



Speaking Through Stories : A Narrative Inquiry Into EFL Learners' Cultural Experiences in English

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Abstract : *Speaking English as a Foreign Language in Indonesian Institution educational has not been widely studied from the learners' perspective. This thesis reports the findings of interviews with four students at an institution that adopted English as the medium of interaction, focusing on their experiences and the barriers they faced during the learning process. One significant issue that emerged was a four year delay in achieving oral fluency in English. A narrative inquiry research design was used to explore the participants' live experiences in the context of this issue. The Learners' who participated in the study were selected voluntarily for in depth interviews, and the data were analyzed thematically to essence of each individual's story. The results showed that the learners' experienced various difficulties, especially in speaking English. They identified limited vocabulary and challenges in pronunciation particularly due the irregularity between English spelling and sound, as primary obstacles. In addition, low motivation, lack of confidence, and lack of confidence and fear of making mistake when formative sentences were found to be contributory factors. Based on these findings it is suggested that the role of the teachers or mentors and the team support system, should be evaluated and improved to be better address the obstacles faced by the learners in developing english speaking proficiency.*

Keywords: *EFL Student; Narrative Inquiry; Speaking Anxiety; Speaking Skills; Willingness to Communicate.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Improving the quality of speaking skills is a significant concern for educational institutions in Indonesia, particularly for EFL learners who regard English as a foreign language (Junaidi et al., 2023; Neno et al., 2022; Yuldashev, 2023). This research focuses on the challenges of mastering English-speaking skills and efforts to minimize their occurrence more widely. English is still recognized as a foreign language in many countries, including Indonesia, where it is essential in developing academic fields (Widodo, 2016). However, despite the emphasis on English proficiency, many learners encounter significant barriers to speaking, such as limited vocabulary, speech difficulties, and a lack of confidence (Getie 2020, Khalishah & Islam (2024), and Yobouet (2021) While previous studies have often used quantitative approaches, there is a lack of research exploring learners' narratives, especially within Indonesia's diverse socio-cultural context. This study aims to address this gap by employing a narrative inquiry approach to understand how learners cope with the challenges of speaking English. The findings highlight the importance of psychological, internal, and external factors and offer insights for developing more adaptive and responsive English learning programs.

However, most researchers concentrate on quantitative or experimental approaches, ignoring learners' personal narrative experiences, especially in diverse socio-cultural settings such as Indonesia. This study aims to fill the gap in previous research using narrative inquiry and offer more insight into how learners cope with the challenges of speaking English in such an environment. Specifically, the study found that psychological factors also affect learners' inability to speak English. These include fear of being wrong and shyness when talking to a more skilled interlocutor. We found that the strategies they adopted were effective in minimizing these factors. This study focused on students at a university in Indonesia who had previously studied at an English language development institute in a boarding school for approximately 4 years. Despite studying for a long time, they still struggled to speak English. In addition, the previous literature examined similar issues, namely covering the inability to say, but could not dive deeper into the personal experience of each learner. In particular, the barriers themselves are not only academic but also psychological.

Most previous studies have focused on quantitative approaches, with numerical data and statistics being the main points. At the same time, the narrative approach that prioritizes personal experience stories is still rarely used, especially in the Indonesian environment, which has a lot of social and cultural dynamics that may play a role in developing learners' English-speaking skills. Thus, efforts to understand how learners experience learning are very noteworthy. Especially those in pesantren environments located in remote villages with local language habits also make it difficult for learners to learn to speak English. One of the concerns in this study is the learning environment that supports learners in learning English. This includes peers and the language environment in the language institute. Given that in the language development process itself, the ability of each learner to process language lessons varies greatly (Ridho Ryanto et al., 2025). The need for attention here is because it can also affect the learning of students' speech skills. The findings from this study will enrich the understanding of the critical role of factors that go into language learning, including psychological, internal, and external factors. Focusing on these three factors can improve speech skills and minimize the likelihood of speech delays in learners who have the potential to have speech delays compared to friends who already speak foreign languages.

