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Exploring Students' Problems in Classroom Interaction: A Multi-School Study

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the problems faced by students in classroom speaking activities at SMP Setia Negara Palembang and SMP Bina Tama Palembang, addressing gaps in previous research by examining two school contexts and involving more participants. This research used a qualitative approach with a multicase study design. The participants consisted of twelve eighth-grade students selected through purposive sampling techniques from both schools. Data were collected through classroom observations and interviews, then analyzed using thematic analysis. The results showed that students faced both non-linguistic and linguistic problems in speaking activities. Non-linguistic problems included inhibition, having nothing to say, low or uneven participation, and reliance on the mother tongue, which were mainly driven by fear of making mistakes, fear of criticism, and low self-confidence. Linguistic problems included a lack of vocabulary, incorrect grammar, and poor pronunciation, which made it difficult for students to express their ideas clearly in English. Based on these results, it is concluded that students experience problems in speaking activities that require attention in terms of both their confidence and their language skills. These findings suggest that teachers need to design supportive, low-anxiety speaking activities while also strengthening students' vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of students' speaking problems across different school contexts and offers insights for developing more effective English-speaking instruction in junior high schools.

Keywords: Classroom Interaction; Speaking Activities; Students' Problems

Introduction

English as a Foreign Language plays a vital role in the increasingly globalized world. It serves not only as a tool for international communication but also contributes to the development of various learning skills (Magyar et al., 2022). Moreover, English proficiency is

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considered essential for accessing global education and enhancing intercultural understanding, which in turn affects students' academic and professional development (Duan et al., 2022). Therefore, English is more than just a means of communication, it is a foundational skill applicable across multiple aspects of life.

In the Indonesian context, English is classified as a foreign language, and it is used only in specific situations rather than in daily life. The Ministry of Education and Culture issued a policy that English is placed as the first foreign language in Indonesia, assigning it a crucial role in the national curriculum (Rozi, 2023). Based on the national curriculum, speaking is a fundamental language skill that must be developed to ensure effective communication. The education curriculum in Indonesia places English language skills as one of the main competencies that must be mastered because it is the key to international communication (Megawati, 2016). Additionally, the Indonesian curriculum trains students to communicate well through various types of conversations in everyday life (Franscy & Ramli, 2022). Thus, the Indonesian curriculum focuses on speaking skills in English as a key competency for international communication and daily practice.

Although the curriculum focuses on speaking skills, the reality is that students' speaking skills are not as expected. The development of fluency and accuracy in students' speaking requires special attention, many students still find it difficult to speak fluently and effectively in English even if it is only in the classroom (Leong & Ahmadi, 2016). The speaking performance of students in Indonesia is still considered low, indicating that their speaking ability is below the expected standard due to various sociocultural, psychological, linguistic, and world knowledge factors affecting their performance (Putra et al., 2023). Thus, these findings show that there are still many students who have problems speaking English.

In practice, there are still many students who have problems speaking English, specifically in speaking activities in the classroom. Students face speaking problems in English activities, including problems with vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, fluency, and comprehension. Anxiety, shyness, fear of making mistakes, low participation, and lack of motivation also cause students to face speaking problems in English activities (Lihami et al., 2024). Students face problems in speaking English due to ineffective teaching methods, and lack of exposure to real contexts, which lead to reluctance and lack of confidence in using English in daily conversation (Lubis et al., 2024). Thus, these problems are experienced by students in English, specifically in speaking activities in the classroom.

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To explore these issues further, a preliminary investigation was conducted at SMP Setia Negara Palembang and SMP Bina Tama Palembang. Classroom observations and interviews revealed that students were reluctant to speak due to fear of making mistakes, low self-confidence, and uncertainty about what to say. Teachers also reported a lack of active participation during speaking activities.

Many previous studies have been conducted on the problems students experience in speaking English, but there are still some research gaps that need to be explored further. This study aims to fill those gaps by exploring more deeply the problems that students experience in classroom activities and analyzing the problems in two locations to get more participants and data. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to find out the problems experienced by students in speaking English in classroom activities by students of SMP Setia Negara Palembang and SMP Bina Tama Palembang.

