



Invention: Journal Research and Education Studies
Volume 6 Nomor 3 November 2025

The Invention: Journal Research and Education Studies is published
 three (3) times a year

(March, July and November)

Focus : Education Management, Education Policy, Education
 Technology, Education Psychology, Curriculum Development,
 Learning Strategies, Islamic Education, Elementary Education

LINK : <https://pusdikra-publishing.com/index.php/jres>

Exploring Students' Obstacle in English Speaking (Research Conducted at English Language Educational Study Programme)

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to identify and describe the specific obstacles encountered by English Language Education students at Gorontalo State University (UNG) in developing their speaking proficiency. The study employed a qualitative approach, utilizing questionnaires (Likert scale) and semi-structured interviews with 4th-semester students. The findings revealed that students face multi-faceted challenges categorized into Linguistic, Personal, Environmental, and Social problems. The dominant obstacles were Linguistic Problems (81% agreement), driven primarily by Mother Tongue Interference and difficulties in choosing appropriate words and maintaining fluency. Personal Problems (70.4%), particularly anxiety and hesitation, were also highly significant, hindering active participation due to the fear of negative evaluation. Environmental Problems (77.4%) highlighted issues with the Teaching Method and limited opportunities for spontaneous speaking practice. Social Problems (67.9%) centered on the fear of committing mistakes and criticism from peers. The research concludes that speaking challenges in this context stem from a strong interplay between linguistic deficits and affective factors. Therefore, effective intervention must address both vocabulary/grammar mastery and psychological support by creating a highly communicative and anxiety-reducing learning environment.

Kata Kunci

Speaking Obstacles, Linguistic Problems, Anxiety, English Education, Fluency.

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INTRODUCTION

The ability to speak English fluently is a crucial skill for students majoring in English education. As prospective educators and language researchers, students are expected to possess proficient communication skills in their target language. However, many English language students encounter various obstacles in developing their speaking skills, which hampers their academic performance and future career prospects.

This research is chosen because it addresses a pressing issue observed among English education students at Gorontalo State University (UNG).

Despite their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, many students struggle to apply these skills in real-life communication. During classroom observations and informal discussions, students frequently cited difficulties in expressing their ideas fluently and confidently in English.

Through prior engagement with English language students, several obstacles are identified. These include:

Anxiety: Many students hesitate to speak due to anxiety about being judged or corrected by peers or lecturers, a fear that aligns with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982), which highlights how emotional factors like anxiety can obstruct language acquisition.

Limited Vocabulary: Limited vocabulary is another significant obstacle that hinders their ability to articulate thoughts effectively, as noted by Thornbury (2005), who emphasized the importance of a robust vocabulary for effective communication.

Pronunciation Issues: Pronunciation issues also frequently arise, affecting students' confidence and fluency.

Psychological Barriers: Psychological barriers such as nervousness and low self-esteem further exacerbate their struggles. These challenges are consistent with the findings of Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), who assert that language anxiety significantly impacts students' ability to speak fluently.

The importance of addressing these issues is evident from feedback provided by lecturers who have observed these challenges firsthand. They noted that fluency in speaking is not just an academic requirement but also a critical skill for professional success. This aligns with empirical evidence from Richards and Renandya (2002), who stress that speaking is a central element of language learning, essential for meaningful communication in both academic and professional contexts.

While speaking obstacles have been widely researched generally, this study focuses specifically on exploring the factors affecting English Language Education students at Gorontalo State University (UNG) within their local context. By specifically identifying the root causes at UNG – which involve a combination of anxiety, vocabulary limitations, pronunciation issues, and a lack of authentic practice exposure – this research aims to provide a unique empirical data basis that can be used to formulate highly targeted intervention strategies relevant to the needs of students at this specific institution, which may have been previously unmapped.

METHOD

Research Problem and Aim

Based on the background and prior literature review discussed, this study seeks to answer the following research question: What obstacles do students have in English Speaking at the English Language Educational Study Programme? Consequently, this research aims to identify and describe the specific obstacles encountered by English language education students at Gorontalo State University. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of targeted strategies to enhance students' speaking skills.

Research Method

This study employed a qualitative approach to investigate students' English speaking obstacles, conducted at the Language Education Study Programme of Universitas Negeri Gorontalo. The participants consisted of 5 to 10 fourth-semester students from Class A (Class of 2023), selected purposefully. Data were collected using two primary instruments: a questionnaire (using a Likert scale) to quantify the prevalence of obstacles (Personal, Environmental, Social, and Linguistic), and semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth, subjective experiences. Data collection procedures included audio recording the interviews and note-taking. For data analysis, the questionnaire responses were processed using descriptive statistics and a percentage formula, while the interview data were analyzed using content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to identify recurring themes. All data underwent data reduction to focus the findings, and triangulation (cross-checking questionnaire and interview results) was used to verify the reliability of the conclusions. All procedures and findings are described using declarative sentences.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Before presenting the detailed research findings, it is important to provide some explanations regarding the data analysis process and the interpretation of the results obtained. The data were collected through questionnaires and interviews to gain a comprehensive understanding of the issues that affect students' English-speaking performance, based on four main indicators: personal problems, environmental problems, social problems, and linguistic problems.

