

Investigating the Problems of Female Ninth-Grade Students in Learning English Speaking at MTs Al-Kautsar Islamic Boarding School, Pekanbaru

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Abstract

Despite the importance of speaking skills in English language learning, many junior high school students continue to experience difficulties in oral communication. Previous studies have often identified individual speaking barriers, yet limited attention has been given to how linguistic and affective factors interact within students' everyday classroom experiences. This study explores the speaking barriers encountered by ninth-grade students at MTS Al-Kautsar School in Pekanbaru and examines the contextual factors that shape these difficulties. Employing a qualitative descriptive design, data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with 20 ninth-grade students. The data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns in students' experiences of speaking English.

The findings indicate that students' speaking difficulties are shaped by three interrelated themes: linguistic limitations, affective challenges, and classroom participation constraints. Linguistic limitations were reflected in restricted vocabulary and a tendency to rely on the native language when communicating. Affective challenges included fear of making mistakes, anxiety in formal speaking situations, shyness when speaking in front of peers, and low self-confidence, all of which reduced students' willingness to communicate. Classroom participation constraints emerged when students struggled to express ideas spontaneously and became passive during speaking activities. The findings suggest that speaking barriers should not be understood as isolated factors but as interconnected challenges that influence students' speaking performance. This study contributes to the understanding of English-speaking difficulties among junior high school learners by highlighting the dynamic relationship between linguistic competence, affective conditions, and classroom interaction.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received : 27 February 2026

Revised : 16 May 2026

Accepted : 25 May 2026

KEYWORDS

speaking barriers, English speaking, affective factors, linguistic limitations, qualitative study, junior high school students.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

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Introduction

Speaking is one of the most important productive skills in English language learning because it enables learners to communicate ideas, opinions, and information effectively in various social contexts. In the twenty-first century, oral communication skills have become increasingly important as globalization, technological development, and international mobility require individuals to interact across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Consequently, English language education is expected not only to develop learners' knowledge of language forms but also to foster communicative competence that enables meaningful interaction in academic and everyday settings (Brown, 2007; Harmer, 2007). In Indonesia, this objective is reflected in the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes communicative competence as a central goal of English instruction. For junior high school students in Phase D, English learning is organized through a genre-based approach that encourages learners

to understand, produce, and respond to various spoken and written texts in authentic communicative situations (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). Despite these expectations, many Indonesian students continue to experience considerable difficulties in developing English-speaking proficiency (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017).

The complexity of speaking lies in the fact that successful oral communication requires the integration of linguistic, cognitive, social, and affective competencies. Learners must access vocabulary, construct grammatically acceptable utterances, produce intelligible pronunciation, and organize ideas in real time. At the same time, they are expected to respond appropriately to interlocutors, maintain interaction, and negotiate meaning during communication. Byrne (1986) describes speaking as a reciprocal process involving both productive and receptive abilities, while Brown (2007) emphasizes that effective speaking requires learners to communicate spontaneously and meaningfully. Therefore, speaking performance is influenced not only by linguistic competence but also by learners' emotional readiness and confidence to participate in communication.

Research in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts has consistently shown that speaking difficulties arise from the interaction between linguistic and affective factors. Linguistic barriers commonly include limited vocabulary, grammatical inaccuracies, pronunciation problems, and lack of fluency, which may hinder learners' ability to express ideas effectively (Harris, 1969). Meanwhile, affective factors such as anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, shyness, and low self-confidence have been found to significantly influence learners' willingness to communicate (Dewaele & Pavelescu, 2021; Khajavy, 2021). Recent studies have further suggested that adolescent learners are particularly sensitive to peer judgment and classroom social dynamics, making emotional factors especially influential during speaking activities (MacIntyre et al., 2020). These findings indicate that speaking difficulties should not be understood as isolated problems but rather as interconnected challenges shaped by learners' linguistic resources, emotional experiences, and learning environments.

Previous studies have investigated speaking difficulties among EFL learners in various educational contexts and through different methodological approaches. Franscy and Ramli (2022), using a quantitative survey in a public secondary school, reported that linguistic limitations were the dominant source of students' speaking difficulties. In contrast, Juhana (2012), through qualitative classroom research, identified psychological barriers such as anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and lack of confidence as the primary obstacles to oral participation. Similarly, Leong and Ahmadi (2017) argued that speaking difficulties emerge from the interaction between linguistic and psychological dimensions. Although these studies provide valuable insights, they have generally focused on identifying individual speaking barriers within conventional school settings. Consequently, they offer limited understanding of how linguistic, affective, and contextual factors interact in multilingual educational environments where institutional language policies shape students' language exposure and communication practices. This limitation highlights the need for further inquiry into speaking difficulties in contexts characterized by the use of multiple institutional languages.