Literature Review

Speaking

Speaking is the ability to communicate effectively by transforming ideas into words, sentences, and precise sounds through an interactive process. Speaking skills involve various processes that interact with each other to produce effective communication which includes several levels, starting from the intentions and ideas to be conveyed, then translated into the selection of words and the preparation of appropriate sentences, until finally converted into sound through pronunciation or articulation (Levelt, 1994).

Components of speaking

Effective oral communication requires mastery of several components. Harris (1974) identifies five key components: pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension.

1. **Pronunciation:** pronunciation is the capacity to pronounce words effectively so that listeners can comprehend what the speaker is saying (Reed & Levis, 2015). Thus, pronunciation is needed for clear communication, so that words can be understood by the listener.
2. **Grammar:** Grammar is a collection of rules governing the order of words. Grammar can be described as a collection of methods for changing the shape of a word or

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combining it into a sentence (Harmer, 2007). As such, grammar is a system that governs the formation of words and other elements into correct sentences.

3. **Vocabulary:** Vocabulary is a collection of words used to communicate. Vocabulary is common in spoken language and is utilized regularly (Turk, 2003). Thus, vocabulary enables the speaker to interact and communicate successfully.
4. **Fluency:** Fluency refers to the ability to speak smoothly, with minimal hesitation. Fluent speakers can express themselves spontaneously and naturally (Harris, 1974; Harmer, 2007). Thus, fluency is the ability that allows speakers to speak naturally without difficulty.
5. **Comprehension:** Comprehension is the capacity to understand spoken messages instantly, without needing to analyze grammar or pronunciation (Brogaard, 2019). It is essential for reciprocal communication.

Classroom Speaking Activities

Teachers can engage in a variety of classroom activities to help students improve their speaking abilities. Classroom activities in speaking include acting from a script, communication games, discussion, prepared talks, questionnaires, and simulation and role-play (Harmer, 2007).

1. **Acting from a script:** Students perform scenes, improving pronunciation and intonation.
2. **Communication games:** Designed to encourage spontaneous speaking, these include games like guessing words or sharing information.
3. **Discussion:** Activities that promote group interaction, such as debates and instant feedback sessions.
4. **Prepared talks:** Students give structured presentations, which improve planning and speaking confidence.
5. **Questionnaires:** Students design and use surveys, which foster both speaking and data interpretation skills.
6. **Simulation and role-play:** These mimic real-life scenarios, providing contextual speaking practice.

Students' Problems in Speaking Activities

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1. Non-Linguistic Problems

In speaking activities, there are several problems experienced by students. According to Ur (1996), there are problems in speaking activities, namely inhibition, nothing to say, low or uneven participation, and mother tongue use.

a. **Inhibition:** Students often feel nervous or shy due to fear of making mistakes or being judged.
b. **Nothing to Say:** Students may lack ideas or confidence to initiate conversation.
c. **Low or Uneven Participation:** Class dynamics often limit speaking opportunities, with more confident students dominating.
d. **Mother-tongue Use:** A shared native language often leads students to revert to it for comfort, hindering English practice.

2. Linguistic Problems

Richards (2008) categorizes linguistic problems that interfere with speaking development:

1. **Lack of Vocabulary**

People who do not have or do not know vocabulary will not be able to communicate well. A lack of vocabulary causes students to struggle in conveying their ideas, thoughts, and opinions (Khasinah et al., 2024). This happens because they find it difficult to express ideas clearly in communication. English has a lot of vocabulary with various meanings (Mido, 2019). This means that one English word can have more than one meaning. Problems in vocabulary usually occur when a person does not have enough vocabulary to speak and does not know how to arrange them into good sentences.

2. **Incorrect Grammar**

Grammar is an important part of English language skills. Grammar consists of rules that determine how words are arranged and related in sentences (Brown, 2001). These rules help create clear and meaningful communication. Grammar is difficult because learners do not learn structures one by one gradually. Even if they seem to have mastered a rule, they may make mistakes again when learning a new form of the language they speak (Celce-Murcia, 2001).

