

Senior high school students' challenges in speaking English across proficiency levels: A narrative inquiry

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify and analyze the challenges Islamic high school students faced in speaking English, focusing on the different levels of speaking ability among students. Using a qualitative approach and narrative research design, the study involved three students with different speaking abilities (high, medium, and low) selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews which took around 10 minutes for each student that revealed various internal and external factors affecting students' speaking ability. The results showed that students faced various difficulties, including lack of confidence, nervousness, vocabulary, limited access to resources, and peer support. In addition, an educational environment that emphasizes religious learning reduces students' opportunities to practice English. Nonetheless, students also developed strategies to overcome these challenges, such as increasing self-confidence and finding study buddies. The findings provide important insights for educators and researchers to design more effective interventions to improve English speaking skills among students of different ability levels. This study is believed to highly contribute to both students and teachers in practice and teaching and as a reference for the future researchers.

Keywords: external factors; internal factors; Islamic high school students; speaking challenges

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INTRODUCTION

Speaking is the act of expressing words verbally. We use a variety of body components to produce sounds when we speak, including the tongue, lips, vocal cords, lungs, and vocal tract (Nakhalah, 2016). Speaking has long been regarded as the most important ability to acquire for several reasons. Spoken language differs greatly from written language in that spoken language requires more planning, editing, and proofreading (Chand, 2021). Speaking is complicated, nevertheless and possibly the hardest to acquire the skill (Dinçer et al., 2017). Indonesian students still find it challenging to practice speaking English in everyday situations (Riadil, 2020). This occurs because English is a foreign language (EFL) in Indonesia. Alsalihi (2020) stated that those who are studying and learning English as a foreign

language are known as EFL learners. In this case, any student who studies a foreign language has little opportunity to engage in authentic discourse in that language.

According to [Dwijayani and Musigrungsi \(2022\)](#) that there are a number of perceived challenges associated with teaching English speaking, such as time constraints, students' English language proficiency, teachers' attitudes about the work, a lack of school and facilities, and teaching and learning that is exam-focused. Other researchers also found that anxiety was strongly linked to the intrinsic components, which included their own opinions of classmates and lecturers, their lack of language proficiency, and their fear of being misinterpreted ([Abrar, 2022](#)). Most researchers found that the challenges faced by EFL students were a lack of vocabulary and lack of self-confidence. However, there are also factors of interest or methods provided by the teachers. To foster a safe and encouraging learning atmosphere where students feel comfortable taking chances and participating in spoken communication, language teachers need to be aware of and responsive to these aspects.

Furthermore, speaking deficiencies can be caused by a variety of variables, including psychological, social, environmental, and linguistic issues; they can also include issues with teachers and instruction, course material, excessive use of one's mother tongue, inadequate education, and classroom culture ([Chand, 2021](#)). Also, [Islam et al., \(2022\)](#) stated that A number of concerns were raised about college English majors, including the deficiency of EFL learners' practice, direction, and self-motivation to enhance their speaking during their elementary and secondary schooling. Similar research was also carried out by [Wahyuningsih and Afandi \(2020\)](#) stating that the lack of appropriate vocabulary, poor grammar, incorrect pronunciation, lack of exposure to English outside of the classroom, lack of confidence, and lack of English-speaking curriculum development are among the issues that students in the English language education department face when speaking the language.

Referring to the previous studies, the difficulties of speaking English as a foreign language at the university and school levels have generally been studied in the past, but only a few researchers have examined the particular difficulties that high school students with different skill levels encounter. Though EFL learners' speaking challenges have been recognized, high school students' experiences—especially with regard to their varying skill levels—have not been sufficiently explored in previous studies. With a more nuanced understanding of the intricate issues involved, this study attempts to close this gap by examining the difficulties that high school students with varying ability levels in English (low, medium, and high) face when speaking English. There are three students with different English speaking abilities as the participants. This study is believed to highly contribute to both students and teachers in practice and teaching and as a reference for the future researchers. To emphasize the significance, the following questions are the focus of this study:

1. What are the experiences of students regarding the difficulties of speaking English across proficiency levels in everyday situations?
2. How do senior high school students overcome difficulties when speaking English in everyday situations?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Speaking is crucial in EFL learning, reflecting effective real-world communication. [Kashinathan and Aziz \(2021\)](#) highlighted that speaking involves organizing thoughts, selecting vocabulary, and applying grammar in real-time. However, mastering speaking is challenging due to limited exposure to the target language outside the classroom, affecting practice opportunities and fluency. Learners face diverse situations, such as making requests and participating in discussions, necessitating a thorough understanding of EFL teaching and learning challenges to improve instructional methods.

EFL learners encounter linguistic and psychological barriers in speaking. Linguistic issues include limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, and grammatical errors ([Sannikova & Shevchenko, 2023](#)). Psychological challenges like fear of mistakes, anxiety, and lack of confidence further hinder speaking abilities ([Nasihin & Oktarini, 2022](#)). In addition, [Sayuri \(2016\)](#) found that fear of judgment and limited speaking opportunities are major obstacles, emphasizing the need for supportive environments where students can practice without fear.

Effective teaching strategies in EFL settings should address these challenges by enhancing fluency, accuracy, and confidence. Interactive methods like role-playing, group discussions, and storytelling boost confidence and fluency (Kashinathan & Aziz, 2021). Technology, such as video conferencing and language apps, offers authentic interactions with native speakers (Dzięciol-Pędich & Dudzik, 2021). Combining traditional and innovative approaches helps create dynamic learning environments catering to diverse student needs.

In this case, anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence are key emotional factors affecting EFL speaking. Cheng et al. (1999) highlighted that foreign language anxiety, driven by fear of mistakes or judgment, is a major hurdle for EFL students. Conversely, strong motivation encourages frequent practice, boosting confidence and spontaneity (Gardner, 1988). Linguistic challenges also impact speaking, with common issues including pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary difficulties (Normawati et al., 2023). These problems can lead to miscommunication and frustration, especially when students feel their speaking skills lag behind their reading or writing abilities (Theriana, 2023).

A supportive learning environment and social interactions are crucial. Speaking practice in group discussions or role plays helps students apply their knowledge and build confidence. Additionally, technology, such as language apps and online simulations, offers accessible practice and instant feedback, enhancing students' speaking skills.

METHOD

Research design

This research uses a qualitative approach. The research design used in this study is a narrative inquiry focusing on the challenges faced by Islamic Senior High School students with different proficiency levels in speaking English. One way for narrative inquirers to start their investigations is by telling stories to participants or by supporting them while they live out stories (Clandinin, 2016). This qualitative design was used because it only requires three participants and information will be extracted in as much detail as possible through interviews. Apart from that, the results of this research do not require numbers, but descriptions of stories from selected participants.

Participants

In this study, there were three senior high school students as participants (two female and one male), and they were selected using purposive sampling with different English speaking abilities (high, medium, and low). We only took three participants to get a deeper understanding of each participant because narrative inquiry has three dimensions (past, present, and future). They were recommended by the English teacher at Islamic Senior High School based on their score in English. The age range of participants is between 17-19 years old. The three students selected were willing to become participants in this research. A letter of consent to become a participant was given to each student in the form of a printout containing the participant's identity, research title, research objectives, and agreement on data confidentiality. The consent letter was signed directly by the participant, researchers, and third parties.

Instruments

The instruments used in this study were a semi-structured interview and the questions adapted from (Nakhalah, 2016). The questions in the questionnaire consist of four questions. The details of the interview questions are stated in Table 1.

