

The Students' Difficulties in Speaking English: A Case Study at Junior High School 3 Mataram

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Received : 21 January 2026

Revised : 27 March 2026

Accepted : 30 March 2026

Published: 30 March 2026

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Abstract: This study aimed to investigate the difficulties faced by seventh-grade students in speaking English at SMPN 3 Mataram. The research employed a qualitative case study design. The participants consisted of fifteen students from two classes. Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews to obtain in-depth information about students' speaking difficulties. The data were analyzed using data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing techniques. The findings revealed that students experienced various linguistic and non-linguistic difficulties in speaking English. The results showed that the main linguistic difficulties included limited vocabulary, incorrect pronunciation, and grammatical errors, which caused hesitation and lack of fluency during speaking activities. In addition, psychological factors such as low confidence, anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and fear of being laughed at by peers were identified as the most dominant factors affecting students' speaking performance. Classroom observations also indicated that students frequently relied on their first language when they lacked English vocabulary. Therefore, it can be concluded that both linguistic and psychological factors significantly influence students' speaking ability, and teachers are encouraged to apply supportive strategies, provide positive feedback, and create a comfortable classroom atmosphere to improve students' speaking skills.

Keywords: speaking difficulties, linguistic difficulties, psychological factors

INTRODUCTION

From elementary school through high school and even at the university level, English instruction is required. Several recent studies highlight that "learning foreign languages especially English significantly enhances students' academic achievement and increases their competitiveness in the global job market" (Darma & Widiastuty, 2023; Yung, 2023). According to Putri and Santoso (2024), the objectives of learning English in Indonesia include developing communication skills in various fields, enhancing access to global knowledge, and preparing students for participation in international contexts. It serves as the international communication language. Researchers such as Crystal (2023) and Kirkpatrick (2022) stated that "many countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Singapore, use English either as their main language or as a medium for international communication."

In learning English, students need to master four primary skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. These skills are interrelated and essential for building effective communication abilities. Listening allows learners to understand spoken messages, speaking enables verbal interaction, reading enhances comprehension and vocabulary, and writing helps in organizing ideas and applying grammar appropriately. Harmer (2007) highlights the importance of teaching these skills systematically to promote communicative competence. Brown (2004) suggests that integrating all four skills through practical activities supports language acquisition in authentic contexts. Supporting this idea, Susanti (2023) found a moderate and positive correlation between listening comprehension and speaking performance among 8th grade students. The study revealed that 48.2% of the students' speaking ability could be explained by their listening comprehension, indicating that students who listen better also tend to speak more effectively.

According to Amrullah (2021), speaking is a crucial skill that not only involves mastering vocabulary and grammar but also effectively using language in real-life conversations. Researchers focus on one particular skill, which is speaking skill. Speaking is one of the four skills in English subject as a tool to communicate each other. Husna, Rachmayani, Maulidya, and Fahriany (2024) emphasize that speaking is viewed as one of the most essential skills in English language learning because it reflects learners' overall ability to use the language effectively. Several studies indicate that speaking tends to be the most engaging and motivating skill for learners because it allows direct participation in real-life communication (Fauzan et al., 2024).

In addition to curriculum innovation, teaching methods such as storytelling have also shown positive impacts on students' speaking performance. Short storytelling significantly improved students' speaking ability, especially in pronunciation, as evidenced by measurable gains in post-test results (Annisa, Susanti, & Wardana, 2022). Similarly, Richards (2002) observes that most English learners globally focus on developing their speaking ability as a primary objective in learning the language. Speaking is also regarded as the most difficult skill for English as a foreign language learners. According to Hinkel (2005), speaking is a particularly demanding and intricate skill that requires learners to master multiple linguistic and communicative elements. In short, a learner's ability in English is often measured by their speaking performance or oral communication skills. For many students, learning to speak English is very important. They might need these speaking skills for different reasons, like sharing information or trying to change someone's mind—for example, convincing others to agree with them.