3. **Poor in Pronunciation**

Pronunciation is crucial in speaking English, as every word must be pronounced correctly to avoid misunderstandings. Pronunciation plays an important role in communication, as incorrect pronunciation is one of the most common causes of misunderstanding between

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speakers and listeners (Thornbury, 2006). In learning English, variations in pronunciation can lead to differences in the meaning of words. Consequently, if a student mispronounces a word, this can change the intended meaning and lead to misunderstandings with others.

Previous Related Study

Previous studies have examined students' problems in speaking English. Fajri (2024) found that students experienced linguistic problems such as vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar, as well as non-linguistic problems such as lack of teacher support and peer environment. Wardhani et al. (2024) also identified similar challenges, particularly in pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. Meanwhile, Turada (2021) identified speaking problems encompassing all components of speaking, as well as affective barriers such as fear and lack of motivation. This study shares similarities in methodology but differs in location and research subjects, and expands the scope by involving two schools.

Research Methodology

This research was conducted with a qualitative approach with multicase study research. Qualitative research focuses on gaining deep insights into a particular phenomenon (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). A multicase study examines several similar cases that occur in different settings (Stake, 2006). Thus, this research aims to provide an understanding of the problems experienced by students in speaking activities at SMP Setia Negara Palembang and SMP Bina Tama Palembang by using qualitative methods to collect information through interviews and observations.

This research used purposeful sampling. Purposive sampling is used to deliberately select individuals and locations to understand the main phenomena that are the subject of the study (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). This method involves selecting individuals, groups, or cases that can provide relevant information about the phenomenon. Participants are eighth-grade students with a total of twelve students selected from SMP Setia Negara Palembang and SMP Bina Tama Palembang.

After collecting data through interviews and observations, the data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was chosen to identify and interpret patterns and themes in the data collected from observations and interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

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Results and Discussion

Results

Students' Non-Linguistic Problems

Table 1. Students' Non-Linguistic Problems

Category	Examples of Behavior
Inhibition	1. Students were afraid of making mistakes because of shyness, fear of being mocked, and fear of people's misunderstanding. 2. Students were afraid of criticism because they felt that criticism can damage their self-confidence. 3. Students felt shy to speak English because they are afraid of being noticed, afraid of making mistakes, and feel awkward.
Nothing to Say	Students have difficulty finding ideas and did not know how to express them in English.
Low or Uneven Participation	1. Students felt they did not get a chance to speak because the class is dominated by classmates who are more fluent in English. 2. Students felt inferior compared to classmates who are more active in speaking English.
Mother Tongue-use	1. Students were more comfortable using their mother tongue. 2. Students used their mother tongue more often because the classroom environment supports it.

1. **Inhibition**

Students experience inhibition in speaking English in class because they worry about making mistakes, are fearful of criticism, and feel shy. During observations, many students avoided eye contact, looked down, whispered, or spoke very softly. Interviews confirmed that this behavior was related to anxiety about being ridiculed. Student N.R. said, “Because I'm afraid of being mocked.” (Interview results, March 17th, 2025). F.Z.L. added, “Because I'm afraid of being ridiculed by my friends.” (Interview results, March 17th, 2025). Some students were also afraid of being misunderstood or feeling embarrassed if they made mistakes, especially in front of many classmates.

Fear of criticism also made students hesitant. Observations showed that after being corrected, students often looked uncomfortable and withdrew. Interviews revealed that this fear stemmed from the feeling that their English was not good enough or from classmates mocking them. As M.L. said, “Because the criticism can break my confidence.” (Interview results,

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March 17th, 2025). In addition, R.P. stated, “Because it makes me lose my self-confidence.” (Interview results, March 18th, 2025).

Shyness is another important problem. Some students cover their faces, laugh nervously, or appear anxious when asked to speak. They say they feel embarrassed because others are watching them, especially if they make mistakes. For example, N.R. said, “I feel embarrassed because many people are watching me.” (Interview results, March 17th, 2025). This embarrassment is exacerbated by the awkward classroom atmosphere and fear of failure. As K.A.Y. said, “Yes, a little embarrassed because of the awkward atmosphere.” (Interview results, March 18th, 2025). In short, students' unwillingness to speak in English stems from fear of mistakes, criticism, and being the center of attention—factors that lower their self-confidence and participation in class.

