OPEN ACCESS

The Art of Expression: Evaluating Speaking Skills Among MTs Riydah El-Ilmi's Eighth Graders

M. Fikri Nugraha Kholid[1*], Indana Salsabila[1], Septa Aryanika[1]

[1]*Tarbiyah and Teaching Traning Faculty, Raden Intan State Islamic University of Lampung, Indonesia*

ABSTRACT

This study provides a descriptive qualitative analysis of the English speaking performance challenges encountered by eighth-grade students at MTs Riyadh El Ilmi. Utilizing a multi-method approach, data were gathered through observation, semi-structured interviews, and video documentation. Student speaking proficiency was evaluated across five key components: grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, and comprehension, using a standardized rubric. To ensure data credibility, a dual-rater approach and interrater validation were employed for assessing speaking performances and interview responses, respectively. Findings indicate prevalent issues such as limited vocabulary, mispronunciations, grammatical errors, and disfluency among students. Interview data further revealed significant contributing factors, including inhibition, lack of ideas, low participation, and reliance on the mother tongue. These insights align with existing literature on EFL learning challenges, highlighting the need for pedagogical strategies that address both linguistic deficiencies and affective barriers to enhance students' communicative competence.

Introduction

English speaking proficiency is a cornerstone of global communication, offering significant advantages in accessing information, facilitating interpersonal exchange, and leveraging technological advancements. As one of the four fundamental English language skills, speaking involves a complex, interactive process of meaning construction through producing, receiving, and processing information (Amiryousefi, 2019). In Indonesia, English is a compulsory second language, introduced at the elementary school level, yet it frequently presents substantial challenges for students, particularly in the domain of speaking (Sari et al., 2023).

The inherent interactive nature of speaking, crucial for daily communication, often renders it the most formidable skill for learners to master. Common impediments encountered by students include deficiencies in grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation,

and comprehension (Hasbi & Nursaputri, 2024). Despite these difficulties, strong speaking skills empower students to articulate their thoughts and emotions, express desires, and forge connections. Consequently, developing speaking proficiency is frequently a high-priority objective for English language learners. Anggraini (2022) underscore the indispensable role of speaking in communication, highlighting the intrinsic link between speech and language as a cohesive unit. They contend that effective speech necessitates both careful attention and self-regulation, as fluency is not universally achieved despite the universal capacity for speech.

Spoken language can manifest in various forms, from static descriptions of scenes or objects to dynamic narratives of events unfolding across different times and locations. The dynamic nature of oral communication demands that students be adaptable to various communicative shifts. Acquiring oral language proficiency requires a comprehensive understanding of linguistic components, including grammar, vocabulary, and appropriate functional forms, alongside the ability to effectively convey messages by adjusting word choice, rephrasing, repeating, filling conversational gaps, and expressing uncertainty (Hartshorne et al., 2018).

This research focuses on the challenges faced by eighth-grade students at MTs Riyadh El Ilmi in Gisting, Tanggamus, in developing their English speaking skills. Preliminary observations and unstructured interviews conducted on April 22, 2024, revealed several persistent issues. Specifically, students exhibited limited vocabulary, hindering their ability to communicate effectively, recall words efficiently, and comprehend others. Pronunciation difficulties, particularly with the "r" sound, led to slow speech and comprehension issues for listeners, often accompanied by long pauses that disrupted fluency. Furthermore, students struggled with grammatical accuracy, making errors in sentence construction and the correct usage of nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Finally, a significant lack of practice was identified, as English speaking opportunities were largely confined to classroom learning sessions.

As Yeh et al. (2021) notes, speaking is often the most challenging aspect for students to master, and indeed, it represents a major source of errors and problems in English language learning. While speaking performance remains a popular research area, unique challenges continually emerge. This study aims to contribute to the existing literature by providing a descriptive qualitative analysis of students' speaking performance problems across five key components: grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, and comprehension, a distinction not extensively explored in prior research reviewed by the investigator. Therefore, this research endeavors to thoroughly analyze the speaking performance challenges encountered by eighth-grade students at MTs Riyadh El Ilmi.

