

AN ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' SPEAKING DIFFICULTIES AND COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES AT SMAN 12 MEDAN

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the speaking difficulties experienced by students and to analyze the communication strategies they use to improve their speaking ability in English. The research was conducted at SMAN 12 Medan, focusing on eleventh-grade students as the main participants. This study applied a qualitative-dominant mixed-method approach. The data were collected through questionnaires distributed to 35 students and semi-structured interviews with 10 selected participants. The instruments used in this research included questionnaire sheets and interview guidelines, while the data were analyzed using descriptive qualitative techniques by categorizing students' responses into psychological, linguistic, and strategic aspects. The findings indicate that students face several major problems in speaking English. The most dominant difficulties are limited vocabulary (82.9%), speaking anxiety (65.7%), fear of making grammatical mistakes (74.3%), and lack of confidence in pronunciation (62.9%). These problems significantly affect students' ability to communicate effectively. To overcome these difficulties, students employ various communication strategies such as using fillers, gestures, asking for help, and simplifying grammar. In addition, students actively engage in informal learning activities, including watching English videos, playing online games, and interacting with others in English, which contribute to their speaking development. The study implies that English teaching should not only focus on linguistic competence but also address psychological factors such as anxiety. Furthermore, integrating students' informal learning practices into classroom activities can enhance their speaking ability more effectively.

Keywords: *Speaking Ability, Speaking Anxiety, Communication Strategies, Data Collection Techniques, Learning Implications.*

INTRODUCTION

Speaking is one of the most essential skills in learning English because it enables students to communicate ideas, express opinions, and interact effectively in both academic and real-life contexts. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), speaking is often considered the ultimate goal of language learning, as students are expected not only to understand the language but also to use it actively in communication. However, in reality, many students still face serious challenges in developing their speaking ability, even after years of formal English education.

In Indonesian educational contexts, English is taught as a compulsory subject, yet the outcomes in speaking proficiency are often not satisfactory. Many students are able to understand written texts and complete grammar exercises, but they struggle when required to speak in English. This indicates a gap between theoretical knowledge and practical language use. One possible reason is that classroom practices tend to focus more on reading and writing skills rather than speaking. As a result, students have limited opportunities to practice speaking in meaningful and interactive situations.

Speaking is widely regarded as the most difficult language skill because it requires the integration of multiple components simultaneously. Students must be able to generate ideas, select appropriate vocabulary, apply grammatical rules, and pronounce words correctly, all within a limited amount of time. This real-time processing creates a high cognitive load, especially for EFL learners who are still developing their language competence. Consequently, many students experience hesitation, frequent pauses, and difficulty

maintaining fluency during speaking activities.

In addition to linguistic challenges, psychological factors also play a significant role in influencing students' speaking performance. Many students experience speaking anxiety, which is characterized by feelings of nervousness, fear, and lack of confidence when speaking in English. This anxiety is often caused by fear of making mistakes, fear of negative evaluation from peers or teachers, and lack of prior speaking experience. As a result, students tend to avoid speaking opportunities, which further limits their chances to improve their skills. This creates a cycle where lack of practice leads to low confidence, and low confidence leads to reduced participation.

Moreover, linguistic limitations such as lack of vocabulary, poor grammar mastery, and inaccurate pronunciation further contribute to students' speaking difficulties. Limited vocabulary makes it difficult for students to express their ideas clearly, while weak grammar knowledge leads to fear of making mistakes. Pronunciation problems, often influenced by the students' first language, can cause misunderstanding and reduce students' confidence in communication. These linguistic and psychological factors are closely interconnected and often reinforce each other, making speaking a particularly challenging skill for learners.

Despite these challenges, students do not remain passive. Many of them attempt to overcome their difficulties by using communication strategies, such as using fillers, gestures, or simplifying their speech. In addition, students also engage in informal learning activities outside the classroom, such as watching English videos, listening to music, and interacting through online platforms. These activities provide additional exposure to the language and help students improve their speaking ability in a more natural and less stressful environment.

