

# The difficulties of elementary teacher education students' speaking performance: a comprehensive analysis



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## ABSTRACT

Speaking English plays a fundamental role in the personal development of students. However, many students struggle when speaking, which limits their capacity to communicate effectively and self-assuredly in a foreign language. The goal of this study is to investigate the elements influencing these difficulties in students' speaking abilities. To effectively design measures to improve kids' speaking abilities, educators and policymakers must have a thorough understanding of these challenges. This research also offers techniques to improve students' speaking abilities. This research used the qualitative research methodology. The data was gathered through observation, documentation, and interviews. The findings demonstrate that the factors that influence the students' difficulties are anxiety, low self-confidence, limited vocabulary, poor pronunciation, and grammar challenges. The strategies for enhancing the students' speaking performance are building a supportive learning environment, improving vocabulary, using technology, and giving feedback on the students' speaking performance. Thus, students and lecturers can contribute to creating strategies to enhance students' speaking performance.



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## 1. Introduction

In today's global society, effective communication is a crucial skill. Furthermore, English has become the universal language for global communication. Writing, speaking, listening, and reading are the four language skills in English. Although all four skills are essential, speaking ability is particularly significant as it enables individuals to express their thoughts, ideas, and emotions. Among these language skills, speaking ability is the most crucial skill to develop and learn when studying a foreign language. According to Jao *et al.*, speaking abilities are vital [1], because speakers of a language are people who can communicate in that language. That implies that they will be able to speak any language. speaking skills are the ability to perform linguistic knowledge in actual communication. Additionally, it encourages social contact, encourages cultural interchange, and increases self-confidence. In order to build effective teaching strategies and promote students' language development, educators must have a thorough understanding of how students perceive their speaking performance. Gultom *et al.* [2] also state that speaking is essentially the act of expressing thoughts aloud and using one's voice. For this reason, speaking proficiency has been declared as the ultimate goal of language acquisition for students by Woods *et al.* [3]. Moreover, speaking abilities play a crucial role in teaching other languages, as asserted by Yalcin [4].

English is essential for communicating with the broader international community, as it serves as the global language. Consequently, English is a mandatory course for students across all majors. Regrettably, many students learning English as a foreign language encounter challenges, especially in practicing it in class, particularly in terms of speaking skills. This problem is especially prevalent among students enrolled in non-English study programs. According to Shen and Chiu [5], students'

difficulties in speaking English stem from three types of issues. These include psychological challenges such as nervousness, fear of making mistakes, and lack of confidence; linguistic challenges such as limited vocabulary, grammar, expressions, and sentence structure; and environmental challenges such as a lack of opportunities for English conversation.

According to Hasriani [6], students' challenges in speaking English can be categorized into three main groups: affective-related issues, social-related issues, and linguistic-related issues. Affective-related problems encompass attitudes, self-confidence, motivation, anxiety, duration of language exposure, classroom environment, family background, and the proficiency of both students and instructors. Socially related difficulties emerge when students face comprehension problems while speaking in class or practicing English outside the classroom. Language-related issues involve vocabulary, fluency, grammar, and pronunciation. Students often grapple with affective issues that hinder their speaking abilities. This can be due to anxiety, lack of confidence, or nervousness, leading them to speak slowly and unclearly in an effort to avoid mistakes. They struggle to speak in front of the class and tend to halt abruptly. In response to questions from instructors, they often limit their responses to a simple 'yes' or 'no,' avoiding extended conversations. Social issues further impede students' ability to understand spoken English outside the classroom. Once class ends, English-speaking activities cease, and students revert to conversing in their native language or regional dialect with friends and family. Additionally, personal factors such as a lack of reading motivation and infrequent practice speaking at home contribute to language difficulties.