Method

This study employed a qualitative research methodology, consistent with definition of qualitative inquiry as a process for understanding social or human problems through distinct methodological traditions (Creswell, 2012). Specifically, a descriptive research design was utilized to thoroughly investigate the existing conditions, extent, and characteristics of the phenomena under examination.

The participants for this research were 25 eighth-grade students from MTs Riyadh El Ilmi, enrolled in the second semester of the 2023/2024 academic year. Data collection commenced in February 2024 and continued until completion.

Data were gathered through a multi-method approach, including observation, interviews, and documentation. Observations involved systematically recording students' speaking performances during regular classroom activities. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to elicit detailed insights into the specific challenges students encountered when speaking English. Additionally, video recordings served as a form of documentation, providing supplementary evidence for analysis. Student speaking proficiency was evaluated against five key components: grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, and comprehension, using a standardized rubric (Brown, 2004).

To bolster the credibility of the data, the researcher employed a dual-rater approach for assessing students' speaking performances. Both the researcher and an English teacher from MTs Riyadh El Ilmi independently evaluated the students using the same scoring rubric. Following their individual assessments, the two raters engaged in a discussion to cross-check their scores and achieve consensus, thereby enhancing the reliability of the evaluations. The collected data underwent a qualitative analysis, where students' speaking abilities were categorized based on the previously mentioned components. The primary problems encountered by the students were then identified and analyzed.

Results and Discussion
Results

This rubric serves as a comprehensive tool for evaluating various linguistic components, specifically assessing pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, fluency, and comprehension against a standardized scoring system. The scores obtained from this rubric provide a detailed indication of problematic areas within each of these components.

To ascertain the underlying causes of students' speaking skill outcomes, the researcher conducted interviews using Indonesian, facilitating uninhibited expression. To ensure the robustness and trustworthiness of the qualitative data, an interrater validation process was employed for establishing credibility in qualitative research. This involved a second, independent rater—an English teacher from MTs Riyadh El Ilmi—who critically reviewed the researcher's categorization of student responses. The second rater was provided with the raw interview data, the researcher's initial categorizations, and a validation instrument. The rater independently evaluated the appropriateness of the researcher's assignment of responses to predetermined categories, such as inhibition, anxiety, use of mother tongue, motivation, and participation, indicating agreement or disagreement for each categorization.

According to the interrater checking results from interviews conducted with 25 students regarding four main affective and behavioral factors: inhibition, nothing to say, use of mother tongue, and participation. Two raters—one being the primary researcher and the other an English teacher—assessed the students' responses to ensure reliability and validate the qualitative coding.

Overall, the majority of the factors demonstrated a high degree of interrater agreement, particularly on "nothing to say" and "use of mother tongue." In most instances, both raters confirmed the presence of these factors across participants, suggesting consistent perceptions of students' reluctance to express ideas and their reliance on the first language during English-speaking activities. These patterns highlight potential challenges in fostering communicative competence among EFL learners, especially in contexts where confidence and vocabulary resources may be limited.

However, disagreement was noted in several instances, especially concerning the "inhibition" and "participation" categories. These discrepancies may reflect differing interpretations between the researcher and the teacher regarding students' engagement levels and the emotional barriers they exhibited. For example, the classification of "active" versus "passive" participation appeared to be more subjective and context-sensitive, leading to inconsistent judgments.

It is also worth noting that a few entries contained incomplete or unclear data, particularly in the responses of Rater 2. This minor limitation suggests the need for more structured coding criteria or further rater training to ensure complete clarity and consistency in future assessments. Nevertheless, the general pattern of agreement affirms the credibility of the thematic analysis and supports the trustworthiness of the qualitative findings.