As in previous studies, this research has limitations in the informal classroom context, which does not explore how psychological, internal, and external factors are adapted in English language development lessons in a broader realm. Moreover, Indonesia itself has a lot of socio-cultural diversity. The need to be proficient in English communication is urgent for sustainable interests. Thus, this research makes a considerable contribution to developing

English language learning. We can create more adaptive learning by providing perspectives from the experiences of learners who have been learning English for a long time, along with the strategies they use for their problems. This study's results should be considered in designing learning programs, either at the informal level, such as in pesantren, or at the formal level, such as in schools. Creating a more responsive curriculum. The findings of this study are expected to inform the design of learning programs at both informal institutions, such as pesantren, and formal schools (Rosmayanti et al., 2023). A more responsive curriculum can better address learners' needs and support the development of practical English-speaking skills.

Some factors that make it difficult for students to speak English include grammar; most struggle to organize sentences well, while grammar is essential to learning English. Language knowledge is critical in any language (Burns, 2017). However, this does not mean that grammar is the starting point of learning. In a sense, students are no longer concerned with errors in language order because students only need to think about how to communicate without being isolated by the structure of the language itself as a temporary first step in learning communication using English. Grammar is also centered on structure and how to use language when communicating. Vocabulary mastery refers to the mastery of language learning (Burns, 2017). Students with a lot of vocabulary will increase their speaking skills in sentence construction (Cahyono & Widiati, 2015; Susanto, 2020). Students need a lot of vocabulary to compose language (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018), indicating that having a lot of vocabulary will make students freer to integrate into the language.

Kikuchi, (2009) state that vocabulary memorization is one of the factors that motivates students to learn to speak English. Students must have sufficient knowledge to understand the purpose of a conversation because it can affect the vocabulary produced during the conversation. Of all the linguistic competencies, grammar, vocabulary mastery, and pronunciation are the most important for students to master to improve their English-speaking mastery. However, mastering these competencies is challenging for EFL students, as these barriers have been identified as learner problems in learning English speech (Newton et al., 2022).

Psychological factors also affect the performance of the English-speaking learning process for students. Nisa et al., (2020) decreased enthusiasm from motivation, excessive anxiety, and, most importantly, self-confidence. The same thing is said by (Qiao 2024), who also recognizes factors that affect language learners, including feelings of stress and excessive nervousness for foreign language learners (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2011). Salam et al.,

(2021) Add that feelings of anxiety can hurt the improvement of foreign language speaking skills. Decreased motivation and even reduced motivation to learn English is the first threat. Dornyei, (2020) said that motivation is divided into two. First is integrative motivation, where students aim to interact with other speakers using the new language they learn to know about their culture; second, instrumental motivation, where students learn for practical purposes. For example, it is to make it easier to find a job, as a requirement to pass an exam, and other functional goals.

According to Shin & Bolkan, (2021), peers are supporters who positively impact the continuity of language learning. This relates to the motivation of students whose seatmates will also influence them. Compared to the best, seatmates who do not have good motivation will hurt other students. Instead of this lack of motivation to learn, it grows from the lack of confidence of students who are still struggling in their careers. So that it grows less innovative, these two challenges are crucial and must be considered by student learners (Abrar et al., 2018; Zuhairi & Mister, 2023). It is known that self-confidence, the confidence of students to learn a foreign language, is a psychological factor involved in learning English. in fact, it is one of the most critical factors, according to (Ellis & Wulff, 2015).

In addition to psychological and linguistic factors, there are also difficulties in learning English speech faced by students caused by external factors. Factors related to the environment, peers, and teacher feedback (Abrar et al., 2018). These factors cause students difficulties in learning to speak. In addition, there is still a healthy environment that will provide good exposure for students, especially for speech learning. The lack of a supportive environment can undoubtedly have a negative impact that can be detrimental because it can affect their language skills (Salam et al., 2021), (Lee & Hsieh, 2018) Same with facilities that do not support students' creativity in learning. In this case, it can be proven by the absence of audio, images, or videos displayed as learning media. Al-Sobhi & Preece, (2018) This is undoubtedly a new problem faced outside the classroom. In addition, the pause in the learning situation is also related to the emotional stress of students and teachers (Shamim & Kuchah, 2016).