2. **Nothing to Say**

Based on classroom observations, it appears that students have nothing to say during English activities. They often stop talking for long periods, use filler words, ask their friends for help, and sometimes stop talking altogether. These observations are supported by interview results, which show that students have difficulty finding ideas and do not know how to express certain words in English. As student M.S. said, “Because I don't know what the teacher is explaining or what the question is, I don't know what to talk about” (Interview results, March 17, 2025). Students also mentioned that they did not know how to pronounce the words they wanted to say. For example, N.R. said, “For example, when the teacher asks a question in English, I have to respond in English, but I don't know how to say it” (Interview results, March 17, 2025). In short, the students didn't know what to say, which led to hesitation, the use of fillers, asking friends for help, or stopping their speech altogether.

3. **Low or Uneven Participation**

Based on classroom observations, it seemed that not all students were equally involved in speaking activities. Only a few students actively spoke, while most stayed quiet and didn't show much interest. Students usually spoke only when the teacher asked them to, not on their own. Interview results supported these observations. Many students said they didn't get a chance to speak because classmates who were more fluent dominated the class. This made them feel left out and discouraged. For example, student D.O.S. said, “I feel inferior, unfair, because other friends who are good at speaking English talk more because only the smart students get to speak.” (Interview results, March 18th, 2025). As a result, when only certain students

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dominate the class, others may feel left behind and lose the motivation to join in speaking activities.

4. **Mother Tongue-use**

Classroom observations showed that students often spoke in their mother tongue instead of English during speaking activities. This was mainly because they felt more comfortable and found it easier to express their thoughts in a language they already understood well. Interview results supported this finding, showing that many students preferred using their native language during English-speaking tasks. For example, student N.R. said, “Yes, I prefer to use my mother tongue and sometimes I use it because I don't know what English is” (Interview results, March 17th, 2025). As a result, frequent use of the mother tongue in class made students rely on it more, making them less willing to try speaking in English. This reduced their chances to practice and improve their English skills.

Students' Linguistic Problems

Table 2. Students' Linguistic Problems

Category	Examples of Behavior
Lack of Vocabulary	1. Students felt that the vocabulary they had was not enough. 2. Students felt unsure during conversations due to limited vocabulary.
Incorrect Grammar	Students felt that they lacked understanding of English grammar rules.
Poor in Pronunciation	1. Students made mistakes with the pronunciation of words. 2. Students asked the teacher for help pronouncing a word.

1. **Lack of Vocabulary**

Based on classroom observations, students were found to have limited English vocabulary. They often repeated the same words because they didn't know other options. This was supported by interview results, where students admitted their vocabulary was not enough to speak English well. As student N.R. said, “It's a little lacking, there is still something to learn” (Interview results, March 17th, 2025). Other students expressed the same concern, saying they often didn't know certain words when talking to others. In conclusion, limited vocabulary makes it hard for students to express themselves, which affects their speaking performance.

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2. **Incorrect Grammar**

Observation data showed that students faced problems with grammar during English-speaking activities. They often used incorrect tenses, incomplete sentences, and unclear sentence structures. Interview results supported these findings, revealing that students felt they lacked sufficient grammar knowledge. As student C.N.U. said, “There is still something missing, sometimes I forget and don't know some of the grammar rules.” (Interview results, March 18th, 2025). In short, students struggled with grammar but were aware of their weaknesses and felt the need to improve.

3. **Poor in Pronunciation**

Classroom observations showed that many students struggled with English pronunciation, often mispronouncing words and sometimes asking the teacher for help. Interview data supported this, as several students admitted they still made frequent pronunciation mistakes. For example, student M.L. said, “There are still many mistakes, often wrong,” and F.Z.L. echoed, “Yes, I often make mistakes.” (Interview results, March 17th, 2025). These pronunciation issues also appeared during conversations with peers. As a result, students became hesitant to speak, and mispronunciations sometimes confused listeners, making it harder to understand the message and requiring repetition. Overall, the findings show that poor pronunciation remains a significant challenge that affects students' confidence and participation in speaking activities.

