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INVESTIGATING LEARNER'S DIFFICULTIES AND PREFERENCES IN SPEAKING CLASSROOM LEARNING

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Abstract

This study investigates learners' difficulties and preferences in English speaking classroom learning at the English Education Department. Grounded in needs analysis theory, this qualitative descriptive study employed semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection instrument. Four semester-4 students from the English Education Department were purposively selected as research participants. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. The findings revealed four key themes: (1) target needs, where students prioritized extensive and intensive speaking ability particularly for academic presentations, classroom discussions, and professional communication; (2) lacks, where lack of self-confidence and limited vocabulary were consistently identified as the most critical difficulties, compounded by speaking anxiety and fear of making mistakes in front of peers; (3) wants, where students expressed a strong preference for low-pressure, communicative speaking activities that gradually build confidence before progressing to more demanding tasks; and (4) learning needs, where students preferred interactive, practice-based, and feedback-centered instructional approaches over theoretical instruction. These findings highlight the central role of affective factors particularly self-confidence and anxiety in constraining EFL learners' speaking development, and underscore the need for learner-centered, confidence-building instructional design in speaking classrooms. The study concludes with practical implications for curriculum designers and English lecturers in developing more effective and responsive speaking courses.

Keywords: *Learner difficulties; speaking preferences; needs analysis; EFL students; speaking classroom*

INTRODUCTION

Speaking is widely considered the most challenging yet most essential productive skill in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. The ability to communicate orally in English is a fundamental requirement for university students, particularly those enrolled in English Language Education programs who will serve as future English teachers. Despite years of formal instruction, however, many EFL learners continue to struggle with spoken English not merely because of linguistic limitations, but due to a complex interplay of affective, cognitive, and contextual factors that classroom instruction has often failed to adequately address.

The issue of speaking difficulties among EFL learners has been extensively documented in recent literature. Normawati et al. (2023) investigated internal barriers to speaking performance among Indonesian EFL students and identified shyness, fear of embarrassment,

limited vocabulary, and grammatical inaccuracies as the most frequently reported obstacles. Their study emphasized that these difficulties were not isolated but mutually reinforcing students who feared embarrassment tended to avoid speaking practice, which in turn limited vocabulary development and grammatical accuracy. Similarly, Rosilah and Ulfa (2024) examined speaking challenges at the tertiary level and confirmed that internal psychological barriers, particularly lack of self-confidence and anxiety, consistently outweighed external or linguistic barriers in their impact on students' speaking engagement and performance.

Speaking anxiety has received particular scholarly attention as one of the most pervasive and debilitating factors affecting EFL oral performance. Rahmawati and Priyono (2022) conducted a meta-analysis of speaking anxiety among Indonesian EFL learners and found that anxiety was significantly negatively correlated with speaking performance across diverse institutional contexts, with fear of negative evaluation emerging as the most consistently reported anxiety trigger. Their findings suggest that anxiety is not merely an incidental concern but a systemic feature of EFL speaking classrooms in Indonesia that requires targeted pedagogical responses. This is further corroborated by Muktiningrum et al. (2024), who examined gender-based differences in speaking anxiety among higher education EFL students and found that anxiety manifested strongly across all participants regardless of gender, underscoring its universality as a classroom challenge.

The relationship between self-confidence and speaking ability has also been a productive area of recent inquiry. Kansil, Tuna, and Liando (2022) analyzed the effect of students' self-confidence on speaking skill and found a significant positive relationship, with self-confidence accounting for a substantial proportion of variance in speaking performance. Their study highlighted that students with higher self-confidence were more willing to initiate spoken communication, sustain conversations, and recover from errors all of which are critical behaviors for oral proficiency development. Joni, Pramawati, and Setiasih (2023) similarly confirmed a significant correlation between self-confidence and English speaking achievement, arguing that confidence-building must be treated as a core instructional objective rather than an incidental outcome of language practice.