One such context is the Islamic boarding school environment, where students are often required to learn and use more than one foreign language simultaneously. Previous research suggests that multilingual educational settings can create both opportunities and challenges for language learning. Exposure to multiple languages may enhance learners' metalinguistic awareness and communication strategies; however, unequal language exposure can also generate competition

among languages and influence language development differently (Rusdin & Purwati, 2023). In institutions where one language receives greater emphasis, students may achieve stronger proficiency in that language while experiencing reduced opportunities to develop competence in another. Therefore, institutional language policy becomes an important factor in understanding students' speaking experiences and language-learning outcomes.

This issue is particularly relevant in MTs Al-Kautsar Pekanbaru, an Islamic boarding school that implements a weekly Arabic–English language rotation system. Although both Arabic and English are formally promoted as institutional languages, Arabic receives greater emphasis during the first semester and is more frequently used in daily communication. Consequently, students are exposed to Arabic more consistently in both academic and residential environments. On the one hand, such conditions may support multilingual development by encouraging students to use a foreign language beyond the classroom. On the other hand, the dominance of Arabic may reduce students' exposure to English and limit opportunities for English-speaking practice. Furthermore, inconsistent enforcement of language policies and limited communicative use of English in everyday interactions may contribute to students' reluctance to speak English. Thus, understanding speaking difficulties in this context requires consideration not only of students' linguistic competence but also of the institutional language environment in which learning occurs.

To gain an initial understanding of the research setting, preliminary observations and informal discussions with English teachers were conducted during November–December 2025. These activities were not included as part of the main dataset; rather, they served as preliminary contextual exploration and informed the development of the observation checklist and semi-structured interview guide used in the study. The preliminary findings indicated recurring issues related to vocabulary limitations, low participation in speaking activities, speaking anxiety, and frequent reliance on Arabic or the mother tongue during communication. These observations suggested that students' speaking difficulties were influenced by multiple interconnected factors and therefore warranted a more in-depth qualitative investigation.

To examine these difficulties comprehensively, this study employs the complementary frameworks proposed by Ur (2012) and Juhana (2012). Ur's framework focuses on observable classroom speaking problems, including inhibition, lack of ideas, low or uneven participation, and excessive use of the mother tongue. In contrast, Juhana's framework addresses affective barriers such as anxiety, shyness, fear of making mistakes, and lack of confidence. Although some categories appear conceptually related, the two frameworks represent different analytical dimensions. In this study, observable participation behaviors are coded using Ur's framework, whereas internal emotional experiences reported by participants are coded using Juhana's framework. For example, low participation is treated as a behavioral manifestation, while anxiety and lack of confidence are analyzed as affective conditions that may contribute to such behavior. This distinction enables the study to avoid overlapping categories and circular interpretations while capturing both the manifestations and underlying mechanisms of speaking difficulties.

Despite the growing body of research on EFL speaking difficulties, limited attention has been given to bilingual Islamic boarding school contexts where institutional language policies influence language exposure, communication practices, and opportunities for speaking development. Moreover, previous studies have often reported speaking barriers as separate factors without sufficiently exploring how linguistic limitations, affective challenges, and contextual conditions

interact in students' everyday experiences. Therefore, this study aims to explore the speaking barriers experienced by ninth-grade students at MTs Al-Kautsar Pekanbaru and to examine how these barriers are shaped by the interplay of linguistic, affective, and contextual factors. Using a qualitative descriptive design and thematic analysis, the study seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of students' speaking difficulties and contribute to the development of more effective English-speaking instruction in bilingual Islamic boarding school settings.

Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore the speaking difficulties experienced by ninth-grade students at MTs Al-Kautsar Pekanbaru. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables researchers to investigate participants' experiences, perceptions, and meanings in depth within their natural setting (Sugiyono, 2018). Given that speaking difficulties are influenced by linguistic, affective, and contextual factors, a qualitative design was considered appropriate for capturing the complexity of students' experiences and the mechanisms underlying their communication challenges.

