



Students' Speaking Difficulties in Learning Descriptive Text in Grade 10 Students at SMA Muhammadiyah 1 Surakarta

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ABSTRACT

EFL students often exhibit passivity, hesitation, and low confidence when required to speak English, particularly during descriptive text instruction. Therefore, this study aims to identify the types of speaking difficulties and analyze the underlying factors influencing these challenges among tenth-grade students at a private Islamic senior high school in Surakarta. This research employs a qualitative approach, utilizing classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis for data collection. The results indicate that students face difficulties in four main aspects: grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and speaking fluency, with limited vocabulary being the most dominant barrier. Additionally, these difficulties are significantly influenced by a combination of psychological, linguistic, and environmental factors, where psychological issues namely anxiety and low self-confidence act as the primary triggers for students' lack of fluency. In conclusion, speaking difficulties in learning descriptive texts stem from a complex interaction of psychological, linguistic, and environmental variables. The implication of this study is that educators must implement comprehensive instructional strategies that not only focus on linguistic competence but also actively build a supportive learning environment to reduce student anxiety.

Speaking Difficulties, Descriptive Text, Psychological Factors, Linguistic Factors, Environmental Factors.

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INTRODUCTION

English language learning at the high school level encompasses four main skills, namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Among these, speaking is a productive skill that plays an important role in developing students' oral communication skills (Robert & Meenakshi, 2022). However, in practice, speaking is often the most difficult skill for students to master. Various factors can hinder speaking skills, including limited vocabulary, lack of confidence, anxiety when speaking, and unsupportive learning experiences. These difficulties often manifest in students' behavior during learning, making them reluctant to speak, hesitant to express their opinions, or choosing to remain silent

when asked to speak in English (Marlia & Akbal et al., 2023; Saputra & Kuning, 2025).

English language learning at the high school level encompasses four main skills, namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Rana & Rana, 2019). One of the learning objectives is for students to be able to communicate effectively both orally and in writing. Among these four skills, speaking is a productive skill and plays an important role in developing students' oral communication skills. Speaking ability is not only related to linguistic ability but also to the psychological factors of students in communicating (Dewan & Sharma, 2025; Idham, 2024; Robert & Meenakshi, 2022).

However, in practice, speaking is often the most difficult skill for students to master. In fact, speaking skills play an important role in building confidence and the ability to convey ideas. Various factors can hinder speaking skills, including limited vocabulary, lack of confidence, anxiety when speaking, and unsupportive learning experiences. A learning environment that does not provide sufficient exposure to English also contributes to students' low speaking skills. These difficulties often manifest in students' behavior during learning, making them reluctant to speak, hesitant to express their opinions, or choosing to remain silent when asked to speak in English (Hidayat et al., 2021; Paraguas, 2025; Perkasa, A.B., Savitri, D., & Yogyakarta, 2022).

According to Suryanto & Muthmainnah, (2024), speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves the production, reception, and processing of information. In developing speaking skills in secondary school, students are expected not only to master linguistic aspects such as vocabulary and grammar but also to integrate cognitive and affective skills to ensure effective communication.

Difficulties in speaking ELF are generally caused by limited vocabulary, grammatical errors, poor pronunciation, and low self-confidence (Syamsudin et al., 2024). According to Dela Cruz & Santos (2024, as cited in Libratar, 2025), emphasizes that foreign language anxiety can hinder students' performance in the classroom because they tend to focus more on their fear of making mistakes than on conveying the meaning of the message. Based on the grand theory of self-efficacy (Badura, 1997), an individual's belief in their own ability is a key determinant of success in performing speaking tasks. According to Horwitz et al., Hermagustiana et al., (2021), anxiety in speaking a foreign language (foreign language anxiety) can hinder students' performance in speaking because students focus more on the possibility of making mistakes than on conveying meaning. Based on the theory of self-efficacy, an individual's belief in their

abilities will affect their effort, persistence, and performance in completing a task (Santoso et al., 2024).