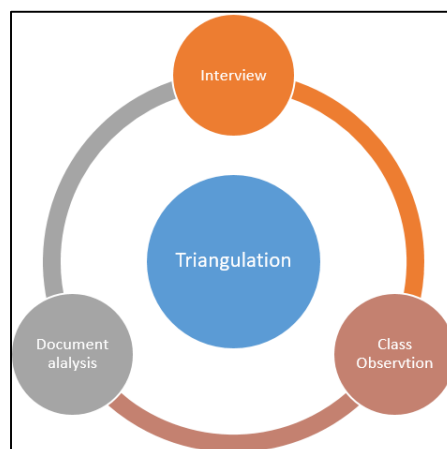
Suryani, Suarnajaya, and Pratiwi [7] stated that students' difficulties in speaking English can be categorized into two factors: affective and cognitive factors. The affective factor includes sub-factors such as shyness, lack of motivation, self-confidence, self-esteem, feelings toward the interlocutor, feelings toward the topic, and self-consciousness. Cognitive factors encompass grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, familiarity with the genre, and knowledge of the topic. Additionally, according to Chan *et al.* [8], for many students learning English as a second or foreign language, mastering speaking abilities is crucial. Consequently, learners often use their perceived improvements in spoken language ability to assess both their level of language learning achievement and the effectiveness of an English course. These issues include (1) Insufficient vocabulary: Effective communication relies on a broad vocabulary. People draw from their vocabulary when speaking, and students need a wide range of words to understand and convey ideas successfully. According to Mouhoubi *et al.* [9], in actual conversations, the focus is more on the topic and how to respond rather than on using proper syntax; (2) Incorrect pronunciation: Proper pronunciation is essential when learning a new language. According to Curtis *et al.* [10], consistently mispronouncing phonemes can make it exceedingly challenging for speakers from other linguistic communities to understand someone. Improving pronunciation is crucial for enhancing speaking abilities; (3) Poor grammar: Understanding grammatical norms is vital for effective English communication. Without a grasp of grammar, students will struggle to speak English proficiently.

Additionally, as outlined by Hornberger [11], speaking issues encompass inhibition, a lack of content, uneven participation, and resorting to the mother tongue. Speaking demands precise timing, unlike writing, reading, or listening, due to inhibitions. Common barriers students face when practicing speaking in class include fear of criticism, apprehension about making mistakes, and embarrassment when speaking a foreign language. 'Nothing to say' signifies situations where students, typically struggling, find themselves at a loss for words, lacking the motivation to express their thoughts. Limited or uneven participation describes scenarios in which some group members dominate discussions, depriving others of opportunities to contribute. Mother tongue usage refers to students frequently resorting to their native language in educational settings like schools and colleges. They often perceive their mother tongue as more natural and simpler to use compared to foreign languages. Previous research has explored the challenges related to speaking skills. Gan [12] conducted research on two Chinese populations (China and Hong Kong) and identified several difficulties in their speaking performance. These challenges were linked to linguistic deficiencies, oral language processes, conversational skills, academic speaking conventions, affective factors, and the availability of opportunities to use English for spoken communication within students' learning contexts. In addition, Al Hosni [13] observed that Omani students in grade 5 encounter difficulties in speaking due to their limited vocabulary and unfamiliarity with grammar structures. Forming a simple sentence poses a challenge, often leading to the use of their native language. Finally, Basic [14] highlighted anxiety as a significant factor contributing to the difficulties Swedish students face in speaking English.

Based on the previous studies, the research regarding the difficulties of students in the elementary education department has never been conducted before. Students in the Department of Elementary Education are expected to have good skill in speaking since the competition in the working environment is severe. English has become one of the most important skills nowadays, not to mention in Indonesia, which makes most elementary schools transform into bilingual education institutions by using English as the instructional language. Therefore, teacher candidates are expected to have good English skills, especially speaking performance. Not only will they teach subjects in Indonesian, but they also will teach the subjects in English. It is because making elementary school students get used to English earlier will make them comfortable to use it in the future. Hence, research regarding the difficulties of elementary teacher candidates in their speaking performance is urgently needed. This research aims to find out the difficulties of students, especially the students of the Elementary Teacher Department of Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, in their speaking performance. This research comes up with two research questions, namely (1) what are the students' difficulties in their speaking performance? and (2) What are the strategies to enhance students' speaking performance? This research is expected to be able to find out the problems of students' speaking performance as well as give some suggestions to improve their speaking skills.

