



EFL students' perceptions of speaking activities in supporting critical thinking in an Indonesian university context

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ABSTRACT

This study explores university students' perceptions of how speaking activities support critical thinking development in an EFL classroom at Universitas Kuningan. Qualitative evidence on how Indonesian EFL students perceive specific speaking activities as supporting or constraining critical thinking remains limited, particularly in localized university contexts. A descriptive qualitative design was employed. Fifteen female third-semester undergraduate students from the English Language Education program at Universitas Kuningan were selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected via an open-ended questionnaire of eight questions administered in Bahasa Indonesia and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings indicate that discussions, debates, presentations, and opinion-sharing tasks were perceived as contributing positively to critical thinking by encouraging idea organization, logical reasoning, evaluation of different perspectives, and reflective thinking. A supportive, low-anxiety classroom environment further enhanced students' willingness to express critical opinions. However, challenges including speaking anxiety, limited vocabulary, grammatical difficulties, and time pressure were consistently identified. The study is limited to a small, purposively selected sample at a single institution and cannot be generalized. These findings suggest that speaking activities may serve as effective pedagogical tools for fostering critical thinking in EFL higher education when accompanied by appropriate instructional and affective strategies.



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Critical thinking is broadly defined as the ability to analyze information objectively, evaluate evidence, and construct reasoned judgments rather than accepting information passively (Facione, 2011). In the context of this study, critical thinking encompasses several interconnected dimensions, including analytical thinking, evaluative thinking, reflective reasoning, and the construction of logical arguments. In higher education, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, these competencies have become central goals where students are expected not only to master linguistic forms but also to articulate ideas, evaluate information, and express reasoned opinions in the target language.

In the modern educational landscape, the development of critical thinking is increasingly viewed as inseparable from communicative skills, particularly speaking, because speaking activities require learners to process ideas cognitively while expressing them orally. This relationship between speaking and critical thinking has attracted growing scholarly attention in EFL research, yet findings differ in emphasis and scope.

Existing research on speaking activities and critical thinking reveals a productive but contested body of evidence. Studies that focus on specific instructional techniques tend to report optimistic outcomes: Irianti et al. (2024) found that debate activities in flipped classroom settings promoted critical argumentation, while Siboro et al. (2024) demonstrated that role-play and debate enhanced cognitive engagement in EFL speaking contexts. Both studies share a common orientation toward measurable skill outcomes, yet they diverge on the mechanisms involved—Irianti et al. emphasize the role of pre-class preparation in enabling in-class argumentation, whereas Siboro et al. foreground the spontaneity and social pressure of real-time debate as the primary cognitive driver. This divergence raises an important question: if similar activities yield comparable outcomes through different processes, then the subjective experience of learners—not only the instructional design—may be a critical mediating variable. Evidence for this interpretation can be found in perception-oriented studies. Lestari et al. (2025) found that students who perceived problem-based speaking tasks positively showed improvements in critical thinking performance, suggesting that attitudinal engagement shapes cognitive outcomes. In contrast, Susanto et al. (2025) caution that affective barriers such as anxiety and limited linguistic confidence can decouple cognitive understanding from oral expression, meaning students may think critically without being able to demonstrate it through speaking. Taken together, these studies point to a gap between what speaking activities theoretically demand and what students are actually able to produce under affective constraints—a gap that quantitative outcome measures alone cannot adequately capture.

Despite these contributions, most existing research has relied on quantitative designs or focused on specific instructional interventions, leaving still limited qualitative evidence on how Indonesian EFL students perceive specific speaking activities as supporting or constraining critical thinking in

classroom interaction. Furthermore, few studies have been conducted in localized university contexts such as Universitas Kuningan, where institutional, cultural, and linguistic factors may shape students' experiences differently from those reported in broader national or international samples. This study differs from previous work by centering the learners' own interpretive frameworks rather than measuring pre-determined outcomes, and by grounding the inquiry in a specific institutional and sociolinguistic context.

Therefore, this study aims to explore university students' perceptions of how speaking activities support critical thinking development in an EFL classroom at Universitas Kuningan. Specifically, the objectives are: (1) to analyze how speaking activities contribute to the development of critical thinking skills; (2) to examine students' perceptions of speaking activities in helping them express critical opinions; and (3) to investigate the challenges students face in developing critical thinking through speaking activities.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables researchers to access participants' meanings, interpretations, and lived experiences in ways that numerical measures cannot adequately capture (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The descriptive qualitative design was considered most appropriate for the research questions in this study, which seek to understand students' subjective perceptions and challenges rather than to quantify outcomes or test hypotheses. By adopting this approach, the study prioritizes depth of understanding over breadth of generalization, allowing for a contextually grounded exploration of how speaking activities are experienced by EFL learners at Universitas Kuningan.