Participants and Sampling

The population consisted of 92 female students enrolled in three ninth-grade classes (IX A, IX B, and IX C) at MTs Al-Kautsar Pekanbaru. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of students who could provide rich and varied information regarding speaking difficulties. Twenty students were chosen proportionally from the three classes and represented different levels of English-speaking proficiency (high, intermediate, and low), as identified through teacher recommendations and classroom observations. The sample size was determined based on the principle of information richness commonly applied in qualitative research rather than statistical representation. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, indicated by the repetition of similar responses and the absence of substantially new information. Saturation was observed after approximately the eighteenth interview, and two additional interviews were conducted to confirm the stability of the emerging themes.

In addition to student participants, English teachers of the ninth-grade classes were interviewed. Teacher interviews served not only as a source of triangulation but also as a means of providing contextual explanations regarding classroom participation, language-use practices, instructional challenges, and students' speaking behaviour. Their perspectives were compared with students' accounts to strengthen the interpretation of the findings.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews as the primary source of information, supported by classroom observations and documentation. The interview guide consisted of eleven questions developed from the complementary frameworks proposed by Ur (2012) and Juhana (2012). The questions explored students' experiences related to inhibition, lack of ideas (nothing to say), low or uneven participation, mother-tongue use, fear of making mistakes, shyness, anxiety, lack of confidence, and lack of motivation in speaking English.

Prior to the main study, preliminary observations and informal discussions with English teachers were conducted during November–December 2025. These activities were not included in the main dataset; rather, they served as contextual exploration and informed the development of the interview protocol and observation guide. The preliminary findings indicated recurring issues

related to vocabulary limitations, speaking anxiety, low participation, and reliance on Arabic or the mother tongue during communication, thereby guiding the focus of the subsequent data collection process. Interviews were conducted in both Bahasa Indonesia and English to ensure participants' comprehension and to allow them to express their experiences comfortably and accurately. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

Language and Translation Procedures

Because most participants were more comfortable expressing complex experiences in Bahasa Indonesia, interviews were conducted primarily in Indonesian. All recordings were transcribed verbatim in the original language. Interview excerpts selected for presentation in the findings were then translated into English by the researcher.

To enhance translation accuracy and preserve participants' intended meanings, the translated excerpts were reviewed by an English lecturer experienced in qualitative research and translation. Any discrepancies in wording or interpretation were discussed and revised until agreement was reached. This process helped minimize translation bias and ensured that the meanings conveyed in the original responses were retained throughout the analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the interactive model developed by Miles and Huberman (1994), which consists of three interconnected stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. During the data reduction stage, interview transcripts, observation notes, and supporting documents were carefully reviewed and coded according to recurring patterns related to students' speaking difficulties. The coding process was guided by the analytical dimensions derived from Ur (2012) and Juhana (2012). Observable classroom participation behaviors, such as inhibition, low participation, and mother-tongue use, were categorized using Ur's framework, whereas emotional and psychological experiences, including anxiety, shyness, fear of mistakes, and lack of confidence, were analyzed using Juhana's framework. This distinction helped avoid conceptual overlap and enabled the identification of both behavioral manifestations and underlying affective mechanisms.

The coded data were then organized into thematic displays to facilitate comparison across participants and data sources. Finally, conclusions were drawn through an iterative process of interpretation, verification, and comparison between student interviews, teacher interviews, observation data, and supporting documentation.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies were employed to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the study. First, member checking was conducted by sharing interview summaries with selected participants to verify the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations. Second, peer debriefing was undertaken with a fellow researcher experienced in qualitative research to discuss coding decisions and emerging themes. Third, triangulation was achieved through the use of multiple data sources, including student interviews, teacher interviews, classroom observations, and documentation. Fourth, an audit trail was maintained throughout the research process by documenting methodological decisions, coding procedures, theme development, and analytical reflections. Finally, coding verification was conducted through repeated comparisons between transcripts, codes, and thematic categories to ensure consistency and credibility in the interpretation of the data.

Conceptual Framework

This study is based on the assumption that students' speaking difficulties are shaped by the interaction of linguistic, affective, and contextual factors. Linguistic and classroom participation problems are adapted from Ur's (2012) framework, which includes inhibition, lack of ideas (nothing to say), low or uneven participation, and excessive use of the mother tongue. These factors represent observable speaking behaviors that emerge during classroom interaction.

