

# Exploring Linguistic and Psychological Barriers to English Speaking Proficiency: A Qualitative Analysis of Junior High School Students' Challenges and Pedagogical Implications

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## ABSTRACT:

**Background:** English speaking proficiency remains a significant challenge for junior high school students in non-native English contexts. Many learners encounter both linguistic and psychological barriers that limit their ability to communicate effectively. Although speaking competence is essential for global communication and academic development, the underlying factors influencing students' speaking performance in Indonesian classrooms remain insufficiently examined.

**Aims:** This study aims to identify the linguistic and psychological challenges that hinder junior high school students' English Speaking proficiency. In addition, it investigates how classroom practices influence student participation and speaking performance in English learning activities.

**Methods:** This research employed a qualitative descriptive design. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with students and teachers, and documentation analysis. The participants were eighth-grade students at a junior high school in Purwokerto, Indonesia. The collected data were analyzed using thematic coding to identify recurring patterns related to speaking difficulties and classroom interaction.

**Results:** The findings reveal that students' speaking difficulties are primarily associated with limited vocabulary, pronunciation problems, anxiety, and low self-confidence. These linguistic and psychological barriers reduce students' willingness to participate in oral communication. The study also shows that teacher-centered instructional practices tend to limit opportunities for student interaction, which further constrains speaking development. Conversely, the use of interactive classroom activities significantly increases students' engagement and willingness to speak.

**Conclusion:** The study concludes that improving English speaking proficiency requires addressing both linguistic competence and students' psychological readiness. Teachers should adopt communicative teaching approaches, provide constructive feedback, and foster a supportive classroom atmosphere. Increased opportunities for peer interaction and regular speaking practice are essential for strengthening students' confidence and participation in English communication.

**KEYWORDS:** English Speaking Proficiency, Linguistic Barriers, Psychological Barriers, Junior High School Students, Pedagogical Implications

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## INTRODUCTION

English speaking skills are essential for effective communication, especially in a globalized educational context. However, many students face significant challenges in expressing themselves orally in English, which hinders their language proficiency. These challenges are often rooted in both linguistic and psychological barriers, including limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, and anxiety about making mistakes (Gobena, 2025 and Ismael et al., 2025). Previous studies have demonstrated that anxiety and lack of confidence play crucial roles in students' speaking abilities, which can lead to lower participation in speaking activities (Chen et al., 2022 and Tsang, 2025). The classroom environment and teaching strategies are also integral to shaping students' performance in oral tasks. Research indicates that teacher-centered teaching methods tend to discourage active student participation, while more communicative and interactive approaches have a positive impact on students' engagement and speaking outcomes (Khan, 2024 and Mukhtarova, 2026). Despite the importance of speaking skills in language education, few studies have focused on the specific challenges faced by junior high school students in non-native English contexts, particularly in Indonesia. Understanding these challenges is crucial for designing pedagogical interventions that can improve students' speaking proficiency and create supportive learning environments.

This study is significant as it addresses the gap in understanding the specific difficulties faced by junior high school students in learning to speak English in Indonesia. While much research has focused on speaking difficulties at the tertiary level, limited attention has been given to younger students at the junior high school level. Moreover, the interplay between linguistic and psychological factors affecting speaking proficiency has not been sufficiently explored in Indonesian classrooms. By examining these factors in detail, this study aims to provide actionable insights for teachers, enabling them to adopt strategies that promote greater student engagement and participation in speaking activities. Additionally, by identifying the key barriers—both linguistic and psychological—this research contributes to the broader field of English language teaching by highlighting the specific challenges that non-native students face. Given the increasing emphasis on communicative competence in English language education, this study provides important implications for improving speaking proficiency in the classroom. The findings of this study can inform the development of targeted interventions that address students' fears and linguistic limitations while encouraging more confident and effective communication in English.

Research has shown that linguistic barriers, such as limited vocabulary and poor pronunciation, significantly hinder students' ability to speak effectively in English (Carrion Zhunio & Peñida Arias, 2022). These barriers are compounded by psychological factors, including anxiety and fear of making mistakes, which negatively impact students' confidence and willingness to speak in front of others (Ahsan et al., 2020). Studies have found that students who experience high levels of anxiety in language learning situations are less likely to participate in speaking activities and more likely to withdraw from interactions altogether (Melchor-Couto, 2017). To address these challenges, it is essential for teachers to create a supportive classroom environment that encourages risk-taking and reduces anxiety. Effective teaching strategies, such as task-based learning and communicative

language teaching (CLT), have been shown to promote a more interactive and participatory classroom atmosphere, thereby improving speaking proficiency.

