

Exploring EFL Students' Speaking Challenges in Their Speaking for Social Purposes

Elisathusilawani^{1*}

¹English Language Education Program, Universitas Kristen Satya Wacana, Indonesia

*Corresponding author: 112019524@student.uksw.edu

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Abstract

Speaking is a crucial aspect of English learning. However, speaking activities in class is a challenge for students from different educational backgrounds, such as those from remote areas in Bengkayang, West Kalimantan. This study aims to explore the speaking challenges of students from Bengkayang because these students often experience difficulties when asked to practice in the Speaking for Social Purposes (SFSP) classes. This is a qualitative study. To collect the data, this study used semi-structured interviews that involved seven students from Bengkayang who had taken SFSP classes. The data obtained were analyzed using thematic analysis where the researcher analyzed and understood the ideas or opinions conveyed by the participants before grouping the data based on their themes. The results indicated some challenges faced by the students, such as a lack of self-confidence, pronunciation errors, and lack of vocabulary. This research also provides practical tips and tricks for students in overcoming some English-speaking difficulties in similar contexts. To overcome pronunciation errors, students can practice speaking through several media. One of the media that students can try is the *Elsa* app. In dealing with vocabulary challenges, students can read more books in English for pleasure. Future researchers can examine the speaking challenges faced by other EFL students from other rural areas in Kalimantan or other big islands in Indonesia and see if the students have similar challenges to those reported in this study.

Keywords: *EFL students, speaking for social purposes, speaking challenges*

INTRODUCTION

Speaking is one of the important skills that must be mastered when learning English ([Blake, 2016](#)). However, speaking in English is challenging because we have to be able to express our feelings or our opinions directly to other people. According to [Ariyanty \(2016\)](#), when students speak in English, they usually face challenges related to psychological factors, such as anxiety, fear of making mistakes, shame, lack of ambition, and low self-esteem. [Wahyuningsih and Afandi \(2020\)](#) also investigated various English-speaking issues experienced by students in the English language education in Kudus, Indonesia. Some of the problems are related to a lack of appropriate vocabulary, a lack of grammar mastery, a lack of correct pronunciation, a lack of English input outside of class, a lack of confidence, and a lack of English-speaking curriculum development. Students' problems like these can be solved by giving a variety of activities that help them enhance their speaking abilities [Huang and Hu \(2016\)](#) commonly utilized classroom activities in English-speaking classes: English dubs, role play, debate, mini-lecture, presentations, and job interviews. More specifically, in a role-play activity, students play a role based on the topic they discuss in class. Students will become accustomed to conversing with their classmates throughout this activity. They can learn some new vocabulary and enhance their lack of confidence ([Choudhury, 2014](#)).

The difficulties students confront are the main topic of this study rather than problems. The distinction between difficulties and problems is demonstrated by the findings of this study. Based on their perceived positive or negative implications, challenges and issues can be differentiated in many ways. In contrast to difficulties, which are frequently considered hurdles to be surmounted, challenges are frequently seen as chances for growth and development. [Achor \(2010\)](#) describes a challenge as "a difficult, but achievable task that requires effort and skill," and contends that challenges can serve as sources of motivation and engagement. On the other hand, he describes a problem as "a situation that needs to be fixed," and he adds that difficulties can be a cause of tension and annoyance.

Previous studies reported students' learning challenges in EFL speaking classes. The first challenge was inhibition, a lack of words, poor or uneven participation, and mother tongue usage ([Riadil, 2020](#)). Aside from student experiences, [Hakim \(2015\)](#) identified four significant issues the teacher faced in the speaking class: the class instructional material, students' one-on-one interactions, students' automaticity, and the student's opportunity. Another study was conducted by [Nuraini \(2016\)](#) who examined the challenges of EFL students' talking in English. The results showed two challenges in speaking which are internal and external problems. One example of the internal problem is motivation, it is essential to achieve goals and teachers should help students find their motivation for language learning. Then, another example from the external problem is the number of students in the class. If the class is too large, the teacher has difficulty paying attention to the needs of each student so students find it difficult to achieve learning goals.