There are several investigative studies related to this research that have discussed it extensively. For example Khalishah & Islam, (2024), Astuti, (2020), Sachithra & Ranasuriya, (2020), Ozdemir & Papi, (2022) the findings of some of these studies are that the main problem of speaking ability is due to limited vocabulary and ideas to express the conclusions of some of these studies is that the main problem of speaking ability is due to limited vocabulary and ideas to express responses from conversations Astuti, (2020), Pitura, (2022)

suggests students often experience problems during conversations, presentations, or even in their campus debate events. In Indonesian education regulations, researchers explored students' experiences in speaking, and they said the results were almost the same as those of previous studies. Pointing out that the main problems are Psychological Factors, such as lack of confidence, anxiety, and worry, and lack of a supportive environment or a rural, poor environment to practice oral English speaking. However, the difference from this study is in the findings, such as the obstacles experienced by each student, the vocabulary acquired per lesson, and the grammar and proficiency in managing it (Abrar et al., 2018).

Previous research partly emphasized quantitative methods, thus neglecting the narrative of a person's life experiences. Especially in the unique social and cultural context such as that found in pesantren, it is necessary to highlight speaking skills. However, practices like these can demonstrate the interaction of local language with institutional culture and their individual learning experiences in shaping English-speaking learning outcomes. Investigations with narratives are rarely conducted despite having the potential to explain interactions in the stories in this article. This study fills the gap in research on the experiences of university students struggling with English fluency as experienced by the participants in this study, who for 5 years dealt with the complexities in training and learning while at an English language development institution based on pesantren. Additionally, highlights the need for more flexible English programs that can address individual issues and strategies. These findings can provide in-depth analysis to all mentors or educators to inform the development of more effective efforts targeting both language and non-language issues affecting EFL students in Indonesia.

This research differs from previous studies because it emphasises the personal experiences of students who have been learning English for a considerable amount of time in pesantren yet still face obstacles in speaking. The narrative approach used allows for a deep understanding of the psychological, cultural, and environmental aspects that influence their learning process. Additionally, this research fills the gap in the literature regarding both external and internal factors simultaneously in the context of rural Indonesia, which has previously received little attention in second language studies.

Unlike research conducted at the school or university level in general, studies focus on investigating speaking strategies to be able to minimize the inability to speak English and what factors influence learners (Lem, 2019), (Wael et al., 2018). studies that specifically focus on the perceptions of students who have studied English for many years but still cannot speak it fluently remain scarce. To address this gap, the present study explores the lived

experiences of learners who have spent years in English language institutes yet continue to struggle with speaking and mastering English. This research aims to provide deeper insights into the unique challenges faced by these learners and the strategies they employ to overcome them. Specifically, the study seeks to answer two main questions: *First*, What challenges do students experience when speaking in English classes, and from their perspective? *Second*, how do they overcome these challenges during their learning process? By focusing on these questions, the study offers a nuanced understanding of the persistent obstacles and coping mechanisms among long-term EFL learners, contributing valuable perspectives to the development of more effective English-speaking instruction.

2. METHOD

This study uses a qualitative research design to explore the experiences of students who have studied English for five years but cannot speak English. Qualitative research is research that results in a description of what is observed. It is possible to understand individual experiences and perceptions in the context in which they are experienced with qualitative methods. This study uses a narrative inquiry approach (Athumani et al., 2021) where the researcher tries to find out the experience of learning English for students over the years and how they manage vocabulary, which the researcher will then retell without changing the overall content of the knowledge of the respondent.

