

## Struggling to Meet Expectations: Speaking Difficulties and Strategies of EFL Students at Datokarama State Islamic University Palu

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### ABSTRACT

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This qualitative research employs a case study design to investigate the difficulties and strategies in speaking English encountered by third-semester students of the English Tadris Department at Datokarama State Islamic University, Palu. The participants were 30 students, and data were collected through classroom observation and semi-structured interviews. The findings categorize students' difficulties into psychological and linguistic factors. Psychologically, students experienced nervousness, fear of making mistakes, fear of judgment, and avoidance of eye contact. Linguistically, difficulties included limited fluency, a limited vocabulary, and errors in pronunciation and grammar. To overcome these barriers, students employed various strategies such as watching English movies, listening to songs, singing along, constructing sentences with new vocabulary, using gestures for visualization, and joining English clubs. Notably, students also utilized digital tools and smartphone applications, including AI, Duolingo, Elsa Speak, Let Me Speak, HelloTalk, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. This research highlights the struggles of English majors and provides insights for lecturers to improve teaching strategies and foster a more supportive learning environment.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, most people are multilingual, able to speak both the national language and their regional languages. Nevertheless, English is learned as a foreign language rather than a second language. Consequently, it is unsurprising that many Indonesians still encounter barriers when speaking English. Children do not acquire specific knowledge of a language that they rarely use in their environment (Saville-Troike, 2012). Therefore, the learning process is not as simple for non-native speakers, such as Indonesians, as it is for those in English-speaking environments. Differences in vocabulary, pronunciation, and subject-verb agreement make it difficult for Indonesians to learn English.

Speaking is an active oral language skill possessed by humans. It is the manifestation of a combination of hearing, mouth positioning, and memory



(Lundquist, 2012). People recognize the words they hear through acoustic and auditory processes. All hearing organs participate in this action so that the brain can interpret words into meaning. When necessary, people recall words they have heard, whether to comprehend a conversation or to speak the language.

To speak English fluently and naturally, students must practice every day. The ability to manage every word orally, especially when it is not one's native language, is challenging. Components of speaking, such as fluency, grammar accuracy, pronunciation, vocabulary, and comprehensibility, are often overwhelming for non-native speakers to handle simultaneously. Being able to speak fluently and chronologically is not merely a gift but a skill that must be trained. Even those labeled as experts can lose some competence if they skip practicing. As the saying goes, "practice makes perfect," so non-native students must push themselves to speak like natives.

Some students find speaking difficult and struggle to get started. Students must be able to pronounce phonemes, use correct stress and intonation, and use connected speech to speak fluently. Aspects such as pronunciation, diction, and grammar are often viewed as obstacles (Harmer, 2013). Based on the researcher's preliminary observation, some students needed to construct sentences on paper as preparation before they started speaking. As a result, the activity of speaking did not occur as naturally as it should. While lecturers prefer spontaneous speaking, providing time for preparation often leads to better participation; without it, some students refuse to speak up.

Regarding students' difficulties and strategies for practicing speaking English, several previous studies have addressed these issues. Maji, Samanhudi, and Mokoagouw conducted research at SMKN 3 Sorong, discovering through observation and interviews that the lack of vocabulary, poor pronunciation, and poor grammar were the main linguistic difficulties. Non-linguistic factors included the fear of making mistakes, low motivation, shyness, anxiety, and mother tongue use (Maji et al., 2022). Similarly, Nurman, Tambusai, and Hasibuan investigated students' strategies through questionnaires and interviews. Their findings showed that students used metacognitive, cognitive, and social strategies, with note-taking being the most common, followed by translation, cooperation, and self-assertiveness (Nurman et al., 2022).

Most speaking difficulties encountered by non-native speakers, including Indonesians, stem from both linguistic and non-linguistic factors. Non-linguistic factors refer to psychological states such as nervousness, stiffness, trembling, and loss of words. Meanwhile, linguistic factors often stem from mother tongue influence. A study on the influence of mother tongue revealed three types of interference: phonological, syntactic, and lexical. Phonological interference involves sound substitution, while syntactical interference covers grammatical errors like auxiliary omission. Lexical interference results in false cognates and direct translations (Yazidi & Amrizal, 2025).