Participants

The participants of this study consisted of fifteen female undergraduate students enrolled in the third semester of the English Language Education program at Universitas Kuningan. Participants were selected using purposive sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018), as they were actively enrolled in an EFL speaking course at the time of data collection and were therefore well-positioned to provide relevant and informed responses regarding their experiences with speaking activities. All participants were female, reflecting the actual composition of the class from which they were drawn, and ranged in age from 19 to 21 years. Their selection was based on direct involvement in the speaking activities under investigation rather than on demographic representativeness. The relatively small sample size is consistent with qualitative inquiry, which prioritizes depth of insight over statistical generalizability.

Instruments and Procedures

Open-ended questionnaire

Data were collected using a single instrument, namely an open-ended questionnaire consisting of eight questions designed to elicit students' experiences, perceptions, and challenges related to speaking activities in their EFL classroom. Open-ended questionnaires are widely used in qualitative research because they allow participants to respond in their own words, producing rich and contextually specific data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The questionnaire addressed themes including the types of speaking activities students encountered, the frequency of opinion-sharing tasks, the perceived cognitive demands of different activities, the extent to which speaking promoted critical thinking, and the challenges students experienced during oral tasks. Sample questions included: "Do speaking activities help you think more critically? Explain" and "What obstacles do you experience during speaking activities?" (see Appendix 1 for the full instrument). The questionnaire was administered in Bahasa Indonesia to maximize clarity and encourage authentic expression. Prior to administration, the instrument was reviewed for clarity by two colleagues to ensure that questions were unambiguous and accessible. No interviews, observations, or other data collection instruments were employed in this study.

Data Analysis Procedures

The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following the six-phase approach described by Braun and Clarke (as cited in Byrne, 2022): (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading of participants' responses; (2) generating initial codes by systematically labelling recurring ideas and patterns across responses; (3) constructing themes by grouping related codes into broader thematic categories; (4) reviewing themes to ensure internal coherence and differentiation between themes; (5) defining and naming themes to capture their essence; and (6) producing the final analysis and report. Coding was conducted inductively, allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than being imposed from predefined categories. To enhance trustworthiness, an audit trail was maintained throughout the analytical process, and peer debriefing was conducted with a colleague familiar with qualitative EFL research. The first author also engaged in reflexive practice, acknowledging her own role in shaping the interpretive process and attending carefully to the influence of her positionality on the analysis.

FINDINGS

This section presents the findings derived from questionnaire responses provided by fifteen third-semester female undergraduate students at Universitas Kuningan. The data were systematically organized and interpreted using reflexive thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and shared meanings across participants' responses in relation to the three research questions. The findings are presented thematically and supported by tables that include

representative excerpts from participants' responses to substantiate the emerging themes.

Types of Speaking Activities Implemented in EFL Classrooms

Participants reported engaging in a variety of speaking activities as part of their EFL instruction. As shown in Table 1, these activities ranged from structured tasks such as presentations and debates to more spontaneous forms of oral communication such as impromptu speaking and opinion sharing. Discussions and presentations were the most frequently mentioned activities across participants' responses. Debates and impromptu speaking were consistently described as more cognitively demanding due to the need for rapid idea construction and spontaneous argumentation under time pressure.

Table 1 Types of Speaking Activities Experienced by Students

No	Speaking Activity	Description	Representative Response
1	Group and class discussions	Students exchange opinions and respond to peers' ideas	<i>"Saya sering melakukan diskusi kelompok, presentasi, debat, dan tanya jawab di kelas"</i>
2	Presentations	Students present topics and answer questions from peers	<i>"Pas presentasi saat berada di sesi Q&A, menjawab pertanyaan saat presentasi"</i>
3	Debates	Students argue for or against a motion within limited time	<i>"Debate sangat menantang karena kita hanya diberi waktu sebentar untuk case build dan setelah itu langsung berargumen"</i>
4	Role play and storytelling	Students perform scenarios or narrate stories in English	<i>"Biasanya kami sering melakukan diskusi kelompok, presentasi, role play, dan kadang debat ringan"</i>
5	Opinion sharing and Q&A	Students express viewpoints after reading or watching materials	<i>"Ada juga kegiatan seperti opinion sharing atau tanya jawab setelah membaca atau menonton sesuatu"</i>
6	Impromptu speaking / video challenge	Students speak spontaneously with minimal preparation	<i>"Video challenge, karena di sana kita diminta menyampaikan pendapat atau pandangan mengenai materi yang telah ditentukan"</i>

Results Related to Research Question 1

How do speaking activities contribute to the development of critical thinking skills among students at Universitas Kuningan?

