



Speaking Challenges of High and Low Achieving EFL Students in Indonesian Pesantren: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

This comparative qualitative study explores the English-speaking challenges experienced by high- and low-achieving EFL students in an Indonesian pesantren context. Twelve female students were purposively selected: six high-achievers and six low-achievers based on academic records and teacher input. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically. The findings reveal that high-achieving students encounter affective and environmental barriers, whereas low-achieving students are constrained by linguistic deficits and motivational issues. Students proposed strategies including self-talk, digital tools, and institutional support to overcome these difficulties. The study highlights the need for differentiated pedagogy and contextualized support in pesantren-based EFL programs.

Keywords: EFL, speaking anxiety, pesantren, learner comparison, English language education.

A. Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, oral proficiency in English is a crucial skill for academic, intercultural, and professional engagement. In Indonesia, English is taught as a foreign language, yet the focus often remains on grammar and reading comprehension rather than on communicative competence (Fahrany & Wahyuningsih, 2025). This issue is especially pronounced in Islamic boarding schools, or pesantren, where the curriculum prioritizes religious and Arabic studies. Consequently, students in these institutions often have limited opportunities to develop spoken English skills

within authentic communicative contexts. Despite national curriculum mandates that emphasize speaking competence (Aoyama & Ouchi, 2022), the sociocultural landscape of *pesantren* tends to marginalize English oral practice. Within *pesantren*-Islamic boarding schools prioritizing religious and Arabic instruction, English-speaking practice often remains marginal due to socio-religious priorities and limited exposure to communicative contexts.

Speaking English in these settings may even be perceived as showing off, which can suppress learners' willingness to speak (Octavianita et al., 2021). In *pesantren* contexts, sociocultural norms may label English verbal interactions as showing off, which suppresses students' willingness to speak English. These issues are exacerbated when pedagogical approaches are not tailored to varied proficiency levels, thus affecting both high- and low-achieving students (Mulyono et al. 2021). The former group often encounters motivational constraints within institutional settings, whereas the latter typically lacks confidence and has very limited exposure to authentic language use. Additionally, the instructional approaches commonly used do not account for the diverse proficiency levels among students, resulting in both high- and low-achieving learners experiencing unique challenges. High-achieving students often face affective constraints such as anxiety or fear of judgment, while low-achieving students struggle with vocabulary, pronunciation, and low self-confidence (Krashen, 1985). High self-efficacy has been associated with resilience, willingness to communicate, and language output in EFL contexts, while low self-efficacy-often accompanied by anxiety and avoidance that limits productive speaking practice (Jeong et al., 2012; Ajiza et al., 2024). In EFL classrooms, mastery experiences, emotional states, and verbal persuasion are key sources influencing self-efficacy.

Previous studies have documented general speaking difficulties among Indonesian EFL learners, including anxiety, lexical limitations, and weak phonological skills (Fachrunnisa & Nuraeni, 2022; Mustamir, 2024). (Fachrunnisa & Nuraeni, 2022), In a study of Indonesian university EFL students, researchers found that learners struggled with pronunciation, lexical insufficiency, and affective inhibition due to insufficient practice and low confidence levels. (Mustamir, 2024) Similarly reported that anxiety manifested in physical symptoms—such as trembling and shyness—limited class participation, and required classroom-based mitigation strategies. Furthermore, other research has been done by several researchers with a similar topic, such as Aldi & Thoyyib Shof (2024a, 2024b; Maji et al., 2022; Meidi Kulsum et al., 2025; Rahman et al., 2024). However, most of these studies have focused on university or public school

contexts, with limited attention to pesantren environments. Although some research has explored speaking anxiety in pesantren. (Imron & Hantari, 2021) few studies have conducted comparative analyses that examine how English-speaking difficulties differ between high- and low-achieving students in these institutions. (Munir, 2022) analyzed speaking anxiety among English club students in a pesantren, revealing that moderate to high anxiety stemmed from fear of public performance, unintelligible input, and limited preparation. Moreover, existing intervention studies such as those employing Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) have not examined differential impacts across learners with varying proficiency levels (Husni Hasibuan & Manurung, 2021). This presents a significant gap in understanding the extent to which learner achievement level influences the experience of and response to pedagogical approaches in pesantren-based EFL education.