Among research on speaking difficulties, only a small number of studies focus specifically on university students majoring in English. While society assumes that English majors possess excellent language skills, these students often struggle

with their own fears, discomfort, and limitations. Furthermore, not all students choose the English major voluntarily. Some enroll due to parental choice or because they are unable to enter their preferred programs. Third-semester students in the English Tadris Department at Datokarama State Islamic University Palu, experience this situation. Regardless of their motivation, in the speaking class, they have no choice but to perform their best.

To cope, some students use technology, such as AI and smartphone applications, to improve their skills. Digital technology helps students practice speaking through platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok (Suadi et al., 2025). However, insufficient research examines the specific digital technologies university English majors use to improve their speaking skills.

In the English Tadris Department, speaking classes begin in the second semester. The curriculum is divided into four levels: interactional, transactional, argumentative, and public/academic speaking. The respondents of this research are thirty third-semester students. Based on this background, the researcher intends to identify the difficulties and strategies these students encounter in speaking English. The researcher applied observation and semi-structured interviews to answer the research question: “What are the difficulties and strategies in speaking English encountered by English Tadris Department students at Datokarama State Islamic University Palu?”

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

This section presents the theories that inform the overview of this research. The theories address speaking, its components, factors affecting speaking, speaking difficulties, speaking strategies, and digital technologies for speaking.

### **2.1. Speaking**

Speaking is one of the two productive skills, along with writing. Speaking is the activity of delivering one's ideas and thoughts through spoken language. It is the process of human communication involving a sender encoding thoughts into a message, which is transmitted through speech organs to a receiver who decodes and interprets the message (Safitriani & Jayadi, 2021). Encoding relies on a speaker's ability to coordinate oral speech organs, while decoding emphasizes a listener's ability to coordinate auditory organs.

Humans need speaking skills on various occasions. In daily communication, speaking is crucial to conveying a message. For academic purposes, speaking is a principal necessity. McCormack and Watkins explain that speaking skills are crucial in presentations, seminars, and discussions (McCormack & Watkins, 2009). University students, especially English major students, must have proficient English language skills. In academic settings such as presentations and discussions, they must possess not only linguistic knowledge of the target language but also the ability to deliver a public speaking performance. In the English Tadris Department of Datokarama State Islamic University Palu, speaking is included in the curriculum and is a prerequisite course. There are four levels of speaking classes in this department: interactional speaking, transactional speaking, argumentative speaking, and public and academic speaking. The first speaking class can be taken in the second semester.

## **2.2. Components of Speaking**

There are three key features of speaking: fluency, accuracy, and complexity. Fluency refers to few pauses when speaking coherently. Accuracy refers to the appropriateness of grammar and pronunciation. Complexity refers to the meaning gained through more advanced grammatical forms (Goh & Burns, 2012). The combination of all three components builds a comprehensive speaking production. Each feature brings its own difficulty and strategy to master. In this study, students reported using specific techniques to master a particular speaking feature. The techniques they used to master one feature differ from those used to master the other.

Aspects of speaking, such as comprehension, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency, cannot be separated from each other. Each aspect forms the production of speech.

Comprehension is the ability to grasp the meaning of spoken messages. It leads to the correlation between listening and speaking skills. Grammar is the aspect of speaking that provides clear and coherent messages through grammatical accuracy. Vocabulary is the amount of lexicon to express spoken messages. Pronunciation relates to the accuracy of the words uttered to provide meaning. Fluency refers to the flow of words to provide effortless speaking production (Wahyudin et al., 2024).

When people speak, they sometimes neglect their interlocutors' need to understand what they say. Interlocutors will find the speech effortless to comprehend if the speech involves all of the components of speaking. As EFL learners, it is not always easy to negotiate meaning. Negotiating meaning can even be something frustrating. While conducting this research, the researcher found that students who have problems with grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency address these issues in various ways. To improve pronunciation, for example, the students tend to watch movies, listen to songs, and sing along.