The questionnaire responses indicate that speaking activities contributed to critical thinking development in several interconnected ways. Participants consistently reported that engaging in speaking tasks required them to organize

their thoughts, construct reasoned arguments, and justify their positions before and during oral performance. These cognitive demands were particularly evident in debate and presentation activities, where students had to think quickly and respond logically to opposing viewpoints. Participants also noted that speaking activities promoted real-time analytical thinking, as responding to peers' questions or counterarguments required rapid information processing and logical reasoning. Additionally, reflective thinking emerged as a recurring theme, with several participants describing instances in which they reconsidered or modified their views following exposure to alternative perspectives during discussion. Table 2 presents the aspects of critical thinking identified across participants' responses, with supporting excerpts.

Table 2 Contributions of Speaking Activities to Critical Thinking Development

Aspect of Critical Thinking	Evidence from Questionnaire Responses	Representative Response
Analytical thinking	Organizing ideas and evaluating arguments before speaking	<i>"Sebelum ngomong, aku harus mikir dulu apakah pendapatku masuk akal, relevan, dan bisa didukung dengan alasan yang jelas"</i>
Evaluative thinking	Assessing peers' opinions during discussions and debates	<i>"Speaking activities bikin aku lebih terbiasa dengerin pendapat orang lain dan mikir sebelum merespons"</i>
Reflective thinking	Revising opinions after discussion	<i>"Setelah denger penjelasan dan sudut pandang teman, aku sadar kalau pendapatku sebelumnya kurang lengkap"</i>
Reasoning skills	Providing reasons, examples, and explanations	<i>"Dalam speaking activities aku sering diminta jelasin pendapat, ngasih alasan, dan contoh, jadi nggak cuma ngomong seadanya"</i>

These findings suggest that speaking activities function as cognitive tools that foster higher-order thinking skills in EFL contexts.

Results Related to Research Question 2

What are students' perceptions of speaking activities in helping them express critical opinions in an EFL classroom?

The questionnaire responses reveal that the majority of participants held positive perceptions of speaking activities in relation to critical thinking development. Students reported that regular participation in speaking tasks gradually increased their confidence in expressing opinions and helped them communicate ideas in a more structured and coherent manner. Participants also emphasized the role of classroom atmosphere in shaping their willingness to

engage critically. When the learning environment felt relaxed and non-threatening, students reported feeling more encouraged to share their perspectives and respond thoughtfully to others. The relevance of discussion topics was also identified as a factor that stimulated deeper thinking and more active participation. Table 3 presents participants' perceptions along with representative responses.

Table 3 Students' Perceptions of Speaking Activities

Perception	Evidence from Questionnaire Responses	Representative Response
Increased confidence	Students feel more confident expressing opinions	<i>"Mungkin di semester awal tidak karena malu, tapi sekarang sangat terdorong karena saya merasa lebih enjoy dan nyaman saat mengemukakan pendapat"</i>
Improved idea organization	Speaking helps structure thoughts logically	<i>"Seringnya saya melakukan speaking activities membuat kata-kata dan kalimat yang saya lontarkan menjadi lebih padu dan tidak berbelit-belit"</i>
Respect for others' views	Students become more open to different perspectives	<i>"Saya jadi bisa menghargai point of view dari orang lain"</i>
Motivation to participate	Comfortable atmosphere encourages participation	<i>"Apalagi jika atmosphere-nya nyaman dan tidak begitu tegang, saya selalu ingin mencoba untuk menyampaikan pendapat saya"</i>

Results Related to Research Question 3

What challenges do students face in developing critical thinking through speaking activities?

Despite the generally positive perceptions reported above, participants identified a number of challenges that constrained their ability to engage fully in speaking activities and express critical opinions effectively. Speaking anxiety emerged as the most pervasive difficulty, with the majority of participants describing feelings of nervousness, fear of making errors, and a tendency to lose their train of thought under pressure. Language-related barriers were also frequently mentioned, including limited vocabulary and insufficient grammatical knowledge, both of which hindered participants' ability to articulate complex ideas in English. Time constraints during activities such as debates and impromptu speaking compounded these difficulties by reducing the opportunity for careful idea construction. Table 4 presents these challenges along with representative responses from participants.