Table 1*Semi-structure questions*

No	Type of Questions	Questions	Number of Questions
1	Causes of speaking difficulties	What are the causes of speaking difficulty that students face while they talk?	1
2	Internal aspects	What are the internal factors that become challenges in speaking English?	1
3	External Aspects	What are the external factors that become challenges in speaking English?	1
4	Solutions	What are the suitable solutions for speaking difficulties that are faced by senior high school students?	1

Data collection

The initial step that the researchers took in this data collection technique was to contact the English teacher at Islamic Senior High School to ask for help regarding students who have different English competence level (high, medium, and low) in speaking English. Then contact the headmaster to ask for permission regarding interviews to be conducted with the three students outside school hours. It took about four days. Researchers conducted interviews with the three students on July 22, 2024 and took around 10 minutes for each student.

Data analysis

The analytical data used by researchers is thematic analysis. because researchers identify, analyze, and report patterns or themes that emerge from the data to develop a deeper understanding of the things being researched.

FINDINGS

In this section, the findings will be explained based on the data obtained, and the data taken is in the form of interviews with three high school students with different levels of English. The next data is in the form of a description of each recorded interview. This description was obtained from the results of interviews conducted by researchers to find out the challenges faced by high school students with different levels of English proficiency.

The following are the challenges faced by high school students with different levels of English proficiency in speaking English. Not only that, the challenges they faced also came from internal and external factors. Apart from examining the challenges faced by students, researchers also asked participants to share the solutions they could provide to the challenges they experienced. These findings were obtained from the results of interviews with each participant, as follows:

RQ1: What are the experiences of students regarding the difficulties of speaking English across proficiency levels in everyday situations?***Internal factors that influence student X's (high-level proficiency) English-speaking***

Internal factors are challenges that come from themselves. Shyness, anxiety, lack of confidence, fear, worry, anxiety, lack of drive, self-esteem, feeling toward the topic, feeling toward the interlocutor, and self-consciousness are the eleven sub-factors (Suryani et al., 2020). There are several internal factors challenges faced by student X (high-level proficiency) in speaking English, such as inferior, accent, pronunciation, lack of vocabulary, and lack of grammar.

Inferior

As a result of this self-perception, minders frequently pose a significant challenge to many people when speaking English, since it can impair one's ability to communicate effectively and with self-

awareness. When someone feels that they are not doing well enough or are having difficulty with anything, they tend to avoid using English, which ultimately reduces their ability to learn and grow. It is important to recognize this feeling so that people can improve their English language proficiency and communicate more fluently.

Excerpt 1

"If the challenge comes from myself, I feel inferior. I'm too afraid of making mistakes when speaking English, afraid of being called 'pretentious English' by my friends. Because I'm introverted, so when someone judges me, I immediately feel down."

Accent

Accent is one of the challenges faced in speaking English. Student X felt that the accent when she spoke is too similar to his mother tongue. This is what causes her difficulty in speaking English in everyday situations.

Excerpt 2

"Speaking with my accent is a huge difficulty for me. My friends frequently make fun of my current accent because they think it sounds too 'cheeky.' Their reply made me feel humiliated and anxious. As a result, I sincerely wish to change my accent to sound more like a non-native speaker's. In doing so, I hope that my friends will not mock my accent and that speaking will come effortlessly to me."

Pronunciation

Pronunciation is something that is often encountered as a challenge faced by students where English is a foreign language for them. There are certain features to English pronunciation that set it apart from some pronunciations in Indonesian (Milania et al., 2022).

Excerpt 3

"Pronunciation is also a challenge for me, sis. In English, there are some things that are pronounced the same, for example in English, 'beach' and 'bitch', if we pronounce it incorrectly, it will give the impression that we are an enemy or say something rude."

Lack of Vocabulary and Grammar

Not only pronunciation, lack of vocabulary and grammar is also a challenge that we often encounter in speaking English. Inadequate vocabulary will make it difficult for students to convey something through speech, so that the point of the topic of conversation is not conveyed well. Meanwhile, grammar that is difficult to understand also makes students compose words with the correct structure. Because of problems with word choice and other grammatical rules, they occasionally have trouble articulating what they want to say (Milania et al., 2022).

