



Journal of English Teaching and Applied Linguistic

<http://jurnal.stkippgribi.ac.id/index.php/jeta>

print ISSN 2722-3388

online ISSN 2722-3396

**ANALYSIS OF FACTORS AFFECTING STUDENTS' LOW SPEAKING ABILITY OF
TENTH GRADE STUDENTS AT SMAN 5 SUMATERA BARAT**

**JINGGA WULANDARI
DODI WIDIA NANDA
MARTIYA NURNI KHAIRITA**

UNIVERSITAS DHARMAS INDONESIA

jinggawulandari672@gmail.com

Abstract: This study aims to analyze the internal and external factors causing the low speaking ability of tenth-grade students at SMAN 5 Sumatera Barat, whose scores fell below the Minimum Mastery Criterion (KKM) of 75. This research employed a qualitative descriptive design to investigate the phenomenon deeply. Data were collected through non-participant classroom observations, open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with one English teacher and three selected students. The data were analyzed using Braun & Clarke's thematic analysis framework systematically. The findings identified 36 conceptual codes revealing that students face linguistic deficits, namely limited vocabulary and pronunciation difficulties, which trigger psychological distress including high speaking anxiety, low self-confidence and low learning motivation. Meanwhile, the external factors showed that these individual barriers are worsened by monotonous teaching strategies, an unsupportive classroom environment dominated by a toxic roasting culture among peers, limited practice opportunities, intrusive teacher feedback and inadequate learning facilities. In conclusion, the complex interaction between these linguistic-affective barriers and a restrictive classroom ecosystem forces students to execute defensive behaviors, such as speaking in whispers, reverting to local dialects or resorting to absolute silence, which ultimately paralyzes their English communicative competence.

Keywords: *Speaking Ability, Internal Factors, External Factors, Qualitative Descriptive, Kurikulum Merdeka.*

INTRODUCTION

Speaking ability is a core component of English language learning and an essential indicator of students' communicative competence in the modern era. In the of Kurikulum Merdeka in Indonesia, senior high school students are explicitly expected to actively express ideas, opinions and information orally through various student-centered activities such as discussions, presentations and roleplays. However, a significant gap remains between these curriculum expectations and the classroom reality found in many local schools. During the Program Pengenalan Lapangan Persekolahan (PLP 2) at SMAN 5 Sumatera Barat from August 4th to December 19th 2025 it was observed that tenth-grade students demonstrated unsatisfactory speaking performance. In a diagnostic individual descriptive presentation task, the majority of students scored well below the Minimum Mastery Criterion (KKM) of 75 due to limited vocabulary, inaccurate pronunciation and extreme nervousness. This phenomenon requires a thorough investigation to uncover the root causes of the widespread communicative paralysis among these young learners.

Speaking is widely recognized as a highly demanding productive skill because it requires the simultaneous processing, production and reception of information in real time (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2019). Learners must manipulate complex grammatical structures, select appropriate vocabulary from their mental lexicon and execute proper pronunciation spontaneously while coping with psychological variables like anxiety and motivation (Harmer, 2015; Srinivas Rao, 2019). Prior studies have established that low speaking proficiency often arises from internal learner-related constraints like foreign language anxiety (Hanifa, 2018; Rahmawati et al., 2025) or external pedagogical limits such as teacher-dominated instructions and lack of practice opportunities (Andriani et al., 2024; Baritanya et al., 2025; Richards, 2017). Despite the abundance of literature on speaking anxiety, localized research that explores the interplay between the transition to Kurikulum Merdeka and rural high school ecosystems in West Sumatera is still relatively scarce. Therefore, this study addresses the multi-layered internal and external factors hindering at the speaking development of tenth-grade

students at SMAN 5 Sumatera Barat to build a clearer understanding of why these communication blocks persist.

Understanding the specific barriers to speaking is critical for designing effective pedagogical interventions that can rescue students from chronic communicative passivity. When students continuously fail to express themselves in English, they develop a sense of learned helplessness that dampens their academic enthusiasm across all language domains. This research intends to fill the gap by documenting the exact nature of both cognitive-linguistic blockages and environmental pressures that students face daily in the classroom. By identifying these variables, English educators can move away from generic teaching methods and begin adopting empathy-driven, context-specific scaffolding. Ultimately, this study serves as an empirical foundation for transforming oral language instruction from a source of academic dread into an engaging, empowering experience for high school students.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive research design to achieve an in-depth understanding of the factors causing students' low speaking ability in its natural context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). A qualitative descriptive design is particularly suitable for this investigation because it allows the researcher to present a comprehensive, straightforward summary of events as experienced by the participants without altering the classroom setting. The research was conducted at SMAN 5 Sumatera Barat, where the geographical and cultural background of the students adds a distinct contextual layer to their language acquisition process. The participants were chosen through purposive sampling to ensure that the gathered data directly addressed the research questions (Patton, 2015). The selected participants included one experienced English teacher and three tenth-grade students who consistently demonstrated low oral proficiency and earned scores far below the institutional KKM threshold of 75 in routine oral assessments (Bryman, 2016; Creswell, 2018).