## 2. Method

This study aimed to learn more about how students perceive and struggle with speaking in class. This research was conducted in the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Ahmad Dahlan. The participants of this research were students in semester one in the elementary teacher education study program in the academic year 2022/2023, class E and F. This research was conducted on the subject of English for Institutional Course. The sample of this study was random sampling. Therefore, the researchers chose the students to be participants randomly. There were 10 participants in this study. This research was carried out using a descriptive qualitative method. Then, observations, interviews, and document study were used as data collection methods. Based on Miles and Hubberman's hypothesis, the researcher qualitatively assessed the data acquired in three contemporaneous flows of activity. They included data condensation, data visualization, and conclusion generation and verification [15]. Data condensation was the first stage. This step was the process of choosing, concentrating, streamlining, abstracting, and/or changing the information found in the entire body of written-up field notes, interview transcripts, documents, and other empirical materials. Following the transcription of taped interviews, review of field notes, and expansion of documentation, the investigator identified and chose the data according to the categories of problems being studied. The data display stage was the second. Presenting the data is the task at hand. After the data display was complete, the researcher came to a decision. The problem statement was addressed in the conclusion. To obtain accurate and trustworthy data for qualitative research, the researcher must assess the data. Thus, the researcher used triangulation to assess the validity and reliability of this research. The triangulation method is a qualitative data-collecting strategy that is obtained by combining several methods for obtaining data sources or methods for gathering data [16], see Fig 1.



**Fig. 1.** Triangulation Technique

By utilizing a separate technique to verify the same data, it evaluates the believability of the data. In order to obtain the same resources, various methodologies were used to assess the authenticity and

credibility of the data in this study. Data from observations, document analysis, and interviews were used to compile the data. The researcher reaffirmed the research's findings to the participants in order to prevent biases in the study. Due to participant agreement over the research's conclusions, it is deemed credible.

### 3. Results and Discussion

This part discusses the research findings about students' challenges faced by students majoring elementary teacher education department in speaking English. Foreign language learning might be difficult for non-English students to talk with fluency since language acquisition is a complex process. The most challenging aspect of learning English, in the opinion of many English Foreign Learners' students, is speaking. Simultaneously, speaking is the skill we use most frequently in our daily activities, even more so than reading and writing, as noted by Alneyadi *et al.* [17]. In this research, the author identified several factors contributing to students' difficulties in speaking and proposed strategies to enhance their speaking performance.

#### 3.1. Factors influencing Students' difficulties in Speaking Performance

The ability to speak in front of an audience is crucial for both academic and professional success. As a result, it is critical to comprehend how students view their speaking abilities because this perspective has a big impact on how well they learn.

- **Anxiety:** Anxiety plays a significant role in hindering students from speaking fluently. In classroom activities, students often feel too shy to speak English due to the fear of being laughed at by their classmates. Based on observations in the classroom, when a student practices speaking in front of the class and makes mistakes, their peers tend to mock them. According to Mak [18], students commonly grapple with communication anxiety, fear of receiving poor grades, and exam anxiety, all of which negatively impact their ability to articulate their thoughts effectively. This fear of making mistakes and facing criticism from others creates a psychological barrier, preventing children from seizing opportunities and fully engaging in speaking activities.
- **Low Self-confidence:** Students' perception of their speaking performance is influenced by various factors. As noted by Jindapitak *et al.* [19], students' perspectives are significantly shaped by their level of confidence. Individuals with high self-confidence tend to have a positive view of their speaking skills, while those with low self-confidence might doubt their abilities. This underscores the importance of building students' confidence through instructional support, encouraging strategies, and ample opportunities for practice.
- **Limited vocabulary:** Another common challenge students face in their speaking performance is having a limited vocabulary. In this research, students encountered challenges in expressing their opinions in English due to their restricted vocabulary. Therefore, before starting the task and speaking, they looked up difficult words using Google Translate.

