

STUDENTS' PERCEPTION ON CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILLS AT SMP NEGERI 5 KUNINGAN

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the challenges students experience in developing their English speaking skills and identify strategies considered helpful by students of SMP Negeri 5 Kuningan. This study used a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews conducted on November 24, 2025, with 16 students in grade VII-B. The data showed that most students experienced speaking difficulties due to vocabulary constraints, pronunciation difficulties, shyness, lack of confidence, and confusion in reading and understanding English texts. Emotional factors such as fear of being laughed at and worry about making mistakes were also major obstacles that reduced their courage in speaking. In addition, cognitive aspects such as the ability to memorize, understand word meanings, and distinguish reading styles also exacerbated the challenges they faced. Regarding strategies, students considered regular practice, increased self-confidence, support from friends and teachers, the use of educational games, and providing clear examples and explanations as effective ways to improve their speaking skills. Students also mentioned that fun activities, such as games, short videos, and group activities, can help create a more positive learning environment so that they are better prepared to practice speaking.

Keyword: *speaking challenges, speaking strategies, EFL learners*

INTRODUCTION

Speaking is seen as a productive skill that enables students to convey ideas, understand the other person's message, and use language in real-life contexts. However, the reality on the ground shows that many junior high school students still face various barriers to speaking English, such as anxiety, limited vocabulary, fear of making mistakes, and low self-confidence. This situation requires a more adaptive pedagogical approach and a deeper understanding of the challenges students experience.

Various literature confirms that speaking is a complex process involving the simultaneous production, reception, and interpretation of language (Brown, 2004, in Leoneta et al., 2023). In addition to linguistic factors such as vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, psychological aspects such as self-confidence and anxiety significantly influence students' speaking abilities. Several studies also emphasize the need for

appropriate learning strategies to help students overcome these challenges. For example, role-play strategies have been shown to improve students' vocabulary comprehension, grammar, and fluency, although they are not entirely effective in overcoming shyness and fear (Wijaya et al., 2024). Previous research has also shown that learning strategies such as discussions, drills, and the use of games can increase student participation, strengthen interactions, and create a fun learning environment (Sabella & Mazidah, 2024). These strategies not only help students with language skills but also boost motivation and confidence in speaking in front of others. However, each school and learning context has unique characteristics, so students' perceptions of challenges and the strategies that help them can vary.

Previous studies have largely focused on students' perceptions of specific teaching techniques or strategies. Malik et al. (2025), for example, examined students' perceptions of the use of role-

play, while Saragih et al. (2024) examined teachers' perceptions of speaking strategies, such as discussions and drills. While these studies provide valuable contributions, there remains a gap in research regarding students' perceptions of the challenges they experience and the strategies they consider helpful in improving their speaking skills, particularly in the context of junior high school students in the Kuningan area. Therefore, this research is crucial for providing a more comprehensive understanding of students' learning needs in speaking.

This research is also relevant to the need to develop more effective learning methods, particularly for English teachers at SMP Negeri 5 Kuningan. By understanding students' perceptions of the difficulties they face and the strategies they need, teachers can design more appropriate learning activities, both in terms of pedagogical approach and the use of learning media. Furthermore, the results of this study are expected to provide schools with insights into how the learning environment can be optimized to increase students' confidence and ability to speak English.

Based on this background, this study focuses on answering two main questions: (1) What challenges do students at SMP Negeri 5 Kuningan experience in developing their English speaking skills? and (2) What strategies do students perceive as helpful for improving their English speaking skills? Using a qualitative, interview-based approach, this study aims to provide an in-depth overview of students' experiences, obstacles, and needs in learning speaking, thus providing a basis for developing more effective, student-centered learning strategies.

METHOD

This study used a qualitative approach with descriptive methods to understand students' perceptions of the challenges and strategies they consider helpful in developing their English speaking skills. This qualitative approach was chosen because it allowed researchers to explore students' experiences, feelings, and perspectives in depth through verbal data, not numbers.

The study was conducted at SMP Negeri 5 Kuningan, focusing on class 7B as the primary participants. Class 7B was selected purposively

based on initial observations that many students displayed fear, embarrassment, and a lack of confidence when asked to read or speak in English. This situation indicated the importance of further exploration of the inhibiting factors and learning needs of their speaking skills.