Beyond documenting difficulties, recent research has increasingly focused on learner preferences for speaking instruction as a means of developing more responsive and effective pedagogical approaches. Leonita et al. (2023) explored students' perceptions and challenges in speaking skill development in the context of 21st-century English language teaching and found that students strongly preferred collaborative, interactive, and technology-supported speaking activities over traditional, teacher-fronted instruction. Their participants specifically reported that speaking activities which distributed communicative responsibility such as pair work, small group discussions, and role play significantly reduced their anxiety and increased their willingness to participate. These findings align with Wulandari and Prasetyo (2023), who demonstrated that pedagogical strategies explicitly designed to reduce speaking anxiety including low-stakes practice tasks, peer feedback, and graduated progression from private to public speaking were significantly more effective in improving both confidence and oral performance than conventional classroom approaches.

Notwithstanding this growing body of evidence, empirical research that simultaneously examines both learner difficulties and learning preferences within a unified needs analysis framework, specifically in the context of English Education Department students in Indonesian universities, remains limited. Most existing studies address either

difficulties or preferences in isolation, without integrating both dimensions into a coherent analytical framework that can directly inform curriculum design. This study therefore aims to bridge this gap by investigating learners' difficulties and preferences in speaking classroom learning at the English Education Department, using Hutchinson and Waters' (1987) needs analysis framework as its theoretical foundation. The findings are expected to provide actionable insights for developing more effective, learner-centered, and affectively responsive speaking instruction.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design. A qualitative approach was selected because the primary objective to investigate learners' speaking difficulties and preferences in depth requires rich, contextually grounded data that illuminate the complexity of students' experiences. As Creswell and Creswell (2023) argue, qualitative research is particularly appropriate when the researcher seeks to understand a phenomenon from the participants' own perspectives in ways that cannot be captured through numerical data.

Four students from the English Education Department at semester 4 were selected as research participants using purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria were: (1) currently enrolled as active students at semester 4, (2) have completed at least one English speaking course, and (3) willing to participate voluntarily. Participants were coded as R1, R2, R3, and R4 to maintain confidentiality.

Table 1. Research Participants

Code	Semester	Speaking Courses Taken
R1	4	Speaking for General Communication
R2	4	Speaking for Academic Purposes, Speaking in Professional
R3	4	Speaking for General Communication, Speaking in Professional Context, Speaking for Academic Purposes
R4	4	Speaking for Daily Communication, Public Speaking

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews consisting of seven open-ended questions structured around five thematic areas: background information, target needs, shortcomings, desires, and learning needs. Each session lasts about 4 to 6 minutes and is conducted in a combination of English and Indonesian. All sessions are recorded audio with the consent of the participants and then transcribed word by word.

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Member checking was conducted to ensure the credibility of the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Target Needs

The first theme concerned students' target needs the speaking competencies they considered most essential. All four participants emphasized the importance of developing extensive and intensive speaking ability, particularly in academic and professional contexts such as presentations, discussions, and public speaking. R1 identified extensive speaking as

the most critical need, expressing a desire to practice speaking in public and engage in dialogues with a wide range of vocabulary. R2 highlighted the need to speak more fluently and confidently during presentations. R3 emphasized fluency and confidence as the primary targets, while R4 focused on the ability to communicate clearly and deliver ideas effectively during classroom discussions and presentations.

These findings reflect the professional orientation of English Education students as future teachers who must model effective oral communication. Leonita et al. (2023) found that EFL students in the 21st-century learning context consistently identified academic presentation and discussion competencies as their most critical speaking targets, directly linked to their professional preparation. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) emphasize that target needs must be understood within the broader situational demands learners will face, reinforcing that speaking courses for pre-service teachers must be explicitly anchored in professional communicative contexts.

> "I need to improve my speaking skills for presentations, especially so that I can speak more fluently and not be too nervous." (R2)

Lacks

The second theme concerned students' lacks. Lack of self-confidence emerged as the most consistently identified difficulty across all participants, followed by limited vocabulary. R1 described overthinking as the primary factor undermining speaking confidence. R2 identified nervousness and fear of making mistakes as the most debilitating barriers. R3 pointed to limited vocabulary and lack of fluency, while R4 similarly identified limited vocabulary and nervousness as the two most significant obstacles.