According to Husna, Rachmayani, Maulidya, and Fahriany (2024), speaking can be difficult for learners because of factors such as lack of confidence, fear of making mistakes,

limited vocabulary, and the tendency to use the mother tongue. Rababah (2005) notes that “students’ speaking performance is influenced by various factors such as learner characteristics, instructional methods, curriculum content, and environmental support”. One of the main challenges is the students’ limited vocabulary, which often hinders their ability to express ideas clearly and sustain conversations. In addition, a lack of strategic and communicative competence can further reduce their capacity to maintain interaction in spoken English.

Susanti (2016, p. 47) found that “students’ difficulties in speaking English were mainly caused by limited vocabulary, nervousness, fear of making mistakes, and grammatical problems”. The study also identified external factors such as students’ preference for using their mother tongue, lack of motivation, and the teachers’ instructional approach. Consistent with these findings, Amrullah (2021) explain that challenges in speaking stem not only from linguistic limitations such as vocabulary and grammar, but also from psychological aspects like confidence and anxiety. The first problem faced by secondary school students is lack of pronunciation, followed by lack of vocabulary due to insufficient practice, and finally, lack of students’ confidence. Real-life learning in English-speaking environments can boost learners’ communication skills and creativity, supporting their ability to design effective English learning media (Camila et al., 2023).

From the issues mentioned above, it is important to investigate the students’ difficulties in speaking English in a real classroom setting. SMPN 3 Mataram, where this research will be conducted, is one of the public Junior High Schools located in Mataram. It has been accredited “A” by the West Nusa Tenggara Office of Education and Culture. Based on the pre-observation, the researcher obtained information that the school has good achievements in English, as seen from the accomplishments of students who participate in various English competitions that deserve appreciation. However, their speaking ability is still considered low; this was observed during the initial teaching practicum (PLP) and supported by their speaking test scores, which were generally below the school’s minimum mastery criteria. In addition, classroom observations showed that many students spoke hesitantly, used limited vocabulary, and often mixed Indonesian with English during speaking activities.

The researcher chose SMPN 3 Mataram because at this school, English especially speaking skills is considered very important in supporting students’ academic and communicative competence. However, despite the strong emphasis on speaking, the results of the researcher’s initial observation during the teaching practicum (PLP) showed that many students still face difficulties in speaking English. These weaknesses include a lack of vocabulary, poor pronunciation, low confidence when speaking in front of others, and fear of making grammatical errors. Some students also struggle to express their ideas fluently and tend to rely on their first language during speaking activities. For example, when they cannot find the right English words, they often switch to Indonesian, saying phrases such as “*saya tidak tahu bahasa Inggrisnya*” (“I don’t know the English word”) or mix both languages in one sentence.

The researcher is interested in conducting research on students’ difficulties in learning to speak English because these problems hinder their ability to communicate effectively and participate in learning activities. The study aims to identify

what difficulties students face in speaking, the factors that contribute to those difficulties, and the possible solutions to overcome them. Based on this background, the researcher decided to conduct a study entitled *The Students’ Difficulties in Speaking English: A Case Study at SMPN 3 Mataram*.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore students’ difficulties in speaking English. Qualitative research focuses on descriptive data derived from written or spoken expressions and observable behavior, emphasizing holistic and contextual understanding rather than numerical measurement, as outlined by Moleong (2010). In line with this perspective, the present study sought to obtain in depth insights into the factors underlying students’ speaking difficulties by directly engaging with participants and examining their experiences in natural classroom settings. This approach enabled the researcher to develop a comprehensive and objective understanding of the phenomenon through narrative description.

The population of the study consisted of all second grade students of SMPN 3 Mataram in the academic year 2025, totaling approximately 110 students across four classes, as defined within the concept of population proposed by Ary (2010). From this population, a sample was selected using purposive sampling, which allows researchers to choose participants based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives, as suggested by Sugiyono (2015). One class, VIII A, was selected with 15 students representing varied levels of speaking proficiency. The selection was based on the English teacher’s recommendation and classroom observations, ensuring that the participants were appropriate for generating rich and focused qualitative data.