## **2.3. Factors Affecting Speaking**

Many factors can affect speaking performance. Anxiety and motivation to speak are two factors referring to the psychological state affecting speaking. Anxiety involves feelings of tension, nervousness, worry, sweating, and nausea. If it relates to personality characteristics and emotional instability of individuals, it refers to trait anxiety. If it relates to the performance of speaking itself, such as the fear of making language mistakes, it is referred to as language anxiety (Goh & Burns, 2012). Students can feel the symptoms of anxiety when they perform speaking, especially public speaking. It is very personal. Only the individual understands when the feelings come and how to overcome them. In line with this research, the students reported feeling nervous when speaking. They were afraid of making mistakes in vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. They did not like making eye contact while speaking. Besides, they were afraid of being judged for their speaking performance.

Psychological factors in second language acquisition cover self-esteem, attribution theory, and self-efficacy, willingness to communicate, inhibition, risk-taking, anxiety, empathy, and extroversion (Brown, 2007). Believing in self-ability is seen as one of the factors leading to success, not only in learning a second language

but also in life. The existence of internal factors, such as ability and effort, and external factors, such as fortune, is also taken into account. Motivation and courage to initiate communication in the target language play a role in speech production. Some students complained that, even though they have already prepared well, once their turn to speak comes, they lose the words they have prepared. This is a clear sign that psychological factors have a significant influence on the speaking production.

#### **2.4. Difficulties in Speaking**

Difficulties in speaking are inevitable, especially for non-native speakers. Linguistic problems and non-linguistic problems are listed as difficulties in speaking. Linguistic problems include inaccurate pronunciation, insufficient vocabulary, and incorrect grammar. Non-linguistic problems involve lack of confidence, anxiety, shyness, lack of motivation, and fear of mistakes (Anggraini et al., 2022). The students who participated in this research encountered both psychological and linguistic difficulties in speaking English. Nervousness, being afraid of making mistakes, avoiding eye contact, and being afraid to be judged are symptoms of their psychological difficulties. Each student coped with the problems and found a solution. Besides, they still had to face difficulties related to linguistic competence, such as limited fluency, limited vocabulary, incorrect pronunciation, and grammatical errors.

Judgmental stereotypes about students majoring in the English study program sometimes become an encumbrance for them. People imagine that students must demonstrate proficiency as advanced speakers of the target language. Vice versa, they are struggling to improve their language skills. They are against themselves in both psychological and linguistic difficulties. People criticize when they make errors or when they do not perform as they are supposed to, without trying to find out why those things happen and how to solve them.

#### **2.5. Strategies in Speaking**

Various strategies can be used to improve speaking performance. Some students tend to use a particular strategy and avoid others. Different strategies are used to improve different components of speaking. Wahyudin et.al describe several strategies to improve pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and pragmatics in speaking skills.

Some strategies to improve pronunciation are practicing minimal pairs, shadowing, and tongue twisters. Minimal pairs provide students with words that are pronounced similarly but differ in only one segment of sound. This technique enables them to differentiate between two similar sounds. Shadowing is a technique for imitating how native speakers pronounce words and sentences. This technique allows students to learn stress, intonation, and rhythm. Tongue twisters do not focus on meaning, but on the accuracy and fluency of how every word is pronounced. Some strategies to improve fluency are choral speaking, timed speaking, and storytelling. Choral speaking requires the students to recite phrases, sentences, or texts together. Timed speaking requires the students to speak within a specific time limit. Storytelling is a technique to improve fluency, creativity, and narrative skills. To develop vocabulary, techniques such as flashcards, extensive reading, and a vocabulary journal can be used. Flashcards are a technique for memorizing words by

using vocabulary cards. It facilitates a memory booster to enhance vocabulary. Extensive reading is an approach to reading for pleasure. The focus is on new vocabulary entries in passages. A vocabulary journal is a technique in which students write down every new word they encounter, along with its meaning and examples in sentences. Improving grammatical accuracy can be achieved through techniques such as drilling, fill-in-the-blank exercises, and error-correction tasks. Substitution drills and transformation drills are two types of drills that enable students to change grammatical features, such as auxiliary verbs, and to transform sentences into affirmative, negative, and interrogative forms. Pragmatics refers to how context can influence meaning. It can be developed through adaptation to the interlocutor's context and cultural background (Wahyudin et al., 2024).