[Aryanty \(2016\)](#) conducted another study in which she looked at the psychological aspects that influence Indonesian students' speaking abilities when speaking in English. Psychological elements that affect students when speaking include anxiety, fear of making mistakes, shyness, lack of ambition, and low self-esteem. ([Mitha et al., 2018](#)) also researched student anxiety and found three types of student anxiety: communication apprehension, fear of speaking tests, and fear of peer and lecturer feedback. According to them, fear of speaking tests is the most common type of speaking anxiety. Students were anxious because they were worried about the consequences of failing the speaking test.

According to several experts, the challenge for students in spoken English lessons is that they are less confident in their abilities and are frightened of making mistakes in practice ([Mufanti,](#)

2015; Nakhalah, 2016; Nariswari & Listyani, 2021). Other speaking issues include a lack of appropriate vocabulary and grammar mastery, a lack of correct pronunciation, a lack of English input outside of class, a lack of confidence, and a lack of English-speaking curriculum development (Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2020). Kara et al. (2017), besides mentioning personal factors (motivation, fear, and impediments to communicating in another language), also mentioned social factors (e.g., environment, daily life, school, or family) and educational factors where the education system focuses more on teaching grammar as possible factors that cause speaking challenges to students. The next is an example from Bangladesh's rural colleges. There is a gap between the teacher and students in the classroom, making it difficult to practice speaking English (Alam, 2016). Based on previous studies reviewed above, it can be said that the challenges faced by students in speaking classes come from various factors. These factors can possibly come from students themselves, their teachers, their environment, and psychological factors.

Students do some speaking activities with direct practice in the Speaking for Social Purposes (SFSP) class. Nariswari and Listyani (2020) informed that SFSP class is a course that attempts to improve students' public speaking skills, using material drawn from real-life events in the students' environment. Some of the events include presentations, explanations of location plans, role plays, afternoon soirees, English dubs, and other activities. These activities facilitate students' hands-on learning that might help students improve their speaking skills. The hands-on practice encourages students to use the target language in context for a purpose (Ozverir et al., 2017). Direct training by role-playing might also improve students' oral skills (Suryani, 2015).

SFSP is a course that includes various activities to help students enhance their speaking abilities. The topics raised in this class are primarily about experiences that students and society usually experience. Santoso (2018) added that the SFSP class applies the concept of authentic learning. Authentic learning is defined as activities or simulations similar to real-life problems and situations. Students are taught how to use English in everyday life in this class. Students will practice the language in front of their classmates and practice with their friends. In this study, SFSP can be understood as a speaking class that provides various activities and gives opportunities for students to practice their speaking skills in a real-life context.

Previous research conducted by Pratiwi (2018), about English-speaking fluency problems in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) speaking classroom showed that anxiety, lack of vocabulary, and problems in aspects of grammar are the main factors that affect students' difficulties in speaking English fluently. However, there has been no research on the challenges of Bengkayang students in speaking class. This research was conducted to examine the challenges faced by students in the SFSP class. Some speaking activities in the SFSP class might be challenging for students from different educational backgrounds, such as those from remote areas in Bengkayang, West Kalimantan. Bengkayang is a district in West Kalimantan, Indonesia. English is taught as a foreign language in schools in Bengkayang, and students are expected to acquire proficiency in the language. However, many students face difficulties in learning English due to various factors, such as a lack of resources, inadequate teaching methods, and a lack of self-confidence. In this paper, we focus on the challenges faced by Bengkayang students in SFSP classes. If we know the problems faced, we can find solutions and students can anticipate if they experience similar problems. Therefore, it is beneficial to learn about the difficulties that students in SFSP class experience. More specifically, this study seeks to answer the following question: *What are the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' speaking challenges in their SFSP class?* Answers to this research question are expected to give practical ideas for EFL-speaking teachers teaching a

similar class about the challenges that might happen in the class and use that information to plan activities to help the students deal with those challenges. This research also hopes to provide practical tips and tricks for students in overcoming some English speaking difficulties in similar contexts.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research was conducted to explore students' speaking challenges in the SFSP class. To achieve this goal, the researcher conducted qualitative research. According to [Riadil \(2020\)](#), qualitative research is a type of research that focuses more on looking at the perspectives or beliefs of the participants in understanding events that occur in social life. Moreover, the goal of the qualitative technique is to generate detailed data in the form of words to comprehend the various dimensions of the subject under investigation ([Queirós et al., 2017](#)) without any attempt to control the subject's behavior ([Mali, 2018](#)). According to [Adhabi and Anozzi \(2017\)](#), qualitative research uses a more flexible interview method, where participants have more flexibility to explain their opinions on the topic discussed.