Excerpt 4

"Not only pronunciation, lack of vocabulary is also a challenge that we often encounter in speaking English. Inadequate vocabulary will make it difficult for students to convey something through speech, so that the point of the topic of conversation is not conveyed well."

Excerpt 5

"Erm, arranging words so that they are structured is also difficult. Sometimes when I speak, I suddenly feel 'how come it doesn't seem like the words I said are right'. So I doubt whether what I said was correct or not."

Internal factors that influence student Y's (medium level proficiency) English-speaking

There are several internal factors challenges faced by student Y (medium-level proficiency) in speaking English, such as embarrassment/shyness, lack of desire, and lack of vocabulary.

Embarrassed/Shyness

Shyness can make it difficult to speak English since it can make it difficult to communicate confidently and with fluency. When someone is ashamed, their speech pattern may be disturbed by worries about mispronouncing words or using them incorrectly. Shy people typically avoid speaking in public or practicing, which prevents them from taking advantage of opportunities to get better at what they do.

Excerpt 6

"What is it, sis, for myself, I feel embarrassed to start speaking English. I was also afraid of my friends' perception. Some of my friends are less supportive and sometimes even make fun of me. That's what makes me embarrassed to speak English."

Lack of Desire

One major obstacle to learning English is typically a lack of desire to learn the language. People may become less driven to practice if they lack a strong motivation, which could impede their ability to speak and comprehend English well. It might be challenging for someone to get better at communicating in English if they are unsure of their English language proficiency or are too lazy to practice.

Excerpt 7

"Oh yes, I also lack the desire to speak English. Because if I want to speak English, I have to have a lot of vocabulary. The pronunciation also has to be correct, whereas I don't like memorizing. But, if I learn English in general, I like it."

Lack of Vocabulary

There are many things that happen when someone speaks English and then struggles because of their lack of vocabulary. As faced by high school students at this medium level.

Excerpt 8

"Usually when I'm talking and I don't know the vocabulary, it's because I rarely find the vocabulary to talk about. Um, maybe I could say it's because I am less familiar and don't often use foreign vocabulary."

Internal factors that influence student Z's (Low-level proficiency) English speaking

There are several internal factors challenges faced by student Z (low-level proficiency) in speaking English, such as nervousness, lack of self confidence, and lack of vocabulary.

Nervousness

Effective communication could be hampered when someone is tense or nervous, especially when speaking in a language other than their mother tongue. As a result, it's critical to recognize techniques that can lessen nervousness and boost confidence when speaking English.

Excerpt 9

"Every time I want to speak English I always feel nervous, so what I want to say immediately goes blank. Usually, I often feel nervous when speaking in front of many people. Because it puts more pressure on me."

Lack of Self Confident

A person may have discomfort and have trouble communicating coherently if they are unsure of their English language abilities. They may also feel nervous or concerned about making mistakes. This lack of confidence not only impacts your speaking, but it can also make it difficult for other people to understand you and have productive conversations when using the English language.

Excerpt 10

"Lack of self-confidence is the thing I experience most often. For example, I want to speak English in front of a lot of people and suddenly I feel less confident because I'm afraid that there are people who are smarter in English than me. If I say something wrong later, I will definitely be laughed at and I will end up embarrassed."

Lack of vocabulary

When someone speaks English and then finds it difficult due to a lack of vocabulary, numerous things can happen. is encountered by students in this medium-level high school.

Excerpt 11

"When I present in English I just talk without knowing the meaning of what I say. Because I don't know the meaning of the English vocabulary itself, it makes me uncomfortable and makes it difficult to understand the material."

External Factors

In the context of speaking English, external factors refer to elements outside an individual that can influence their ability and success in using the language. External influences are those that arise from the student's immediate environment and have an impact on their speaking performance (Utomo, 2022). The following are external factors that influence the English speaking of students with different ability levels.