Based on preliminary observations conducted at SMAN 12 Medan, it was found that students experience a combination of linguistic and psychological barriers in speaking English. At the same time, they demonstrate various efforts to overcome these challenges through communication strategies and independent learning practices. However, these phenomena have not been thoroughly analyzed, particularly in terms of how students' difficulties and strategies are interconnected.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the main speaking problems experienced by students and to analyze the communication strategies they use to overcome those problems. This research is expected to provide a deeper understanding of students' speaking difficulties and to contribute to the development of more effective teaching strategies in English language learning, particularly in EFL contexts.

METHODOLOGY

The findings of this study present the results of data analysis related to students' speaking difficulties and the strategies they use to overcome those difficulties. The data were collected through questionnaires and interviews involving 35 students of SMAN 12 Medan. To make the findings clearer, the results are presented in the form of tables followed by detailed explanations.

No	Types of Difficulties	Number of Students	Percentage
1	Vocabulary	29	82.9%
2	Grammar	26	74.3%
3	Pronunciation	22	62.9%
4	Speaking Anxiety	23	65.7%
5	Lack of Confidence	21	60.0%

Table 5.1 Students' Speaking Difficulties

Based on Table 5.1, it can be clearly seen that vocabulary is the most dominant

difficulty faced by students, with 82.9% of students experiencing this problem. This indicates that most students have limited vocabulary, which makes it difficult for them to express their ideas in English. During the interview, several students mentioned that they often stop in the middle of speaking because they do not know the appropriate words. This shows that vocabulary limitation directly affects students' fluency.

Grammar is also one of the major problems, experienced by 74.3% of students. Many students reported that they are afraid of making grammatical mistakes when speaking. As a result, they tend to think too much before speaking, which makes their speech slow and less fluent. This condition reduces students' confidence and willingness to participate in speaking activities.

In addition, pronunciation difficulties are experienced by 62.9% of students. Many students feel unsure about how to pronounce English words correctly. This makes them hesitant to speak because they are afraid of being misunderstood or judged by others. Some students prefer to use simple words that they can pronounce easily, even if those words are not the most appropriate.

Psychological factors such as speaking anxiety and lack of confidence also play an important role. The data show that 65.7% of students experience anxiety when speaking English, especially in front of the class. Many students feel nervous, shy, and afraid of making mistakes. This feeling often causes them to forget what they want to say or become "blank" during speaking activities. In addition, 60% of students reported that they lack confidence in their speaking ability.

No	Strategies Used	Description
1	Using Fillers	Saying "um", "ee", "well" to think
2	Asking for Help	Asking friends or teacher
3	Using Gestures	Using body language to explain
4	Simplifying Sentences	Using simple words and grammar

Table 5.2 Students' Communication Strategies

Based on Table 5.2, it can be seen that students use several strategies to overcome their speaking difficulties. One of the most common strategies is using fillers such as "um" or "ee" to gain time while thinking. This strategy helps students continue speaking without long pauses.

Another common strategy is asking for help from friends or teachers when they do not know certain words. Students also use gestures or body language to support their communication, especially when they cannot express their ideas verbally. In addition, many students simplify their sentences by using basic vocabulary and simple grammar. This helps them communicate their ideas more easily, even with limited language ability.

Furthermore, the findings also show that students try to improve their speaking ability through informal learning activities. Many students reported that they often watch English videos, listen to English songs, and practice speaking with their friends. These activities help them improve their vocabulary, pronunciation, and confidence.

Overall, the findings indicate that students' speaking difficulties are caused by a combination of linguistic and psychological factors. However, students actively use various strategies to overcome these difficulties, which shows their effort to improve their speaking ability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The discussion of this study focuses on interpreting the findings by connecting them

with relevant theories and previous studies. Based on the results, it is clear that students at SMAN 12 Medan experience both linguistic and psychological difficulties in speaking English. These findings are consistent with the theory proposed by Brown (2004), who states that speaking requires mastery of several components such as vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and fluency. When students lack these components, their speaking performance becomes less effective.

First, the problem of limited vocabulary, which was the most dominant issue found in this study, supports the idea that vocabulary is a fundamental element in speaking. Without sufficient vocabulary, students cannot express their ideas clearly. This finding is in line with Thornbury (2005), who explains that vocabulary knowledge is essential for spoken communication. Students in this study often paused or stopped speaking because they did not know the appropriate words. This shows that vocabulary limitation directly affects students' fluency and confidence when speaking English.