Research data were collected through face-to-face interviews conducted on November 24, 2025. A total of 16 class 7B students were randomly selected as interview participants. This technique was chosen because it provided richer information and allowed researchers to understand students' responses more comprehensively, including nonverbal expressions related to anxiety or fear when speaking English.

Interviews were conducted individually in the school environment, in a comfortable atmosphere to allow students to answer questions honestly and without pressure. The interview instrument consisted of seven open-ended questions designed to identify: (1) factors that make it difficult for students to speak English, (2) causes of anxiety or shyness, (3) factors that can increase speaking confidence, (4) preferences for classroom learning activities, (5) the most difficult parts of the lesson, (6) students' expectations of their teachers, and (7) efforts they believe they can make to improve their speaking skills.

The data obtained were analyzed through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. Data reduction was carried out by selecting important information from all interview results. The data were then presented in thematic categories according to the research focus, such as speaking challenges, psychological factors, preferred learning methods, and strategies deemed effective. The final stage, drawing conclusions, was carried out continuously throughout the analysis process to ensure relevant and accurate data interpretation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study were divided into two parts: 1) What challenges do students at SMP Negeri 5 Kuningan experience in developing their English speaking skills? and 2) What strategies do students perceive as helpful for improving their English speaking skills?

1. Students' challenges in developing English speaking skills

This section is to answer the first research question, which is about the students' challenges in developing English speaking skills. Based on interviews conducted by researchers on Monday, November 24, 2025, five challenges were found that students faced in developing English speaking skills, namely:

1) Difficulty in Pronunciation and Word Recognition

A dominant theme in the interview data is that many students struggle with pronunciation, word recognition, and reading English words aloud. Students stated that English words are difficult to pronounce, hard to memorize, and different from Indonesian spelling rules. For example, several students (S6, S7, S12, S15) explained that they struggle because English words "are difficult to say," "hard to read," and "sound different from how they are written."

This indicates a phonological barrier, where students lack exposure to English sounds and do not understand the letter-sound correspondence in English. This aligns with early EFL learner characteristics, where unfamiliar sound systems create anxiety and prevent students from speaking confidently.

2) Low Confidence and Fear of Making Mistakes

Another striking theme is students' fear of embarrassment. Many participants (S1, S3, S4, S10, S15) said they were afraid of being laughed at by peers, especially when mispronouncing words. Others reported being nervous, shy, or afraid of speaking in front of classmates.

This emotional barrier strongly affects speaking participation. Students associate speaking English with the risk of negative evaluation, leading to avoidance behavior. Their anxiety is not only linguistic but also social, showing that peer pressure plays a major role in shaping their speaking performance.

3) Limited Vocabulary and Memory Difficulty

Several students (S2, S5, S7, S9, S13, S14) mentioned that they find English difficult because they cannot memorize words, do not understand the

meaning, and forget vocabulary quickly. This suggests that the students lack strategies for vocabulary retention. Without adequate vocabulary, speaking becomes impossible, and students feel frustrated.

The interview data also reflect a lack of internalized vocabulary learning habits. Students rely heavily on memorization but struggle because rote learning alone is insufficient for long-term recall at their age.

4) Lack of Understanding of English Structures and Classroom Materials

Some students identified specific learning topics as difficult, such as text procedure, prepositions of place, and verbs. The difficulty comes from their limited comprehension of grammar and unfamiliarity with instructions written in English. For instance, S12 explicitly mentioned struggling with "preposition of place because I forget the meaning," while S1 and S5 indicated difficulty in understanding "verbs" and "explaining the lesson." This highlights that comprehension issues hinder speaking because students cannot form sentences or even understand simple tasks.

5) General Perception that English Is "Hard"

A number of students simply responded by saying "I can't," "I don't know," or "English is difficult." These responses (S10, S11, S13) reflect a negative mindset toward English, likely influenced by inconsistent exposure, lack of successful learning experiences, and low self-efficacy.

Taken together, the challenges show that students face linguistic, psychological, and pedagogical barriers when attempting to speak English.