External factors that influence students X, Y, and Z's English-speaking

Every student—high, medium, and low—has the same response in this section on external factors: the environment is what hinders their ability to speak English. Language acquisition is hindered when someone is in a setting that does not offer opportunities for them to practice or communicate in English, such as when they are not interacting with native speakers or have limited access to appropriate language resources. In these circumstances, people could find it challenging to increase their vocabulary, grasp linguistic nuances, and improve their public speaking abilities. As a result, meeting communication objectives in English gets harder and necessitates working harder to get over environmental constraints.

Excerpt 12 (student X)

"If external factors are more related to a less supportive environment. What this means is that this is a boarding school where the students cannot go out freely, so it is very difficult for me to find people who are fluent in English and who I can chat with in English. Meanwhile, my friends at the cottage rarely speak English. When I was still in elementary school, I still had the opportunity to speak English with my friends who were from Japan. Since middle school until now, it has been very difficult for me to find friends who can support me and be my partner in speaking English."

Excerpt 13 (student Y)

"In this Islamic boarding school, it must be very difficult to speak English. Apart from the people not having sufficient knowledge, here it is also quite difficult to get support from friends, especially when it comes to speaking English. Because at the boarding school, we will definitely learn more about religious knowledge, such as interpreting and discussing books or Islamic schools. However, we can still share English knowledge during evening study hours."

Excerpt 14 (student Z)

"Here I only have a few friends, maybe one or two people who can speak English with me and even mixed with Indonesian hebe. Moreover, it is difficult to access the internet here because students have to obey existing regulations. For example, if I can freely access the internet, maybe I can practice speaking English through a supporting application."

The most common response from students is that they don't have any friends or partners with whom they can just have English conversations. Therefore, improving their English-speaking abilities is challenging.

RQ2 : How do they overcome difficulties when speaking English in everyday situations?

The researchers will outline or describe the responses from each student with varying English proficiency in the form of a narrative in order to address the second research question, which asks about solutions to the difficulties encountered by each student in speaking English. This was necessary because the researchers employed narrative inquiry in this study, which required that all responses be thoroughly detailed in the form of stories in order to get the desired result.

Solutions provided by student X (high-level proficiency)

Increase self-confidence

Student X offers suggestions on how to keep attempting to boost our self-confidence. Boosting self-confidence can be a useful way to deal with this issue. Someone who exudes confidence will be more daring to speak in English without worrying about making blunders. Self-confidence enables people to maintain composure and concentration. According to student X, this is quite difficult for her, who is introverted and also has anxiety. But if she is not willing to try and take advantage of the opportunities that exist then her potential will never develop.

Excerpt 15

"The solution is that we have to increase our self-confidence and try to be completely ignorant of people's perceptions. Actually, it's not certain that people will judge us, but because we are afraid first and think about things that won't necessarily happen, it ultimately has an impact on our self-confidence. Usually I train my confidence by chatting in front of the mirror, sis. So I think of myself in the mirror as someone else hehe."

Invite friends to talk in English about things they like

Student X has found a way to invite a friend to talk about their interests because the atmosphere is not encouraging. The conversation flows more easily and becomes more entertaining when we discuss our shared interests or hobbies. She also advised her to find out why she disliked English. In this manner, she will understand the reason from her friend and be able to share with her the enjoyable aspects of learning English. This step, in her opinion, will increase the likelihood that her friend will enjoy English as well, making him a potential discussion partner in the language down the road.

Excerpt 16

"This seems like it can be done as well, sis. We approach a friend who is genuinely proficient in English but shows less interest in the language since she believes it is hard. We will subsequently inquire as to why you find English objectionable and whether there are any English-language media that you enjoy, such as English-language movies or music. After we find out the answer, we invite her to speak mixed English. We can encourage her to continue our conversation about her interests."

Solutions provided by student Y (medium-level proficiency)

Lift up voice

Student Y claimed that speaking up will help her feel more confident. She will thus speak up if she begins to sense that her confidence is waning. Not only that, convincing herself is also a solution to the challenges she faced.

Excerpt 17

"When I feel afraid and not confident, I definitely raise my voice to restore that feeling of confidence. Apart from that, I constantly convince myself that I can and even better than them. So far this is the most effective method that I always use."