Discussion

The analysis indicates that only four students reached the highest performance level in vocabulary acquisition, with scores of 4. These students demonstrated the ability to identify and recall new vocabulary swiftly and conveyed their ideas using a relatively broad lexicon. However, gaps were still observed in their knowledge of common daily expressions. Twelve students, who received a score of 3, could comprehend and produce basic vocabulary in response to questions, though they encountered challenges when engaging in broader conversational contexts. Meanwhile, eight students with a score of 2 showed limited vocabulary knowledge, often pausing as they struggled to find appropriate English words, resulting in disjointed responses. One student, who scored 1, was largely unable to recognize or utilize even the simplest vocabulary and displayed significant hesitation and inaccuracy in expression.

Regarding pronunciation, eight students scored a 4 and displayed minimal pronunciation errors. Their speech was generally clear and intelligible, although issues with intonation and word stress were still apparent. Sixteen students scored 3, exhibiting several mispronunciations, such as rendering "uncle" as "engkel" or "student" as "staden." Their speech was also marked by a lack of clarity, often resembling a whisper. One student, who obtained the lowest score, was unable to pronounce words accurately or clearly, resulting in largely unintelligible speech.

In terms of grammar, eighteen students received a score of 3. These students could communicate using structurally accurate sentences sufficient for basic interactions, although their grammatical control diminished in extended or complex discourse. Seven

students scored 2 and displayed frequent errors, such as using "My live" instead of "I live" and failing to apply subject-verb agreement rules when listing multiple hobbies.

The fluency assessment showed that eleven students reached a score of 4, indicating their ability to speak smoothly and spontaneously with only occasional errors that did not hinder communication. Ten students who scored 3 could speak with some fluidity but were frequently interrupted by long pauses or hesitation. The remaining four students, with a score of 2, were notably disfluent, primarily due to poor vocabulary retention, frequent pauses, and grammatical errors that disrupted the flow of communication.

In terms of comprehension, only two students reached the highest score of 4, demonstrating an ability to understand spoken English well, including more complex conversations. Seven students who scored 3 could comprehend familiar expressions and simple exchanges but struggled with full-English dialogues. Thirteen students at level 2 could only recognize a limited number of basic phrases, often failing to grasp their meanings. Two students who scored 1 were unable to understand even the most frequently used classroom phrases, significantly impeding their ability to respond appropriately.

Interview data with Grade 8 students at MTs Riyadh El Ilmi revealed four primary challenges that hinder students' English-speaking performance: inhibition, lack of ideas, low participation, and the use of the mother tongue. Inhibition emerged as the most prevalent issue, with students expressing fear of making mistakes and being ridiculed by peers. This fear led to a lack of confidence and reluctance to speak, even in supportive classroom environments.

The issue of "nothing to say" was also notable. Students often reported difficulty in generating ideas for speech, either due to limited vocabulary or uncertainty about what to say. Some students expressed that although they understood what they wanted to convey, they lacked the vocabulary to express it clearly. Low participation was also frequently reported, with many students choosing to remain silent due to fear of errors or a lack of fluency. Lastly, the habitual use of the mother tongue—Indonesian or Javanese—served as both a coping mechanism and a barrier, preventing consistent practice in English and reducing students' exposure to the target language in communicative contexts.

These findings are consistent with earlier research by De Saint Léger (2009), who identified similar challenges among EFL students, such as limited vocabulary, fear of making mistakes, and the influence of first-language interference. Their study emphasized that students with low confidence and restricted lexical knowledge are less likely to participate in oral tasks, mirroring the present study's findings. Furthermore, the continued reliance on the mother tongue during English-speaking activities, as reported here, aligns with the observations of Ihsan and Ihsan (2016), who argue that in contexts where English is taught as a foreign language, students often default to their native language when they lack the linguistic resources to express themselves fully.

However, in contrast to some previous studies that suggest peer interaction can foster speaking confidence (Ilma & Manurung, 2019), the current findings show that peer presence may also increase inhibition due to fear of ridicule. This suggests that the

effectiveness of peer-based strategies may be context-dependent and influenced by classroom dynamics and student relationships. Thus, while collaborative learning is generally supported in communicative language teaching, the emotional climate of the classroom must be carefully managed to prevent anxiety from impeding language production (Hastomo et al., 2025).