In addition to linguistic and psychological factors, classroom interaction patterns and teaching methods play a pivotal role in shaping students' speaking abilities. A study by Tsui suggests that traditional teacher-centered approaches often fail to engage students in meaningful communication, leading to lower speaking competence. On the other hand, interactive methods, including group discussions, peer teaching, and problem-solving tasks, encourage students to use the target language more actively and authentically. Research has consistently shown that communicative language teaching methods, which emphasize interaction and meaningful communication, result in higher levels of student engagement and improved speaking proficiency (Robillos, 2023). Thus, this study investigates how these teaching strategies, in combination with an understanding of linguistic and psychological barriers, can enhance the speaking skills of junior high school students.

Despite the substantial body of research on English language learning, there remains a gap in understanding the specific challenges faced by junior high school students in Indonesia when speaking English. Previous studies have predominantly focused on university-level students, leaving a critical gap in addressing the needs of younger learners. Furthermore, while many studies have examined linguistic barriers, few have integrated psychological factors such as anxiety and fear of making mistakes within the context of language learning at the junior high school level. This gap is particularly pertinent in non-native English-speaking countries like Indonesia, where cultural and educational factors significantly influence students' speaking proficiency. This research aims to fill this gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of both linguistic and psychological barriers faced by junior high school students and exploring how classroom practices influence their speaking performance.

The primary purpose of this study is to explore the linguistic and psychological barriers to English speaking proficiency faced by junior high school students in Indonesia. This study aims to identify the specific challenges students encounter and how these challenges are influenced by classroom practices and teaching strategies. By analyzing the factors that hinder students' speaking abilities, this research seeks to provide practical recommendations for teachers to create a more supportive and engaging learning environment. Ultimately, the study aims to contribute to the field of language education by offering pedagogical insights that can help improve speaking proficiency among junior high school students. Additionally, the study will investigate the role of communicative teaching methods in overcoming these barriers and enhancing student participation in speaking activities.

## **METHOD**

### **Research Design**

This research employed a qualitative descriptive design to gain an in-depth understanding of junior high school students' speaking difficulties in English. Qualitative research is appropriate as it allows for the exploration of complex factors such as psychological and linguistic barriers, which quantitative methods might not fully capture (Lim, 2025; Rana et al., 2023). The descriptive design was chosen to provide a comprehensive analysis of the students' experiences in real classroom contexts. By focusing

on the students' perceptions and challenges, this study seeks to contribute meaningful insights into how linguistic and psychological barriers affect their speaking proficiency. The qualitative approach also facilitates the identification of factors that hinder speaking ability, enabling the development of effective pedagogical strategies. This design is well-suited for examining individual experiences and classroom dynamics that influence language acquisition (Sulis, 2024 and Wiboolyasarini et al., 2024). The research methodology emphasizes capturing the rich, contextual details of students' struggles with speaking English, which can inform practical solutions in language teaching. Through this approach, the study provides a nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by junior high school students in Indonesia, an area with limited existing research on this topic.

### **Participant**

The participants in this study were 30 eighth-grade students from a public junior high school in Purwokerto, Indonesia. A purposive sampling technique was used to select students with varying levels of English proficiency, allowing the research to encompass a broad spectrum of experiences. This selection criterion was aimed at ensuring that both students who face significant speaking challenges and those who experience less difficulty in speaking English were included. Additionally, five English language teachers from the same school were interviewed to provide insight into their teaching strategies and perceptions of student difficulties. By incorporating teachers' perspectives, the study also aimed to understand the role of classroom instruction in shaping students' speaking abilities. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, and consent was obtained from both students and their parents. Ethical considerations were taken into account, ensuring that participants' identities remained confidential. The diversity in proficiency levels within the student participants allowed for a richer analysis of the different factors influencing speaking performance. Data from both students and teachers were crucial for understanding the various challenges from multiple perspectives.