While the existing literature underscores pervasive speaking difficulties in Indonesian EFL contexts and begins to explore pesantren-specific factors, there remains a lack of comparative research examining how these issues manifest differently among learners with high versus low achievement levels in pesantren settings. Moreover, intervention studies such as CLT adoption require further investigation regarding differential impacts across proficiency groups. This study seeks to fill these gaps by; Investigating the speaking challenges experienced by both high and low achieving pesantren students, compare internal and external factors contributing to these difficulties across achievement levels, propose pedagogically informed strategies that respond to learners' diverse needs.

By focusing on pesantren a culturally distinct yet under-researched educational context this study contributes a comparative perspective that enhances our understanding of learner diversity in EFL speaking instruction. It provides insights for language educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers to design more inclusive and responsive interventions that foster oral language development among all students, regardless of their academic standing.

B. Methods

This qualitative case study aimed to explore English-speaking challenges faced by high-versus low-achieving students in a pesantren context. A qualitative design was chosen to uncover nuanced perceptions and lived experiences in their authentic sociocultural environment (Nowell et al., 2017). The study was conducted at STITMA, an Islamic boarding school in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, focusing on the female students. The

research uses a purposive sampling which selected 12 participants that contains six high achievers and six low achievers across Semesters 3, 5, and 7—to reflect a range of academic exposures and language competence.

The Data were collected via semi-structured interviews, a method praised for combining structure with flexibility, allowing participants to elaborate on relevant issues (Merriem B & Tisdell, 2016) . Each session, lasting 30–45 minutes, was conducted in a private and comfortable setting within the pesantren. This semi-structured approach encouraged consistent questioning while accommodating emergent themes across participants (Alshenqeeti, 2014; Merriem B & Tisdell, 2016). Interviews were audio-recorded (with consent), transcribed verbatim, and translated as needed. Pseudonyms were used to maintain the confidentiality of the participants. Trustworthiness was assured through member checking (participants verified their transcripts and interpretations), peer debriefing, and meticulous audit trail documentation throughout the analysis (Nowell et al., 2017)

C. Result and Discussion

This study reveals the differences and similarities in the speaking challenges experienced by high- and low-achieving EFL students in a pesantren. High-achieving students face affective and environmental barriers, whereas low-achieving students are hindered by linguistic limitations and motivation. This section outlines the findings, compares them with existing literature, explores pedagogical implications, and concludes with an analysis of the study’s limitations and suggestions for further research.

1. Key Findings and Comparison with Previous Research

The study confirms that difficulties in speaking English vary based on students’ proficiency levels, which are influenced by internal and external factors unique to the pesantren context.

| Factor Category | Specific Difficulties |
|------------------|--|
| Internal Factors | Affective: Fear of being perceived as “showing off,” self-censorship, impact of past negative teacher experiences. |
| External Factors | Environment: Lack of English-speaking environments, dominance of Arabic and Indonesian, curriculum focused on religious studies. |

| | |
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| Resources | Limited authentic practice opportunities, and gamified apps are less effective for speaking. |
|-----------|--|

Table 1:
Internal and External Factors Contributing to Speaking Difficulties of High-Achieving Students

a. High-Achieving Students

Based on the Table.1, high-achieving students face affective barriers, such as fear of being perceived as “showing off” when speaking English, leading to self-censorship, and unsupportive environments for speaking practice (Krashen, 1985). One participant expressed comfort in speaking because “no one understands me”, indicating the need for safe practice spaces. Negative past experiences with teachers temporarily reduced motivation, but inspiring teachers later boosted students’ enthusiasm (Gardner, 1985).

Speaking Difficulties among High-Achieving Internal Barriers:

Despite having strong grammatical and lexical competence, high-achieving students reported emotional reluctance when asked to speak English in public. Several participants cited the fear of being perceived as "showing off" as a major psychological obstacle. *"Even if I know what to say, I hold back because I don't want people to think I'm arrogant."* (Participant A, Semester 5). This is consistent with Krashen’s Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982), which posits that negative emotions such as fear, embarrassment, or peer judgment can act as a psychological filter that impedes the natural acquisition and production of language (Krashen, 1985). In such cases, even proficient learners avoid verbal expression, thereby diminishing opportunities for fluency development.