The following key findings summarize the major obstacles faced by students, based on the quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire.

Overall, these results provide an essential overview of the obstacles students encounter, offering a clearer picture of where efforts should be focused.

The analysis of the questionnaire data reveals that four main indicators significantly influence students' English-speaking obstacles. Among these, linguistic problems emerged as the most prominent, with 81% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that limited vocabulary, grammatical errors, and pronunciation difficulties hinder their ability to speak English effectively. Following closely, personal problems also played a crucial role, as 70.4% of students reported that low confidence, fear of making mistakes, and hesitation serve as major barriers. Environmental problems were also notable, with 77.4% of respondents indicating that limited exposure and a less supportive classroom environment negatively impact their speaking skills. Additionally, social problems affected students' confidence, with 67.9% acknowledging that fear of judgment and lack of encouragement from peers and teachers decrease their willingness to speak. Overall, these findings (illustrated in Figure 4.1) suggest that linguistic and personal issues are the most significant obstacles faced by students, while environmental and social factors also contribute to their difficulties.

Personal Problem

The data analysis concerning students' personal problems (presented in Table 4.1 and Figure 4.2) indicates that anxiety is perceived as the most significant psychological barrier, totaling 78% agreement (28% strongly agree and 50% agree). Following this, nervousness totals 74%, and hesitation totals 66%. This underscores the high prevalence of psychological barriers. The mean percentage confirms that these internal psychological factors are highly disruptive.

Environmental Problem

The data regarding environmental factors (presented in Table 4.2) reveals that external systemic and pedagogical influences are significant. The Institutional System sub-indicator shows high agreement (64% agreement, with 20% strongly agreeing and 44% agreeing) that policies or curriculum substantially impact practice opportunities. This is closely followed by the Teaching Method (82% agreement) which indicates that instructional approaches used by teachers are highly influential. Classroom Interaction has a comparatively lower percentage (86% agreement) but remains highly impactful. The data (illustrated in Figure 4.3) underscores that the academic ecosystem—from institutional policies to teaching methodologies—is a dominant factor influencing students' willingness and ability to speak English.

Social Problem

The analysis of social problems (presented in Table 4.3 and Figure 4.4) confirms that anxieties related to error avoidance and peer judgment are nearly universal. The most prominent concern is the fear of criticism (74% agreement). The fear of committing mistakes (66% agreement) and the fear of correct pronunciation (64% agreement) are similarly widespread. These minimal disagreement levels across all factors confirm that social anxieties related to error avoidance and peer judgment play a crucial role in shaping students' confidence and willingness to actively communicate in English.

Linguistic Problems

The data on linguistic problems (presented in Table 4.4 and Figure 4.5) reveals significant internal obstacles. Problems in choosing an appropriate word (76% agreement) and problems with fluency (76% agreement) are highly prevalent. Mother tongue interference remains a critical obstacle with 80% agreement, and problems in using appropriate grammatical patterns are widely reported (88% agreement). These internal linguistic obstacles significantly impact students' fluency and confidence in speaking English.

Dominant Obstacles (Summary of Questionnaire)

The detailed findings (summarized in Table 4.5) highlight the dominant sub-indicators within each main category: Hesitation (58% agreement) for personal problems; Teaching Method (66% agreement) for environmental problems; Fear of Committing Mistakes (54% agreement) for social problems; and Mother Tongue Interference (62% agreement) for linguistic problems. These findings underscore the necessity of addressing these specific issues to enhance students' speaking skills.

The Data Findings Obtained From Interview

The interview data provided a qualitative depth to the questionnaire findings. Personal problems emerged as the most dominant factor. Participants frequently reported feeling nervous and lacking confidence due to the fear of being laughed at or corrected, stating, "I feel nervous fearing classmates will laugh at me" (P1) or "I often hesitate and think too much about what to say" (P7). This confirms that psychological factors—such as anxiety, fear, and lack of self-confidence—are the main barriers.

Regarding environmental problems, participants often complained that the learning environment does not sufficiently support speaking practice. Statements like "We rarely use English in class, so lack practice" (P2) or "There are not many chances to speak English during lessons" (P6) highlight the limited use of English outside of classroom hours and the minimal focus on spontaneous speaking activities.

For social problems, the fear of social judgment was pronounced. Students admitted to being afraid of being ridiculed, preferring to speak in small groups or informal settings: "Less nervous speaking with friends" (P5). Teachers who apply engaging and supportive teaching methods were cited as helpful in reducing fear.

Finally, linguistic problems were clearly articulated. Participants reported struggling with limited vocabulary ("Sometimes stop mid-sentence, unsure of the word" - P3), pronunciation, and grammar ("Overthink grammar, get nervous, stay silent" - P7).

