

SPEAKING PROBLEMS AMONG EFL LEARNERS: A NARRATIVE REVIEW OF CAUSES AND COPING STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

Kemampuan berbicara memainkan peran penting dan menantang dalam belajar bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing (EFL). Banyak orang yang belajar bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa kedua merasa kesulitan untuk berbicara, terutama karena masalah dengan tata bahasa, kosakata, pengucapan dan juga kecemasan, rasa malu dan kepercayaan diri yang rendah. Artikel ini akan berfokus untuk menemukan apa yang menyebabkan orang mengalami masalah dalam berbicara dan cara-cara yang digunakan siswa untuk mengatasinya. Untuk melakukan penelitian ini, 12 artikel dari tahun 2015 hingga 2025 yang ditemukan di database akademik ditinjau dengan metode berbasis naratif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kesulitan berbicara terjadi karena faktor pribadi dan lingkungan. Peserta didik dapat menghadapi keraguan diri, khawatir akan dihakimi, dan kurang terpapar dengan ide-ide baru dan hal ini juga dapat dipengaruhi oleh peran guru, lingkungan kelas, dan pendekatan pengajaran yang berbeda. Para pengajar memanfaatkan latihan mengingat kata yang dilakukan oleh para siswa setiap hari dan self-talk mereka sendiri di depan cermin, dan para guru merespons dengan memberikan saran yang mendukung dan kegiatan yang mengarahkan. Penelitian ini menemukan bahwa pengajaran berbicara yang sukses perlu merefleksikan kebutuhan emosional dan pemikiran siswa. Guru disarankan untuk menciptakan suasana yang menyenangkan di dalam kelas dan menyertakan strategi yang membantu siswa merasa tenang dan berperan aktif dalam berbicara.

Kata kunci: Kecemasan Berbahasa, Masalah Berbicara, Pembelajaran EFL, Pembelajaran Bahasa, Strategi Coping, Ulasan Literatur Naratif.

ABSTRACT

Speaking plays a vital and challenging role in learning English as a foreign language (EFL). Many people learning English as a second language find it difficult to speak, mainly because of problems with grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and also anxiety, shyness and low confidence. The article will focus on discovering what causes people to have speaking problems and the ways students handle them. To perform the study, 12 articles from 2015 to 2025 found in academic databases were reviewed with a narrative-based method. The study shows that speaking difficulties happen because of both personal and surrounding factors. Learners can face self-doubt, worry about being judged and not enough exposure to new ideas and these can also be affected by the role of teachers, the environment of the classroom and different teaching approaches. Copers make use of learners' daily word memory practice and their own self-talk in the mirror and teachers respond by communicating supportive advice and leading activities. It finds that successful speaking teaching needs to reflect on the emotional and thinking needs of the learners. Teachers are advised to create a nice atmosphere in the classroom and include strategies that help students feel calm and take an active role in talking.

Keywords: Coping Strategies, EFL Learners, Language Anxiety, Narrative Literature Review, Speaking Problems.

INTRODUCTION

Speaking is one of the most essential skills in learning English as a foreign language (EFL). It plays a central and crucial role in oral communication of many aspects and it reflects the

extent to which learners are able to express their ideas, thoughts and opinions from source language to target language. Among the four major language skills, speaking is considered as the most crucial. As stated by Rao (2019), the most crucial ability

for learning a foreign language is speaking. Speaking is considered to be the most crucial of the four language skills for learning a foreign or second language. This highlights the urgency of mastering speaking in order to achieve communicative competence.

However, many EFL students still struggle with speaking activities because of internal and external factors in both formal and informal situations. The problems may occur from linguistic limitations such as lack of vocabulary, poor pronunciation, and grammatical errors until psychological problems such as fear of making mistakes, low confidence, and anxiety. Problems with speaking are those that contribute to an individual's poor performance (Riadil, 2020). This situation is in line with what Abadi said (as cited in Riadil, 2020) who noted that a significant amount of students are not actively participating in speaking classrooms, which is why many English of Foreign Language (EFL) teachers express dissatisfaction with their speaking classes.