These findings are strongly corroborated by recent empirical studies. Kansil et al. (2022) confirmed a significant positive relationship between self-confidence and speaking ability, demonstrating that students with lower self-confidence consistently performed worse on oral tasks and were less willing to initiate communication. Rahmawati and Priyono (2022) further found through meta-analysis that fear of negative evaluation was the most consistently reported trigger of speaking anxiety among Indonesian EFL learners, directly mirroring R2's experience. Muktiningrum et al. (2024) additionally confirmed that speaking anxiety manifested strongly across all student groups regardless of background, suggesting that it represents a systemic rather than individual challenge in EFL speaking classrooms.

> "What is still lacking is my own confidence which still likes to think too much, so it affects the confidence I have." (R1)
>
> "What hinders the most is nervousness and fear of making mistakes, especially if you have to speak alone in front of the class." (R2)

Wants

The third theme focused on students' wants. All participants expressed a strong desire to improve speaking confidence and fluency. R1 wanted to develop intensive speaking skills, R2 desired greater confidence and fluency, R3 wished to improve fluency and accuracy, and R4 wanted to enhance fluency and the ability to express ideas clearly. Notably, R2 expressed a preference for low-pressure speaking activities such as small group discussions and relaxed conversation practice rather than high-stakes public speaking tasks.

This preference for low-pressure, graduated speaking development is supported by Wulandari and Prasetyo (2023), who demonstrated that students exposed to gradually escalating speaking challenges beginning with low-stakes pair work before progressing to public presentations showed significantly greater confidence development. Joni et al. (2023)

similarly found that when students' confidence was incrementally built through structured practice, their overall speaking achievement improved significantly, suggesting that learner wants in this regard are pedagogically well-founded and should be directly reflected in course design.

> "I prefer activities such as small group discussions, or casual conversation exercises that can help to be more confident before performing in front of many people." (R2)

Learning Needs

The fourth theme concerned students' learning needs. All four participants consistently preferred interactive, practice-based, and communicative approaches. R1 preferred methods involving extensive peer interaction including discussions, describing activities, and engaging games. R2 valued practical instruction combined with constructive and non-intimidating feedback. R3 emphasized interactive and engaging activities, while R4 highlighted the importance of regular direct speaking practice with peers and the lecturer.

These preferences are directly supported by recent findings. Leonita et al. (2023) found that students strongly preferred collaborative and interactive speaking activities over teacher-fronted instruction, with peer interaction activities specifically associated with reduced anxiety and increased participation. Rosilah and Ulfa (2024) further emphasized that learner-centered instructional approaches particularly those incorporating peer collaboration and supportive feedback environments were significantly more effective in addressing speaking difficulties than traditional grammar-focused instruction. The emphasis on non-threatening feedback articulated by R2 is consistent with Wulandari and Prasetyo (2023), who demonstrated that growth-oriented, encouraging feedback significantly increased students' willingness to take communicative risks in subsequent speaking tasks.

> "A method that interacts a lot between classmates using English, such as discussing, describing something, interesting games that can improve speaking skills and add new vocabulary." (R1)
>
> "The most effective learning method in my opinion is the one that has a lot of practice, not too theoretical, and the lecturer also gives feedback but does not make you afraid." (R2).

Table 2. Summary of Findings

Theme	Key Findings
Target Needs	Students need extensive and intensive speaking ability for presentation, academic discussions, and public speaking
Lacks	Lack of self-confidence and limited vocabulary are the most significant barriers; fear of mistake and nervousness are primary obstacles
Wants	Students want to improve speaking confidence and fluency; prefer low-pressure communicative activities over high-stakes tasks
Learning Needs	Students prefer interactive, practice-based methods involving peer discussion, games and constructive non-intimidating feedback

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study has analyzed the speaking needs of four semester-4 students at the English Education Department through in-depth interviews. The findings reveal that self-confidence is the most critical and consistently identified gap across all participants,

compounded by limited vocabulary. Students expressed a clear desire for more communicative, interactive, and low-pressure speaking activities that gradually build confidence before progressing to more demanding public speaking tasks.

The findings call for a fundamental reconceptualization of speaking instruction that places confidence-building at the center of the pedagogical agenda. The English-Speaking Course should incorporate more interactive activities, authentic communicative tasks, and a feedback system that encourages students without triggering anxiety. These changes would better align the course with students' actual needs and learning preferences, ultimately supporting more effective and sustainable speaking development.

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