Data collection was executed through an intensive triangulation of qualitative techniques consisting of non-participants classroom observations, open-ended questionnaires distributed to students and semi-structured interviews (Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Detailed field notes were maintained across multiple sessions to carefully document descriptive and reflective elements of classroom interactions, pedagogical pacing and visible teacher-student dynamics. The open-ended questionnaires were utilized to gather broad initial insights regarding students' self-perceived difficulties, which were later explored deeply through semi-structured interviews to extract rich personal narratives. Each interview session was audio-recorded, fully transcribed verbatim and cross-checked with the observation field notes to maintain high factual precision. By combining these multiple data streams, the researcher sought to capture not only what the participants said about their speaking barriers but also how those barriers manifested during actual classroom communication tasks.

The compiled qualitative data were analyzed systematically using Braun & Clarke (2019) reflexive thematic analysis framework to discover meaningful patterns across the dataset. The analytical process strictly followed six recursive steps: familiarizing with the data through repeated reading, generating initial conceptual codes, searching for broader themes, reviewing potential themes against the entire dataset, defining and naming final themes and producing the scholarly report. To establish trustworthiness and rigorous data quality, the researcher implemented structural triangulation of data sources and maintained a prolonged field engagement throughout the school term (Creswell, 2018). Member checking was also conducted by returning the interview transcripts to the participants to ensure that their perspectives were accurately represented without any researcher bias. This rigorous methodological structure guarantees that the resulting interpretations are grounded entirely in the authentic, lived experiences of the high school community.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

The inductive thematic analysis of the qualitative data yielded 36 conceptual codes, which were categorized into internal factors and external factors. The data collected from the semi-structured interviews, classroom observations and questionnaires confirm that the students' low speaking capacity is not an isolated problem but stems from an interactive chain of individual and environmental deficits. The presentation of these results focuses on narrating the experiences of the participants and highlighting the systemic nature of their communicative struggles.

1. Internal Factors

The internal dimension of students' speaking struggles comprises five main themes: limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, speaking anxiety, low self-confidence and low motivation. The English teacher explicitly noted that most tenth- grade students possess a very restricted lexical range, stating that their vocabulary is still highly limited and insufficient for basic everyday communication. The students heavily confirmed this linguistic gap, noting the massive brain power and cognitive effort required just to recall basic words during activities. Participant 2 remarked that it felt like an enormous amount of brain energy was being used just to find words, while participant 3 expressed immense shame because their vocabulary size was incredibly small. When facing these vocabulary gaps during the spontaneous communication, students either halted their speech entirely or integrated Indonesian words into their sentences. Participant 1 explained that they usually substituted missing words with Indonesian or immediately looked at their peers for translation help.

Pronunciation difficulties further restricted oral production due to the vast graphic-phonetic mismatch between written English and its spoken form. The teacher clarified that English is inherently difficult for local students because the words are written completely differently from how they are actually pronounced. Students expressed a deep-seated fear of making phonological errors because they believed a slight mispronunciation could drastically change the intended meaning

of a word. Participant 1 emphasized that they were terrified of wrong pronunciation because they knew many English words sound similar but have completely different meanings. This phonetic confusion caused students to feel highly insecure, which frequently led them to lower their vocal delivery to a quiet whisper. Classroom observations confirmed that when students were unsure of how to pronounce a word, they chose to mumble so that the teacher could not easily hear their mistakes. These linguistic deficiencies directly triggered immense speaking anxiety when students were forced to perform formal presentation tasks in front of the class. Students experienced extreme nervousness, physical shaking and abstract, chaotic thoughts that made coherent sentence structure impossible to maintain. Participant 2 mentioned that when the nervousness became too intense, it completely paralyzed their pronunciation and caused their thoughts to become totally abstract and messy. To manage this sudden panic during oral activities, field observations and interviews showed that students actively executed physical avoidance strategies. Participant 3 stated that they would immediately look down at the floor, lower their heads and stop speaking altogether while trying to remember their lines. This psychological freezing created a barrier that prevented students from demonstrating their true communicative potential during evaluations.