The participants in this study were four senior administrators from an English language institute in a pesantren-based foundation in Probolinggo District, Indonesia. Participation was voluntary. The researchers conducted interviews to gather information about the participants' extensive learning experiences at the institute. At the time of the interview, the four administrators had different tenure levels in the Institute. Their learning and management experience ranged from 3 to 4 years. Qualitative research typically involves a small number of participants to allow for in-depth exploration of individual experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013). These four participants were recruited because they are administrators or people responsible for managing and organizing an institution and ensuring that goals can be achieved effectively. In addition, these four administrators are senior administrators at the institution. And one of these administrators is now an English student at a university in the probolinggo district. However, speaking English is still one of her most significant difficulties. Considering all the learning experiences of these four administrators, the researcher hoped that they could share their experiences and describe in detail the challenges they faced while studying for many years and were still unable to speak English fluently.

Tabel 1. Participants' background information.

No	Participants	Gender	Board Term
1	P1	Female	4
2	P2	Female	2
3	P3	Female	4
4	P4	Female	1

Narrative inquiry was selected as the research method, as it provides a framework for exploring and understanding participants' life experiences in depth (Fikri et al., 2024). In this context, the narrative inquiry approach will highlight the personal life lived by the female student. Reveal the dynamics of difficulty, ease, and interest of female students in learning English. In addition, this approach can also be used to improve teacher professionalism and explore a teacher's experience in teaching (Faujiah et al., 2023). For example, a female student can write but cannot speak, or a student who is good at reading and writing but not speaking, and some students cannot read, write, or speak English at all but are happy and excited when learning begins. These phenomena can be easily found and then investigated using a narrative approach to learn the events behind the student personally.

To answer the two questions above, the researcher chose interviews to collect data from relevant participants. The researcher applied in-depth interviews to review the participants' experiences and perceptions in this case study (Yin, 2011). The interview sessions were conducted using the national language, Indonesian. The interviews were also recorded to secure the written data. The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key themes and patterns in participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process involved coding the data, categorizing responses, and interpreting the underlying meanings (Creswell et al., 2007). Hence, after recording the interviews, the researcher grouped each experience. The relationships between the analyzed categories were discussed to capture the overall data.

The steps in collecting this data refer to the stages of research proposed by Creswell regarding narrative research procedures (Creswell et al., 2007). The following are the data collection steps: the first is finding a phenomenon to study, and the second is selecting one or two individuals who match the research phenomenon to describe their experiences. The third step is analyzing raw data from the results of individual experience stories, and the fourth step is repeating individual stories and then forming a chronology of these stories. The fifth step is to actively collaborate with individuals to check the validity of the meaning of the

experience stories provided by individuals. The last step is to validate the chronology of individual experiences in a written finding.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Linguistic Factors

The interview results show that the challenges experienced by students when learning to speak English are mastery of vocabulary, which is still minimal. The four participants interviewed agreed that vocabulary is the main problem in speaking English. Of course, this also causes problems in their English learning, such as being unable to complete assignments from language mentors appropriately and lacking confidence when speaking English with others. Their reasons are in line with their expressions in telling their experiences:

Clip 1:

"When I first entered the Institute, I only had 100 known vocabulary words, which was more difficult than expected. The lack of vocabulary and not knowing how to read made it difficult to process sentences when speaking." (P1)

"The lack of vocabulary affects my speech, for example, when I want to ask a question or pick up on my friend's story, I say 'mmm... You have this' the word (this) I usually use gestures or speak silently to my friend." (P2)

"I'm a bit confident when speaking, it's just that there is a lot of vocabulary in my mind, but I can't say it. And in the end, I will still go back to sign language to avoid punishment from the institution." (P3)

This finding tells us that limited vocabulary can be very influential for students, which can result in decreased student motivation. Students will more often use sign language or speak silently when responding to questions or conversations with surrounding friends, as previous researchers have also highlighted. Another competency that also triggers the inability to speak English is student pronunciation. They said there was a discrepancy between what they wrote and how they read, so P4 shared his personal experience in his interview.