### **Instrument**

Data were collected using a combination of classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Classroom observations were conducted to observe real-time interactions between students and teachers, focusing on how speaking activities were implemented and how students engaged during those activities. A field note template was used to record observations on factors such as student participation, teacher-student interactions, and the types of tasks employed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 students and 5 teachers to gather detailed accounts of the students' speaking difficulties and teaching strategies used in the classroom. The interviews allowed for an open-ended exploration of personal experiences, enabling participants to describe their challenges and insights in their own words (Henderson et al., 2023 and Kahlke et al., 2025). Additionally, lesson plans and teaching materials were analyzed to assess how classroom activities were designed to support speaking development (Lee & Zhai, 2024 and Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2024). This multi-instrument approach ensured that both the students' personal experiences and the contextual classroom environment were thoroughly explored. The instruments were chosen to provide both qualitative depth and contextual relevance, essential for understanding the complexity of the challenges involved in English speaking proficiency.

### Analysis plan

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a common method for identifying and interpreting patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2021 and Morgan, 2022). The analysis process involved several stages, starting with the transcription of interviews and field notes from classroom observations. Next, initial codes were generated by highlighting significant phrases or statements related to speaking difficulties, such as anxiety, limited vocabulary, and pronunciation issues. These codes were then grouped into broader themes reflecting the linguistic and psychological barriers that hindered speaking proficiency. In addition, a comparison was made between students' experiences and the teaching strategies observed in the classroom. This allowed for an exploration of how certain classroom practices either exacerbated or mitigated speaking difficulties. The findings were then triangulated by cross-referencing interview data with classroom observations and document analysis. This multi-source data analysis helped ensure the reliability and validity of the findings. Finally, the identified themes were synthesized to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors affecting speaking proficiency and to suggest practical pedagogical solutions. The analysis was performed iteratively, with constant refinement of the themes as new insights emerged from the data.

**Table 1.** Thematic Analysis Process.

Stage	Description	Example Codes	Main Themes
Data Transcription	Transcribing interviews and observation notes to obtain text for analysis.	-	-
Initial Coding	Identifying segments of text relevant to the research topic, such as speaking difficulties.	"Anxiety", "Limited Vocabulary", "Fear of Mistakes"	Psychological Barriers
Code Grouping	Grouping initial codes into broader categories to identify common patterns.	"Low Confidence", "Stress during Speaking"	Psychological Factors in Speaking Proficiency
Theme Identification	Identifying main themes that emerge from code grouping.	"Classroom Anxiety", "Teacher Support"	Linguistic and Psychological Barriers
Data Comparison	Comparing data from interviews, observations, and documents to find consistent patterns.	-	-
Thematic Synthesis	Summarizing the identified themes to explain the challenges students face in speaking.	"Linguistic Barriers", "Psychological Support"	Pedagogical Solutions and Recommendations

The table above illustrates the steps used in thematic analysis to identify the factors affecting students' speaking abilities. Each stage of the analysis is conducted systematically, starting from transcribing data, initial coding, code grouping, theme identification, to thematic synthesis. This table helps summarize the analytical process and demonstrates how data from multiple sources can be compared and merged to produce comprehensive findings. By using this approach, the research aims to provide deeper insights into the factors

influencing students' English speaking proficiency, offering actionable recommendations for improving teaching strategies.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