Table 4 Challenges in Developing Critical Thinking through Speaking Activities

Challenge	Description	Representative Response
Speaking anxiety	Nervousness and fear of making mistakes	"Speaking anxiety, <i>aku gampang nervous, takut salah ngomong, takut nge-freeze, takut English-nya jelek dan diketawain</i> "
Limited vocabulary	Difficulty expressing ideas clearly due to insufficient word knowledge	" <i>Kurangnya kosakata yang saya ketahui dan kemampuan grammar yang belum terlalu bagus merupakan kendala terbesar saya</i> "
Grammar limitations	Concern about sentence accuracy during oral production	" <i>Takut jika kata-kata yang saya sampaikan tidak sesuai dengan grammar</i> "
Time pressure	Stress during spontaneous speaking activities with limited preparation time	" <i>Debat sangat menantang karena hanya diberi waktu sebentar untuk case build dan setelah itu langsung berargumen</i> "

DISCUSSION

This study examined how university students perceive speaking activities in relation to critical thinking development in an EFL classroom at Universitas Kuningan. The discussion that follows situates the findings within relevant theoretical and empirical literature, organized around the three research questions addressed in this study.

The questionnaire responses indicate that speaking activities such as discussions, debates, presentations, and opinion-sharing tasks were perceived by students as making meaningful contributions to their critical thinking development. Participants described how these activities required them to organize ideas coherently, construct and defend arguments, and respond to peers' viewpoints in real time. This finding resonates with Hidayati and Pratiwi (2023), who demonstrated that debate and discussion tasks encourage analytical and evaluative thinking by placing students in situations where they must reason through and justify their positions. In a related vein, Setiawan et al. (2024) found that debate activities not only strengthen public speaking skills but also cultivate the kind of disciplined argumentation that underlies critical thinking. The present study extends these findings by foregrounding students' subjective experiences of these cognitive demands, rather than measuring outcomes alone.

The data further suggest that speaking activities fostered real-time critical thinking, particularly during interactive and spontaneous tasks. Students reported needing to process information rapidly, evaluate competing arguments, and refine their own reasoning on the spot, especially during debates and Q&A sessions following presentations. This aligns with Jumariati and Sulisty (2023), who found that oral presentations create conditions for higher-order thinking because students must anticipate questions and construct informed responses under pressure. The

present findings add nuance to this picture by highlighting that the cognitive demands of speaking activities were experienced differently depending on the format: debates and impromptu tasks were perceived as more cognitively intensive than structured presentations or role plays.

Concerning students' perceptions, the findings reveal that the majority of participants held favorable views of speaking activities as vehicles for expressing and developing critical opinions. Students reported that consistent engagement in oral tasks helped them communicate ideas more clearly and systematically over time, and that a supportive classroom environment played a significant role in enabling this development. These observations are consistent with Irianti et al. (2024), who found that students demonstrate more positive engagement with speaking activities when instructional conditions reduce anxiety and foster a sense of safety. Similarly, Lestari et al. (2025) found that structured problem-based speaking tasks were perceived positively when delivered in environments that prioritized student comfort alongside cognitive challenge. Taken together, these studies and the present findings suggest that students' perceptions of speaking activities are shaped not only by the nature of the tasks themselves but also by the affective conditions under which they are carried out.

Despite these broadly positive perceptions, several challenges were consistently identified across participants' responses. Speaking anxiety was the most frequently reported barrier, with students describing nervousness, fear of judgment, and sudden loss of concentration as recurring difficulties during oral tasks. These experiences are well documented in the EFL literature. Pratama et al. (2024) identified anxiety and limited linguistic resources as persistent obstacles for Indonesian EFL learners attempting to engage in critical oral communication. Susanto et al. (2025) similarly caution that affective barriers such as fear of error can undermine students' capacity to express complex ideas, even when they possess the cognitive understanding needed to do so. The present study corroborates these findings and underscores the importance of designing speaking activities that are not only intellectually demanding but also affectively accessible, particularly for learners in contexts where risk-taking in oral communication may feel socially or academically costly.

