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## **Unspoken Motivation: Investigating Speaking Difficulties and Language Interference Among Indonesian EFL Students**

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### **Abstract**

Understanding the reasons behind Speech Difficulties and Language Interference is a very urgent matter to address amidst the ease of access to learning English. This study shows the continuous speaking difficulties and language interference experienced by Indonesian university students majoring in English Education, despite their advanced level of study. A qualitative phenomenological approach was used in this study and data were collected through semi-structured interviews with ten seventh and eighth semester students preparing for teaching practicums. Thematic analysis revealed five major issues: lack of intrinsic motivation, dialect-based insecurity, limited exposure to English media, reluctance to speak with peers, and low engagement with digital learning tools. These findings highlight that the students' reluctance is not merely linguistic but also influenced by psychological and sociocultural factors. The study recommends that English teacher training programs integrate motivational awareness, pronunciation support, and accessible English input to improve speaking competence and reduce communication anxiety.

**Keywords:** ELT, language interference, speaking difficulties



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## 1. Introduction

The phenomenon of Indonesian EFL students enrolling in English Education programs yet feeling reluctant to become English teachers due to low speaking confidence has become increasingly noticeable (Meliyani, Utomo & Masrupi, 2022). Despite years of formal language instruction, many students still perceive themselves as unable to meet the speaking proficiency expected in academic settings (Febriyanti et al., 2025). Even in advanced semesters, students often remain hesitant to speak English, regardless of their performance on speaking tests (Mahmudi & Anugerahwati, 2023). This enduring silence raises a critical issue: why those senior students, close to graduation, are still lack motivation and ability to speak English, even when such skills are required for assessments and teaching practicums.

In addition, speaking difficulties in this context are commonly attributed to speaking anxiety, which includes fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and low self-esteem (Meliyani et al., 2022). Research has shown that lower-proficiency students experience higher anxiety levels, often due to fear of making mistakes or being judged by peers (Febriyanti et al., 2025). These psychological factors are compounded by limited vocabulary, insufficient speaking practice, and personality traits such as shyness and introversion (Mahmudi & Anugerahwati, 2021). As a result, many students opt to stay silent rather than risk embarrassment, even in supportive classroom environments (Marliana & Yuyu, 2023).

Hence, another major factor contributing to students' reluctance to speak is first language (L1) interference, which affects pronunciation, intonation, and overall fluency (Riswanto, 2022). Indonesian EFL learners frequently struggle with specific phonemes in English that do not exist in their native language, such as interdental fricatives and diphthongs (Subandowo, 2023). This linguistic interference often leads to noticeable pronunciation errors, which further increase students' fear of being misunderstood or mocked (Listyani, Kurniawan & Thren, 2024). Consequently, these linguistic challenges intensify students' hesitation to speak and reduce their willingness to participate in oral speaking tasks.

However, while previous studies have documented speaking anxiety, dialectal influence, and lack of motivation among EFL learners, few have explored how these elements intersect in the context of students preparing for teaching practicums. There is a gap in understanding how language interference, socio-environmental factors, and professional identity interact to shape speaking reluctance among senior English education students. This study aims to

address this gap by investigating the lived experiences of these students who confront the demands of spoken English in both academic and professional contexts. To support this study, qualitative studies conducted in Indonesian teacher training institutions reveal that students' speaking reluctance is shaped by a combination of linguistic, psychological, and socio-environmental factors (Meliyani et al., 2022). These include fear of being judged, dialectal influences, limited digital exposure to English, and family environments that do not encourage language use (Indrayani & Widodo, 2023). Moreover, students from rural areas often face additional challenges such as poor internet access and fewer opportunities for authentic language interaction (Nisa et al., 2024). These findings suggest a pressing need for more inclusive and context-sensitive pedagogical approaches that address students' motivation, confidence, and socio-cultural backgrounds.

### ***1.1. Research question***

This study has two research questions as follow:

- 1) What motivational, linguistic, and socio-cultural factors contribute to students' speaking difficulties?
- 2) How do these factors affect students' willingness to speak English during their preparation for teaching internships?