Discussion

Based on the thematic analysis of the collected data, the researchers identified several challenges experienced by students at SMP Setia Negara Palembang and SMP Bina Tama Palembang during classroom speaking activities. These challenges are consistent with the speaking difficulties proposed by Ur (1996), including reluctance to speak, difficulty expressing ideas, unequal participation, and frequent use of the mother tongue. Furthermore, students encountered several linguistic difficulties, particularly limited vocabulary, grammatical inaccuracies, and pronunciation problems, as discussed by Richards (2008). These findings are in line with previous studies conducted by Fajri (2024), Wardhani et al. (2024), and Turada (2021), which similarly identified various obstacles to students' English-speaking performance, including psychological, participatory, and linguistic difficulties.

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First, reluctance to speak emerged as one of the major challenges experienced by students during classroom speaking activities. The findings indicated that students were often hesitant to express themselves in English because they were afraid of making mistakes, worried about receiving negative criticism, and felt embarrassed when speaking in front of their classmates. This finding supports Risadi et al. (2020), who identified reluctance to speak as a common obstacle in English language classrooms, particularly when students experience anxiety about making errors, fear negative responses, or feel uncomfortable speaking publicly. Similarly, Lubis et al. (2024) reported that students' reluctance to communicate in English is associated with several factors, including fear of grammatical or pronunciation mistakes, negative evaluations from peers, and insufficient self-confidence. Therefore, students' unwillingness to participate in classroom speaking activities can be attributed primarily to their fear of making mistakes, concerns about criticism, and feelings of embarrassment, all of which may negatively influence their speaking performance.

Second, difficulty expressing ideas was another significant problem identified in students' classroom speaking activities. The findings revealed that students frequently struggled to generate and organize ideas when they were required to communicate in English. They often experienced uncertainty about what to say and found it challenging to maintain fluency during conversations. This finding is consistent with Sari et al. (2023), who found that students commonly experience difficulties expressing their thoughts because they lack ideas, struggle to recall appropriate English vocabulary, and have limited speaking fluency. Likewise, Sabariyanto (2021) demonstrated that students' difficulties in generating ideas are closely related to their limited speaking proficiency, which prevents them from delivering their thoughts effectively and performing confidently in classroom interactions. Accordingly, the difficulty of expressing ideas is not merely associated with students' inability to generate content but also with their limited linguistic resources and uncertainty in constructing appropriate responses. These challenges consequently restrict their involvement in classroom speaking activities.

Third, unequal participation was identified as another obstacle affecting students' involvement in English-speaking activities. The findings suggested that students' opportunities to participate were influenced by the presence of classmates who were more dominant and

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fluent in speaking English. Some students felt less capable and uncomfortable when interacting with more proficient peers, particularly when those peers tended to control or dominate classroom conversations. This situation created a sense of inferiority and limited opportunities for less active students to contribute. This finding corresponds with Laila et al. (2023), who explained that students' limited participation in speaking activities may result from insufficient motivation and the dominance of certain individuals during classroom interactions. Students who are less confident may consequently feel that they have fewer opportunities to express themselves or become reluctant to participate because they are afraid of being compared with more active classmates. As a result, classroom communication tends to be dominated by a small number of students, while others remain passive listeners. Thus, unequal participation reflects not only differences in students' speaking abilities but also the influence of classroom interaction patterns on their willingness to communicate in English.

Fourth, the use of the mother tongue was also found to be a recurring issue in classroom speaking activities. The findings indicated that students tended to communicate more frequently in their first language because they considered it more familiar, accessible, and comfortable than English. This tendency was also influenced by the classroom environment, where interactions among students commonly occurred in their mother tongue. This finding is supported by Andas and Rutniatyanti (2020), who reported that students frequently rely on their native language because it is more readily available when expressing their thoughts and communicating with others. Similarly, Siahaan et al. (2022) explained that learners tend to transfer linguistic patterns from their first language into the target language, particularly in learning environments where the native language is commonly used. These findings suggest that students' preference for using their mother tongue is associated with their familiarity with the language and established communication habits. Moreover, the frequent use of the first language among classmates reinforces this tendency, consequently reducing students' opportunities to practice and develop their English-speaking abilities through active classroom interaction.