In this research, some students reported using unfamiliar words to expand their vocabulary, while others visualized words with gestures to grasp their meanings. Vocabulary journaling is very familiar to the students. Whenever they encountered unfamiliar words, they opened their smartphones to look them up and wrote them in their notebooks. Some students claimed they had to pronounce words as directed by AI applications to make them easier to remember.

Some speaking strategies attract female students more than male students. The statistical data gathered indicate a significant effect of gender on the intensity of use of six speaking strategies: interactional-maintenance, self-evaluation, fluency-oriented, time-gaining, compensation, and interpersonal. Female learners mainly apply the speaking strategies above. Besides, the four speaking strategies, such as interactional-maintenance, self-improvement, compensation, and memory strategies, make a great contribution to speaking proficiency (Mistar & Umamah, 2014). In this research, the researcher found that many female students used more smartphone applications than male students. Some male students even stated that they did not use any internet-based applications to improve their speaking skills. However, this finding still requires further research, as the number of students who became respondents in this study did not balance with the total number of male and female students. There were more female students than male students.

A research result shows that the students used strategies such as memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social, but the most frequently used were cognitive and metacognitive strategies. The memory strategy covers creating mental linkages, applying pictures and sounds, well review, and executing action. Cognitive strategies involve repetition, practice with sounds, writing systems, grammar, and translation. Compensation includes gestures, miming, and the use of descriptive words. Metacognitive strategies comprise a set of activities, such as defining goals, focusing, activating background knowledge, and predicting. Affective strategies include learning through music, fun learning, and practicing self-reward for performance. Social strategy involves interacting and collaborating with others to improve speaking performance and confidence (Afifah & Punama, 2024).

In line with this research's results, some students used compensatory strategies, such as gestures, to help them remember new words. Social strategy was also applied by joining English clubs to interact with others who share an interest in English. Joining English clubs is one optional strategy to improve speaking

performance. Speaking strategies used by non-English students to improve speaking skills are divided into two parts: internal and external strategies. Internal strategies involve self-speaking practice, memorizing vocabulary, the shadowing technique, reading news articles, language switching, and determining speaking time. External strategies include taking an English course and forming a friendship circle. Among those strategies, self-speaking practice was ranked as the most often used strategy since it provides a friendly environment without any pressure or judgment from interlocutors (Azisah et al., 2024). Joining the English club is an external solution that the students undertake. Besides, they can expand their social circle with new friends who share the same goal in the target language. The English Tadris Department of Datokarama State Islamic University Palu, has one English club. It is under the auspices and supervision of EDSA (English Department Student Association) of Datokarama State Islamic University Palu. The English club holds a weekly meeting where students discuss current issues in English study, scholarship tips, the environment, and more.

Students who actively participate in the classroom, especially in speaking classes, tend to dominate class activities and set the tone. The question-and-answer technique can be applied to boost students' speaking skills. The results of the experimental research show a significant improvement in students taught using the question-and-answer technique compared to those who were not. This technique enables the students to enjoy the activity of speaking in the classroom because they are given time to speak without any tendencies or pressure (Muzammil et al., 2024). In this research, the researcher often instructed the students to post a question right after their friends' performances finished. Undoubtedly, this activity can transform the speaking class into a fun class. They asked about opinions, hobbies, families, sports, and many more. Students use their own learning strategies, which may differ from those of other students. They tend to choose activities they enjoy to create a supportive atmosphere for studying alone, in pairs, or in groups.