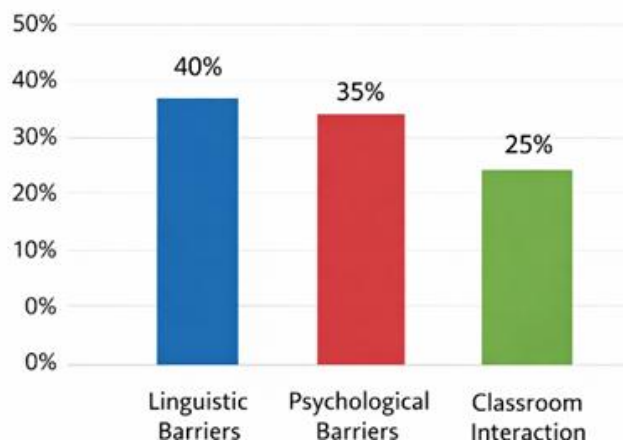
### Result

The results of this study reveal that students' speaking difficulties stem from various interconnected factors. Linguistic challenges include limited vocabulary and pronunciation issues, which hinder students from expressing themselves effectively. In addition to these, psychological factors, particularly anxiety and the fear of making mistakes, play a significant role in limiting their speaking performance. Students often experience low self-confidence, which further affects their participation during speaking activities. Classroom observations confirmed that teacher-centered instruction, which limits opportunities for interactive communication, contributes to the students' reluctance to speak in front of their peers. Conversely, more collaborative and interactive activities, such as group discussions and role-playing, led to higher levels of engagement and participation. These findings emphasize the importance of creating an environment where students feel supported and encouraged to take risks in speaking English. By integrating communicative language teaching methods, teachers can foster a more dynamic classroom environment that enhances students' confidence and speaking abilities.

**Table 2:** Linguistic and Psychological Barriers Identified in the Study.

Barrier Type	Description	Example from Students
Linguistic Barriers	Limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties	"I don't know the word, so I stay quiet."
Psychological Barriers	Anxiety, fear of making mistakes, low self-confidence	"I'm scared I'll say something wrong."
Classroom Interaction	Teacher-centered activities reducing participation	"The teacher talks a lot, and we don't speak much."

The table above illustrates the primary barriers identified during the study, including both linguistic and psychological factors. These barriers were observed through classroom interactions and highlighted in student interviews. The table shows the direct impact of these factors on students' willingness to engage in speaking tasks, reflecting the critical areas where pedagogical improvements can be made.



**Figur 1.** Factors Contributing to Speaking Difficulties

The bar chart presents a clear visual representation of the relative importance of various factors impacting students' ability to speak English. It shows that while both linguistic and psychological barriers are prominent, classroom interaction also plays a notable role in hindering speaking performance.

## **Discussion**

The findings from this study offer important insights into the difficulties faced by junior high school students in speaking English. The linguistic barriers identified, such as limited vocabulary and pronunciation issues, are consistent with previous research indicating that these challenges are common in language acquisition (Jawaid et al., 2024). The students' vocabulary limitations prevent them from expressing themselves fluently, causing frustration and disengagement. Pronunciation difficulties, particularly with sounds that are not present in their native language, further exacerbate the problem. These findings align with the broader literature on language learning, which emphasizes the importance of vocabulary acquisition and pronunciation practice in developing speaking proficiency (Zega, 2025). However, the psychological barriers, such as anxiety and fear of making mistakes, were found to be equally significant in hindering speaking abilities. Previous studies have shown that language learners often experience high levels of anxiety in oral tasks, leading to avoidance behaviors (Maher & King, 2023).

In addition to these individual challenges, the study highlights the role of classroom interaction patterns. Teacher-centered instruction, where the teacher predominantly leads the speaking activities, was found to limit students' opportunities to practice speaking and interact with their peers. This supports the findings of Tsui, who argued that interactive teaching methods, such as pair or group work, create more opportunities for students to engage in meaningful communication. Classroom observations also indicated that students were more willing to speak when engaged in activities that encouraged peer collaboration. This reflects the importance of creating a student-centered learning environment where communication is prioritized over rote memorization and grammar drills.

Integrating communicative language teaching (CLT) strategies, which focus on real-world communication, can help address both linguistic and psychological barriers. CLT has been shown to improve students' speaking proficiency by providing a more dynamic and supportive environment for language use (Abdelmageed & Omer, 2020). The findings also suggest that feedback plays a critical role in boosting students' confidence. Providing positive reinforcement and corrective feedback in a supportive manner can reduce students' anxiety and encourage them to participate more actively in speaking activities. This aligns with Dewaele's research on the emotional dimension of language learning, which emphasizes the need for a nurturing and non-threatening classroom environment to reduce anxiety.

The findings also suggest that teachers need to be aware of the psychological factors influencing their students' speaking abilities. Anxiety, fear of mistakes, and low self-confidence were recurrent themes in the interviews with students. These factors can significantly affect how students engage with speaking tasks and influence their overall language learning experience. The study underscores the importance of incorporating activities that help build students' self-esteem, such as role-playing and peer feedback. By addressing these psychological barriers, teachers can foster a classroom environment that encourages risk-taking and language use without the fear of judgment.