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that eighth-grade students at MTs Riyadh El Ilmi face significant challenges in their English speaking proficiency, specifically in the areas of vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, fluency, and comprehension. The analysis revealed that while a small subset of students demonstrated higher proficiency in certain components, the majority exhibited deficiencies, such as limited vocabulary, mispronunciations, grammatical errors, disfluency marked by frequent pauses, and difficulty comprehending spoken English. These issues collectively hinder their ability to engage in effective and spontaneous oral communication in English.

Furthermore, interview data highlighted key underlying factors contributing to these speaking difficulties, including inhibition, lack of ideas ("nothing to say"), low participation, and the pervasive use of the mother tongue. Inhibition, driven by a fear of making mistakes and peer ridicule, emerged as a particularly prominent barrier to confident English expression. These findings align with existing literature on EFL learning challenges, underscoring the complex interplay of linguistic knowledge, psychological factors, and environmental influences on speaking performance. Consequently, pedagogical interventions should address not only linguistic deficits but also foster a supportive classroom environment that mitigates anxiety and encourages active participation to improve students' overall speaking skills.

References

Amiryousefi, M. (2019). The incorporation of flipped learning into conventional classes to enhance EFL learners' L2 speaking, L2 listening, and engagement. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, *13*(2), 147–161. https://doi.org/10.1080/17501229.2017.1394307

Anggraini, A. (2022). Improving students' pronunciation skill using ELSA Speak application. *Journey: Journal of English Language and Pedagogy*, *5*(1), 135–141. https://doi.org/10.33503/journey.v5i1.1840

Brown, D. H. (2004). *Language Assessment - Principles and Classroom Practice*. San Fransisco State University. https://www.academia.edu/26575645/H_Douglas_Brown_Language_Assessment_Principles_and_Classroom_Practice

Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational research: Planning, conducting and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. Pearson Education.

De Saint Léger, D. (2009). Self-Assessment of Speaking Skills and Participation in a Foreign Language Class. *Foreign Language Annals*, *42*(1), 158–178. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1944-9720.2009.01013.x

Hartshorne, J. K., Tenenbaum, J. B., & Pinker, S. (2018). A critical period for second language acquisition: Evidence from 2/3 million English speakers. *Cognition*, *177*, 263–277. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2018.04.007

Hasbi, M., & Nursaputri, E. (2024). Using ELSA Speak Application as A Medium to Improve English Speaking Skills. *IJLHE: International Journal of Language, Humanities, and Education* , *7*(2), 91–102.

Hastomo, T., Sari, A. S., Widiati, U., Ivone, F. M., Zen, E. L., & Andianto, A. (2025). Exploring EFL Teachers' Strategies in Employing AI Chatbots in Writing Instruction to Enhance Student Engagement. *World Journal of English Language*, *15*(7), 93–102. https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v15n7p93

Ihsan, M. D., & Ihsan, M. D. (2016). Students' Motivation in Speaking English. *JEES (Journal of English Educators Society)*, *1*(1). https://doi.org/10.21070/jees.v1i1.147

Ilma, R., & Manurung, J. E. (2019). Empowering Speaking Achievement by Using Inside-Outside Fishbowl. *Channing: Journal of English Language Education and Literature*, *4*(1), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.30599/CHANNING.V4I1.729

Sari, L. P., Hastomo, T., & Nurchurifiani, E. (2023). Assessing the Efficacy of Duolingo for Acquiring English Vocabulary Skills: Experimental Research. *Journal of English Teaching Applied Linguistics and Literatures (JETALL)*, *6*(2), 193–200.

Yeh, H. C., Chang, W. Y., Chen, H. Y., & Heng, L. (2021). Effects of podcast-making on college students' English speaking skills in higher education. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, *69*(5), 2845–2867. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-021-10026-3