## **2.6. Digital Technologies as Supports for Speaking English**

Technology plays a significant role in all aspects of life. Students in this digital era cannot be separated from the internet and gadgets. Technology is part of their needs and lifestyle. Recognizing their speaking difficulties, some students tend to use the digital technologies available to them. Smartphones and AI-based applications are part of their problem-solving. Research has been conducted to analyze the digital technologies students use to improve their speaking. YouTube has dominated 53% of the market share, followed by Spotify, Twitter, Duolingo, Instagram, Google Translate, Netflix, and TikTok (Kameswara et al., 2023). This finding aligns with the reality of the students majoring in the English program at Datokarama State Islamic University, Palu. They tended to open social media and smartphone applications to improve their speaking skills rather than using conventional methods such as reading books or consulting a dictionary. Some students even claimed they could not spend long reading and preferred watching YouTube. The use of AI also contributes to students' progress in speaking. AI can assist students to understand learning materials, increase motivation, and provide real-time feedback (Bungsu Keumalasari et al., 2024). In line with that, students majoring in the English program at

Datokarama State Islamic University, Palu, used AI rather than a dictionary to search for unfamiliar English words, construct sentences, and more.

### 3. METHOD

This research applies a qualitative approach. A qualitative approach is used to explore individuals or groups to interpret the complexity of a social problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The design of this research is a case study analyzing the phenomena that occurred among third-semester English Tadris Department students at Datokarama State Islamic University, Palu. According to Mackey and Gass, a case study provides a holistic description of language learning within a specific population and setting (Mackey & Gass, 2005). A case study is applied to obtain in-depth information on the difficulties and strategies encountered by English Tadris Department students in speaking English at Datokarama State Islamic University, Palu.

The researcher took the whole third-semester class in the transactional speaking class as the respondents in this research. There were 30 students in the class, including eight males and twenty-two females. They are around nineteen to twenty-two years old. Some of them are indigenous people in Palu, so they have lived in Palu since they were born. However, the other students come from the other regions outside Palu, such as Sigi, Morowali, Banggai, Tolitoli, and others. There are also some students from other provinces, such as South Sulawesi and Kalimantan (Borneo). This research was conducted with permission from the Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teacher Training, Datokarama State Islamic University Palu, with the letter number as follows: 4091/Un.24/F.1.B/ PP.00.09/10/2025.

The data collection instruments used in this research are observation and semi-structured interviews. Creswell explains that qualitative research relies on general interviews with a few self-designed open-ended questions (Creswell, 2012). Difficulties and strategies are two specific, personal topics to discuss. Every student may have different problems in speaking English, as well as different ways to overcome them. Therefore, the researcher decides to use a semi-structured interview as the data collection instrument, in addition to observation. Before observing and interviewing the students, the researcher informed them that they would be participants in this research and asked for their willingness to participate, with assurances of confidentiality in accordance with ethical guidelines.

The observation involves the researcher's investigation of the circumstances during the speaking class. The observation was conducted before the interview for four meetings. In every meeting, the class discussed one topic of speaking, such as family, environment, sports, and traditional cultures. The researcher observed some indicators, such as: (1) students' active participation in class discussion; (2) speaking components such as fluency, pronunciation accuracy, grammar accuracy, and vocabulary; (3) students' psychological state of being at the moment of speaking; and (4) students' strategies to overcome their limitations.

The interview applied was a semi-structured interview with guided open-ended questions. The questions were about the topic of this research – students' difficulties in speaking and the strategies they used to overcome them. Examples of



the questions were: (1) Do you find any difficulties in speaking English? Please explain it! and (2) Do you use any strategies or techniques to deal with the difficulties? However, the researcher also included several additional questions outside the research topic, such as: (1) What do you feel when speaking English in the classroom?; (2) How do you study English at home?; (3) Who is your partner to speak English with?; (4) Do you apply any internet-based applications to assist you in speaking?; and (5) Why do you choose to apply it among other internet-based applications? The interview was conducted in the classroom when the students did not have any class.

The data collected were analyzed descriptively in a coherent narrative. The researcher used triangulation to analyze the research results. The researcher gathered data from the students through interviews. To strengthen the data, the researcher observed students' behavior in the classroom during the speaking class. The researcher conducted this research herself and, to help her remember the details of the students' speaking performance, asked the students for permission to record them in video form. The following is the analysis process of data collection. The researcher applied thematic analysis to both the observation and the interview.

### **3.1. Observation day 1**

In this step, the researcher observed the students' behaviors and speaking production. The speaking topic was about family. The researcher documented the observation and recorded videos of students' individual performances. When the class was over, the researcher rewatched the videos to increase authenticity and details.