Learn with friends who like English

Studying with friends who are interested in and proficient in English can be a useful way to get beyond obstacles that arise outside of the classroom. This cooperative method increases self-confidence and learning motivation in addition to language proficiency. Students can overcome obstacles like lack of

access to educational resources, time limits, and academic pressure through active interaction and social support.

Excerpt 18

"Usually I often study together and also share together with my friends who like English. I do this to increase my vocabulary, even if it's only one or two words. That way I will always get new vocabulary every day."

Solutions provided by student Z (low-level proficiency)

Active learning

According to Student Z, focusing on learning methods and practices that have been shown to be beneficial in enhancing English language proficiency can help overcome speaking challenges in the language.

Excerpt 19

"Because the challenges I face are related to my lack of knowledge, maybe my solution is to continue learning so our knowledge will increase. With this, our English speaking skills will definitely improve."

DISCUSSION

This study highlights the complex barriers that Indonesian secondary school students face in their pursuit of English fluency, with a particular emphasis on students with different levels of competence. The results show that internal factors that greatly hinder students' ability to communicate well in English include anxiety, low self-esteem, and lack of confidence. For example, although Student X is very proficient in English, he still has anxiety and feelings of inadequacy, which can hinder his ability to speak in English. Their own thoughts on classmates and instructors, their lack of language proficiency, and their fear of being misinterpreted are also being challenges for them (Nasihin & Oktarini, 2022; Normawati et al., 2023). Similarly, Student Y, who spoke with a medium level of proficiency, found that her challenges in speaking were compounded by a lack of support from her peers. These difficulties were also heavily influenced by external factors. Students' ability to participate is limited by the educational environment, which includes limited access to resources and practice opportunities. The school environment limits students' ability to participate in meaningful English conversations by limiting their access to resources and practice opportunities. For example, low-ability student Z mentioned how difficult it was to find classmates with whom to practice, thus limiting her exposure to English. The cultural background of pesantren, where religious studies take precedence over language studies, exacerbates this lack of interaction.

The research also illustrates the diverse tactics used by the students to overcome these barriers. Student X emphasized that to foster a more encouraging learning atmosphere, it is crucial to develop self-confidence and have conversations about common interests. While Student Z advocated active learning and continuous practice to improve her abilities, Student Y suggested raising her voice during interactions to restore her confidence. These techniques highlight the value of self- and peer-promoting behaviors in the language acquisition process. Positive motivation and encouragement should be provided to EFL learners who are learning English (Nasihin & Oktarini, 2022).

CONCLUSION

In summary, this study clarifies the unique challenges Indonesian high school students encounter when speaking English, especially in different proficiency levels. The results show that speaking skills are highly influenced by both external and internal factors. The internal factors faced by student X (high-level proficiency) are inferior, accent, pronunciation, lack of vocabulary, and grammar. While student Y (medium-level proficiency) are embarrassed/shy, lack of desire, and lack of vocabulary. Therefore, internal factors faced by student Z (low-level proficiency) are nervousness, lack of self confident, and lack of vocabulary. From the findings, we can find that student X (high-level proficiency) faced more challenges than student Y and student Z. Beside that, in the external factors student X, Y, and Z has the same challenges such as environment, do not have peer support, and

limited access to appropriate English sources. The techniques that the students came up with show how self-motivation and peer cooperation may help people overcome these obstacles. This study emphasizes the necessity for customized support systems that cater to the particular needs of students at various proficiency levels, offering insightful information for educators and future researchers. Through the provision of a more supportive and resource-rich environment, teachers can assist students in overcoming obstacles related to speaking and ultimately improve their language ability. Further research may build upon these results by examining the efficacy of certain interventions designed to enhance speaking abilities in English as a foreign language (EFL) learners.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors of the manuscript affirm that they have no conflicting interests.

Availability of data and materials

Upon request, the accompanying author can supply the data utilized to back up the study's conclusions.

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