Data were collected through classroom observation and semi structured interviews to capture multiple perspectives on students’ speaking difficulties. Creswell (2012) emphasized the importance of using more than one qualitative data collection instrument to enhance the depth and credibility of findings. Observation enabled the researcher to document students’ actual speaking performance during learning activities, consistent with the definition of observation as systematic information gathering at a research site proposed by John (2012). Interviews were conducted with the selected students to explore their perceptions, experiences, and strategies related to speaking English, allowing flexibility and deeper exploration of individual responses.

The data were analyzed using a descriptive qualitative approach following the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (1994), which involves data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. To ensure trustworthiness, triangulation of methods was applied by comparing observation data with interview results, in accordance with the principles of triangulation described by Marlina, Purwaningsih, and Siagian (2024). This approach aligns with Bhandari’s (2023) explanation of method triangulation as a means of enhancing credibility through cross checking data from different sources. Through this systematic process, the findings were validated and interpreted to accurately reflect the speaking difficulties experienced by second grade students at SMPN 3 Mataram.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

In this chapter, the researcher presents the findings and discussion about the students' difficulties in speaking English. The data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews conducted with fifteen students from class VIII A at SMPN 3 Mataram. The objective of this research was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the students' speaking difficulties and to identify the factors that contribute to these challenges. The research was conducted on October 9th, 10th, and 11th, 2025, during English learning activities.

During the classroom observation, the researcher focused on several indicators, such as students' willingness to participate in speaking activities, their use of English during class, pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, and confidence levels. The interview was conducted to collect detailed information about students' experiences and perceptions of their speaking difficulties. The findings from both observation and interview reveal two major categories of students' speaking difficulties, namely linguistic and psychological factors. These results lead to the discussion presented in the next section, Student Difficulties in English Speaking Skill.

Students' Difficulties in English Speaking Skill

Based on the analysis, the eighth-grade students at SMPN 3 Mataram experienced several linguistic and non-linguistic difficulties in speaking English. The linguistic difficulties included lack of vocabulary, pronunciation problems, and grammar errors, while the non-linguistic difficulties involved lack of confidence, anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and low motivation. These findings were obtained from classroom observations and semi-structured interviews conducted on October 9th–11th, 2025.

1. Linguistic Difficulties

One of the major linguistic difficulties identified in this study was related to vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar, with vocabulary being the most dominant aspect. Many students admitted that they found it difficult to express their ideas because they did not know the appropriate English words. When they forgot a word, they tended to pause, hesitate, or switch to Indonesian. For instance, one student said:

"Kadang saya lupa kata berikutnya, jadi bilang 'emm... saya pergi ke market'."
(Sometimes I forget the next word, so I say things like 'emm... saya pergi ke market'. Student 5, interview on October 10th, 2025)

During classroom observation, several students also used fillers such as "emm", "apa ya", or mixed Indonesian phrases during their English tasks. This supports Nunan (2020), who stated that limited vocabulary prevents learners from expressing meaning clearly and naturally. Similarly, Alqahtani (2018) emphasized that students with limited vocabulary are less fluent and less confident when communicating in English. Therefore, vocabulary limitation was found to be one of the main obstacles to achieving fluency.

Another linguistic issue was pronunciation. Many students mentioned that English pronunciation was confusing because it differs from spelling. As a result, they frequently mispronounced words. One student commented:

"Sulit sekali kak, karena pengucapan bahasa Inggris beda dengan tulisannya."
(It's really hard, Miss, because English pronunciation is different from how it's written. Student 5, interview on October 10th, 2025)

Observation results confirmed that students often pronounced words as they were written, for example, pronouncing "develop" as /de-velop/ instead of /di'veləp/. Some also pronounced silent letters such as in "know" or "hour". This finding aligns with Gilakjani (2016), who found that learners' first language phonological habits strongly influence English pronunciation and intelligibility.