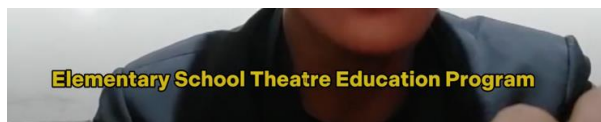
“I cannot speak English fluently because I don't know the meaning in English. Usually, I always use Google Translate to translate my words before I speak and write.” (Student 1).

Furthermore, studies by Khan *et al.* [20] emphasize the importance of vocabulary knowledge for clear speaking. Students lacking the necessary language to express their views clearly often hesitate and have less coherent conversations.

- **Poor pronunciation:** The researcher learned from conversing with students that pronunciation issues were a problem for students in speaking English. The students claim that because English and Indonesian reading styles differ, they are unable to pronounce English words.

“It is difficult to pronounce English words because how to read the words are different in English and Indonesia. I often make mistakes in pronouncing many words.” (Student 2)

The document data from the video of the speaking performance regarding the procedures also supports this information. Many students pronounced words incorrectly. For example, the student makes a mistake in pronouncing “Teacher” [tēCHər]. He pronounced it by “Teacer” [teacər]; see Fig 2.



**Fig. 2.** Documentation of Pronunciation error

One of the key components of learning a foreign language is pronunciation. To enhance students' speaking abilities, they must pronounce words correctly, although pronunciation issues are common challenges faced during speaking practice. According to Pennington *et al.* [21], it can be extremely challenging for speakers from another language community to understand someone who consistently mispronounces various phonemes.

- Grammar challenges: Furthermore, the students faced difficulty in using grammar correctly. The students said that grammar is difficult when it is applied in speaking practice.

“When I speak English, I don’t know the grammar structure that should I use in the sentence because it makes me confused.” (Student 3)

Grammatical and syntactical issues may also contribute to students' speaking performance challenges. According to research by Robert *et al.* [22], effective communication depends on using proper grammar and sentence construction. Students often struggle with word order, verb tenses, and sentence structure, leading to frequent mistakes and decreased fluency. Additionally, students who master proper grammar will be able to write and speak with confidence [23].

### 3.2. Strategies to enhance students’ speaking performance

Students' academic progress and personal growth are greatly influenced by their ability to communicate effectively, especially while speaking. Exploring methods that might improve students' speaking abilities is crucial since speaking is a basic component of language acquisition. The findings showed that first-semester Elementary Teacher Education students had several tried-and-true methods of learning to speak by putting their learning skills into practice.

- Building a Supportive Learning Environment: Creating favorable impressions of speaking performance requires a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Based on the data, students try to reduce their anxiety and try to build their confidence in speaking.

“I will train myself to have the confidence to speak English in front of my friends and the courage to do so, and hopefully, we, as the learners in the class, do not ridicule the other friends who want to try to speak English” (Student 4)

The lecturer may be accomplished by promoting peer cooperation, offering chances for speaking practice in a secure environment, and recognizing students' advancement and accomplishments. A supportive classroom environment can reduce communication anxiety and enhance students' self-confidence in their speaking skills [24]. It can be set in a cooperative learning classroom with small-group discussions. Small-group settings are crucial for fostering relationships between students, encouraging English language learners to communicate about the topics they are studying, and giving students the opportunity to practice the academic information and skills they need to gain.

- Improving Vocabulary: To assist students in increasing their word knowledge, they should manage themselves to add new vocabulary every day. Furthermore, teachers also should implement explicit vocabulary education. As it is stated by the student:

“In my opinion, the students should prepare many vocabularies and the lecturer also can help the students to improve the vocabulary using interesting techniques.” (Student 5)

The lecturer could use several techniques in the class. Word mapping, context-based learning, and routine vocabulary tests are all techniques that can help in vocabulary learning and application in spoken dialogue. The students also can play games to improve their vocabulary, such as playing Scrabble, see Fig 3.