In addition to reducing classroom participation, speaking problems also can negatively impact students' academic outcomes. Those problems can distract students from improving their speaking ability. As Riadil (2019) mentioned that Language issues can have an impact on students' poor academic achievement. This highlights again the urgent need to explore more the causes of speaking problems and how learners' strategies to overcome them. Therefore, this article aims to review previous related to speaking problems faced by EFL learners, focusing on both the contributing factors and the coping strategies. This narrative literature review is expected to offer theoretical insights and pedagogical implications for improving speaking instruction in EFL classrooms.

METHOD

This study applied a narrative literature review to examine speaking problems among EFL learners, focusing on the causes and coping strategies discussed in previous studies. The narrative review approach was selected due to its descriptive and flexible nature, allowing the researcher to synthesize and summarize findings from various academic sources and identify emerging themes. The goals of narrative reviews are to find and summarize previously published material, prevent

duplication, and suggest unexplored research areas (Ferrari, 2015).

Relevant articles were collected from several academic databases including Google Scholar, Research Gate, Science Direct and Publish or Perish, covering a publication range of the last ten years (2015–2025). The keywords used to search articles included are those related to: “speaking problems in EFL,” “speaking difficulties,” “EFL speaking anxiety,” and “coping strategies in speaking skill.” Articles were selected based on the following criteria: (1) Published in English or Indonesian, (2) Discussing speaking problems in EFL contexts, (3) Presenting either causes or strategies, (4) Publications between 2015 and 2025 in English and Indonesian language, and (5) Accessible for full-text review online.

Although narrative reviews do not require as strict a structure as systematic reviews, the researchers still apply a structured selection process to ensure relevance and quality. Articles were screened by the title and abstract, followed by full-text evaluation based on inclusion and exclusion criteria. This step aimed to improve the focus and thematic consistency of the final review.

A total of 12 articles were included in the review. The instrument used for the review process was a self-developed checklist to categorize data based on themes such as type of speaking problem, contributing factor, and coping strategies. These themes were derived inductively through a manual thematic analysis, which involved reading, coding, and grouping similar ideas from the selected literature. All articles and data used in this review are traceable through online academic repositories and databases. The whole process follows the principles of narrative review, which is flexible while maintaining transparency in data selection and analysis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Types of Speaking Problems

One of the most difficult and challenging skills to master for ESL/EFL learners is speaking simply because it is spontaneous and a productive skill. Its real-time nature, the need for accurate production, and social pressure during oral communication often cause difficulties for EFL learners. Different researches have also pointed out some issues in speaking problems that are highlighted frequently across different contexts.

According to Normawati et al. (2023) grammar (48%), pronunciation (27%) and vocabulary (12%) are the language parts which given big challenge to EFL learners, as indicated Normawati et al. (2023) showing technical side of language that not easy to become native like to face oral in communicative activity. This is in line with Sayuri's study (2019) at Mulawarman University, where pronunciation, fluency and grammar as well vocabulary have been stressed; they all often go wrong so the learners apparently do not have control over the mechanical and functional part of L2 production. These constraints clearly have some effect on the students to formulate good speech and continue having good interaction in English. They are critical as they impact the very intelligibility and comprehensibility on the speaking output of learners. Rahmaniah & Asbah (2019) also detailed the difficulties encountered by non-English department students, noting that 80% of students were nearly completely wrong in grammar, and 73% of students made serious pronunciation errors, emphasizing how lack of linguistic mastery often leads to hesitation or avoidance in speaking tasks.

Beyond linguistic elements, psychological and behavioral barriers also contribute significantly to speaking problems more than just words and grammar. Riadil (2020) described the experience of students at Tidar University as having inhibition, they did not know what to say or had uneven practice rates in speaking activities. He further noted that "the fear of vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar are predominant among students and they worry if others will judge their performance when they speak in English. It indicates that even the proficient knows the language they are afraid of being watched and makes mistakes in speaking and it prevents them from engaging in spoken communication. Even as Sayuri (2019) pointed out a lack of self-confidence, shyness and nervousness can keep the students silent, avoid answering in class and can block learners from expressing themselves.

In broader context, Alaraj (2017) further noted that the speaking problems of students are divided into cognitive and emotional areas as well. In his study, he observed with the EFL learners of Jordan that his constraints limiting the fluency of students in speaking were insufficient vocabulary, lack of listening and practice, and psychological

problems. These included thinking in the mother tongue while speaking English and feeling a constant fear of making mistakes, which in turn reduced their willingness to participate. The existence of these psychological filters means speaking difficulties are not single kind of linguistic gaps, but as multi-faceted obstacles that are linked to many factors, mindset and environment.