This overwhelming anxiety was closely linked to low self-confidence, as students suffered from a negative self-image regarding their academic capabilities. The teacher observed that students lacked the basic self-belief required to speak English because they feared being publicly laughed at by their classmates. Students routinely felt inferior when comparing their own limited skills to a few fluent classmates who had received prior language tutoring outside of school. Participant 3 shared that they felt incredibly insecure when looking at other students whose English language vocabulary seemed so vast and advanced. This constant social comparison caused the lower-proficiency students to view themselves as dynamic failures who were incapable of mastering a foreign language. Consequently, they preferred to remain invisible during English lessons rather than risk damaging their self-esteem further.

Finally, students' learning motivation fluctuated wildly based on the instructor's immediate mood and teaching style. Intimidating teacher behaviors or unexpected task distribution caused their interest in learning English to crash immediately. Participant 1 stated that they felt like completely shutting down and refusing to speak or learn because the teacher would suddenly give heavy tasks without explaining the underlying material. Participant 2 added to this sentiment by noting that the teacher often entered the classroom looking angry, which instantly ruined the classroom atmosphere. When the learning environment felt hostile or unpredictable, students lost their intrinsic desire to practice speaking English. Their motivation shifted from a genuine desire to learn to a survival mechanism focused entirely on avoiding the teacher's negative attention.

2. External Factors

The external dimension reveals that individual learner deficits are worsened by five pedagogical and environmental factors: teaching strategies, classroom environment, limited practice opportunities, teacher's feedback and broken learning facilities. Pedagogically, while the teacher occasionally utilized collaborative role-plays to build group confidence, the standard instructional layout relied heavily in rapid full-monolingual English lectures that alienated low-proficiency students. Participant 1 noted that because the teacher explained everything fully in English, they could not understand the core definitions of the material and ended up feeling completely confused. This lack of instructional clarity was worsened by independent textbook tasks assigned without prior explanation or scaffolding, as criticized by participant 2. Students were often forced to translate pages of text by themselves without any prior verbal modeling from the teacher.

The classroom climate provided very low psychological safety due to a toxic culture of public mockery and social "roasting" among peers. Participant 1 reported that the classroom became chaotic and loud because classmates would actively laugh at them whenever they stepped forward to do a presentation. Participant 2 confirmed this hostile environment, noting that the classroom was far from conducive because students were always afraid of being blamed or mocked by their

peers. This peer hostility often manifested as explicit verbal bullying aimed at discouraging any attempts at using English. Participant 3 shared that their friends would discourage them by saying that they were incapable of speaking English and should stop acting smart because learning English was useless for their future. This constant peer rejection forced students to adopt absolute silence as a safety measure.

Furthermore, limited opportunities for actual speaking practice occurred because the curriculum required equal coverage of reading, writing and listening. The teacher noted that they had to divide the limited individual talk time among listening, writing, reading and speaking, which left very little room for dedicated oral production. Large class sizes further limited individual talk time, leaving students with fewer than two minutes of speaking time per week. Participant 2 stated that they were rarely selected to practice speaking because there were simply too many people in the classroom. The sheer volume of students made it impossible for the teacher to monitor and guide individual oral development effectively. As a result, speaking lessons became passive listening sessions where only a few selected students participated.

The teacher's feedback strategies also created mixed reactions and emotional distress among the tenth-grade students. Although the teacher aimed to use delayed correction, students reported experiencing immediate, emotionally charged interruptions that disrupted their cognitive thoughts. Participant 1 mentioned that when they were in the middle of a presentation, the teacher would suddenly interrupt them with an emotional tone that left them feeling shocked and startled. This sudden interruption shattered their concentration and made them forget the remaining parts of their speech. Interestingly, students showed contrasting feedback preferences depending on their anxiety levels. Participant 2 preferred delayed corrections at the very end of the activity, while participant 3 found immediate corrections helpful despite the initial shock it caused.

Finally, the learning facilities at SMAN 5 Sumatera Barat were highly inadequate and failed to support modern audio-visual language learning. The teacher admitted that vital audio equipment was broken, noting that the classroom

speakers had been out of order for a considerable amount of time. Participant 1 confirmed that the lack of functional infocus projectors made it impossible for the teacher to show engaging visual media or interactive slides. Participant 3 noted that when videos were occasionally played on a small laptop screen, the native speaker dialogue moved too fast for their cognitive loading capacity. Without functional multimedia tools, speaking lessons were reduced to dry reading exercises from outdated paper textbooks.

