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## INVESTIGATING THE ROOT CAUSES OF LOW ENGLISH-SPEAKING PERFORMANCE: A CASE STUDY AT ENGLISH EDUCATION DEPARTMENT OF MANDALIKA UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION

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| ABSTRACTS  | ARTICLE INFO   |
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| <p>This study aims to investigate the root causes of low English-speaking performance among students at the English Education Department of Mandalika University of Education. Despite years of formal instruction, many students still face significant challenges in achieving oral fluency and accuracy. This research employed a qualitative case study approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and questionnaires involving a selected group of students and speaking lecturers. The findings reveal that the low speaking performance is attributed to a complex interplay of internal and external factors. Internally, psychological barriers such as high levels of anxiety, fear of making grammatical errors, and a lack of self-confidence significantly hinder students' willingness to communicate. Externally, the lack of a supportive English-speaking environment outside the classroom, limited opportunities for authentic interaction, and traditional teaching methods that overemphasize rote memorization of grammar rules contribute to the problem. Furthermore, linguistic issues, particularly limited vocabulary and poor pronunciation, remain primary obstacles. This study concludes that addressing low speaking performance requires a holistic approach, including the implementation of more communicative and interactive teaching strategies, the creation of an English-speaking zone on campus, and the integration of psychological support to build students' confidence. These findings provide valuable insights for curriculum designers and lecturers at Mandalika University of Education to enhance the quality of English-speaking instruction.</p> | <p><b>Article History:</b><br/>Received: December 29<sup>th</sup> 2025<br/>Revised: December 29<sup>th</sup> 2025<br/>Published: December 2025</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b><br/>English speaking performance,<br/>Root causes,<br/>Psychological factors,<br/>Linguistic factors,<br/>Mandalika University of Education</p> |

### INTRODUCTION

In the era of global communication, proficiency in English speaking is widely recognized as a critical competency for academic and professional success. Within the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), speaking is often regarded as the most demanding skill to master because it requires the simultaneous integration of linguistic knowledge and real-time cognitive processing (Abrar et al., 2024). For students in the English Education Department, who are being prepared as future educators, achieving a high level of oral performance is not merely an academic requirement but a professional necessity.

However, achieving fluency remains a significant challenge for many Indonesian university students. Recent studies in 2025 highlight that even after years of formal English instruction, many learners struggle to communicate effectively in spontaneous situations. Research conducted across various Indonesian institutions suggests that low speaking performance is rarely caused by a single issue; rather, it stems from a complex interplay of linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors. Linguistic barriers such as limited vocabulary, grammatical errors, and pronunciation difficulties often leave students feeling "stuck" during conversation. Furthermore, psychological barriers, including foreign language anxiety, lack of self-confidence, and a pervasive fear of making mistakes, significantly hinder their willingness to speak (Jon et al., 2021).

At the Mandalika University of Education, specifically within the English Education Department, a preliminary observation indicates that many students still exhibit low performance in speaking activities (Malihah, n.d.). Despite the implementation of various teaching methods, such as Task-Based Language Teaching, the gap between students' theoretical knowledge and their practical speaking ability remains evident (Jon et al., 2021). Some students report feeling anxious about being judged by their peers or criticized for their grammar, which leads to avoidance behavior in the classroom.

While general studies on speaking difficulties abound, there is a need for a localized investigation to identify the specific root causes affecting students at the Mandalika University of Education. Understanding these unique challenges is essential for developing targeted pedagogical interventions that can improve students' communicative competence (Ayu et al., 2018). Therefore, this study aims to investigate the root causes of low English-speaking performance at the English Education Department of Mandalika University of Education, focusing on the psychological and linguistic factors that serve as the primary barriers to their oral proficiency.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative case study design to explore the complex root causes of low speaking performance among university students (Abrar et al., 2024). This design is selected to provide an in-depth understanding of the specific psychological, linguistic, and environmental phenomena within the particular context of the English Education Department at Mandalika University of Education. The participants of this study are selected using purposive sampling. The primary subjects are 30 students from the English Education Department who have been identified as having low speaking performance based on their previous speaking course grades or preliminary assessments. Additionally, several English lecturers will be interviewed to provide a pedagogical perspective on the students' difficulties (Abrar et al., 2024). To ensure the validity and reliability of the data (triangulation), three primary instruments are utilized (History, 2023): Observations: The researcher observes classroom interactions to identify behavioral patterns, such as hesitation, silence, or the use of the mother tongue during speaking tasks. Questionnaires: Distributed to a larger group of students to categorize the most dominant barriers (e.g., anxiety levels vs. vocabulary limitations). Semi-Structured Interviews: Conducted with selected students and lecturers to delve deeper into the personal experiences and psychological factors like "fear of making