External (Environmental) Constraints

Students also described the lack of an English-speaking environment as a significant hindrance viewed from an external factor. *"We are told to focus on Arabic and religious studies. There is no real space or encouragement to speak English in daily life."* (Participant C, Semester 7). This institutional emphasis on Arabic over English restricts the availability of meaningful interactional contexts, which are essential for internalising spoken English. According to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), language is best learned through authentic communication; however, these students operate in a context where such interaction is institutionally and culturally limited.

Participants expressed frustration with gamified learning apps. "Duolingo is fun, but it doesn't help me speak. I just click options." (Participant B, Semester 3). This suggests that while ed-tech tools may enhance vocabulary acquisition, they are insufficient for developing productive oral skills, especially in the absence of feedback. This gap underscores the importance of form-focused instruction embedded in communicative task design.

b. Low-Achieving Students

Low-achieving students face linguistic challenges, such as limited vocabulary and pronunciation difficulties (e.g., strong regional accents), as well as low motivation and confidence. They tend to complete tasks for grades rather than for language mastery (Ur, 1996).

Speaking Difficulties among Low-Achieving Students

Linguistic and Phonological Deficits. Low-achieving students struggle with fundamental speaking skills. They frequently mentioned vocabulary recall issues, mispronunciation, and strong regional accents as challenges. *"I know the words in my head, but they do not come out right. People laugh at how I say them."* (Participant D, Semester 3). Such experiences are emblematic of low phonological awareness and inadequate exposure to English. This reflects the findings of Tuan and Mai (2015), who reported that pronunciation anxiety and a limited lexicon are critical barriers to EFL speaking success. Many low achievers spoke of completing English tasks out of obligation rather than interest *"I just memorise for tests. I don't try to speak because I always make mistakes."* (Participant F, Semester 5). This supports the theory that emphasizes that students with low confidence in their language capabilities often avoid communicative opportunities, thereby reinforcing a cycle of failure and demotivation. These students lacked what is termed the "Ideal L2 Self"—a vision of themselves as competent English speakers that drives motivation A.

Sociocultural Pressure and Fear of Judgment

Participants also reported ridicule from peers, particularly when they made pronunciation errors, which contributed to their social inhibition and silence. Such dynamics elevate students' affective filters, reinforcing avoidance behaviours.

2. Factors Contributing to Speaking Difficulties

| Factor Category | Specific Difficulties |
|------------------|---|
| Internal Factors | Linguistic: Limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties (e.g., regional accents). |
| Motivation | Low confidence, grade-oriented motivation, and reluctance to practice vocabulary. |
| Affective | Fear of mistakes and ridicule. |
| External Factors | Environment: Dominance of Arabic and Indonesian, limited practice opportunities, curriculum focused on religious studies. |

Table 2:

Internal and External Factors Contributing to Speaking Difficulties of Low-Achieving Students

a. Internal Factors

Based on Table 2, High-achieving students exhibit strong intrinsic motivation, which is occasionally hindered by negative past experiences. They feel freer to speak when they are not worried about judgment (Asrida & Fadli, 2018). Low-achieving students have low self-efficacy and motivation driven by academic grades, rather than language mastery. Fear of making mistakes and ridicule pose significant barriers. High-achieving students possess solid grammar and vocabulary foundations but lack authentic practice opportunities, which hinders their fluency. Low-achieving students face vocabulary and pronunciation limitations, such as regional accents that affect clarity, underscoring the need for phonological training.

b. External Factors

Both groups reported a lack of English-speaking environments in pesantren, where Arabic and Indonesian dominate, limiting communicative practice. The pesantren curriculum prioritises religious studies over speaking competence, exacerbating the students' difficulties (Muhammad & Purbani, 2024). High-achieving students utilise online resources, for example, YouTube, but find apps like Duolingo less effective for speaking practice. Low-achieving students benefit from audio-visual materials, supporting the multimodal approach (Muslem et al., 2022).