Contexts of the Study

The data were collected from students who enrolled in SFSP classes in their first year at a private university in Central Java. The SFSP aims to help students develop their public speaking skills by using material derived from real-life situations in the student's area ([Nariswari & Listyani, 2021](#)). Students were invited to practice speaking abilities by applying their vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation abilities in this session. The material in this session encourages students to put their English skills to use in everyday situations.

Research Participants

This study involved seven students from Bengkulu who had taken SFSP classes. The selection of these participants was in accordance with the criteria needed in the study because researchers used criterion sampling. The researcher focused on students who came from Bengkulu and had already passed this SFSP class. The researcher previously asked them whether they still remember the activities carried out in the SFSP class, and they answered yes. This study used criterion sampling to select the research participants, in which according to [Ary et al. \(2010\)](#), criterion sampling is where the researchers set criteria and included the participants who meet the criteria. In this study, for example, the participants were selected only from those who have enrolled the SFSP course in their first year of college. Their educational backgrounds in Bengkulu are different from those of their friends in Java. This difference makes them have challenges in speaking classes because they have never practiced speaking using English directly.

Data Collection Instruments

To obtain the data, the study used semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are less organized than structured interviews, and their success is determined by how participants respond to questions or topics provided by researchers ([Adhabi & Anozie, 2017](#)). [DeJonckheere and Vaughn \(2019\)](#) state that semi-structured interviews acquire data from important informants with personal knowledge, attitudes, views, and ideas regarding the topic of interest. [Adams \(2015\)](#) argues that semi-structured interviews require follow-up questions for open-ended questions. In addition, through semi-structured interviews, the researcher can collect specific data that can be contrasted with that of other participants while remaining adaptable enough to present other important data ([Dawson, 2019](#)).

Table 1 Sample of Interview Questions

No	Interview Questions	Adapted/ Generated From
1	What were the challenges you faced when speaking in English in the SFSP class?	Huang and Hu (2016) ; Quyên et al., (2018)
2	What do you think are the causes of those speaking challenges?	Riadil (2020) ; Kara et al., (2017)

Data Collection Procedures

Before conducting the semi-structured interview, the researcher piloted the interview questions with two participants from nine students that still remember the activities in SFSP class. The researcher chose two students to pilot the interview in order to get information from the two participants so that the researcher rechecked the questions given whether they were clear or needed some improvement. Then the remaining seven students were interviewed and data were collected to be processed in research findings. The aim of the pilot interview was to check if the interview questions were clear and if the respondents could answer the questions clearly. Following the piloting, the researcher revised the interview questions, then began interviewing the research participants individually. This interview was done in Bahasa Indonesia so that participants could easily describe and speak about their difficulties in the SFSP class. This interview was conducted offline, face-to-face, and was recorded on a smartphone to make it easier for the researcher to review the participants' comments. The questions were the same for all participants. Some questions lead students to tell the challenges they face in SFSP class. The researcher also provided follow-up questions to go deeper into the participants' answers or statements.

Data Analysis Procedures

In analyzing the data, the researcher used a Thematic Analysis (TA) (similar to [Castleberry & Nolen, 2018](#); [Clarke et al., 2015](#)) For this type of analysis, first, the researcher made a transcript of the interview data after listening to the recording several times. Second, the researcher reread the transcript and found some phrases or sentences that could answer or be related to the research question. The third step was to gather similar responses in groups to form some themes that could answer the research question. The last activity was that the researcher checked the themes to ensure that they were relevant and could answer the research question.