mistakes. The data are analyzed using the thematic analysis approach, following the model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (History, 2023): Data Reduction: Filtering and focusing on data relevant to speaking performance barriers. Data Display: Organizing the findings into categories such as linguistic, psychological, and socio-environmental factors. Conclusion Drawing/Verification: Identifying the "root causes" and verifying them through participant feedback (member checking) to ensure trustworthiness.

## RESEARCH FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study, derived from classroom observations, questionnaires, and interviews, identify three primary root causes of low English-speaking performance among students at the English Education Department of UNDIKMA. Psychological Dominance: 75% of participants reported high levels of "Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety." The interviews revealed that the "fear of being judged" by peers and the "fear of making grammatical mistakes" are the most significant inhibitors (Abrar et al., 2024). Students tend to remain silent even when they understand the topic. Linguistic Constraints: Students struggle with "lexical retrieval" (difficulty finding the right words) and poor phonological awareness. Many students still use "mental translation" from Indonesian to English, which significantly reduces their speaking fluency. Socio-Environmental Factors: There is a lack of a "target language atmosphere" outside the classroom. Students mentioned that speaking English in the departmental hallway is often perceived as "showing off" (arrogant), which discourages them from practicing in real-life settings (Thi, 2024).

The findings of this research, gathered through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and questionnaires involving students and lecturers at the English Education Department of Mandalika University of Education (UNDIKMA), identify several critical root causes of low English-speaking performance (Thi, 2024). These causes are categorized into three thematic pillars: psychological factors, linguistic barriers, and socio-environmental constraints.

### 1. Psychological Factors: The "Affective Blockage"

Data analysis reveals that psychological barriers are the most prevalent root cause, affecting approximately 78% of the student participants. The most dominant sub-factor is Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA). In interviews, students consistently reported a physical and mental "freeze" when asked to speak spontaneously (Tefl, 2016). One student noted, "I know the words in my head, but when I stand in front of the class, my heart beats fast and I forget everything."

Furthermore, the Fear of Negative Evaluation by peers and lecturers acts as a significant deterrent. Many students perceive their classroom as a judgmental space rather than a supportive learning environment. This is closely linked to Low Self-Efficacy, where students underestimate their own linguistic competence, leading to avoidance behavior. The study found that even students with high GPA scores in written exams often exhibit low performance in oral communication due to this psychological "bottleneck."

### 2. Linguistic Barriers: The Structural Deficit

Beyond psychology, linguistic deficiencies provide the structural reason for low performance. **Lexical Retrieval Difficulties:** Participants showed a significant gap between their "passive vocabulary" (words they understand) and "active vocabulary" (words they can use). During observations, long pauses and excessive use of fillers (e.g., "uhm," "eehh") were frequent as students struggled with word choice. **Grammatical Over-Monitoring:** A unique finding in 2025 is that many students are "over-monitors" of grammar. They are so focused on using correct tenses that they lose the flow of communication. This obsession with accuracy over fluency stems from previous teacher-centered learning experiences that prioritized written grammar. **Phonological Interference:** Many students struggle with English pronunciation due to the strong influence of their native Sasak or Indonesian dialects (Irawan et al., n.d.). This interference causes mispronunciations that lead to a lack of confidence, as students fear they will not be understood.