The third linguistic difficulty was grammar. Most students admitted that they found English grammar confusing, especially in constructing sentences using correct tenses. Common grammatical mistakes observed included "He go to school yesterday" or "She don't like it." One student stated:

"Saya sering salah tata bahasa, apalagi kalau bicara cepat."
(I often make grammatical mistakes, especially when speaking fast. Student 8, interview on October 10th, 2025)

This finding was consistent with the classroom observation where several students used incorrect verb forms and omitted auxiliary verbs. According to Richards (2015), grammatical competence plays a central role in communicative ability because it allows learners to produce accurate and meaningful sentences. Without sufficient grammatical knowledge, students often struggle to construct correct utterances, which leads to reduced confidence and communication breakdowns.

2. Non-Linguistic Difficulties

In addition to linguistic barriers, students also faced non-linguistic or psychological difficulties that significantly affected their speaking performance. The most dominant factors were lack of confidence, anxiety, and fear of making mistakes. During interviews, almost all students admitted that they felt nervous when asked to speak in front of others. For example:

"Saya gugup dan takut salah, nanti ditertawakan teman."
(I feel nervous and afraid of making mistakes because my friends might laugh at me. Student 10, interview on October 11th, 2025)

Observation data also supported this, showing that several students avoided eye contact, looked down, or kept silent during speaking activities. During classroom observation, several students avoided eye contact, looked down, or kept silent during speaking activities. These behaviors indicated that students experienced fear of negative evaluation and lacked self-confidence when speaking English. According to Raja (2017), fear of negative evaluation and low self-esteem are common psychological barriers that prevent students from speaking confidently in class. This finding was consistent with the interview results, which showed that many students were afraid of making mistakes and being laughed at by their classmates. As a result, students tended to remain

silent or spoke very little during speaking activities, which negatively affected their speaking performance.

Another non-linguistic problem was anxiety. Many students became tense when called upon to speak, which affected their fluency. Some even forgot simple words because of nervousness. This aligns with Horwitz et al. (2019), who found that language anxiety significantly reduces learners' willingness to communicate and affects their oral performance.

Additionally, low motivation was also evident. Some students admitted that they only participated when the teacher called them directly, while others showed little interest in practicing speaking outside the classroom. As one student mentioned:

*"Kalau tidak disuruh guru, saya jarang latihan ngomong Inggris."
(If the teacher doesn't ask me, I rarely practice speaking English. Student 13, interview on October 11th, 2025)*

This finding is consistent with Zhang (2021), who emphasized that intrinsic motivation is essential for improving speaking performance. Without it, students are less likely to take initiative in using English.

The Factors Influencing Students' Speaking Difficulties

The results of this study identified three main factors influencing students' difficulties in speaking English: linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors. These factors were identified based on the data obtained from classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with the students.

1. Linguistic Factors

Students experienced problems related to limited vocabulary, inaccurate pronunciation, and difficulties in using correct grammar. Many students struggled to find appropriate English words during speaking activities, which caused frequent pauses and hesitation. Pronunciation was also a challenge, as students often pronounced words based on Indonesian spelling. Grammar errors frequently appeared in their spoken sentences, especially when they tried to speak quickly or spontaneously.

2. Psychological Factors

Psychological conditions strongly affected the students' participation in speaking activities. Based on the interview results, several students stated that they felt shy, were afraid of making mistakes, and lacked confidence when speaking English in front of the class. These psychological conditions caused students to hesitate, remain silent, or avoid participating during speaking activities.

3. Environmental Factors

The learning environment contributed to students' speaking difficulties. When the classroom atmosphere felt strict or uncomfortable, students became more passive and relied more on their mother tongue (Indonesian or Sasak). Additionally, students had limited opportunities to practice English both at school and at home, which reduced their exposure and confidence in speaking.