Second, the issue of grammar also plays an important role in students' speaking difficulties. Many students reported that they were afraid of making grammatical mistakes. This finding supports Harmer (2007), who argues that excessive focus on grammatical accuracy can hinder students' fluency. Students tend to think too much before speaking, which interrupts the natural flow of communication. As a result, students become less active in speaking activities and prefer to remain silent rather than risk making mistakes.

Third, pronunciation problems also contribute to students' lack of confidence. When students are unsure about how to pronounce words correctly, they become hesitant to speak. This finding is supported by previous studies which show that pronunciation difficulties can lead to misunderstanding and reduce communication effectiveness. In this study, students preferred to use simple words that they could pronounce easily, even if those words were not the most appropriate. This indicates that pronunciation affects both clarity and confidence.

In addition to linguistic factors, psychological factors such as anxiety and lack of confidence significantly influence students' speaking performance. The findings show that many students feel nervous and afraid when speaking in front of others. This is consistent with MacIntyre and Gardner (1994), who state that anxiety can interfere with cognitive processes and reduce language performance. When students feel anxious, they may forget what they want to say or become unable to organize their thoughts. This condition was also observed in this study, where students reported feeling "blank" during speaking activities.

Furthermore, the relationship between linguistic difficulties and psychological factors is very strong. Students who have limited vocabulary and weak grammar tend to feel more anxious. On the other hand, anxiety itself can reduce students' ability to use the language effectively. This creates a negative cycle that affects students' speaking development. Therefore, improving students' speaking ability requires not only improving their language skills but also reducing their anxiety and increasing their confidence.

The findings also show that students use various communication strategies to overcome their speaking difficulties. This supports the theory of Dörnyei and Scott (1997), who explain that communication strategies help learners maintain interaction when they face problems in communication. In this study, students used fillers, gestures, asking for help, and simplifying sentences. These strategies help students continue speaking even when they do not have complete language knowledge. This indicates that students are not passive learners but actively try to solve their communication problems.

In addition, the use of informal learning activities such as watching English videos, listening to songs, and playing online games shows that students are aware of the importance of exposure to English. This finding is supported by Nunan (2003), who emphasizes that

meaningful exposure and practice are essential for language learning. These activities help students improve their vocabulary, pronunciation, and familiarity with English expressions. Moreover, learning in a relaxed environment can reduce anxiety and make students more confident.

The implications of this study for English language learning are very important. Teachers should not only focus on teaching grammar and vocabulary but also create a supportive and comfortable learning environment. Students need opportunities to practice speaking without fear of making mistakes. Teachers can use interactive activities such as group discussions, role plays, and games to encourage students to speak more actively. In addition, teachers should also teach communication strategies explicitly so that students know how to handle difficulties during speaking.

Overall, this study confirms that students' speaking difficulties are caused by a combination of linguistic and psychological factors. However, the use of communication strategies and informal learning activities shows that students have the potential to improve their speaking ability. Therefore, a balanced approach that addresses both language skills and psychological factors is needed to enhance students' speaking performance.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that students at SMAN 12 Medan experience significant difficulties in speaking English, which are influenced by both linguistic and psychological factors. The most dominant problems include limited vocabulary, grammar difficulties, pronunciation issues, speaking anxiety, and lack of confidence. These difficulties affect students' ability to express their ideas clearly and fluently. As a result, many students hesitate to speak and tend to avoid participating in speaking activities.

Furthermore, the findings also reveal that students actively attempt to overcome their speaking difficulties by using various communication strategies, such as using fillers, asking for help, using gestures, and simplifying sentences. In addition, students engage in informal learning activities, such as watching English videos and practicing with peers, to improve their speaking ability. These findings indicate that although students face several challenges, they still make efforts to develop their speaking skills and adapt to their limitations.

Suggestions

1. Teachers should create a supportive and relaxed classroom environment to reduce students' anxiety.
2. Teachers need to teach communication strategies explicitly to help students speak more confidently.
3. Students should practice speaking more frequently through informal activities such as watching movies, gaming, and interacting in English.

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