In conclusion, the interview findings indicate that all four indicators are interconnected. However, personal and social factors appear to be the most dominant, reinforced by environmental and linguistic factors (limited practice and insufficient language mastery).

Discussion

Variability in Responses for Certain Speaking Difficulties

The overall findings from the questionnaires show that linguistic difficulties are the most prevalent objective challenge (81%), followed by environmental (77.4%), personal (70.4%), and social (67.9%) problems. This variability confirms that improving students' speaking skills requires a multi-faceted approach addressing not only linguistic competence but also psychological and social aspects. These findings strongly support the research question by detailing the multifaceted obstacles encountered by students.

Personal Problem: The Role of Self-Efficacy and Anxiety

The finding that anxiety and lack of confidence are the most pressing personal obstacles (78% for anxiety) is a key scientific finding of this research. Why does this occur? This phenomenon aligns with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982), which suggests that high anxiety levels act as a mental block, preventing comprehensible input from reaching the language acquisition device. The students' fear of negative evaluation (P1) and self-doubt (P7) directly reduce their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), causing avoidance behaviors (Beck, 2011). This trend contrasts with the perception of shyness/confidence found in some general L2 research, but strongly supports research focused on performance anxiety.

Environmental Problem: Lack of Communicative Practice

The high agreement regarding Teaching Method and Institutional System as significant obstacles (82% and 64% respectively) reveals a critical gap. Why is the trend observed? Students are majoring in English education, yet their learning environment does not prioritize speaking. Chand (2021) suggests that the lack of structured speaking activities in the learning

environment hampers students' fluency. In an educational setting where assessment often focuses on discrete skills (grammar, reading) over spontaneous communication, students naturally focus their effort on passing those tests, leading to minimal practice and slow progress in speaking skills, thus creating an unsupportive environment for fluency development.

Social Problem: Fear of Negative Evaluation and Criticism

The fear of social judgment, particularly concerning pronunciation correction (74% agreement) and making mistakes (66% agreement), is highly consistent with classic research by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) on foreign language anxiety. Why is this significant? This fear increases anxiety, reinforcing avoidance behaviors (Beck, 2011). Students view pronunciation not merely as a linguistic issue but as a social marker of competence, making them vulnerable to peer criticism. The high percentage of agreement indicates that a competitive or unsupportive classroom environment exacerbates the students' affective filter, directly limiting their output, as supported by P5 and P8's preference for smaller, less-judgemental groups.

Linguistic Problem: Fluency Disruption due to Accuracy Focus

The most prominent linguistic difficulties reported, such as problems in choosing appropriate words (76% agreement) and fluency disruption (76% agreement), are fundamental scientific findings. Why do these trends prevail? Although the students have studied grammar and vocabulary, their knowledge is often passive rather than active (Gherbi & Sandil, 2021). The cognitive load required for simultaneous processing of appropriate vocabulary, correct grammar, and pronunciation during real-time speech production exceeds their capacity. This cognitive overload leads to frequent pauses ("Sometimes stop mid-sentence, unsure of the word" - P3), hesitation, and ultimately, a breakdown in fluency. Furthermore, the high rate of mother tongue interference (80% agreement) is a common phenomenon explained by Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, where the structural differences between L1 and L2 interfere with the spontaneous production of L2, impacting both pronunciation and grammatical patterns.

Limitations of the Research

One of the significant challenges faced during this research was the difficulty in recruiting participants to fill out the questionnaires. Many potential respondents showed reluctance or lacked motivation to complete the surveys, which hindered the process of data collection. This reluctance could be attributed to various factors, such as their busy schedules, lack of interest, or simply not feeling motivated to participate in the research. As a result, the sample size may have been limited.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to identify and describe the specific obstacles encountered by English Language Education students at Gorontalo State University. The findings clearly indicate that these obstacles are multi-layered and interconnected, spanning four key domains. Psychological barriers, characterized primarily by high levels of anxiety, hesitation, and fear of negative evaluation (Personal Problems - 70.4% agreement), emerged as the most debilitating factor, directly diminishing students' confidence and willingness to speak actively. Concurrently, Linguistic Problems (81% agreement), dominated by Mother Tongue Interference and difficulties in finding appropriate vocabulary, serve as technical constraints that disrupt fluency. These internal issues are significantly reinforced by external factors, namely Environmental Problems (77.4%)—highlighting the limited opportunities for spontaneous speaking practice and issues with the Teaching Method—and Social Problems (67.9%)—driven by the fear of criticism and making mistakes. In summary, the primary obstacle to speaking proficiency is the interplay between linguistic deficits and affective filters, with emotional factors governing whether students utilize the language skills they possess. Therefore, effective intervention requires comprehensive strategies that not only target vocabulary and grammar mastery but also prioritize creating a supportive, anxiety-reducing, and highly communicative learning environment.

For future research, it is recommended that studies focus on developing and testing specific pedagogical models designed to mitigate speaking anxiety and integrate authentic communicative tasks, providing empirical evidence on the effectiveness of holistic strategies in improving student self-efficacy and fluency in the Indonesian context.

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