In conclusion, the findings demonstrate that students' speaking difficulties are not caused by a single aspect but by the interaction between linguistic competence, psychological conditions, and learning environment. Therefore, to help students overcome these challenges, teachers need to focus not only on language accuracy but also on building confidence and creating a supportive classroom atmosphere.

How students overcome their difficulties in speaking English

Based on the interview results and classroom observations, the students employed several strategies to overcome their difficulties in speaking English. These strategies emerged naturally as responses to the linguistic and psychological challenges they experienced during learning activities.

First, when students forgot certain English words or were unsure about how to express an idea, they tended to pause briefly to think before continuing their speech. This behavior was identified based on classroom observation data, which showed that students frequently paused and used fillers such as "emm" or "apa ya" during speaking activities. In addition, interview data revealed that some students substituted unknown English words with Indonesian ones so that they could maintain the flow of communication. One student stated that when they forgot an English word, they preferred to use Indonesian to continue speaking.

Second, students attempted to improve their pronunciation by imitating the way their teacher or more proficient classmates pronounced certain words. During classroom activities, several students were observed quietly repeating words to themselves before speaking aloud, indicating that they practiced pronunciation through repetition.

Third, consistent speaking practice contributed to reducing students' anxiety. Based on the interview results, several students stated that frequent participation in speaking tasks helped them feel more comfortable and less afraid of making mistakes. For example, students mentioned that when they were involved in repeated speaking activities such as dialogues and group discussions, they became more confident in expressing their ideas. In addition, classroom observation data showed that students who practiced speaking more regularly hesitated less and spoke more smoothly, indicating gradual improvement in their fluency and confidence.

Fourth, teacher encouragement played an important role in supporting students. Positive feedback, simple guiding questions, and the teacher's willingness to assist helped reduce students' fear of speaking. This supportive interaction created a classroom atmosphere that motivated students to participate.

Lastly, peer support was also beneficial. Some students learned by observing how their friends responded during speaking tasks, while group activities allowed them to practice in a less intimidating context. This helped them build confidence and become more willing to speak.

In conclusion, students overcame their speaking difficulties through a combination of pausing to think, substituting Indonesian words when needed, imitating pronunciation models, practicing regularly, receiving teacher encouragement, and learning from peers. These strategies helped them gradually improve their fluency, pronunciation, and confidence.

Discussion

In This section discusses the findings of the study by linking the results with relevant theories presented in Chapter II. The discussion is organized based on the three research questions: (1) students' difficulties in speaking English, (2) the factors influencing these difficulties, and (3) the strategies used by students to overcome them.

Students' Difficulties in Speaking English

The findings revealed that students faced linguistic and psychological difficulties in speaking English. Based on classroom observations and interview results, the linguistic difficulties identified included limited vocabulary, inaccurate pronunciation, and grammatical errors. Observation data showed that students frequently paused due to limited vocabulary, mispronounced English words, and produced incorrect grammatical structures during speaking activities. These findings are consistent with the theoretical explanations of Harmer (2007), who highlights vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar as essential components of speaking. Similarly, Thornbury (2005) states that pronunciation greatly affects intelligibility, which aligns with the observation that students often pronounced English words based on Indonesian spelling.

The students' frequent pauses and hesitation caused by vocabulary limitations support Nunan's (1999) view that speaking requires sufficient lexical resources to express meaning smoothly. Their grammatical errors, especially in verb usage and sentence structure, are in line with Richards' (2008) explanation that inadequate grammatical competence reduces accuracy in spoken language.

In addition to linguistic challenges, psychological difficulties also played a significant role. The findings showed that many students felt shy, lacked confidence, and were afraid of making mistakes. This aligns with Juhana (2012), who identifies shyness and fear of evaluation as major psychological barriers in speaking. Horwitz et al. (1986) also emphasize that language anxiety limits students' willingness to communicate. The behavior observed in the classroom such as avoiding eye contact and remaining silent supports these theoretical perspectives.