In the English language learning curriculum at the high school level, students are required to master various types of genre-based texts, including descriptive text. In speaking lessons, descriptive texts are expected to enable students to organize and convey ideas coherently, use appropriate vocabulary, and deliver descriptions with understandable pronunciation (Nahid et al., 2018; Telaumbanua et al., 2025). However, an empirical phenomenon observed among 10th-grade students at a private Islamic senior high school in Surakarta reveals significant speaking difficulties during descriptive text learning. This difficulty is evident from the students' behavior, which tends to be passive, lacking in confidence, and hesitant when asked to describe an object orally. In addition, students appear to experience distinct obstacles in choosing vocabulary, utilizing grammar, and pronouncing words correctly in English (Apichat & Fatimah, 2022; Rahmawati et al., 2025).

Previous studies have extensively explored the general factors contributing to EFL speaking difficulties. Research by Cao Minh Ky et al. (2021), Pratama et al. (2022), and Kulsum et al. (2025) emphasizes that linguistic constraints particularly limited vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation are the primary barriers to students' oral fluency. Concurrently, psychological factors such as anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and low self-confidence have been proven to significantly hinder speaking performance (Kulsum et al., 2025; Ky et al., 2021; Pratama et al., 2022). Furthermore, environmental factors, including the lack of structured speaking practice and limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom, exacerbate these difficulties.

While these studies provide a robust understanding of speaking difficulties in general EFL contexts, a notable research gap remains: there is limited exploration of how these linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors intersect specifically during the oral production of descriptive texts. Most existing research treats speaking as a generic skill without isolating the unique cognitive and linguistic demands required to systematically describe objects or people. Therefore, the novelty of this study lies in its specific focus on mapping the interaction of these three factors within the context of descriptive text instruction, specifically framed within the unique learning environment of a private Islamic senior high school.

This study examines the difficulties faced by high school students in speaking when learning descriptive texts in a school environment, particularly religious based private schools such as SMA Muhammadiyah 1 Surakarta. The objectives of this study are to determine (1) To identify the types of speaking

difficulties experienced by 10th grade students in learning descriptive texts; (2) To analyze the factors that influence students' speaking difficulties in learning descriptive. The researcher hopes that the results of this study can provide an overview of the phenomenon of students' speaking difficulties and become a consideration in the process of teaching speaking in the classroom.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study was conducted at SMA Muhammadiyah 1 Surakarta, located at Jalan R.M. Said No. 35, Ketelan Village, Banjarsari District, Surakarta City, Central Java Province. This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the speaking difficulties faced by 10th-grade students during descriptive text instruction. This approach is selected for its capacity to provide a detailed overview of participants' experiences, perceptions, and challenges. The study focuses on capturing real-time classroom dynamics and the interaction between linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors (Leko & Cook, 2021).

The primary instruments used for data collection in this study consist of several complementary components. First, observation guides are employed to record students' interactions, pronunciation, and fluency during classroom presentations and discussions. Second, semi-structured interview protocols are designed to elicit in-depth responses from students regarding their speaking anxiety, as well as to capture teachers' perspectives on environmental and linguistic barriers affecting the learning process. Finally, document checklists are utilized to systematically analyze students' learning outcome scores and visual evidence of classroom activities.

The participants of this study are 10th-grade students at a private Islamic senior high school in Surakarta. Using a purposive sampling technique, 5 to 10 students were selected based on their specific levels of speaking difficulty as identified by the English teacher. This selection ensures that the data gathered provides deep insights into the technical and personal obstacles faced by learners with varying ability backgrounds.

Data collection in this study was carried out through three main techniques that complement one another. First, observation was conducted in which the researcher acted as a participatory observer, directly witnessing how students describe objects orally and identifying points where communication breakdowns occur. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with both students and English teachers to explore students' subjective experiences as well as teachers' professional perspectives on speaking barriers. Third, document analysis was performed to enrich the qualitative findings with objective evidence derived from student records and photographic documentation of learning

sessions. The overall procedure followed a sequential flow, beginning with initial classroom observation, followed by individual interviews to clarify observed behaviors, and concluding with a review of academic documents to verify and strengthen the findings (Husain & Mustofa, 2025; Liando, 2022).