### ***1.2. Theoretical framework***

This study is grounded in a combination of second language acquisition (SLA), sociolinguistic, and educational psychology theories that help explain the speaking difficulties experienced by EFL university students. These frameworks support the investigation of internal and external factors that influence students' speaking performance, particularly in teacher education settings.

One of the main theories used to understand students' lack of speaking engagement is Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which focuses on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. According to this theory, learners perform better when their actions are driven by internal goals such as personal interest or a sense of purpose, rather than by external pressure (Ryan & Deci, 2020). In this study, students' reluctance to speak is partly due to the absence of intrinsic motivation, often caused by parental pressure or the mismatch between personal interest and their chosen major (Alamer & Lee, 2021). This supports earlier findings in Indonesian contexts where lack of personal motivation results in passive learning behaviours (Sari & Permana, 2023).

The study also draws on Willingness to Communicate (WTC) theory, which explains learners' readiness to speak as a result of psychological, linguistic, and contextual factors (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Students' hesitation to speak English in class, especially with peers, is often rooted in fear of negative judgment and low confidence in their speaking ability (Mahmudi & Anugerahwati, 2023). This aligns with findings by Moustafa, Jang, and Han

(2021), who reported that WTC is significantly influenced by learners' social environment, anxiety levels, and perception of their own competence.

In addition, Sociolinguistic Identity Theory offers a lens to understand how language use reflects one's identity and perceived social value. When students believe their local accents or dialects are inferior, they often avoid speaking English to protect themselves from ridicule (Norton, 2000). Recent studies in the Indonesian EFL context confirm that dialect-based insecurity negatively affects students' participation and fluency (Yulia, Sari, & Adnan, 2023). Accent-related anxiety is also supported by earlier work on linguistic discrimination and speaking apprehension in multilingual classrooms (Derwing, Munro, & Thomson, 2021).

To better understand the linguistic challenges faced by students, this study also refers to Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (Lado, 1957) and Phonological Transfer Theory (Ellis, 1994), which highlight how differences between the students' first language (Bahasa Indonesia or local dialects) and English often cause mispronunciations. These theories help explain why students find it difficult to produce certain English sounds, such as /θ/ or diphthongs, which do not exist in their native language (Subandowo, 2023; Listyani, Kurniawan, & Thren, 2024).

Finally, Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis also plays a role in understanding speaking difficulties. It suggests that emotional factors such as anxiety, low motivation, and fear can block language input and reduce learning efficiency (Krashen, 1982). When students feel insecure or fear being laughed at, their affective filter becomes high, making it harder for them to engage in speaking tasks (Astuti, 2020).

In summary, these theories work together to explain how motivation, identity, anxiety, and linguistic background influence speaking performance among EFL students. By applying this integrated theoretical framework, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the barriers students face in speaking English, especially in the context of teacher education programs in Indonesia.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Research design**

This study employed a qualitative design using a phenomenological approach to explore students' lived experiences and perceptions regarding their difficulties in speaking English. A phenomenological perspective is particularly suited to capture students' subjective feelings, motivations, and language-related anxieties (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The goal is to understand the participants' meaning-making processes rather than to generalize the results. This approach allows the researcher to delve into the emotional, social, and linguistic barriers that influence speaking performance among EFL learners in higher education.

## ***2.2. Participants of the study***

The participants consisted of 10 English Education students enrolled in the 7th or 8th semester at one of state Islamic university in Jambi, Indonesia. These students were selected through purposive sampling, with the following inclusion criteria: (1) they had completed at least 6 semesters, (2) had received an average speaking score of B or C, and (3) were preparing for their teaching practicum. These criteria were chosen to focus on students with significant classroom exposure to English instruction but who still struggle with speaking. The selected university is a state Islamic institution in Jambi, which draws students primarily from rural or suburban areas, often with limited early exposure to English. This context is crucial as it reflects typical challenges faced in under-resourced teacher education programs across Indonesia. Demographically, participants were aged 21–23, with diverse regional dialect backgrounds such as Javanese, Malay, and Minangkabau, which allowed the study to capture a range of dialectal influences on English pronunciation and confidence.