Thus, the difficulties experienced by the students are consistent with existing theories on speaking skills, confirming that speaking challenges commonly arise from both linguistic and psychological factors.

Factors Influencing Students' Speaking Difficulties

The study identified three main factors influencing students' speaking difficulties: linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors. The linguistic factors align with Harmer's (2007) explanation that vocabulary mastery and pronunciation accuracy are crucial for effective speaking. Students' limited exposure to English input also supports the view of Brown (2001), who states that inadequate language input restricts the development of speaking competence.

Psychological factors found in this study shyness, anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and lack of confidence correspond with the theories of Horwitz et al. (1986), who describe foreign language classroom anxiety as a major obstacle in oral performance. Similarly, Aftat (2008) asserts that fear of correction can lead to avoidance behavior, which was clearly observed among students who preferred to remain silent.

Environmental factors, such as the classroom atmosphere and limited practice opportunities, reinforce the idea proposed by Harmer (2007) that a supportive and communicative environment is essential for language development. When the environment feels tense or overly formal, students are less willing to speak. This also aligns with Gebhard (2000), who emphasizes the role of classroom dynamics in influencing students' participation.

Therefore, the factors influencing students' speaking difficulties are consistent with theoretical frameworks in the literature, indicating that speaking performance is shaped by the interaction of internal and external factors.

Students Overcome Their Difficulties in Speaking English

The findings showed that students used several strategies to cope with their speaking difficulties. Pausing to think, substituting Indonesian words temporarily, and imitating pronunciation models were common strategies. These strategies align with Brown's (2001) classification of learning strategies, particularly self-monitoring, repetition, and compensation strategies used when learners face linguistic limitations.

Students also relied on repeated practice to reduce anxiety and increase confidence. This supports Ur's (1996) assertion that exposure and repeated speaking opportunities can enhance learners' willingness to speak. The role of the teacher was significant in this process. Encouragement, guidance, and positive reinforcement provided by the teacher created a supportive classroom environment, which is consistent with Harmer's (2007) view that teacher support is crucial for developing communicative competence.

Peer support also contributed to students' improvement. Group activities allowed students to practice in a less intimidating setting, which reflects Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasizing the importance of social interaction in language learning.

In summary, the strategies used by the students correspond with the theoretical perspectives presented in Chapter II, indicating that learners naturally adopt cognitive, social, and affective strategies to overcome difficulties in speaking.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussion of the study, it can be concluded that eighth grade students at SMPN 3 Mataram faced substantial challenges in speaking English that were both linguistic and psychological in nature. Linguistic difficulties were reflected in limited vocabulary knowledge, inaccurate pronunciation, and frequent grammatical errors, all of which reduced students' fluency and clarity in oral communication. At the same time, psychological barriers such as anxiety, shyness, fear of making mistakes, and low self-confidence discouraged students from actively participating in speaking activities, often leading them to remain silent or avoid speaking tasks.

The study also revealed that students' speaking difficulties were influenced by a combination of linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors. Limited exposure to English, frequent reliance on the mother tongue, and a classroom atmosphere that did not always encourage risk taking contributed to these difficulties. Nevertheless, students attempted to cope with their speaking problems by applying various strategies, including pausing to organize ideas,

substituting words when vocabulary was lacking, imitating correct pronunciation from teachers or peers, and practicing regularly. Support from teachers and classmates played an important role in reducing anxiety and gradually increasing students' willingness to speak English.

Future research is recommended to involve a larger and more diverse sample in order to obtain broader and more generalizable findings regarding students' speaking difficulties. Further studies may also explore additional variables such as learning motivation, classroom interaction patterns, or teaching strategies and their effectiveness in improving speaking skills. By examining these aspects in greater depth, future researchers can contribute more comprehensive insights into effective approaches for enhancing students' English speaking ability.

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