Taken as a whole, the discussion points toward a more fundamental interpretation: speaking activities foster critical thinking not simply because they create opportunities for oral practice, but because they impose epistemic demands that are difficult to meet without thinking critically. When a student must construct an argument for a debate, anticipate an opposing question during a presentation, or reformulate a position after hearing a peer's counterpoint, she is compelled to move beyond surface-level recall and engage in the kind of evaluative and reflective

reasoning that defines critical thought. The mechanism is therefore not exposure but cognitive necessity—speaking activities work precisely because they make it functionally difficult to remain uncritical. This interpretive insight helps explain why the format of the activity matters: debates and impromptu tasks, which offer the least preparation time and the most immediate social accountability, were perceived as most cognitively demanding, while structured presentations allowed more planning and correspondingly less visible critical engagement in real time. It also helps explain the role of affect: anxiety does not merely make speaking harder, it short-circuits the cognitive processing that critical thinking requires, redirecting cognitive resources from reasoning to self-monitoring. This suggests that the pedagogical challenge for EFL instructors is not simply to include speaking activities in the curriculum, but to calibrate the epistemic pressure of those activities against learners' affective capacity—maintaining enough challenge to necessitate critical thinking while preserving enough psychological safety for that thinking to be expressed. This study contributes to the existing literature by offering qualitative evidence of how this dynamic is experienced from the inside, in a specific Indonesian university context where quantitative outcome measures have predominated.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore how university students perceive speaking activities in relation to critical thinking development in an EFL classroom at Universitas Kuningan. The findings, derived from questionnaire responses from fifteen purposively selected third-semester female students, indicate that speaking activities such as discussions, debates, presentations, and opinion-sharing tasks were perceived as meaningful contributors to critical thinking development. Participants reported that these activities encouraged them to organize ideas more systematically, construct and defend arguments, evaluate peers' perspectives, and engage in reflective reconsideration of their own views. In this respect, speaking activities were experienced not merely as opportunities for linguistic practice but as cognitively demanding processes that stimulated higher-order thinking, encompassing the analytical, evaluative, reflective, and reasoning dimensions described in the framework outlined in the introduction.

The study also found that students generally held positive perceptions of speaking activities as vehicles for expressing critical opinions, particularly when implemented in a supportive and low-anxiety classroom environment. At the same time, the findings draw attention to persistent challenges including speaking anxiety, limited vocabulary, grammatical concerns, and time pressure during spontaneous tasks, suggesting that the effectiveness of speaking activities in promoting critical thinking depends significantly on the instructional and affective conditions surrounding their implementation.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The findings are based solely on self-reported questionnaire responses from a small,

purposely selected sample of fifteen female students at a single institution, and cannot be generalized to broader EFL populations or other institutional contexts. The use of a single data collection instrument means that the actual critical thinking processes occurring during speaking activities were not directly observed or triangulated. Future research may benefit from incorporating multiple data collection methods such as classroom observation and interviews, larger and more diverse samples, and longitudinal designs to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how speaking activities shape critical thinking development over time.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this study offers qualitative insights that complement existing quantitative research by foregrounding students' lived experiences of speaking activities in an Indonesian university context. The findings suggest that EFL instructors may find value in designing speaking tasks that balance cognitive challenge with affective support, creating conditions under which students feel both intellectually stimulated and sufficiently confident to express their ideas critically.

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APPENDIX 1

The following eight open-ended questions were administered in Bahasa Indonesia to participants via a printed questionnaire. English translations are provided below for reporting purposes.

1. *Aktivitas speaking apa saja yang sering kamu lakukan di kelas EFL?* (What speaking activities do you frequently do in your EFL class?)
2. *Menurutmu, seberapa sering kamu diminta menyampaikan pendapat atau argumen saat speaking?* (How often are you asked to express your opinion or argument during speaking activities?)
3. *Aktivitas speaking mana yang paling menantang bagimu? Mengapa?* (Which speaking activity is most challenging for you? Why?)
4. *Apakah speaking activities membantu kamu berpikir lebih kritis? Jelaskan.* (Do speaking activities help you think more critically? Please explain.)
5. *Dalam speaking activities, apakah kamu merasa terdorong untuk memberi alasan, contoh, atau pendapat pribadi?* (In speaking activities, do you feel motivated to provide reasons, examples, or personal opinions?)
6. *Bagaimana speaking activities memengaruhi cara kamu menanggapi pendapat teman?* (How do speaking activities affect the way you respond to your classmates' opinions?)
7. *Pernahkah kamu mengubah pendapat setelah diskusi speaking? Ceritakan.* (Have you ever changed your opinion after a speaking discussion? Please describe.)
8. *Kendala apa yang kamu alami saat speaking activities?* (What obstacles do you experience during speaking activities?)