## ***2.3. Data collection procedure***

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in Indonesian to allow participants to express themselves more freely. The interview consisted of 10 open-ended questions, targeting themes such as personal motivation, linguistic challenges, language exposure, and dialect interference. Each interview lasted approximately 30–40 minutes and was recorded with participant consent. The steps of data collection were as follows:

- 1) Participants were invited through internal announcements and provided with a consent form explaining the research purpose and confidentiality measures.
- 2) Interview Sessions: Individual interviews were scheduled either in-person or online, depending on participant availability.
- 3) Transcription: Interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure accurate representation of responses.
- 4) After that, Data of Transcription were coded and categorized into emerging themes using Braun and Clarke's (2006).
- 5) Validation: Peer debriefing was conducted with two fellow researchers to ensure credibility and confirmability of the findings.

This study used ten interview questions to explore the psychological, linguistic, and socio-environmental factors that influence students' reluctance and difficulty in speaking English. Each interview question functions as a tool to investigate specific indicators, which are theoretically grounded in second language acquisition (SLA), sociolinguistics, and educational psychology. The framework below outlines each question, its corresponding indicator, and the theory that supports its inclusion in this study.

Table 1. Indicators and theoretical framework

Interview Question	Research Indicator	Theoretical Framework
1. Do you have the motivation to speak English fluently?	Level and type of motivation (intrinsic/extrinsic)	Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985); Gardner's Integrative Motivation Theory (2001)
2. Are you aware that to become an English teacher, you need to be able to speak English?	Career awareness and goal orientation	Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) (Shulman, 1986); Professional Identity Theory (Beijaard et al., 2004)
3. What are your reasons for finding it difficult to speak English?	Perceived linguistic and psychological barriers	Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982); Willingness to Communicate (MacIntyre et al., 1998)
4. Do you find it difficult to pronounce English words? Why?	Pronunciation difficulties and phonological interference	Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (Lado, 1957); Phonological Transfer Theory (Ellis, 1994)
5. Have you ever taken an English course before?	Formal English learning experience and support	Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985); Language Exposure Theory (Gass & Selinker, 2008)
6. Have you ever watched English content intensively for at least a month?	Level of authentic exposure to English input	Comprehensible Input Theory (Krashen, 1985); Digital Media and Language Acquisition (Lai, 2015)
7. Do you feel motivated to understand English conversations through podcasts?	Media-related learning motivation	Autonomous Learning Theory (Little, 1991); Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (Stockwell, 2013)
8. Does your local dialect influence your English speaking?	Dialect interference and identity conflict	Sociolinguistic Identity Theory (Norton, 2000); Accent and Perception (Munro & Derwing, 1999)
9. Do you feel insecure about your accent when speaking English?	Accent-related anxiety and fear of mockery	Communication Apprehension Theory (McCroskey, 1977); Language Ego (Guiora, 1972)
10. What do you think could motivate you to speak more English?	Suggested learning supports and motivational strategies	Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978); Constructivist Motivation Model (Schunk, 2012)

The interview protocol was developed based on key constructs from second language acquisition theories and reviewed by two experts in English education and qualitative research. A main interview was conducted with one student who met the criteria but was not included in the final data set. Based on that, questions were refined to ensure clarity and alignment with research objectives.

#### 2.4. Data analysis techniques

These indicators are not only used to interpret students' answers but also serve as analytical categories in thematic analysis. For instance, students' responses about lack of motivation

(Q1, Q7, Q10) are analyzed under the broader theme of motivational barriers, drawing on Deci & Ryan's distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Questions about pronunciation (Q4, Q9) reflect both phonological difficulties and accent-based anxiety, supported by Lado's (1957) and Norton's (2000) frameworks.

Furthermore, the awareness of career demands (Q2) is framed using Shulman's concept of Pedagogical Content Knowledge, emphasizing the importance of aligning subject mastery with pedagogical preparedness. Questions about previous learning experiences (Q5) and media exposure (Q6) reveal students' language input history, which is crucial for building speaking competence (Krashen, 1985).