The data were analyzed using the interactive analysis model proposed by Miles and Huberman, which consists of three interconnected stages. First, data reduction was carried out by selecting, focusing, and simplifying the raw data obtained from interviews and observations, with particular attention to grouping the data into psychological, linguistic, and environmental categories. Second, data display involved presenting the reduced data in the form of descriptive narratives, allowing patterns and relationships among the identified factors to emerge more clearly. Finally, conclusion drawing and verification were conducted by interpreting these patterns through the triangulation of multiple data sources, ensuring the validity and reliability of the research findings (Kazu & Kuvvetli, 2023).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Research Results

This section presents the findings derived from classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. The results are structured to directly address the two main objectives of this study: first, to identify the types of speaking difficulties experienced by the 10th-grade students in learning descriptive texts, and second, to analyze the specific factors influencing these difficulties.

Types of Speaking Difficulties in Descriptive Text Learning

The first research objective is to identify the specific types of speaking difficulties. Based on classroom observations and student performance analysis, the following table summarizes the types of errors identified

Table 1.

Summary of Students' Speaking Difficulties

Type of Difficulties	Indicators Found	Example of Errors
Grammar	Incorrect tense and pronoun usage	"He is" for objects; "She go" instead of "She goes"
Vocabulary	Word repetition and limited word choice	Constant use of "good" or "beautiful"
Pronunciation	Mispronunciation of specific phonemes	"Revival" → /revivel/; "Highest" → /higest/

Fluency	Excessive pausing and hesitation	Long silence (3-5 seconds) during descriptions
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To provide further evidence, an observation note during a student's description of a person showed: 'Student S1 paused for 5 seconds when trying to describe the subject's face, then reverted to Indonesian word "itu" when they forgot the English term for "dimples".' This confirms that vocabulary and fluency are deeply intertwined.

Based on observations and interviews with students, as well as analysis of student speaking performance in descriptive text learning, the researcher found that 10th grade students at Muhammadiyah 1 Surakarta High School experienced several difficulties in speaking skills. These difficulties can be categorized into four main aspects, namely grammatical difficulties, limited vocabulary, pronunciation errors, and lack of fluency in speaking.

1. Grammar Difficulties

Researchers found that some students still had difficulty constructing sentences that followed the rules of descriptive writing. The most common mistakes were the incorrect use of pronouns and verbs. For example, "He is" and "it is" were used to describe a person. In addition, there is inconsistent use of the simple present tense, which should be a key feature of descriptive texts. These errors indicate that students' grammatical understanding has not been fully absorbed into their spontaneous speaking practice.

2. Vocabulary Limitations

Vocabulary limitations are a major difficulty experienced by students. Most students use simple, short, and repetitive sentences. The researchers noted that some students had difficulty using new vocabulary. When asked to describe someone or something in more detail, students often paused to remember the appropriate word or substituted a simpler word. This resulted in descriptions that lacked depth.

3. Pronunciation Problems

Researchers found errors in the pronunciation of several words, for example, the word "revival" pronounced "revivel," "testament" as "testemen," "transformed" as "tranfomed," and 'highest' as "higest." The results show that these pronunciation errors were influenced by interference from the first language and a lack of phonetic practice in daily learning. These errors not only affect the clarity of meaning, but also impact students' confidence levels when speaking in front of the class.

4. Fluency Problems

Problems with fluency were evident in the number of pauses, word repetitions, and hesitations when speaking. Some students spoke too quickly without clear articulation, while others spoke too slowly because they thought too long before continuing their sentences. Students also appear to pause in the middle of sentences because they have difficulty finding the right words. This condition shows that students are not yet able to produce language automatically and spontaneously.

Factors Influencing Students' Speaking Difficulties

To address the second research objective, data from semi-structured interviews were quantified to show the prevalence of each factor among the participants.

Table 2.
Factors Influencing Students' Speaking Difficulties

Category	Specific Factor	Frequency	Percentage
Psychological	Anxiety and Nervousness	8	80%
	Low Self-Confidence	6	60%
Linguistics	Limited Vocabulary	10	100%
	Grammatical Errors	3	30%
Environmental	Lack of English Exposure	6	60%
	Peer Pressure/Teasing	1	10%

Direct evidence from student interviews supports these figures. For instance, Student S3 stated: "I actually know what I want to say, but I'm afraid my friends will laugh if my pronunciation is wrong, so I just stay quiet." This statement clarifies why psychological factors (anxiety) are the most dominant triggers for speaking barriers.