The study also adopts Juhana's (2012) framework to examine affective factors that may hinder students' willingness and ability to speak English. These factors include anxiety, shyness, fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, and lack of motivation. Unlike Ur's framework, which focuses on behavioral manifestations, Juhana's framework emphasizes the internal psychological experiences that may contribute to speaking difficulties.

In addition, the study considers contextual influences specific to the bilingual Islamic boarding school environment. These include the Arabic-English language policy, unequal exposure to English and Arabic, opportunities for English-speaking practice, and classroom participation conditions. Such contextual factors are expected to influence both linguistic development and students' emotional responses toward speaking English.

The interaction of linguistic, affective, and contextual factors shapes students' speaking experiences at MTs Al-Kautsar Pekanbaru. Through thematic analysis, these interconnected factors are examined to identify recurring patterns, underlying mechanisms, and broader themes that explain students' speaking difficulties within the bilingual boarding school setting.

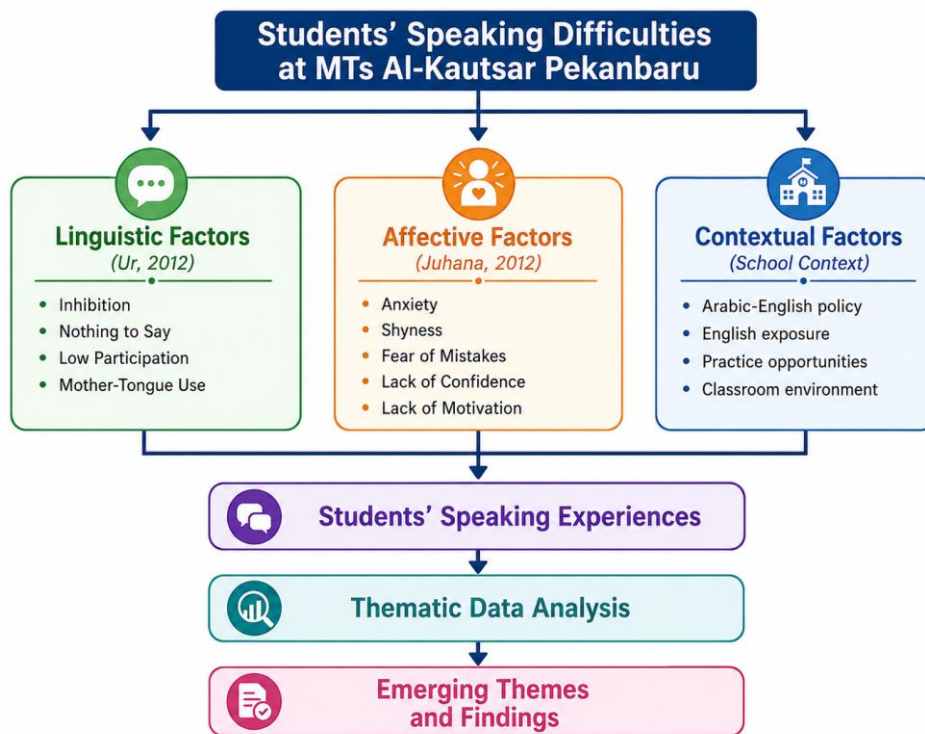


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Source: Adapted from Ur (2012), Juhana (2012), and developed by the researcher (2026)

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited to a single Islamic boarding school context and involved only female ninth-grade students. Therefore, the findings should not be generalized to all EFL learners or Islamic boarding

schools in Indonesia. Rather, the study provides an in-depth understanding of how linguistic, affective, and contextual factors interact within this particular educational setting. Future research may examine similar bilingual institutions in different regions, include more diverse participant groups, or investigate the effectiveness of instructional interventions designed to reduce speaking anxiety and increase opportunities for meaningful English communication.

Result and Discussion

Result

This study explored the barriers experienced by ninth-grade students when speaking English and examined the contextual conditions shaping those barriers in a bilingual Islamic boarding school setting. The findings are presented in two sections. The first section reports the linguistic, participatory, and affective barriers identified from student interviews. The second section presents contextual patterns related to students' language use, coping responses, and preferred speaking activities. Because one participant could report more than one barrier, the frequencies presented in Table 1 are not mutually exclusive.