Lastly, dialect interference (Q8) and peer pressure (Q9) are analyzed within sociolinguistic and affective domains, pointing to how identity, environment, and social perception shape language use. The final question (Q10) captures students' own proposed strategies, which are essential for developing contextualized motivation models in EFL settings.

### **3. Findings and Discussion**

#### **3.1. Findings**

This study yielded five major themes based on the ten indicators described in the theoretical framework. Each theme is illustrated with selected quotes from participants (coded as S1–S10).

##### **3.1.1. Factors contributing to students' speaking difficulties**

###### **3.1.1.1. Lack of intrinsic motivation and career misalignment**

Most participants revealed that they entered the English Education program not out of personal interest, but due to external influence, especially from parents. This lack of intrinsic motivation significantly affected their engagement in learning activities, particularly in speaking tasks.

*"Mmm... Saya gak mau jadi guru Bahasa Inggris, tapi orang tua yang nyuruh. Saya dulu pengennya jurusan lain." (S1)*

*"jadi begini... Saya milih jurusan ini karena gak lolos pilihan pertama. Ya udah, ikut-ikut aja..." (S7)*

Some students even admitted they had no long-term plans to work in education or use English professionally:

*"ahhh... Kalau udah lulus, pengennya kerja di tempat lain aja. Gak harus ngajar kayaknya..." (S4)*

This theme highlights a motivational gap that hinders students' willingness to practice English, especially in oral communication.

### 3.1.1.2. Pronunciation difficulty and dialect-based insecurity

Almost all students expressed that they could write or recognize English words, but struggled with pronunciation. This challenge was further exacerbated by anxiety over their regional accent.

*"oh iya, Saya tahu cara nulis dan arti katanya, tapi pas mau ngomong, mmm... bingung mulai dari mana." (S2)*

*"Logat saya tuh daerah (melayu) banget. Jadi malu kalau ngomong Inggris, ya... takut diketawain." (S9)*

Several students recounted negative experiences, including being laughed at by peers:

*"gak... mmm.... Pernah ngomong Inggris di kelas, terus ditiru-tiru sama teman. Sejak itu jadi males ngomong..." (S6)*

*"Saya ini dari daerah transmigrasi, medok banget jawa-nya, kadang suka diledekin..." (S1)*

These insecurities caused many students to avoid speaking altogether unless required by the lecturer.

### 3.1.2. The impact on students' willingness to speak English

#### 3.1.2.1. Minimal exposure to English media and input

Students from remote areas described having limited access to the internet and English-language media. Most had little to no exposure to English content until entering university.

*"iya... Dulu di kampung saya susah sinyal, jadi gak bisa streaming apa-apa." (S8)*

*"Nonton YouTube Inggris baru-baru ini aja, itu juga gak rutin." (S3)*

Some participants had never taken any formal English courses before university:

*"Gak pernah kursus. Di SMA juga cuma seminggu sekali, kadang guru gak masuk." (S10)*

This limited input affected their listening comprehension and reduced opportunities to mimic natural English speech patterns.

#### 3.1.2.2. Reluctance to speak English with peers

Many students admitted they rarely, if ever, spoke English with classmates. Even in classroom discussions, they preferred using Indonesian unless directly asked to use English.

*"Kalau ngomong Bahasa Inggris sama teman, kayaknya aneh. Malu sendiri." (S5)*

*"Saya cuma ngomong Inggris kalau dosen nyuruh. Itu juga cuma sedikit." (S1)*

Some even code-mixed or reverted to Indonesian immediately after initiating English:

*"Kadang ngomong Inggris satu kalimat, habis itu lanjut Bahasa Indonesia." (S3)*

This peer-based avoidance creates a classroom environment where English becomes associated with discomfort or judgment.

### **3.1.2.3. Low motivation to engage with English-learning tools**

Although students were aware of podcasts, YouTube channels, and other English learning resources, they rarely engaged with them. The main reasons cited were lack of motivation and feelings of irrelevance.