Furthermore, the study highlights the need for long-term interventions to support sustainable improvements in speaking proficiency. One-time strategies, such as introducing interactive tasks, may not be sufficient to overcome deep-rooted barriers. Therefore, it is recommended that schools implement ongoing professional development programs for teachers, focusing on how to incorporate communicative teaching methods effectively and how to address students' psychological barriers. This approach could create a more consistent and supportive environment for language learners, leading to more significant improvements in their speaking proficiency over time.

### **Implications**

This study has significant implications for English language teaching at the junior high school level. The findings suggest that linguistic and psychological barriers must be addressed simultaneously to improve students' speaking abilities. Teachers should consider adopting communicative teaching strategies that prioritize student interaction and provide ample opportunities for students to practice speaking. Additionally, creating a supportive learning environment where students feel safe to make mistakes is essential for reducing anxiety and building self-confidence. Schools should also consider providing teachers with professional development opportunities that focus on these areas, ensuring that they are equipped with the tools and knowledge to support their students' speaking proficiency.

### **Research contribution**

This study contributes to the field of language education by providing a detailed analysis of the linguistic and psychological barriers that hinder speaking proficiency among junior high school students. It also offers practical recommendations for teachers and educators to enhance students' speaking abilities through communicative teaching strategies and supportive feedback. By identifying both the challenges and potential solutions, the study fills a gap in the existing literature on language learning difficulties at the junior high school level, particularly in non-native English-speaking contexts.

### **Limitations**

While this study provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by junior high school students in learning to speak English, it is not without limitations. First, the study was conducted in a single school, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. Additionally, the sample size of students and teachers may not fully represent the diversity of experiences and challenges faced by all learners. Future research could benefit from expanding the sample size and including multiple schools to gain a broader perspective on the issue. Furthermore, the study focused on short-term observations, and a longitudinal study would be useful to explore how students' speaking proficiency develops over time with consistent intervention.

### **Suggestions**

Future studies should explore long-term interventions that could address the identified barriers to speaking proficiency. Additionally, further research could investigate the role of teacher training in equipping educators with the skills necessary to create a supportive classroom environment that fosters effective language use. Researchers should also consider exploring the impact of digital tools and online platforms on students' speaking abilities, as these technologies offer new opportunities for interactive language practice.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study provides a comprehensive examination of the linguistic and psychological barriers that hinder junior high school students' speaking proficiency in English. The findings highlight that limited vocabulary, pronunciation issues, and psychological factors such as anxiety and low self-confidence significantly affect students' ability to engage in speaking activities. Teacher-centered methods were found to exacerbate these difficulties by reducing opportunities for interactive and communicative practice. In contrast, interactive teaching methods, which foster student participation in low-anxiety environments, proved to be effective in improving students' speaking skills.

The study emphasizes the importance of addressing both linguistic and psychological barriers in the language learning process. By adopting communicative language teaching strategies and providing supportive feedback, teachers can create a more engaging and less anxiety-provoking learning environment. The integration of peer interactions, along with regular speaking practice, can help students build confidence and improve their speaking proficiency. These findings contribute to the growing body of research on language education and offer valuable insights for educators seeking to enhance their students' speaking abilities.

However, the study's limitations, including the small sample size and its focus on a single school in Indonesia, suggest that further research with a larger, more diverse sample is needed to generalize the results. Future studies should also explore the effectiveness of long-term interventions and digital tools to address speaking difficulties. Overall, this research provides actionable recommendations that can be implemented in the classroom to improve English speaking proficiency and contribute to the development of more effective language education strategies.

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### **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT**

The author, Annisa Rahma, was responsible for the conception, design, and implementation of the study. She conducted all aspects of the research, including data collection, which involved classroom observations, interviews with students and teachers, and the analysis of relevant documents. The author was also responsible for the transcription of interviews, coding of data, and the identification of themes through qualitative analysis.

In addition, Annisa Rahma wrote the manuscript, including the introduction, literature review, methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion sections. She incorporated the feedback from academic mentors and colleagues to refine the study and improve the clarity and quality of the research. The author also ensured that all ethical considerations, including informed consent and participant confidentiality, were adhered to throughout the research process.

The author declares that no other individuals made significant contributions to the research. The study was conducted independently, with full responsibility for all aspects of the research lying with Annisa Rahma.

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