### **3.2. Observation day 2**

On the second day of observation, the researcher analyzed the students' speaking production. The students performed speaking in a group discussion about the environment. The researcher observed and documented the students' behavior and speech production through note-taking and video recording.

### **3.3. Observation day 3**

On day 3 of the observation, the researcher focused on analyzing the students' behavior and speaking production about sports. In this meeting, the students presented their individual speaking performances. Note-taking and video recording were conducted.

### **3.4. Observation day 4**

On the last day of observation, the researcher conducted note-taking and video recording of the students' speaking performance on the topic of traditional culture. The students performed individually.

### **3.5. Interviewing the students**

In this step, the researcher investigated the students' difficulties and strategies in speaking through a semi-structured interview. The students responded to six to seven interview questions. The interview lasted for 210 minutes (three and a half hours). Note-taking and voice recording were available.

### **3.6. Transcribing interview**

After finishing interviewing the students, the researcher transcribed the voice recording of the interview into the written form (transcription). This step was conducted to ease the researcher's work and ensure that no information is missed.

### **3.7. Coding the key segments of the interview**

When transcription was complete, the next step was to manually code the fundamental parts of the interview. The researcher used deductive coding, assigning labels to text segments based on the research question. This step was conducted to convert unstructured narratives from interview answers into structured ones.

### **3.8. Grouping the codes into the themes**

This step requires the researcher to assign codes to the themes. The codes were categorized by theme. The main themes were the difficulties and strategies in speaking, while the subthemes were linguistic difficulties, psychological difficulties, vocabulary strategies, grammar strategies, and pronunciation strategies.

### **3.9. Interpreting the result of the interview**

After categorizing the codes into main themes and subthemes, the next step was to interpret the codes into structured narratives from the interview. This step leads to the answer to the research question. Furthermore, the researcher presented the research results from both observation and interviews.

## **4. RESULTS**

This part presents the results of data collection from the two instruments used – observation and interview.

### **4.1. Observation Result**

The observation was conducted for four meetings. In the first meeting, the students performed speaking in front of the classroom. The topic was about family. The lecturer showed a video about a boy introducing his family members. After that, they had to talk about their family – how many of family members they have, who the members are, and how they spent times as a family – and one of the family members they were closed to including his/her personality, and physical appearance such as hair color, hair style, skin color, and how they spent days together. This was an individual performance. Once the performance ended, there was a question-and-answer session in which their friends asked questions about the performer's family. Sometimes, the following questions made the performance feel like a discussion. After the performer finished speaking, they had to point out one of their friends to be the next performer.

In the second meeting, the students were instructed to talk about the environment. The students were classified into five groups. There were five topics to be discussed: maintaining campus cleanliness, reducing plastic pollution, reducing air pollution, conserving fuel, and preventing deforestation. Each group's members had to speak. When all the members in a group have presented, the question-and-answer session is opened for the other groups. The learning technique in this meeting was group discussion.

In the third meeting, the lecturer provided ten pictures related to sports. The in-focus was used as the medium to present the pictures to the students. The pictures were displayed to the students before any speaking activity started. Then the students

had to guess the names of the sports from the displayed pictures. After one picture was displayed, the lecturer asked the students which of their favorite sports were represented in it. If students raised their hands, the lecturer would call on them to speak about their favorite sport in front of the class. They had to explain why they liked the sport, how much time they spent doing it, with whom they did it, and where they did it. A question-and-answer session was conducted after one student performed about his/her favorite sport.

In the fourth meeting, the students were instructed to bring a picture or an object, or to demonstrate a dance, to discuss traditional culture. The lecturer did not restrict the traditional cultures they had to talk about. Therefore, some students talked about traditional cultures abroad. They had to explain why they decided to present on the culture.