*"iya... tahu podcast sih, tapi males dengarannya.... Mmm... kadang Gak ada yang nyuruh juga." (S7)*

*"Saya gak suka belajar dari YouTube... Ribet.... Terus ngabisin kuota... mmm... ya karena uang jajan dikit." (S6)*

Some even felt that these tools were unnecessary because they didn't plan to become English teachers.

*"Kadang gak ada ketertarikan dengar in podcast, saya gak mau jadi guru Bahasa Inggris juga." (S4)*

This further illustrates how internal motivation rather than awareness is the key determinant of language engagement.

## **3.2. Discussions**

These findings provide clear evidence that speaking difficulties among Indonesian EFL students in higher education cannot be attributed solely to linguistic limitations. Rather, they are shaped by a complex interaction of psychological, sociocultural, and educational factors. Each theme identified in the findings aligns with a specific theoretical framework.

The first theme illustrates students' lack of intrinsic and integrative motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Gardner, 2001). Students like S1 and S4 show no internal drive to develop speaking skills because they do not identify as future English professionals. This aligns with the study of Sari and Permana (2023), which found that externally chosen academic paths often result in disengagement and low academic performance. Such disengagement also suggests a fractured professional identity (Beijaard et al., 2004). Without a clear vision of becoming a teacher, students lack the desire to acquire pedagogical tools like oral English fluency (Shulman, 1986).

On the other hand, in the aspect of pronunciation and accent anxiety, the students' fear of being judged for regional accents (S6, S9) is consistent with Norton's (2000) theory of linguistic identity. Students who feel their accents are socially inferior avoid speaking to prevent mockery. This supports Maharani & Mardijono (2022), who argue that pronunciation difficulties are exacerbated by accent-based stigma rather than linguistic complexity alone.

This also resonates with McCroskey's (1977) communication apprehension theory, which suggests that anxiety from social judgment severely limits a learner's willingness to communicate.

In addition, consistent with Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985), the absence of authentic English exposure impedes the development of fluency. Students like S8 and S10, who grew up in remote areas, had fewer chances to hear and practice real spoken English. This confirms findings by Nisa et al. (2024), who highlighted digital inequality as a major barrier in language education in rural Indonesia. Furthermore, the lack of formal training or English courses before university (S10) highlights gaps in the education system, especially in secondary schools with limited instructional time or unqualified teachers (Marcellino, 2021).

In term of peer pressure, Students' refusal to use English with their classmates reflects high affective filters (Krashen, 1982) and peer-induced anxiety. As seen in S1 and S5, the classroom becomes a space of surveillance and social risk rather than safe learning. This aligns with findings by Astuti (2020), who documented silence in speaking classrooms as a coping mechanism for fear and shame.

Although students are aware of learning tools like podcasts or YouTube (S4, S6, S7), they do not engage due to low autonomous learning motivation (Little, 1991). As noted by Stockwell (2013), mere access to technology does not ensure engagement, because motivation is key. This passivity reveals a deeper issue in how students perceive English: not as a tool for communication or personal growth, but as a compulsory academic subject to endure.

### ***3.3. Implications of the study***

The results of this study offer several practical implications for lecturers, program administrators, and curriculum developers within English Education programs, particularly in similar institutional contexts in Indonesia.

First, the results suggest that speaking reluctance among senior students is not only a matter of language proficiency but also closely related to career motivation and identity formation. Therefore, English Education programs should consider integrating reflective components early in the curriculum that help students evaluate their personal and professional goals. Short modules or counselling sessions focused on career alignment could support students who enter the program due to external pressure, helping them build a more positive sense of purpose in learning English.

Second, pronunciation support in speaking classes should prioritize building students' confidence rather than aiming for native-like accuracy. Teachers might adopt a more flexible, accent-inclusive approach by validating students' regional speech characteristics while supporting intelligibility. Activities like anonymous audio recordings or self-paced voice

journals could reduce anxiety and allow students to practice speaking without the fear of peer judgment.

Third, while access to technology remains a barrier for some students, the findings show that low engagement with digital resources is also linked to low motivation and relevance. To address this, lecturers can design assignments that incorporate curated English media (e.g., subtitled videos, beginner podcasts) and connect them to students' real-life interests or teaching practicum tasks, thereby increasing authenticity and motivation.