Research Trustworthiness

The researcher utilized three strategies to ensure the trustworthiness of this research. The first one was called member checking. According to [Birt et al. \(2016\)](#), member checking is the process of taking the interview or transcript data to the participants to confirm or validate the participants' views regarding the data created by researchers. The researcher asked the participants to read the interview transcriptions and asked whether they agreed or wanted to add something or clarify something in the interview transcriptions. The use of this technique in qualitative research is particularly relevant because previous researchers (e.g., [Mali, 2017](#); [Mali & Salsbury, 2022](#)) also used the member-checking strategy to enhance the credibility of their qualitative research findings. The second strategy was called peer review or peer debriefing, where the researcher let the lecturer see and check the research data. The researcher presented the research data in this session and explained it to the

supervisor and asked for feedback, advice, or recommendations. This is in line with [Hanafizadeh and Shaikh \(2021\)](#) who mentioned that researchers need a peer review to ensure that their study findings are credible. Third, the interview questions were piloted with two students who have taken the speaking class. The unclear words, irrelevant sentences, or ideas were revised and edited to prepare the final form of the interviewer's questions. This study uses research trustworthiness which has been done before writing the findings. The results of the interviews were transcribed and the researchers provided access to the source so that the participants can clarify the data that has been obtained if there is some information that is unclear, then the participants can add more. Therefore, when compiling the findings, the researcher could obtain relevant data and information.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses the findings from the interview conducted to explore the speaking challenges experienced by EFL students in their SFSP classes. The findings of the research will be discussed under three main themes: 1) students lack confidence because they believe their skills still need improvement; 2) students find it challenging to communicate their ideas when they make pronunciation errors; 3) students' lack of vocabulary made them difficult to follow the class well. The selection of these themes were based on the answers of all participants. After transcribing the results of the interviews, the researcher grouped all the participants' answers with similar reasons. The codes were made to group data according to the participants' answers, if the answers given by the participants were the same then they are entered into the same code. The results showed that there were three answers with the same codes so the researcher created three themes to make the research finding. The findings in each theme will be supported by the interview excerpts.

Theme 1: Students Lack Confidence because They Believe Their English Skills Still Need Improvement

The students feel they still have insufficient knowledge of English and mostly in vocabulary and pronunciation. This insufficient knowledge makes them not confident to speak in English in the SFSP class. This problem is also a challenge for students in class; even they feel embarrassed and afraid to practice as some students say in the interview.

Excerpt 1

I lack self-confidence because, in the SFSP class, we were in the same class with friends outside Bengkayang; those were Javanese students. The level is much higher than mine, so I feel a little less confident about my English education knowledge. (S5/interview/translated by the researcher)

Excerpt 2

I feel inferior because the other friends are already fluent in pronouncing English words. Speaking is already good; they don't need to think about it anymore, and public speaking is already good. Meanwhile, when it comes to role play, I still think about what words I need to respond to some questions. (S3/interview/translated by the researcher)

Students from Bengkayang mostly learned English when they were in high school. Students feel they are late in learning English, so they are not confident in their abilities. In comparison, they believe that other friends learned English first, even when they were still in kindergarten. Most students think their friends from outside Bengkayang have a better knowledge of English. They say their understanding of English is lacking, and they feel insecure. In addition, students from Bengkayang also have difficulty adapting to new friends. They find it difficult because they never have casual conversations in English, but they had to do it in the SFSP class. They say they do not know their friends well but have to

interact directly using English. They are not confident in their abilities, so they are embarrassed to practice English with friends from outside Bengkulu. Not being confident makes students also afraid to practice in class and fearful if the teacher asks them to speak in front of the class.

Based on the findings above, a lack of self-confidence is found to be the students' biggest obstacle in the SFSP class. They were less confident with their English skills. This made students feel embarrassed and afraid to practice speaking. This is in line with research conducted by [Ariyanty \(2016\)](#) who found that a lack of self-confidence is a psychological factor that causes EFL students' speaking challenges. That lack of confidence makes students not want to participate and prefer to be silent.

However, in this study, only one student said that when speaking practice, she was afraid to speak in English and, therefore, sometimes chooses to be silent. Yet, this student did not give up; after several times of practice, she tried to be active in speaking. Even the other participants were fearless in making mistakes; she tried to speak using whatever vocabulary they know. If she was afraid of making the same mistakes, she tried to practice through certain media (*Youtube, Elsa Speak, Google search*) before class. This finding contradicts [Nakhalah,s \(2016\)](#) views who mentioned that students are not confident when their speaking partners do not understand what they are saying, so they choose to be silent. There was a student from Bengkulu who said that she was afraid of making mistakes but did not remain silent. Most of the other students said that they were not afraid of being wrong and tried to speak using whatever vocabulary they knew to express their opinion.