#### **4.1.1. Linguistic Difficulties**

Linguistic difficulties can be observed during the students' performance. Some vocabulary, such as 'housewife', 'fisherman', 'household', and 'bravery', was not quite familiar to the students. Some pronunciation errors occurred on the words such as 'popular', 'often', 'build', 'priority', and 'focus'. Some students performed without checking their pronunciation. These errors also occurred in the question-and-answer session. Grammatical errors were common in the subject-verb-agreement, such as 'My mom always cooks dinner for us,' and 'My brother has to go to campus every day'. Missing verbs also occurred on nominal sentences such as 'When my sister is sick, ...', and 'He is about thirty years old'. Errors in word order were also common in phrases such as 'fee tuition' and 'traditional ceremony'. Fluency was the most visible component of speaking. While performing, some students showed gap-filling in their speech. The filling occurred when they were unsure of the words, pronunciation, or grammar, or when they were nervous.

#### **4.1.2. Psychological Difficulties**

Some students clearly indicated psychological difficulties when speaking in front of the classroom. Symptoms such as excessive sweating, trembling, and avoiding eye contact with the audience by looking at the ceiling were clearly visible. Several students even refused to provide a question-and-answer session just because some classmates stared at them while performing. However, during the speaking class, the students seemed excited, especially when the lecturer showed pictures or videos related to the topic being discussed, and when their friends performed traditional dance.

#### **4.1.3. Strategies to Overcome the Difficulties**

A limited number of strategies can be explored from the observation. The researcher obtained information from what was visible, not from what the students stated. Some students overcame psychological difficulties – stage fright – by taking a deep breath for a moment. Avoiding eye contact, some students looked up at the ceiling.

When the lecturer gave students time to prepare before the speaking performance, some students asked their friends for words they wanted to use in their presentations in Indonesian. In contrast, others stayed connected on their smartphones to look up unfamiliar words. The use of the mother tongue is

unavoidable in classroom discussions. Whenever they forgot the words, even while speaking in front of the class, they negotiated the meaning in Indonesian. However, some students started everyday classroom conversations in English, for example, when they needed to borrow their friends' pens, paper, or correction pens.

## **4.2. Interview Result**

Thirty third-semester students who actively participated in the speaking class were interviewed. The researcher instructed them to answer the interview questions based on their own experiences. During the interview, the researcher asked the students about their feelings in the speaking class, the difficulties they faced while speaking, and the strategies they used to improve their speaking skills.

### **4.2.1. Linguistic Difficulties**

Most students agreed that having a limited vocabulary is the biggest problem they face when speaking. Without a large vocabulary, they feel confused about which words to use to express their thoughts and organize their ideas. YA, a third-semester student, states, "My main difficulty is my limited vocabulary, which sometimes makes me confused about which words to use." In addition, MIR claims, "It's difficult because I don't know much vocabulary. Sometimes I get confused or don't know the right words to say."

Pronunciation was ranked second among the most challenging skills for students to speak. AN states in an interview, "I often mispronounce some words because I forget or do not know how to pronounce them correctly." Furthermore, KHN explains, "I have trouble in finding the right words and pronouncing them correctly."

Another challenge they faced when speaking was using correct grammar during spontaneous conversations. They couldn't stop themselves from thinking about grammatical errors while speaking. TSR explains, "I find it difficult to speak in correct grammar." Additionally, NF states, "The difficulty I encounter when speaking English is that I don't have a large vocabulary. I also still have trouble putting words together into sentences with correct grammar."

### **4.2.2. Psychological Difficulties**

Most students felt nervous when speaking English. KHN states, "I usually feel nervous because I'm scared of making mistakes." In addition, NH explains, "I'm nervous because I am not yet fluent in English and my vocabulary is still limited." There were many reasons for their nervousness based on the interview results, such as not being fluent in speaking, having a limited vocabulary, fearing mistakes, fearing judgment, fearing eye contact, and fearing forgetting what they wanted to say. FZM clarifies, "I try hard not to be afraid of making mistakes." However, others felt excited just to be able to express their thoughts openly. LS says, "I'm very excited because in this class, I try to be brave to speak English in front of many people." Based on the students' statements, the speaking class was fun, and the atmosphere was supportive, allowing them to enjoy the activities.