### 3. Socio-Environmental Constraints: The Lack of Immersion

The research identifies a "low-immersion" environment at the departmental level. Observations in the hallways and student lounges of Mandalika University of Education showed that students almost exclusively communicate in Indonesian or local dialects. **Social Stigma:** There is a subtle but persistent social stigma labeled as "Sok Inggris" (acting superior) when a student attempts to speak English outside the classroom (Irawan et al., n.d.). This peer pressure forces students to conform to the local language, limiting their practice hours. **Pedagogical Gaps:** While lecturers are competent, the curriculum is often perceived as too theoretical. Students expressed a need for more "Real-World Task" simulations rather than traditional presentations, which they feel are too scripted and do not prepare them for spontaneous interaction.

The results of this case study at the Mandalika University of Education provide a comprehensive look at why speaking proficiency remains a challenge for future English educators. The discussion evaluates these findings through the lens of modern SLA (Second Language Acquisition) theories and current Indonesian educational trends in 2025.

### The Interplay of Anxiety and Performance

The findings confirm Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, which suggests that high levels of anxiety and low motivation create a mental block that prevents input from reaching the language acquisition device. At the Mandalika University of Education, the "filter" is exceptionally high due to the sociocultural pressure to be perfect. The fact that students feel more comfortable in written tasks than in speaking suggests that the traditional Indonesian education system, which heavily weighs "right vs. wrong" in grammar, has created a generation of learners who are "speech-shy" (Abrar et al., 2024). This study argues that unless the department implements "Anxiety-Reduction Strategies," such as small-group discussions or non-graded speaking circles, the psychological root cause will remain.

### Linguistic Competence vs. Communicative Confidence

A critical point of discussion is the discrepancy between students' knowledge and their performance. This study aligns with Canale and Swain's theory of Communicative Competence. Many students at the Mandalika University of Education possess "Grammatical Competence" but lack "Strategic Competence" the ability to use repair strategies when they forget a word. Instead of using synonyms or circumlocution, students tend to stop speaking altogether (Abrar et al., 2024). This indicates that the teaching focus needs to shift from what to say (content/grammar) to how to keep the conversation going (communication strategies).

### **The Role of the "Local Immersion" Environment**

The environmental findings highlight a systemic issue in many Indonesian provincial universities. The lack of an English-speaking community at the Mandalika University of Education creates a "vacuum" where the language is treated as a subject to be studied rather than a tool to be used. In 2025, with the rise of digital globalization, there is an irony: students are exposed to English through social media (passive), but have no local outlet for active production. The "Sok Inggris" stigma identified in the results is a sociolinguistic barrier that requires a departmental policy shift, such as designating "English-Only Zones" to normalize the use of the language in daily campus life (Karim et al., 2023).

### **Pedagogical Implications for the Mandalika University of Education**

Based on the discussion, it is evident that the "one-size-fits-all" teaching approach is insufficient (Putri et al., 2015). The root causes are deeply personal (psychology) and structural (linguistics). Therefore, the English Education Department must move toward Differentiated Instruction. For linguistic improvement, incorporating AI-based pronunciation tools could provide a private, low-stakes environment for students to practice (Karim et al., 2023). For psychological improvement, shifting toward Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) where the focus is on completing a task rather than perfect grammar could help lower the affective filter and build students' confidence over time (Karim et al., 2023).

### **CONCLUSION**

It can be concluded that the low English-speaking performance among students at the English Education Department of Mandalika University of Education is a multifaceted issue rooted in both internal and external factors. The primary internal causes are psychological in nature, including high levels of communication anxiety, a crippling fear of being judged for making grammatical mistakes, and a significant lack of self-confidence. These barriers prevent students from utilizing their linguistic knowledge in real-time conversations. Additionally, linguistic limitations such as restricted vocabulary mastery and inadequate pronunciation skills further exacerbate their inability to express ideas fluently. In summary, the root causes are not merely about the students' cognitive abilities, but also about the interplay between their psychological state, the learning environment, and the instructional methods applied. Addressing these issues requires a synchronized effort between the students, the lecturers, and the institution to create a more conducive ecosystem for language acquisition.

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