Based on observations, interviews with 10th grade students, and analysis of the learning situation in the classroom, the researcher found that students' difficulties in speaking descriptive text material were influenced by three main factors, namely psychological factors, linguistic factors, and environmental factors. These three factors are interrelated and reinforce each other in

influencing students' speaking performance.

1. Psychological Factors

Based on observation and interview data, researchers identified psychological factors as the most dominant factor affecting students' speaking difficulties. The majority of 8 out of 10 students showed symptoms of anxiety and nervousness when asked to speak in front of the class. They admitted to being afraid of making mistakes in pronunciation and grammar. More than 6 out of 10 students showed low self-confidence, characterized by feelings of awkwardness, hesitation, and lack of confidence in their own abilities. A total of 5 students also revealed that their mental state and readiness greatly affected their fluency in speaking. When they did not feel ready, they tended to stop mid-sentence or speak in a limited manner. This shows that anxiety and low self-confidence are the main triggers for long pauses, hesitation, and lack of fluency in speaking.

2. Linguistic Factors

Linguistic factors also contribute significantly to students' speaking difficulties. All students showed limited vocabulary variation. Sentences tended to be simple, short, and repetitive. Although some new vocabulary had been acquired during learning, its use was not yet completely fluent. In addition, 3 out of 10 students made fairly obvious grammatical errors, such as incorrect use of pronouns, tenses, and adjectives. Pronunciation errors were found in 4 out of 10 students, especially in the pronunciation of new vocabulary and words with final consonant sounds or the sounds /θ/ and /ð/. Meanwhile, 5 out of 10 students showed a lack of fluency in speaking, characterized by frequent pauses, word repetitions, and hesitations when constructing sentences. Therefore, it can be concluded that limited vocabulary is the most consistent linguistic factor that often triggers anxiety when students are unable to find the right words when speaking.

3. Environmental factors

Environmental factors also contribute to students' difficulty in speaking. Six out of ten students stated that they rarely use English outside of class, either at home or at school. This lack of exposure means that students are less accustomed to actively speaking English. Only a small number of students, 2 out of 10, mentioned that the noisy classroom atmosphere disrupted their concentration when speaking. In addition, one participant revealed that they had an unpleasant experience due to the reactions of their peers when speaking in front of the class. Students also experienced limited practice time due to their busy schedules outside of class, which resulted in limited opportunities for consistent practice.

Discussion

The Interplay of Speaking Difficulties in Descriptive Text Instruction

The study found that 10th-grade students at SMA Muhammadiyah 1 Surakarta experienced difficulties in speaking skills during descriptive text instruction, including limited vocabulary, grammatical errors, pronunciation errors, and a lack of fluency. The findings in Table 1 reveal that vocabulary limitation is the primary linguistic barrier. This aligns with Cao Minh's research, which states that limited vocabulary is the primary factor hindering students from conveying ideas orally (Ky et al., 2021). However, this study adds a specific nuance: in descriptive texts, vocabulary issues are more acute because students specifically lack the adjectives and spatial prepositions necessary for vivid descriptions (Nuralisaputri & Megawati, 2023; Rostiana, 2021). The findings of this study reveal that speaking difficulties among 10th-grade students are not isolated issues but rather a result of a complex interplay between linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors. While the results identify vocabulary as the most dominant linguistic barrier, the discussion below explains the underlying mechanisms of why these difficulties persist in the senior high school context (Suryani, 2020).