DISCUSSIONS

The empirical findings demonstrate that the low speaking capacity of tenth-grade students at SMAN 5 Sumatera Barat is a multifaceted crisis that validates Richards (2017) communicative framework. Speaking proficiency does not develop in a vacuum but depends heavily on the continuous interaction between linguistic knowledge, affective states and classroom environments. When a student's underlying language knowledge is limited, it triggers immediate cognitive overloading and affective distress, causing speech performance to decline. This study shows that internal deficits and external pressures reinforce each other, trapping high school students in a cycle of speech failure.

Linguistically, the limited vocabulary mastery observed functions as a primary obstacle to fluent oral communication. As argued Wilkins (2015) and modeled by Levelt (2019) in his speech production theory, lack of lexical automaticity causes working memory to freeze under communicative pressure. This lexical deficit forces students to exhaust excessive brain power on basic word retrieval, leading to fragmented sentences and an absolute reliance on code-switching to Indonesian or local dialects as a defensive mechanism (Nation, 2018). This linguistic breakdown is intensified by pronunciation difficulties, where orthographic confusion over unpredictable English sound breeds deep phonetic anxiety (Hanifa, 2018). For local Minangkabau speakers, foreign sound structures feel highly unnatural, leading them to consciously muffle their voices and drop their vocal volume to a whisper during presentations to obscure potential pronunciation errors (Kenworthy, 2015; Derwing & Munro, 2022).

This combination of vocabulary and phonetic limitations triggers intense foreign language anxiety and low self-confidence. Somatic disruptions, such as hand tremors, excessive sweating and physical freezing, show the heavy psychological strain students experience when speaking in front of an audience (Horwitz, 2016). This anxiety leads to immediate mind-blanking, causing pre-memorized scripts to disappear due to an elevated affective filter (Krashen, 2015; MacIntyre, 2017). Visual avoidance mechanisms, such as lowering the head and staring at the floor, are deployed by students to shield themselves from immediate peer evaluation (Hanifa, 2018). This lack of self-belief is fueled by constant negative self-evaluations and an inferiority complex when comparing themselves to advanced peers (Anandari, 2015; D. Rahmawati & Rizqiya, 2023). Because students lack intrinsic motivation, their willingness to participate remains completely dependent on the teacher's immediate mood, resulting in passive withdrawal whenever instructional support feels threatening (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

These internal vulnerabilities are worsened by the external classroom ecosystem. The teacher's reliance on rapid monolingual explanations without conceptual scaffolding violates the input hypothesis, leaving lower-proficiency students completely disconnected from the lesson (Krashen, 2015). This pedagogical mismatch is worsened by independent textbook tasks and a lack of communicative modeling (Burns et al., 2015; Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2015). Although collaborative role-plays provide small pockets of engagement (Harmer, 2015; Kumaravadivelu, 2016), the toxic classroom culture of "roasting" and verbal bullying destroys any sense of psychological safety (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2020). As analyzed by Allwright (2015), peer mockery directly threatens a learner's personal face, causing an immediate emotional shutdown.

Furthermore, institutional constraints such as large class sizes and compressed timetables limit individual talking time, preventing the proceduralization of language knowledge (Ellis, 2017; Swain, 2015). Impulsive, emotionally charged corrections from the teacher create further affective blocks, breaking the students' communicative flow and reducing their willingness to communicate (Lyster & Ranta, 2015; Nassaji, 2015). Finally, the degradation of

learning facilities-such as broken audio speakers and projectors-deprives students of the authentic audio-visual exposure necessary for proper phonological acquisition (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016; Reinders, 2018). This structural deprivation traps students in a cycle of speech failure, keeping their scores below the KKM threshold of 75.

CONCLUSION

Based on the comprehensive findings and discussion, this study concludes that the low speaking ability of tenth-grade students at SMAN 5 Sumatera Barat is caused by a profound interplay of internal and external factors. Internally, students are severely hindered by a lack of vocabulary and distinct pronunciation difficulties that stem from the linguistic differences between English and their native language. These cognitive-linguistic deficits trigger extreme speaking anxiety, low self-confidence and fluctuating motivation, which manifest physically as mind-blanking, shaking and avoidance behaviors during verbal tasks. Externally, these individual vulnerabilities are intensified by an unsupportive educational ecosystem characterized by rapid monolingual teaching strategies without scaffolding, a toxic classroom culture of peer mockery ("roasting"), and a severe lack of practice opportunities due to large class sizes. Furthermore, the problem is compounded by emotionally disruptive feedback from the teacher and broken learning facilities, such as lowering their voices to an unintelligible whisper, reverting to local dialects, or choosing absolute silence which ultimately prevents them from achieving the required KKM score of 75.

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