may simplify the expression, use generic adjectives like "sad" or "happy," or remain silent. This linguistic gap in expressing emotions often prevents students from engaging more personally or authentically in English communication.

Limited exposure is another key factor contributing to speaking difficulties related to the topic. Students who seldom encounter discussions about government policies, environmental issues, or social justice in English lack the background vocabulary needed to participate meaningfully. Their struggle does not stem from a lack of intellectual capacity but from limited opportunities to practice English across varied thematic contexts. Classroom topics often revolve around everyday communication, leaving little room for engagement with complex or formal issues. Without sufficient exposure to input such as news articles, debates, or podcasts that use domain-specific English, learners remain unfamiliar with the discourse patterns typical of those subjects.

By contrast, learners demonstrate greater fluency and confidence when the topics are familiar, relatable, and conversational, such as hobbies, favorite foods, family, occupations, entertainment, or daily routines. These topics allow for spontaneous expression using vocabulary that has been repeatedly practiced and reinforced over time. Because the linguistic structures involved are simpler and the content is personally relevant, learners can speak more naturally and with less anxiety. Their focus shifts from "how to say it" to "what to say," leading to smoother, more meaningful interactions.

Overall, it can be concluded that the perceived level of speaking difficulty depends on two main factors: the degree of familiarity with the topic and the extent of practice with the related vocabulary. Familiarity provides cognitive ease, while practice strengthens linguistic retrieval and automaticity. When both are present, learners can express even complex ideas with greater confidence. Therefore, consistent exposure to diverse themes through classroom discussions, media consumption, and authentic communicative tasks can gradually expand learners' expressive range. Over time, with sustained practice and guided feedback, students are expected to gain greater comfort in discussing a wider variety of subjects, moving beyond personal and casual topics toward more academic and professional discourse with confidence and competence.

The Classroom Conditions to Boost Speaking Competence

Speaking activities that are interactive, collaborative, and relaxed, such as group discussions, role plays, casual conversations, games, and debates, are generally preferred by learners because they create a learning

atmosphere that emphasizes communication over perfection. In these settings, students perceive speaking not as a test of accuracy but as an opportunity to share ideas and engage in meaningful exchanges. One of the respondents said, "I like speaking games because they feel fun and relaxed, so I don't feel afraid of making mistakes. When I play the game, I focus on winning or completing the task, not on my grammar, and that makes it easier for me to speak. These activities often lower the affective filter by reducing anxiety and promoting a sense of belonging within the group. Through these activities, greater comfort and confidence are experienced because participation usually occurs in a fun, less formal environment alongside peers, where laughter and encouragement are common.

When speaking in a group, the psychological pressure is shared, rather than being concentrated on one individual. This diffusion of responsibility reduces nervousness about making mistakes or being judged. Learners can take turns, negotiate meaning, and build on one another's contributions, which fosters both fluency and interpersonal communication skills. During group discussions or role plays, participants express ideas more freely, explore various perspectives, and even test out new expressions in a supportive context. Additionally, students benefit from peer modelling and scaffolding, as they can acquire new vocabulary, sentence structures, and pronunciation patterns from classmates, thereby reinforcing their linguistic competence through authentic interaction.

Certain speaking tasks are particularly appreciated for their naturalness and relevance. Activities such as ice-breakers, podcast role-plays, simulations, and discussions on relatable topics, for instance, daily routines, cultural heritage, or current social issues, are found to be especially engaging. Relate to role play, one respondent said that "I like role play because I can pretend to be someone else, so I feel less

shy when speaking English. Acting in a situation makes it easier to express ideas, and I don't worry too much about making mistakes". The same way happens in ice-breaker activity. One respondent claimed that "I like ice-breaker activities because they make the class feel relaxed and friendly. After laughing and talking a little at the beginning, I feel more confident and ready to speak English during the lesson". These activities mirror real-life communication and encourage spontaneous language use, allowing students to experiment without the fear of formal evaluation. They also help bridge the gap between classroom language and everyday speech, which increases learners' motivation and willingness to communicate.