Clip 2:

"It's not just me who has difficulty in reading, there are some of the institute's students who also have difficulty distinguishing between the written and the read."
P4

In addition, other participants also said that there are different causes of difficulties in reading and writing in English. This situation was shared by one of the participants,

Mother tongue also plays a role in influencing one's pronunciation of a language. So it becomes tough to imitate, let alone to equalize with native speakers," P2

Many institutional peers in this study who can be classified as speaking English well tend to refer to how native English speakers pronounce it. In this sense, most of them choose to learn native accents, which is a new challenge for other children still learning. However, similar problems are still ignored. This issue has been a factor and a challenge in learning to speak English, but all four agreed that their mother tongue accent played a negative role. Previously, it was proposed that raising learners' awareness about accents and mother tongue, as well as the role of teaching mentors or teachers, was essential.

This study's findings support previous studies, which say vocabulary and pronunciation are included in the linguistic factors group (Almusharraf, 2024). One of the things they did not mention was grammar. At the same time, grammar is the most basic thing for someone to start a conversation. One of the participants in this study did not consider it essential, as he argued that the point of speaking is that the listener understands the meaning of the sentence spoken (P1). Taking this idea into account, the author argues that it is necessary to reprimand the sentences issued by the learners and then correct them so that, from here, the learners will have full awareness of the grammar that will be spoken.

To provide a more comprehensive picture of the obstacles faced by participants in the English learning process, percentage data related to certain aspects are illustrated in Table 2. This table presents the distribution of participants' percentages based on the types of obstacles they encounter during learning, such as vocabulary difficulties, pronunciation, and psychological factors. With this data, readers can more clearly and measurably understand the prevalence of various obstacles experienced by participants, which can be used as a basis for designing appropriate interventions according to their needs.

Table 1. Challenges and Strategies in Speaking.

Aspect	(%)	Explanation
Linguistic Factors	45%	Limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, sentence structure
Psychological factors	30%	Low self-esteem, anxiety, fluctuating motivation
External Factors	15%	Lack of facilities, minimal opportunities for authentic communication
Strategi Coping	7%	Collaboration with friends, self-motivation

The Influence of the Social Environment	3%	Supportive learning environments greatly influence self-confidence.
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Psychological factors

Another challenge experienced by the administrators who participated in this study was related to the learners' psychology. Two factors emerged during the thematic analysis. The first was self-confidence, and the second was motivation to learn. During the interview, this factor emerged and was documented by the researcher that the lack of self-confidence in each learner could cause a decrease in learning motivation. The factor is still the same: the lack of vocabulary mastered and then the decline when speaking appears. As a result of this, they no longer want to communicate in English. On several occasions, when learners make mistakes in speaking, their friends will mock them with laughter. This was confirmed by one of the research participants during the interview:

Clip 3:

"I always want to improve myself by not being embarrassed when I say something wrong when speaking English. However, maybe because we are the same age, we laugh at each other when we make mistakes. When this happens over and over again, the result is that I get embarrassed and stop trying. Moreover, I admit that this does affect my confidence when speaking English." P1

Given the ongoing research, this kind of feedback is categorized as demotivation of peers. Culturally, peers do have a significant influence on learners' motivation. Apart from the ups and downs of motivation experienced by learners, mentors or teachers can still motivate in the form of real conditions in the field if they can master a second language, such as English. As told by P3 and P4, the motivation often conveyed by mentors and teachers, such as English, can increase the restaurant's prestige, resulting in higher income. Not stopping there, with English language skills, it will undoubtedly be very easy to choose a job. This was revealed in the P3 and P4 interviews:

Clip 4:

"After every lesson at the Institute, Mentors always take the time to communicate interactively with students. In this communication, motivation is inserted for friends to remain enthusiastic about learning to speak English, even though it has been years. Still, they have not been able to master it. Usually, it will also be accompanied by the advantages of mastering English well." P3

"Evidenced by the consistency of the mentor after each lesson will provide a little motivation, there is an impact that has been seen. Not the impact on the four of us, of course. But on the younger siblings below my level first." P4

From the explanation of the two participants' stories, the motivation used by mentors for students is instrumental. From the mentor's words, it is known that the goal is to increase the restaurant's prestige and make it easier to find employment (Dornyei, 2020). Motivation for EFL learners is also to increase students' interest in learning and willingness to continue trying to improve their English skills (Purwati, 2020). This motivation may be very effective, considering that job applications are minimal in the Probolinggo region, especially in rural areas, and it is not uncommon for S1 graduates to be unemployed. This English language ability is beneficial in finding a side job.