Lastly, the limited use of English among peers, even in an English Education context, highlights the need to build a classroom culture that encourages informal English use. Lecturers could implement small group discussion tasks, peer role-plays, or collaborative storytelling in a low-stakes environment to normalize English as a communication tool rather than a test subject.

While these suggestions are based on a small group of students from a single university, they may be relevant for similar institutions with students from rural or under-resourced backgrounds. Further research is needed before wider application of these practices across diverse educational contexts.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This study reveals that the speaking difficulties experienced by senior EFL students in an English Education program are not only linguistic in nature but deeply rooted in psychological, socio-environmental, and motivational factors. Although the students have completed six or more semesters and are preparing for teaching internships, many still express an unwillingness to speak English, even when required by lecturers. This is mainly due to low intrinsic motivation, lack of professional commitment, anxiety about pronunciation and accent, minimal exposure to English input, and peer pressure within classroom environments.

Moreover, students' fear of being judged, mocked, or misunderstood due to their local dialects exacerbates their reluctance to speak. The lack of regular access to English content during their formative years, especially for those from rural areas, further limits their fluency development. Although some students are aware of various online English resources, they are not actively engaged due to a lack of personal motivation and meaningful integration into their learning goals. Thus, these speaking challenges reflect a broader systemic issue, including inadequate language exposure in secondary education and insufficient support for building students' self-confidence and professional identity.

##### ***4.1. Limitations of the study***

Although this study provides valuable insights into the speaking difficulties of senior EFL students in an English Education program, it still has several limitations. First, the sample

size was limited to only ten participants from a single institution, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to broader student populations. Students from different regions, academic backgrounds, or universities may experience distinct challenges influenced by local contexts or institutional support.

Second, as the study relied solely on self-reported interview data, there is a possibility of response bias, where participants may have underreported or overemphasized certain experiences. The absence of classroom observations or speaking performance assessments also limits the ability to cross-validate the participants perceived difficulties with actual classroom behaviour or oral proficiency.

Lastly, the study was conducted at a single point in time and does not capture how students' speaking confidence and motivation may evolve over time or across different stages of their teaching practicum. Longitudinal or mixed-methods research would be beneficial to explore the dynamic nature of these challenges more comprehensively.

#### **4.2. Suggestions**

Based on the findings of this study, several practical suggestions are proposed for improving students' speaking ability and addressing the psychological and environmental barriers they face. First, English language lecturers and teacher educators should foster a more inclusive and low-anxiety classroom atmosphere where students feel safe to speak without fear of judgment. Creating a supportive environment that acknowledges and respects regional dialects can reduce pronunciation-related anxiety and increase students' willingness to communicate. Lecturers are also encouraged to promote speaking activities that are low-stakes, peer-based, and reflective, such as casual storytelling, group discussions, or digital voice journals. These allow students to practice speaking in meaningful contexts while gradually building confidence.

In addition, curriculum designers in English Education programs should integrate explicit modules on professional identity formation and motivation-building. Since many students show signs of career misalignment, counselling and orientation programs could help align their personal goals with their academic path. English departments should also provide structured exposure to authentic English input, especially through accessible media like podcasts or subtitled videos, which can be incorporated into classroom assignments. Furthermore, pronunciation support should focus on intelligibility rather than native-like accuracy, allowing students to embrace their own voice without feeling inferior.

From a broader perspective, policymakers should consider strengthening the quality and availability of English instruction in rural and underserved areas by investing in infrastructure, training qualified teachers, and expanding digital access. Early and consistent exposure to English during secondary education is crucial to reduce the input gap that many university students still experience.

As for future research, it is recommended that similar studies be conducted with a larger and more diverse sample of students across different regions and institutions to enhance generalizability. Longitudinal studies tracking students' speaking development over time could also provide insights into how motivation, exposure, and confidence evolve throughout their academic journey. Moreover, classroom-based observational studies or action research involving speaking interventions may offer concrete pedagogical strategies to address speaking reluctance and build communicative competence in real teaching contexts.

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