When students make mistakes, sometimes other students laugh at them, so they are not confident in their abilities. This is supported by previous research by [Nariswari and Listyani \(2020\)](#) who said that if they make mistakes, other students immediately laugh at them and even talk about them behind their backs. Bengkulu students are not confident in their abilities because their friends laughed at them. The students feel they do not know their friends from outside Bengkulu, resulting in difficulties initiating communication.

Speaking practice activities in class makes them insecure. This is also in harmony with the research conducted by [Wahyuningsih and Afandi \(2020\)](#) who found that students who do not participate in organizations outside the classroom might have difficulty speaking English in new communities. This difficulty can be seen in Bengkulu students communicating in English with students from outside Bengkulu. They feel insecure with their English speaking skills when communicating with students from Java.

Theme 2: Students Find It Challenging to Communicate Their Ideas when They Make Pronunciation Errors

Students still learn many new vocabularies, and most of them find it difficult to pronounce some new words. Students sometimes make pronunciation errors, making their friends not understand while speaking. This situation would also make students not want to practice more because they usually make errors in pronunciation. Dealing with the pronunciation, a participant explained that her local language affected her learning English;

Excerpt 3

Yes, for the pronunciation, I would like to say that I am from Bengkulu and in my area, in my village. How many words can "R" change to "L" That affects my education in English and becomes my biggest challenge in speaking because when I say the word, the one that should use the letter "R" I use "L. And sometimes my classmates

laugh at me, and the vocabulary I say is not heard enough by my friends and lecturers in class. (S5/interview/translated by the researcher)

Based on the excerpt above, words in their local language rarely use the letter "R"; when she finds English words with the letter "R," she would have difficulty pronouncing it. This problem is challenging for students because some also say they rarely use English. They are used to using Bahasa Indonesia or local languages to communicate in their daily lives. The habit of using the local language becomes a challenge when they go to college and must use English. They have a challenge pronouncing some English words, making it difficult for them to follow the lesson. Most students also say that they were not taught enough to pronounce some words when they were in high school. In SFSP class, they often practice speaking in front of the class using English. When speaking, their other friends find it difficult to understand when communicating with them, if they make pronunciation errors.

Some students from Bengkayang are afraid of making pronunciation errors, but they do not remain silent and try to speak using the vocabulary they are familiar with. They practice using several media or practice with friends outside the class. This makes their pronunciation understandable when they do speaking practice again. Most of these students said their low English proficiency is because they learned English in junior high school. If only teachers in middle schools provide effective teaching, then their pronunciation skills will improve. Even in college, their local language still affects their pronunciation because they are not taught intensively about correct pronunciation during high school. [Wahyuningsih and Afandi \(2020\)](#) believed that students found problems pronouncing vowels, consonants, and wrong articulations; these students needed more input about English from the teacher. Nariswari and Listyani (2020) also said that teacher feedback plays an important role so students can correct mistakes. Students from Bengkayang received less English input in high school, making it difficult for them to speak English in class.

Theme 3: The Students' Lack of Vocabulary Made Them Difficult to Follow the Class Well

Some participants say that the SFSP class is fun and important for them since they learn how to communicate with others. However, in speaking, vocabulary is also important for us to converse with others. When we talk, of course, we need some words in English to make people understand while we express our feelings as mentioned by a participant in the interview.

Excerpt 4

In this SFSP class, there are a lot of role-play activities, and as I have experienced in role-play, we need to speak with friends. I was confused thinking about the right vocabulary; sometimes, I forgot or was still unfamiliar with some words. What I want to convey is that I have not done well because of my limited vocabulary. (S4/interview/translated by the researcher)

The students frequently do some speaking practice in the SFSP class to familiarize themselves with speaking English. The students who still lack a lot of vocabulary in English would find this problematic and find it challenging to communicate their opinions or respond to questions from their friends. They may find it challenging to understand some words when talking with friends. This situation makes them have difficulty interacting with friends. They also find it challenging to understand the teacher's instructions in class because they do not understand some vocabulary used by the teacher.