Confidence in speaking is not built instantaneously but develops gradually through repeated group-based activities. In collaborative tasks such as group presentations or debates, preparation is shared, allowing students to plan together, divide responsibilities, and rehearse their parts collectively. The presence of supportive peers fosters a sense of solidarity, making the speaking experience less intimidating. Even when mistakes occur, learners tend to interpret them as part of the learning process rather than as personal failures. Some students even extend practice beyond the classroom by rehearsing role-plays or dialogues with friends, which further enhances enjoyment and retention. Over time, this repeated exposure within safe, cooperative contexts strengthens self-assurance and fosters a more positive attitude toward speaking in English.

In contrast, individual speaking tasks are often perceived as stressful. They are therefore disliked or avoided by many learners, particularly when they involve presenting alone before the class or being randomly called upon without preparation. Such situations can provoke high levels of anxiety, self-consciousness, and fear of negative evaluation. When standing alone before an audience, students frequently report feeling

nervous, losing their train of thought, or focusing excessively on grammatical accuracy at the expense of fluency. This heightened self-monitoring disrupts natural speech flow, leading to hesitation or fragmented utterances. In more severe cases, physical symptoms of anxiety (sweating, trembling, or going blank) have been observed, further undermining confidence and performance. Consequently, many learners prefer tasks that provide preparation time, clear instructions, and opportunities for peer interaction before individual performance.

Ultimately, these contrasting responses to group versus individual speaking activities highlight the importance of psychological safety and social support in developing oral communication skills. When students feel comfortable, supported, and engaged, they are more likely to take risks in language use, communicate authentically, and sustain long-term interest in speaking practice.

■ CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, this study demonstrates that learning to speak English in an EFL classroom is shaped by a dynamic interaction of linguistic, affective, psychological, and contextual factors. While core linguistic components such as vocabulary, grammar, fluency, and sentence structure remain visible obstacles, they do not operate in isolation. Affective variables such as confidence, anxiety, motivation, and fear of negative evaluation emerged as equally influential and, in many cases, more decisive in shaping learners' willingness to communicate. These findings suggest that speaking proficiency cannot be fully understood through linguistic competence alone. Given that the study involved 25 respondents, its contribution is proportionally exploratory rather than generalizable. The findings do not claim statistical representativeness across broader EFL populations; instead, they offer context-sensitive insights into recurring patterns of learner experience. Within this scope, the study contributes by clarifying how affective and contextual dimensions consistently mediate speaking performance even among learners with comparable linguistic knowledge.

Pedagogically, the results underscore the need to balance linguistic instruction with psychological and social support. Learners showed better performance in low-pressure, interactive settings such as pair work and small-group discussions, indicating that reduced performance anxiety facilitates greater fluency and risk-taking. Scaffolded speaking tasks that gradually increase in complexity were found to support both linguistic development and self-efficacy. These findings reinforce communicative and task-based approaches, where meaning-making and interaction take precedence over mechanical accuracy. The study also highlights the role of teacher feedback and classroom atmosphere. Constructive, non-threatening feedback and a supportive teaching style help learners reinterpret errors as part of learning rather than as personal failure. This aligns with the affective filter hypothesis (Krashen, 1982), suggesting that lowering anxiety and fostering emotional safety enables more effective oral production. Even within a small sample, this pattern appeared consistently, strengthening its pedagogical relevance.

Another contribution lies in the emphasis on contextualized and topic-based speaking. Learners demonstrated greater confidence and fluency when discussing familiar or meaningful topics, whereas abstract or technical topics elicited greater hesitation. This supports syllabus designs that draw on learners' lived experiences, local contexts, and culturally relevant content to bridge linguistic form and communicative function. Theoretically, the findings reaffirm that speaking competence is a multidimensional construct involving cognitive, affective, and social elements, aligning with sociocultural perspectives on

language learning (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). Although limited in scale, the study provides a grounded foundation for future large-scale, longitudinal, and mixed-method research. Overall, it contributes proportionally by reinforcing the view that effective EFL speaking instruction must address emotional readiness, interactional support, and contextual relevance alongside linguistic development.

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