2. Students' perceived helpful strategies for improving their English speaking skills

This section is to answer the second research question, which is about the students' perceived helpful strategies for improving their English speaking skills. Based on interviews conducted by researchers on Monday, November 24, 2025, five strategies were found that students' perceived helpful strategies for improving their English speaking skills, namely:

1) Supportive and Non-Judgmental Classroom Environment

Many students stated that they would feel more confident if their peers did not laugh at them or if mistakes were corrected gently (S3, S4, S15). This indicates their desire for a safe classroom climate, where making errors is considered normal.

Students also mentioned that having supportive teachers who correct mistakes politely would reduce their anxiety. This reveals that emotional safety is one of the strongest motivating factors for junior high learners.

2) Clear Pronunciation Guidance from the Teacher

Students (S6, S12, S15) emphasized the need for teachers to explain how to pronounce words correctly, showing that explicit phonetics instruction is important for beginners. They believe that proper guidance on reading and speaking will help them overcome their fear and confusion.

This finding suggests that teachers should incorporate more modeling, choral repetition, pronunciation drills, and listening activities to strengthen students' sound awareness.

3) Fun, Game-Based, and Engaging Learning Activities

A strong preference for game-based learning emerged from responses. Many students (S3, S5, S6, S13, S16) stated that they enjoy games, guessing activities, and interactive tasks in class. Students also mentioned group work, storytelling, and watching video clips as enjoyable.

Engaging activities reduce pressure, increase motivation, and allow natural speaking opportunities. When learning is enjoyable, students are more willing to try speaking without fear.

4) Peer Support and Group Learning

Several students mentioned that they feel braver when friends join them or when they practice in groups (S2, S7, S12). This highlights the importance of collaborative learning for young learners. Through group activities, students feel less isolated and more supported, helping them gradually build confidence.

5) Independent Efforts to Improve Speaking Skills

Some students identified personal strategies that they believe could help them speak better, such as:

- memorizing vocabulary (S1, S2, S7, S12),

- reading more often (S3, S4),
- practicing pronunciation repeatedly (S6),
- watching English videos or films (S15),
- playing online games with foreign players (S9).

This shows that although students have difficulties, they do have awareness of beneficial independent learning strategies. Their ideas reflect the influence of digital media and the possibility for authentic exposure outside the classroom

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of a study conducted with 16 seventh-grade students at SMP Negeri 5 Kuningan through direct interviews, it was found that most students experienced significant challenges in developing their English speaking skills. The main difficulties they encountered included limited vocabulary, difficulty memorizing, perceived pronunciation difficulties, and embarrassment and fear of being laughed at by peers. Psychological factors such as anxiety, lack of confidence, and fear of making mistakes were the biggest obstacles preventing students from performing or practicing speaking English, both inside and outside the classroom.

In addition to these challenges, the study also showed that students had a clear understanding of strategies that could help them improve their speaking skills. Social support from peers and teachers, clear examples, non-judgmental correction, and fun learning activities such as games, short videos, and group activities were highly valued by the students. They also considered independent practice such as reading, watching English videos, memorizing, and practicing pronunciation to be effective ways to improve their speaking skills. This suggests that a combination of internal (personal effort) and external (supportive learning environment) strategies is necessary to help students develop.

Overall, this study confirms that improving speaking skills in junior high school students requires a sensitive approach to their psychological well-being, as well as a variety of engaging and relevant activities tailored to their needs. Teachers play a crucial role in creating a safe, supportive, and fearless learning environment. Meanwhile,

students need to be encouraged to develop consistent, independent learning habits to build confidence in using English. By combining these two aspects, the speaking learning process can be more effective, enjoyable, and positively impact the development of students' English skills.

Based on the research findings, it is recommended that English teachers at SMP Negeri 5 Kuningan implement more interactive learning methods and foster a safe learning environment for students. Teachers can increase communicative activities such as language games, role-plays, and simple discussions, as well as provide examples of clear pronunciation and non-judgmental correction. Furthermore, it is important for teachers to foster student confidence by creating a classroom atmosphere free from teasing and providing positive reinforcement whenever students attempt to speak.

Students are advised to increase independent practice outside of class by watching English videos, listening to songs or simple content, and trying to converse with peers. Students also need to gradually develop reading habits and memorize basic vocabulary to be better prepared for speaking. With the combined efforts of teachers and students, it is hoped that English speaking skills can improve significantly.

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