External Factors

External factors also highlighted here are that the institution has no complete facilities. Facilities that support the learning process are available. First, there is no projector or LCD to help with learning activities, a sound system for listening activities, and other learning aids. In the interview, one of the participants shared his security concerns:

Clip 5:

"In terms of classes, there are no facilities except small boards and markers. The institution does provide a sound system, but it is in the office and cannot be turned on except on holidays. For mentors, there are already those who stand by at the institution every day. So it is unsurprising that many students feel bored with learning, ultimately making it difficult for them to develop. Moreover, this condition also makes it difficult for the actual mentors." P3

This study was to investigate the factors affecting students' learning of English and how the students dealt with challenges during the English language learning process at a foundation institute in the village, yet were unable to speak English well. This study offers valuable insights into research through a narrative approach to how the students' barriers and challenges affect their learning process (Kaspul et al., 2020). Research showed that the students experienced many problems, including the English language barrier. They argued that the language's lack of vocabulary and pronunciation, which is very complicated to read, are the main problems encountered while studying English at English language institutes. In addition, there are other factors such as lack of motivation, lack of confidence, and lack of

confidence are also inhibit them from producing sentences when interacting (Darong & Guna, 2023; Nurlia & Suardiman, 2020; Rindrasih et al., 2024).

Referring to the findings, the role of the teacher or mentor and the improvement of each student must be reframed in terms of the barriers and factors that are the problem. Enhancing a positive learning system can enable similar students to be handled well. This study answers the research questions and demonstrates how a narrative research approach that is small in scope can also offer significant feedback to the surrounding environment. Especially in a place where English is a foreign language, this narrative study provides a free opportunity to explore further the challenges that may seem small but significantly impact the limited English-speaking environment.

They can give their opinions and suggestions to be used as an evaluation for mentors, teachers, and students who are learning and experiencing similar things. This finding is consistent with previous research, which says that a lack of interest and motivation is a significant problem in the English language learning process, especially in the classroom (Al-Sobhi & Preece, 2018). In addition, Meşe & Sevilen, (2021) conducted research using a qualitative case study. Thus, research investigating the perception of each participant's personal experience in Indonesia is still rare. Similarly, a study said most of them find it challenging to place sentences well, while grammar is essential to learning English. Language knowledge is critical in any language (Burns, 2017).

In addition, creating an environment that does not overemphasize the need for beginners to speak well and correctly can provide a sense of unashamedness and fearlessness for students who want to try. This study builds on previous research exploring students' English-speaking ability but with different approaches and samples. In particular, it can help students who experience similar things in various places. Be it schools, institutions, or courses. In addition, this narrative approach also highlights vocabulary acquisition. Previous research by Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey (2018) noted that students need a vocabulary to compose language. Some students in this study had much vocabulary, and some had little vocabulary but could not pronounce it.

The findings provide practical value for teachers or mentors at the Institute where this research occurred. What are the perceptions of each student who cannot speak English despite years in the Institute but still cannot speak English? Integrating a narrative approach to evaluating the performance of mentors and teachers can provide many opportunities for students to speak. Despite the results obtained after this study, the limitation of this study is that it is only in the context of EFL learning with 4 students whose experiences are explored;

most researchers use quantitative or experimental research in their studies (Azizi et al., 2022). Thus, narrative inquiry, or research focusing on each person's experience, will undoubtedly provide more insight into the challenges and personal motivation during learning in the institution (Meşe & Sevilen, 2021).

Another limitation is the reliance on data reported in large-scale studies, which may not fully represent small-scale institutions, especially in remote villages. Incorporating objective measures such as audio recordings of interviews and notes taken during the interview process may provide a glimpse of the whole picture. Finally, the results of this study may not be generalizable to other educational contexts as it was conducted in one institution. This study shows that individual students' perceptions significantly facilitate teachers in managing the learning flow. Despite the limitations, the findings offer practical and theoretical insights that can benefit institutional educators and researchers. By overcoming these limitations and exploring new areas of study, the potential of students pursuing English language learning can be further realized.