Fifth, limited vocabulary was identified as a linguistic difficulty that affected students' ability to communicate effectively in English. The findings demonstrated that students perceived their vocabulary knowledge as insufficient to support their speaking performance.

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They frequently encountered unfamiliar words when communicating with classmates and experienced difficulties recalling vocabulary they had previously learned. This finding is consistent with Fajri (2024), who identified vocabulary limitations as one of the major challenges in English-speaking activities. The study highlighted that students frequently struggled to memorize unfamiliar words and retrieve previously learned vocabulary when needed during communication. Therefore, insufficient vocabulary knowledge can restrict students' ability to convey their thoughts, develop meaningful responses, and communicate spontaneously. Such limitations may also increase their hesitation and reduce their confidence when participating in classroom speaking activities.

Sixth, grammatical inaccuracies represented another linguistic challenge encountered by students when speaking English. The findings indicated that students still experienced difficulties understanding and applying grammatical rules, particularly when constructing sentences during oral communication. They acknowledged that their knowledge of English grammar was insufficient to support accurate sentence production. This finding is in agreement with Fajri (2024), who found that students frequently encountered grammatical difficulties, particularly in understanding tenses and applying grammatical structures appropriately in speaking contexts. These difficulties indicate that students' limited mastery of grammatical rules affects their ability to construct accurate sentences while communicating orally. Consequently, inadequate grammatical knowledge may not only reduce the accuracy of students' spoken English but also influence their confidence and willingness to participate in classroom communication.

Finally, poor pronunciation was identified as another linguistic problem affecting students' English-speaking performance. The findings revealed that students were aware of their pronunciation difficulties and frequently felt uncertain about whether they were pronouncing English words correctly. During classroom speaking activities, several students demonstrated difficulties articulating particular English words and occasionally asked their teacher for assistance when they were unfamiliar with the correct pronunciation. This finding is supported by Fajri (2024), who reported that pronunciation was a common difficulty among students, particularly in distinguishing between English vowels and consonants with similar sounds. Similarly, Wardhani (2018) identified pronunciation difficulties as a frequently

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encountered problem in students' English oral communication. These findings suggest that inadequate pronunciation skills can interfere with students' ability to communicate clearly and effectively. Furthermore, uncertainty about correct pronunciation may cause students to hesitate when speaking in front of their classmates or teachers, thereby negatively affecting their confidence and active participation in classroom speaking activities.

Conclusion and Suggestion

Based on the findings, students at SMP Setia Negara Palembang and SMP Bina Tama Palembang faced non-linguistic and linguistic problems during English-speaking activities. Non-linguistic problems included reluctance to speak, difficulty expressing ideas, uneven participation, and frequent use of their native language. These issues are often caused by internal factors such as fear of making mistakes, fear of being judged, and lack of self-confidence. Some students also show a lack of interest or motivation. External factors, such as an unsupportive classroom environment, also contribute. Meanwhile, linguistic issues include limited vocabulary, grammatical errors, and poor pronunciation, which make it difficult for students to express themselves clearly in English.

To describe these problems in depth, this study uses a qualitative approach. While this method allows for a richer understanding of students' experiences, it also has some limitations. It does not reveal cause-and-effect relationships, and data interpretation may be influenced by the researcher's subjectivity. Additionally, time and resource constraints may limit the scope of data collection. However, the researcher addresses these limitations through strategies such as data triangulation, instrument validation, and consultation with experts. Therefore, despite its limitations, this study aims to provide meaningful insights for the field of English language education. Future research is recommended to explore these speaking problems using a wider range of methods and settings, and teachers are encouraged to design speaking activities that build students' confidence while strengthening their vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation.

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