English-Speaking Barriers Experienced by Ninth-Grade Students

The interview findings revealed nine categories of speaking barriers. These categories included inhibition, inability to express ideas spontaneously, low or uneven participation, use of the mother tongue and limited vocabulary, fear of making mistakes, anxiety, shyness, lack of confidence, and lack of motivation. Table 1 and Figure 2 summarize the distribution of these barriers among the 20 participants.

The most frequently reported barrier was the use of the mother tongue combined with limited vocabulary, experienced by all participants (100%). The second most frequent barrier was inability to express ideas spontaneously, reported by 17 students (85%). Shyness during debates or speeches was reported by 14 students (70%), followed by anxiety in formal speaking situations, reported by 13 students (65%). Low or uneven participation was experienced by 12 students (60%). In contrast, lack of motivation was the least frequently reported barrier, experienced by only 6 students (30%).

No.	Speaking barrier	Frequency (f)	Percentage	Description
1	Inhibition (shyness and lack of confidence)	8	40%	Experienced by nearly half of the participants.
2	Inability to express ideas spontaneously	17	85%	Experienced by most participants.
3	Low or uneven participation in speaking activities	12	60%	Experienced by more than half of the participants.
4	Use of the mother tongue and limited vocabulary	20	100%	Experienced by all participants.
5	Fear of making mistakes	8	40%	Experienced by nearly half of the participants.
6	Anxiety in formal speaking situations	13	65%	Experienced by more than half of the participants.
7	Shyness during debates or speeches	14	70%	Experienced by the majority of the participants.
8	Lack of confidence associated with limited vocabulary	8	40%	Experienced by nearly half of the participants.
9	Lack of motivation to speak English	6	30%	Experienced by a small number of participants.

Table 1 shows that the most dominant speaking barrier was the use of the mother tongue combined with limited vocabulary, reported by all 20 participants (100%). This was followed by difficulty expressing ideas spontaneously (85%), shyness during debates or speeches (70%), and anxiety in formal speaking situations (65%). In contrast, lack of motivation was the least frequently reported barrier, indicating that most participants remained interested in improving their English-speaking ability despite facing linguistic and affective challenges.