Some suggestions were made to improve and minimize the situation they are currently experiencing. First, the institution should prepare supporting tools to help students master English. For example, the institution provides a sound system that can be used for daily conversation activities or listening to music once a week. In addition, facilities with the potential to support include projectors or LCDs, which can play a learning video (Yang et al., 2020). This type of support will be beneficial and maximize the work of mentors who can stand by at the institution daily. Dixon & Ward, (2015) Assume that "if you want to be a professional teacher, you must commit to professional competence". The government can help teachers with professional development programs to achieve professionalism. So that both teachers and mentors will learn and focus on how to teach and apply communication skills, such as speaking. According to the software, this also helps to alleviate the confusion of mentors or teachers later when teaching learners, but they are not getting anywhere. Moving on to classroom management, there is no problem at all. Given that several levels have been implemented in the institution, starting from A1 Beginner: Beginner level, A2 Elementary: Basic level, B1 Intermediate: Intermediate level, B2 Upper Intermediate: Upper intermediate level, C1 Advanced: Advanced level, C2 Proficient: Skilled level. So that it can be mapped, and there will be an assessment every three months. To overcome vocabulary limitations and poor pronunciation, the mentor already has several strategies prepared to be practiced on the participants, for example, by holding a conversation every day that all

institution students follow, then imitating what the mentor reads, asking some learners to memorize or re-practice the conversation that was read at the beginning.

This study provides a unique and significant new perspective on the continuous challenges EFL learners who have studied English for many years in pesantren-based language schools still find to speak English well. Unlike most other research, which either largely depends on quantitative data or concentrates on broad school and university environments, this narrative inquiry demonstrates the quite particular and contextualized experiences of learners in rural Indonesian contexts. The findings show that psychological and environmental factors greatly affect the issues, which are not only linguistic ones, including limited vocabulary, poor sentence structure, and pronunciation problems. Psychological barriers, including low self-confidence, fear, and changing motivation, are just as crucial as language restrictions. Moreover, underlined as primary obstacles to speaking development are outside factors, including bad institutional attitudes, insufficient instruments for technology, and poor enabling peer conditions (Russak & Zaretsky, 2021; Shahidzade & Mazdayasna, 2022). This study on students who still find it challenging to communicate in spite of intensive and thorough English instruction emphasizes a tremendous uniqueness. The story technique clarifies the interplay between institutional culture, personal experience, and local language practices to either hinder or encourage language acquisition.

The study also underlines the significance of instrumental motivation in which mentors and professors actively deploy strategies to sustain the enthusiasm and endurance of their students. This method is quite relevant in pesantren, where religious and cultural values mix with language evolution (Brown & Lee, 2025). These findings are significant and influential in the field. First, the study indicates that in EFL settings, resolving speaking problems requires a whole strategy comprising contextual, psychological, and linguistic interventions. Second, especially in rural or pesantren-based environments, the results of the research highlight the need to organize English language courses that are sensitive to the real experiences and socio-cultural backgrounds of students. The comprehensive stories provide evidence that institutional and personal support systems such as peer encouragement and adaptive teaching strategies could reduce psychological obstacles and increase the confidence in speakers. By giving learners' voices and lived reality top priority, this study offers pragmatic guidance to educators and lawmakers wishing to establish more successful, inclusive, and culturally relevant English-speaking programs. This clarifies Indonesian language acquisition in a whole sense.

According to the study results, participants in learning English face mostly vocabulary problems, pronunciation difficulties, and psychological issues including anxiety and low self-confidence. The ability of participants to create sentences and establish communication was much influenced by the 65% of those who complained about the lack of vocabulary (P4). This is consistent with the hypothesis (H. Douglas Brown, 2025), which holds that learning second language, especially Speaking Skill, mostly depends on the expansion of vocabulary. Lack of sufficient vocabulary will cause the language creation process to stagnate, therefore influencing participants' confidence when they talk (Abrar et al., 2018).