3. Recommended Strategies

| Strategy Category | Specific Strategies |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Active Practice & Self-Regulation | Self-talk, code-mixed conversations, real-life simulations, mini-theater, daily vocabulary practice, song/podcast transcription. |
| Technology Resources | & Interactive multimedia, pronunciation training apps, and online platforms for listening/reading. |
| Institutional Support | Curriculum-based speaking activities, mandatory English-speaking rules, beginner courses, constructive feedback. |

Table 3:
Student-Recommended Strategies to Address Speaking Difficulties

a. Active Practice and Engagement

Table. 3 Shows that High-achieving students suggested self-talk, code-mixed conversations, and activities such as real-life simulations or mini-theatre to enhance engagement. Low-achieving students recommend consistent practice, listening to songs and podcasts, and daily vocabulary memorisation, followed by transcription and self-correction. Students from both groups advocated for strategies such as self-talk, role-plays, daily vocabulary practice, and acting out real-life scenarios in English. *"Sometimes, I talk to myself in English about my day. It helps me think faster in English."* (Participant A). These practices are directly aligned with Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), which emphasizes meaningful communication through real-world tasks (Ellis, 2003). Such activities create low-anxiety contexts in which learners can build fluency independently.

b. Technology Utilization

High-achieving students propose interactive multimedia and pronunciation-training apps to support learning. Low-achieving students highlighted the benefits of online learning apps for improving listening and reading skills, which support speaking. Several students emphasised the utility of speech-sensitive apps such as Elsa Speak or YouGlish *"I use pronunciation apps because they let me hear and repeat what I hear. They tell me what's wrong, too."* (Participant E). These tools exemplify multimodal language learning and enable learners to receive feedback in the absence of human interlocutors. However, their value depends on the presence of interactive feedback loops that support pronunciation, fluency, and self-monitoring.

c. Institutional Support

Both groups advocated for more speaking activities in mandatory English-speaking rules in class and beginner-level courses. High-achieving students emphasise the importance of constructive feedback from teachers to accelerate skill development. Participants stressed the need for systemic changes, such as integrating English-speaking rules into pesantren routines, beginner-friendly speaking courses, and constructive feedback from teachers. *"We need teachers who encourage us, not just correct us. That gives us confidence."* (Participant B) This highlights the centrality of Vygotsky's ZPD in language instruction: learners must be guided through their "next step" in development by teachers who scaffold knowledge rather than merely evaluate correctness. Constructive feedback not punitive correction is key to learner growth.

D. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that high- and low-achieving EFL students in pesantren face distinct challenges in speaking. Despite their strong intrinsic motivation, high-achieving students are hindered by affective factors like fear of social judgment and environmental constraints like a lack of speaking practice. Conversely, low-achieving students face linguistic limitations, both vocabulary and pronunciation, as well as low motivation and confidence. The dominance of Arabic and Indonesian and a curriculum focused on religious studies exacerbate these challenges. Several Recommendation strategies for improving students' speaking skills are to always practice in daily conversation, using technology, and being supported by an institution that offers practical solutions to enhance speaking skills. This study underscores the importance of differentiated teaching strategies and supportive institutional policies in fostering a communicative learning environment. Future research can test specific interventions and expand the sample scope for more comprehensive results.

This study had several limitations that affected the generalisability of the findings. First, the sample was limited to 12 female students, thus not reflecting male students' experiences or the broader pesantren population. Second, reliance on interviews as the primary method may introduce self-reporting bias, as students may not be fully honest or aware of their difficulties in the classroom. Third, the study did not directly observe speaking performance, which could provide additional insights into the practical challenges. Future research should: (1) expand the sample to include male and female students from various pesantren; (2) combine classroom observations and speaking performance assessments to complement interview data; (3) test the

effectiveness of specific interventions, such as technology-based pronunciation training or structured speaking practice programs; and (4) explore the influence of pesantren sociocultural norms on speaking motivation in greater depth. These approaches can enrich our understanding and yield more applicable solutions.

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