### **4.2.3. Strategies to Overcome the Difficulties**

There are various ways students work to overcome their speaking shortcomings. Some strategies they use to expand their vocabulary include watching English movies—sometimes short films—listening to English songs, joining English

clubs, practicing speaking with friends, noting new vocabulary, constructing sentences with new words, memorizing vocabulary by making gestures to visualize the words, and even talking to themselves when they cannot find partners to practice speaking English. NH explains, "I memorize vocabulary little by little." While FZM confirms, "I watch movies and listen to songs to increase vocabulary." Additionally, AMD says, "I frequently speak English with friends and outside campus environments. I practice speaking using online platforms like TikTok and Instagram. I also speak in front of a mirror."

In the digital era, students cannot escape technology. Those who find advantages in smartphone applications tend to become attached to using AI, Duolingo, Elsa Speak App, Let Me Speak App, HelloTalk, TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and so on to enhance their speaking skills and improve their pronunciation. If possible, they try to find native speakers as conversation partners. Others still enjoy singing along to improve their pronunciation. AN states, "I like Instagram and YouTube because I can see how people practice speaking English. HelloTalk allows me to talk to native speakers."

## 5. DISCUSSION

Based on the results of the observation and interview, the researcher finds that students' difficulties can be divided into two categories. The first relates to their mental and psychological issues in speaking, such as nervousness, fear of making mistakes, fear of making eye contact with interlocutors, and fear of being judged. Even students who are fluent in English can experience these symptoms. Some students were dissatisfied with the feedback they received from the lecturer on their speaking performance. These fears do not arise spontaneously. When looking back on their childhood, they can understand why these symptoms occur. They are often the result of trauma from early ages, when children are criticized, leading to feelings of failure and rejection. However, these feelings can be replaced with positive emotions like confidence and self-control (Tracy, 2008). Therefore, speakers need to confront themselves to reduce these symptoms and improve their speaking skills. Still, the remaining students continued to seek feedback from the lecturer and their classmates, noting their speaking shortcomings to improve in the future.

The other challenge students face is linguistic difficulty. Limited vocabulary can be a major barrier preventing students from speaking, especially since they can easily access the internet to learn new words. They also worry about their speaking fluency, which is connected to their ability to organize ideas and express thoughts. Grammar and pronunciation errors are also among their difficulties in speaking. Additionally, they are afraid of making grammatical and pronunciation mistakes and aren't confident in their correct use. In other words, their knowledge of these components is limited. Cendra and Sulindra investigated speaking accuracy, fluency, and more among vocational students. The study shows that students prioritize accuracy over fluency, leading to poor speaking performance. They also experience psychological issues while speaking, such as nervousness, apprehension, and fear of making mistakes (Cendra & Sulindra, 2022).

The researcher observed the students' speaking performance when they discussed family, hobbies, culture, and environment. Although the topics are considered easy, students often struggle with using proper vocabulary and arranging words appropriately. Whenever they were confused by the problems they encountered, they would use Indonesian words as equivalents. Their friends would help them fix the problem by telling them the English words.

The implication of the research results will contribute to society's recognition that students in the English department are struggling with speaking difficulties. They are expected to be experts in their major, but they are in the process of improving their English, including their speaking skills. The findings of this research will make a beneficial contribution to lecturers of speaking classes by providing teaching materials and methods that utilize various recent internet-based platforms in classrooms, as well as by creating a low-pressure learning environment.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the observation and interview, the researcher concludes that the students' difficulties in speaking can be classified into two categories: psychological and linguistic difficulties. Nervousness when speaking English, fear of making mistakes, fear of making eye contact, and fear of being judged are categorized as psychological difficulties. The students need to face themselves to overcome these shortcomings. Limitations in fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammatical errors are categorized into difficulties related to speaking components.

The strategies the students used in speaking vary. To expand vocabulary and improve pronunciation, some students watch English movies, listen to English songs, sing along, use new vocabulary in constructing sentences, make gestures to visualize words, and join English clubs. As the generation that relies most on technology in their activities, students also use smartphone applications such as AI, Duolingo, Elsa Speak App, Let Me Speak App, HelloTalk, TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and so on to improve their speaking performance. Further research is needed to explore specific platforms or AI-based applications used to improve speaking components, especially grammar accuracy, as limited investigation of this aspect is found in this current research.

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