In addition, pronunciation issues also pose a major obstacle for the participants, with 58% of them reporting difficulties in spelling and pronouncing words fluently. According to the motor speech planning theory by (Dr. Kaharuddin, 2021), fluency in speaking is greatly influenced by the process of motor planning and execution, which needs to be consistently practiced to become automatic. Lack of efficient practice and chances for continuous speaking engagement inside the limited surroundings of the pesantren causes participants to feel insecure while speaking, shown by their reliance on gestures or subdued speech to reduce feelings of guilt and anxiety about making mistakes (P3).

In addition to internal factors, external factors such as an unsupportive learning environment also worsen the situation. This research found that 50% of participants reported limited opportunities to practice speaking authentically due to restricted interaction with native speakers and peers who actively communicate in English (P4). According to the idea (Dr. Kaharuddin, 2021), the success of language acquisition is much influenced by social surroundings as well as educational and cooperative contacts. Lack of a conducive environment can impede the immersion process and necessary practical application needed to reach mastery in speaking.

These findings highlight the need of more flexible and creative courses as well as in classroom architecture. Using authentic communication-based learning Tuhuteru et al., (2023) and peer-assisted learning could be effective ways to improve participants' speaking competency. Furthermore, the development of learning programs that consider the psychological aspects of participants, such as providing motivation and reducing anxiety, also needs serious attention so that participants' confidence can significantly increase.

Therefore, the findings of this study confirm the need of including linguistic, psychological, and environmental elements of learning into the design of a more inclusive and successful English language training program in pesantren and related establishments.

Accelerating mastery of Sustainable Speaking Skill Creswell, 2018; Fikri et al., (2024) will depend on improving the quality of interaction and enabling real communication experiences.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, students who had studied English for five years—both in foreign language development institutes and at the university level—still struggled to speak English fluently. The main challenges they identified were grouped into three categories: linguistic, psychological, and external factors. Linguistically, students faced difficulties such as limited vocabulary, challenges in reading and pronunciation, and trouble organizing sentences, all of which hindered their speaking development. Psychologically, a lack of self-confidence and fluctuating motivation were prominent, with many students attributing their struggles to anxiety, low self-esteem, and negative peer attitudes within their institutions.

Externally, inadequate technological facilities and a lack of supportive learning environments further exacerbated their difficulties. The study also found that mentors and teachers played a crucial role in sustaining students' motivation, often employing instrumental motivation strategies to help learners persist. These results highlight the complex interplay of internal and external factors affecting EFL learners' speaking abilities. The application of these findings can inform the design of more adaptive and responsive English language curricula and support systems, particularly in pesantren and similar educational settings, ultimately contributing to improved speaking proficiency and greater learner confidence among EFL students.

The major conclusions of this study show that the participants still encounter different difficulties reaching speaking fluency even if they have been learning English for five years at a pesantren-based language development institution. These limitations include psychological elements such as low self-confidence, anxiety, and changing motivation in addition to language ones, including restricted vocabulary, pronunciation problems, and sentence structure challenges. This condition indicates that participants' English learning process should consider psychological and emotional elements as well as the academic ones since they are naturally part of their educational experience.

Apart from internal elements, the findings of this research highlight how much the development of participants' speaking abilities is hampered by less encouraging surroundings. Participants feel annoyed and less motivated to practice speaking English because of insufficient facilities and lack of chances for real communication both within and outside the

classroom. Conversely, coping mechanisms, including peer support and self-motivation, turned out to be means for individuals to get above these challenges. This emphasizes the need for a welcoming and encouraging environment as well as the need for instilling self-confidence during a good language acquisition process.

Practically, these results suggest the necessity of creating more flexible and responsive English language learning initiatives to satisfy the demands of the students. By means of a safe and supportive learning atmosphere as well as chances for participants to engage really, a strategy that pays more attention to the psychological and social components of participants can assist in developing their oral communication competency. Furthermore, success in raising speaking fluency calls for stronger cooperation among teachers, participants, and their surroundings so that the learning process emphasizes not only theoretical language knowledge but also relevant and inspiring experiences.

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