Moreover, students find it challenging to compose the right words, which can also be related to the use of grammar. Students in the SFSP class practice speaking more, but Bengkulu students still focus on using vocabulary. Meanwhile, their vocabulary is still lacking, making it difficult for them to communicate. As said by the fourth participant above "I was confused thinking about the right vocabulary; sometimes, I forgot or was still unfamiliar with some words". Students do not think about using the correct grammar, but they are thinking more about the right words to respond to their friend's speaking. This happens because students believe that they are not taught to practice English words properly when they study in high school. When they were in high school, most English teachers rarely attended class. In addition, teachers did not teach vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar effectively.

Bengkayang students find it difficult to follow the class because they do not master the vocabulary. They have difficulty understanding what friends and teachers say in class. In the speaking practice, students have difficulty expressing their opinions because they do not master the vocabulary. However, students from Bengkulu do not choose to remain silent; they try to explain their opinions using the vocabulary they are familiar with. This is contrary to research conducted by [Riadil \(2020\)](#) who reports that if students do not understand the topic of conversation, they will tend to be silent. Bengkulu students are very enthusiastic about learning even though they experienced many obstacles in English, but they still try to practice outside the classroom. In this class, the students try to speak using the vocabulary they know; students assume that vocabulary is essential in speaking. If they master a lot of vocabulary, they can express their opinions more easily. This statement is also supported by research conducted by [Wahyuningsih and Afandi \(2020\)](#) who mention that vocabulary is the main factor that enables students to express their ideas correctly using English.

CONCLUSIONS

The study resulted in the following conclusions. First, students are not confident in their English skills, making it challenging to follow the learning process. Second, the local language and teacher input affect students' pronunciation ability, making it difficult for them to join the speaking class. Third, the lack of vocabulary knowledge makes it difficult for students to communicate and understand what friends and teachers are talking about in class. Bengkulu students still speak using the vocabulary they know to express their opinions.

Based on the results of the study, it was shown that the challenges faced by Bengkulu students in the SFSP class were lack of self-confidence, pronunciation errors, and lack of vocabulary. It can be seen that students do not master vocabulary because of the lack of input that can be obtained in high school. The lack of known vocabulary also results in them not mastering the pronunciation of each word properly. This can also happen because the lack of input in high school or their regional language affects their English learning. All of these problems ultimately make students less confident in their English skills when they are in college. The results of this study are expected to have an impact on both students and teachers. It is hoped that teachers can understand the conditions of their students and use learning methods that can help students learn well. From this research, students can anticipate if they find the same problem. Students can make preparations before class to practice vocabulary or pronunciation.

Based on the conclusions, the researcher provides several practical suggestions to teachers to teach speaking English effectively. The strategy that the teacher can do is that the teacher can group students in small groups before they practice speaking in front of the class. This can make them confident in front of their friends. Teachers can also motivate students and

encourage them to be confident in speaking English by creating a communication rule at the beginning of the class that making mistakes when speaking is a part of the learning process, and, thus, students are not allowed to laugh at their friends' mistakes (e.g., when they mispronounce English words). This communication rule should encourage all students to respect each other and not be afraid to practice speaking in class. Then, to overcome pronunciation errors, students can practice speaking through several media. One of the media that students can try is the *Elsa Speak* app. This app can help students in speaking because there are some features to help them practice their pronunciation. Some participants also use *Elsa Speak* apps to correct the pronunciation of some English words. Furthermore, in dealing with vocabulary challenges, students can read more books in English for pleasure. Besides that, students can take notes when the teacher explains in class or writes down new words they find in books. In the end, students can try to practice the new vocabulary they have learned in speaking practice in the SFSP class.

This research only involved the students from Bengkayang. Future researchers can examine the speaking challenges faced by other EFL students from other rural areas in Kalimantan or other big islands in Indonesia and see if the students have similar challenges to those reported in this study. In addition to examining the challenges, future researchers might try to see if there is a strong correlation between the students' speaking challenges with their educational background, motivational levels, and age. Moreover, further researchers can also look for practical strategies that students can do when facing some challenges in speaking classes. The strategies that students use may vary but future researchers can look for the most appropriate strategies that can help students face challenges in the speaking class, such as that similar to SFSP.

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