In conclusion, speaking problems among EFL learners are not only limited to linguistic defects (pronunciation or vocabulary differences), but also psychological and emotional barriers such as fear, embarrassment, inhibition, and low self-esteem. Taken together, these findings suggest that barriers in speaking are not just about knowing language structures, but also believing and wanting to use them in real situations. Therefore, labeling the types of speaking problems is the first aspect of the way forward to better understand the deeper learning and affective needs in the EFL classroom.

Causes of Speaking Problems

Knowing the cause of speech issues is essential in overcoming and minimizing them. Causes of the problems are multifactor, including psychological, internal, emotional, instructional and environmental causes. Sayuri (2019) discovered that the students' challenges related to self-confidence, fear of mistakes, nervousness, shyness, and lack of speaking practice. It is also interesting to observe how many learners reported "nothing to say", which could have its explanation about not being familiar with the topic and that some affective issues.

Kashinathan & Abdul Aziz (2021) also noted that students' lack of vocabulary is the main reason why they are hesitant in speaking. Without enough word knowledge, students shy away from speaking tasks, afraid they won't be able to say what they want to say correctly. This is consistent with other research indicating that lexical constraints are still a challenge for many ESL students to overcome in authentic classroom exchanges.

Riadil (2020) also highlighted inhibition as a dominant factor. He explained that students are afraid of being criticized by their classmates, especially when they make grammar or pronunciation mistakes. This fear of negative evaluation contributes to learners' silence.

Furthermore, students' low topical knowledge, meaning they did not have ideas to share, also emerged as a cause of reduced participation. Similarly, Alaraj (2017) found that students who lack confidence due to fear of mistakes often think in Arabic while speaking in English, which disrupts their fluency and causes hesitation.

In terms of cognition, Normawati et al. (2023) and Rahmaniah & Asbah (2019) both described how the influence of the L1 or first language, in terms of grammar and pronunciation, affected speaking fluency. They described how students' lack of grammatical mastery, limited vocabulary retention, and poor pronunciation skills were not only becoming problems in themselves but also resulted from limited opportunities for exposure and practice, especially outside the classroom.

There was also the factor of the teacher's role. For example, Mouhoubi-Messadh & Khaldi (2022) stated that students with greater self-worth are less fearful of speaking English, and teachers who help provide relevant vocabulary and demonstrate understanding of students' struggles can develop an increase of student confidence. The researchers identified that students' anxiety becomes worse when they have limited vocabulary knowledge. This makes teacher support more relevant. With the same discussion, on the other hand, it can also have different impacts depending on the teacher's treatment in the classroom, Rafieyan (2016) highlighted that teachers are the main cause of language learner anxiety especially in terms of performance anxiety. Evaluating students' speaking performance was the most anxiety-causing factor in his research, he added. His research revealed that classroom practices, such as testing, correcting, or emphasizing students, can induce fear and silence among students who should be capable.

Taly & Paramasivam (2020) also found that international postgraduate students experience speaking anxiety due to self-perception, lack of practice, low language ability, and concerns about being evaluated by peers or lecturers. Among other things, he emphasized that the students were in an academic environment where their speaking practice was rather limited, and this added to their stress. These findings suggest that it is not only teaching that is needed, but also the learning

trajectory and acculturation of students that should be targeted for speaking problems.

The findings illustrate that speaking problems are caused by a dynamic combination of personal (internal) factors such as fear, low self-esteem and language impairment, and external factors such as classroom pressure, inadequate practice and less supportive teaching approaches.

Coping Strategies in Speaking

To assist EFL learners with their speaking challenges, a variety of strategies have been suggested and implemented. These strategies are divided into two primary groups: those started by learners themselves and those that stemmed from teaching and instructional approaches. Alaraj (2017) while defining these categories documented a number of strategies. For vocabulary improvement, students did active word listing, tried to learn five new words each day, and paid attention to pronunciation, spelling, and context. For fluency improvement, back chaining, repeated listening, and mirror speaking were practiced. These approaches helped students form routines, which in turn gradually reduced anxiety.