Cognitive Load and Linguistic Barriers

The data shows that limited vocabulary (100% prevalence) is the primary trigger for speaking breakdowns during descriptive text activities. In descriptive tasks, students are required to retrieve specific adjectives and spatial prepositions spontaneously to create a vocal picture for the listener (Sanjines & Pila, 2025; Suseno et al., 2024). When the student's mental lexicon is insufficient, it creates a high cognitive load. This explains why students experience long pauses and word repetitions; their brains are over-tasked with searching for basic words, leaving no cognitive resources for grammar or correct pronunciation (Aghdam Shamsi, Mohammadi, Roya Ranjbar, Asadollahfam Hasan, 2025; Baxter et al., 2021). This finding reinforces the notion that linguistic competence is the foundation of oral production.

The Anxiety-Silence Cycle

The 80% prevalence of anxiety shown in Table 2 reinforces the Foreign Language Anxiety theory. Most students show discomfort when speaking in front of the class, evidenced by difficulty thinking spontaneously and stopping mid-sentence (Horwitz et al., 1986; Khaldi, 2022). Unlike previous general studies, this research highlights that in the specific context of a private Islamic school, the 'fear of making mistakes' is exacerbated by a lack of informal English practice outside the classroom, directly impacting their mental preparedness. Low self-confidence is a dominant factor contributing to students' lack of

participation in English speaking activities (Rusdin & Purwati, 2023; Shalehah & Rahmawati, 2025). Therefore, psychological factors are the most dominant factors because they directly influence students' confidence and fluency in speaking.

Linguistic factors

Limited vocabulary, pronunciation errors, grammatical errors, and a lack of fluency are the main barriers to students' spoken language production. In general, students tend to use a limited vocabulary, resulting in sentences that are simple, short, and lacking in variety (Rusdin & Purwati, 2023; Shalehah & Rahmawati, 2025). Who also indicates that a limited vocabulary is the dominant factor hindering students from conveying ideas orally. Errors in pronunciation and grammar significantly affect the clarity and articulation of communication (Normawati et al., 2023; Wahyuningsih, 2020; Zahra et al., 2023).

Therefore, the grammar and pronunciation errors are the primary factors contributing to students' low speaking proficiency. A lack of fluency in speaking, characterized by pauses and word repetitions, indicates that students are not yet able to produce language automatically (Arjulayana, 2022; Huensch & Nagle, 2021; Shinwari et al., 2025). This is consistent with state that low fluency is closely related to limited vocabulary. Thus, linguistic factors not only affect accuracy but are also closely related to students' confidence and speaking fluency (Wafi et al., 2025).

Environmental Constraints and Lack of Automaticity

The environmental data (60% lack of exposure) explains the lack of automaticity in students' speech. Speaking skills require consistent input and output to move from conscious effort to automatic production. Because students rarely use English outside the 45-minute classroom window, their neural pathways for English speech are not reinforced. Furthermore, a noisy or unsupportive classroom atmosphere (environmental) acts as an additional stressor that lowers students' self-efficacy, making them choose silence as a safety strategy to avoid embarrassment (Hidayat et al., 2021; Rusdin & Purwati, 2023).

In conclusion, speaking difficulties in this context occur because the linguistic deficit (vocabulary) acts as a "trigger" that activates psychological barriers (anxiety), which are then reinforced by an unsupportive learning environment. Therefore, addressing speaking difficulties in senior high schools cannot be done through vocabulary drills alone; it requires a holistic intervention that simultaneously builds a safe psychological space and increases environmental exposure (Perkasa, A.B., Savitri, D., & Yogyantoro, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that speaking difficulties in descriptive text instruction are a multifaceted phenomenon driven by a systemic Anxiety-Silence Cycle. The empirical evidence reveals that linguistic deficits, specifically a 100% prevalence of vocabulary limitations serve as the primary cognitive trigger that activates deep-seated psychological barriers, evidenced by an 80% prevalence of anxiety. This interaction is further entrenched by a 60% lack of environmental exposure to English outside the classroom. Conceptually, the speaking difficulties observed in this context represent more than just a lack of linguistic skill; they function as a socio-psychological safety strategy where students choose silence or passivity to navigate social evaluative fears within the school environment. Therefore, efforts to improve speaking proficiency must move beyond traditional vocabulary drills. Effective intervention requires a holistic instructional framework that balances systematic linguistic scaffolding with the creation of a psychologically safe learning environment to break the cycle of anxiety and silence.

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