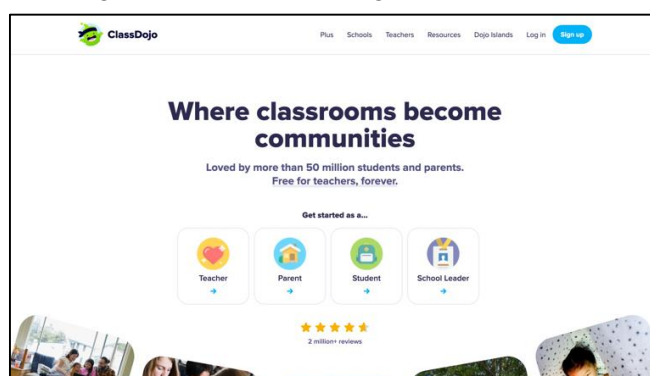


**Fig. 3.** Scramble Game to improve vocabulary (<https://www.britannica.com/sports/Scrabble>)

- **Technology usage:** Including technology in speaking exercises might help students feel more confident about their performance. Students can film and publish their presentations on platforms, which opens up the possibility for peer and self-reflection. As it is stated by the student:

“Maybe sometimes, we can practice speaking English using online tools or other technology because it can reduce anxiety” (Student 6).

Challenges in speaking, mediated by technology, foster engagement, motivation, and self-efficacy, ultimately enhancing students' speaking abilities [25]. Additionally, using technology in language learning may be quite advantageous. Students can practice speaking with native speakers or other learners from across the world via online platforms, language learning applications, and video conferencing technologies. In the twenty-first century, students can learn in many ways, especially using digital technology. There are many online platforms that can be used to learn to speak, for example Class Dojo platform, see Fig 4. It is an online forum where students may interact and finish their homework. The purpose of this program is to assist educators in enhancing communication among their students.



**Fig. 4.** Screenshot Class Dojo Platform (<https://www.classdojo.com/>)

Students' perceptions of their speaking ability may be improved by this exposure to real language use, which also offers beneficial educational opportunities.

- **Giving Feedback:** Based on the data, the students need to get feedback from the lecturer about their speaking performance.

“After we practiced speaking English, the lecturer can give us some comments or critiques about our speaking performance, maybe about the grammar or the pronunciation” (Student 7).

Providing constructive criticism and correcting mistakes is another tactic to enhance students' speaking performance. According to Rusmiyanto *et al.* [26], timely and focused feedback can have a significant impact on students' language development. Both broad elements, like fluency and coherence, and particular language qualities, like grammar and vocabulary, should be the

focus of instruction. Teachers may help students grow and build their confidence by positively correcting mistakes made by their students.

#### 4. Conclusion

To summarize, the students of the Elementary Teacher Education Department faced problems in speaking performance. The factors that influence those difficulties are anxiety, which makes students worry about making errors; low self-confidence, which makes them shy and fear practicing English; limited vocabulary, poor pronunciation, and grammar challenges. In addition, there are several tried-and-true methods for enhancing students' speaking abilities. The students and the lecturer can work together to enhance speaking performance by building a supportive learning environment in the class so that the students can develop speaking skills using collaborative learning. The students also can improve their vocabulary using many games, such as scramble games. Moreover, digital technology can increase curiosity and motivate students to learn English with fun learning; there are many online platforms that can be used, such as Duolingo or Class Dojo. Then, the lecturer should give feedback on the students' speaking performance. Students need to understand how important it is to speak English even if they are not English language students, and they also must speak the language accurately and fluently. They need to improve their capacity to communicate in English rather than focus on a subject they find difficult. Additional investigation may involve students with diverse backgrounds, abilities, and personalities. The current study has noted the performance elements related to students' difficulties speaking English. It focuses on issues related to psychology and language usage. Subsequent research endeavors may explore additional issues that are associated with the challenges that appear to be impeding students' ability to communicate in English.

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#### Declarations

- Author contribution** : Ramadhani Uswatun Khasanah was responsible for the whole research project. Along with the second author, she wrote and revised the manuscript. Patria Handung Jaya participated in the data collection, transcription, and analysis. Both authors approved the final manuscript.
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- Conflict of interest** : The authors declare no conflict of interest.
- Additional information** : No additional information is available for this paper.

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