These findings were deepened by the addition of Mohammad (2022) research that divided the strategies into "Self coping" and "Provided coping by teacher." Students volunteered using "self-recording, breathing control, mirror speaking, and positive thinking" as techniques to calm down when they want to improve their speaking ability. He also reported that several students found that they were more comfortable speaking English in situations outside of class where they could talk without apprehension. The teacher's behaviour significantly impacts student speaking confidence on whether to speak or not. Mouhoubi-Messadh & Khaldi (2022) noted that a teacher who appreciates students' anxieties and provides appropriate lexical scaffolding is able to motivate learners to participate in class discussions. He stressed students are more empowered when their needs are met. Additionally, He stated that the vocabulary activities were proved to minimize the level of anxiety related to speaking.

Kashinathan & Abdul Aziz (2021) notes that the students adopt self-initiated strategies such as reading English books, listening to songs, and watching English programs without subtitles. Such self-directed efforts help in vocabulary acquisition

and developing self-confidence. She emphasized that educators need to create a positive environment for students to feel encouraged to express themselves freely.

Furthermore, Rafieyan (2016) pointed out the importance of the classroom environment and climate. In his findings, he noted that a fun, non-threatening classroom was the most effective way to alleviate students' anxiety about speaking. On the contrary, too strict or critical atmospheres increased fear and reduced participation. Moreover, he noted that peer help was of minimal impact, meaning the teacher has a far greater impact than do the students.

Taly & Paramasivam (2020) suggested that educators should remain positive and supportive to help students manage anxiety gradually. He pointed out that useful techniques include the use of relaxation methods, positive self-talk, ample speaking opportunities, and even nonverbal tactics such as looking away or other movements to control nervousness. These findings demonstrate how different coping mechanisms, when facilitated by the learning environment, enable students to participate more readily in speaking activities.

As for motivation, Flores et al. (2020) pointed out the teacher's approach as one of the most important factors. She highlighted that the teacher's positive attitude seems to be the main coping strategy. The students tend to relax and become more responsive in class when there is a kind, humorous, and supportive teacher. She remarked, when learners are made to understand that errors are part of the learning process, they tend to regard striving for perfection benignly. This positive change in thinking is very important for breaking the cycles of speaking anxiety.

Al-khresheh (2024) demonstrated evidence related to improvement of speaking performance as a result of presentation based tasks. He noted that learners participating in these tasks improved on fluency, coherence, pronunciation, delivery of content, and self-confidence. Such tasks offered a framework within which learners could meaningfully and safely practice authentic communication, gradually lessening anxiety and increasing competence over time.

As an interrelated set of strategies, both student initiative and teacher support emerge as crucial to surmounting speaking blocks. When

students are empowered with a few tools and a friendly environment, speaking is no longer a terrifying chore, but a place for real language play.

CONCLUSION

Speaking is one of the basic skills required for EFL learners, but it is still difficult capability to achieve. In this narrative literature review, the characteristics of speaking problems faced by EFL learners were discussed in three parts: types of speaking problems, sources of speaking problems, and strategies for coping with them. In terms of linguistic challenges faced by EFL learners, pronunciation, limited vocabulary, and grammatical errors were reported to be common issues; psychological challenges include fear of making mistakes, low confidence and speaking anxiety.

These issues do not have one special cause only rather they are the result of a complex set of internal and external factors. Internally, students battle inhibition, self-confidence, and lack of motivation. Externally, classroom settings, attitudes of the teachers, insufficient exposure, and test pressure are causes of learners' speaking difficulties. Specifically, the teacher's role was found to be the most significant factor, either reducing or heightening anxiety depending on the attitude.

Students use several methods on their own such as practicing talking in front of a mirror, breath control and expanding their range of words. On the other hand, involving teachers in various ways by welcoming fun classroom activities, offering a friendly atmosphere and showing students it is okay to make mistakes in speaking has proven very effective in reducing anxiety and boosting speaking success. Taking part in presentations has been very successful for students in improving their ability to speak and take part in lessons.

In summary, solving speaking problems in English for learners calls for knowing the many factors that hold them back from good speaking. The review points out that confidence and proficiency in speaking come from helping students manage learning and keeping teachers close by. Educators should notice both the emotional and language needs of their students and arrange a supportive atmosphere where students can take risks, get practice and advance in spoken

English. Studies could explore if these strategies can be adapted in various ways to improve how speaking is taught in education.

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