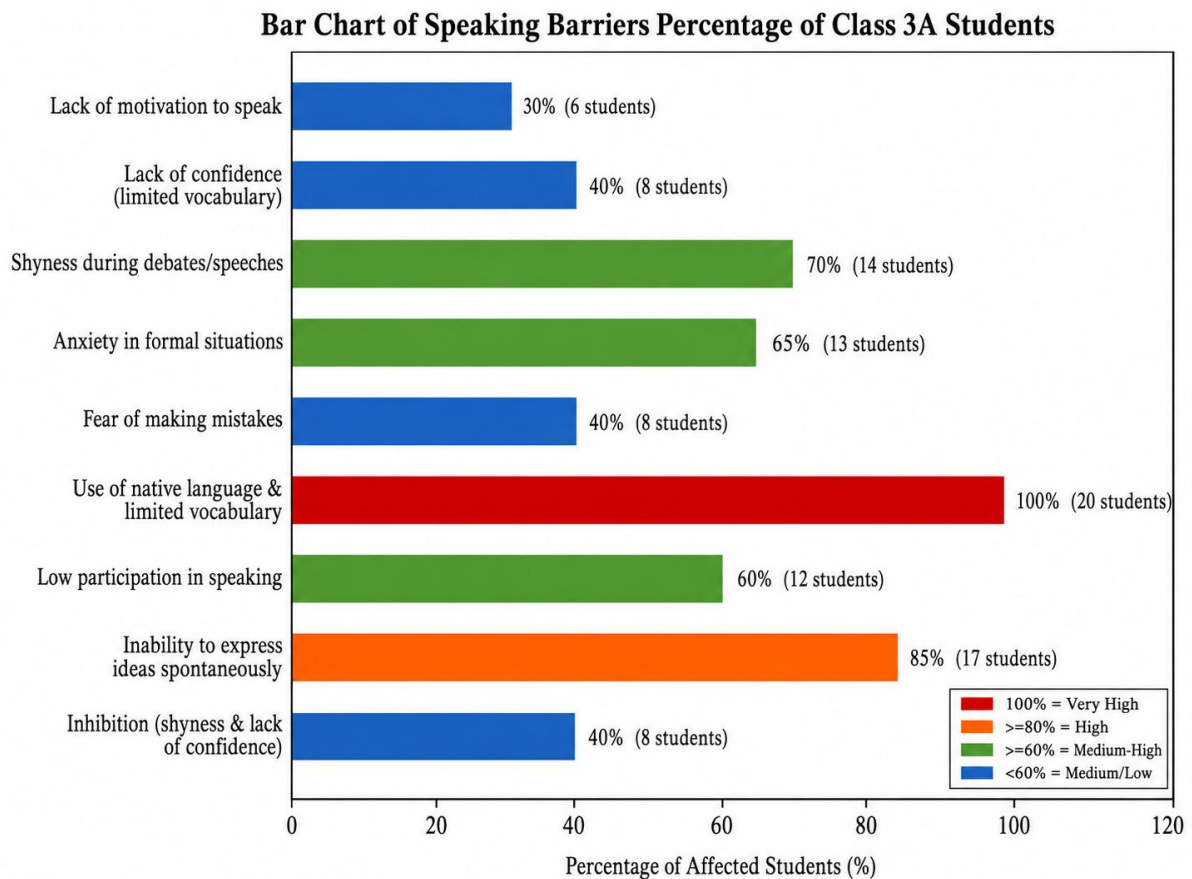


Figure 2. Distribution of English-Speaking Barriers among Ninth-Grade Students

Figure 2 presents the relative frequency of the nine speaking barriers identified through the interviews. The chart highlights the predominance of mother-tongue reliance and limited vocabulary, followed by difficulty generating ideas spontaneously. It also illustrates that psychological barriers, especially shyness and anxiety, were more prevalent than lack of motivation. The figure therefore supports the finding that students’ English-speaking difficulties were shaped by interconnected linguistic, affective, and participation-related conditions.

Linguistic and Strategic Barriers

The first major finding concerns students’ limited linguistic resources when speaking English. Eight students reported inhibition, particularly when they were required to speak in front of the class. These students described feeling shy, nervous, insufficiently fluent, or uncertain about their ability to speak English. Their insecurity was closely associated with limited vocabulary, grammatical uncertainty, and concern about inaccurate pronunciation.

The inability to express ideas spontaneously was reported by 17 students. Participants commonly explained that they felt panicked or confused when the teacher suddenly asked them to respond in English. They often knew the general topic but could not immediately retrieve suitable

vocabulary, sentence patterns, or expressions. As a result, they hesitated before speaking or waited for assistance from classmates.

Students also reported a strong reliance on Indonesian or Arabic during English-speaking activities. All 20 participants stated that they felt more comfortable using Indonesian or Arabic because these languages were more familiar in their daily communication. When students forgot an English word, 18 participants reported consulting a dictionary, while 2 students used a vocabulary book. No participant reported using paraphrasing, approximation, circumlocution, or replacement with simpler English expressions. This finding shows that students mainly depended on direct word retrieval rather than alternative communication strategies.

Participation Barriers

Low or uneven participation was reported by 12 students. Students' participation varied across speaking activities and was influenced by their perceived fluency, vocabulary knowledge, and concern about making mistakes. Several participants explained that they would speak only when directly asked by the teacher or when they felt confident that their answer was correct.

Students who reported low participation frequently mentioned shyness, lack of vocabulary, and fear of incorrect pronunciation. In particular, they were reluctant to volunteer during classroom speaking activities when they were unsure about the words they needed to use. Although some students stated that they participated regularly, the interview data showed that their participation was often dependent on teacher prompts rather than self-initiated communication.

Affective Barriers

Fear of making mistakes was reported by 8 students. These students described feeling embarrassed, nervous, or panicked when they made grammatical, vocabulary, or pronunciation errors in front of teachers and classmates. However, the responses also revealed a contrasting pattern. Twelve students stated that making mistakes did not discourage them from learning English. Instead, they regarded mistakes as a reason to study harder and improve their performance. Thus, students showed different emotional responses to errors: some associated mistakes with embarrassment and avoidance, whereas others viewed them as part of the learning process.

Anxiety in formal speaking situations was experienced by 13 students. The situations most frequently associated with anxiety were delivering speeches in front of the class and being called on directly by the teacher. Eight students identified public speaking as the situation that made them most nervous, whereas five students mentioned teacher-directed questioning. Three participants explicitly stated that they did not experience substantial anxiety when speaking English.

Shyness was reported by 14 students. Debate activities were the most common setting associated with shyness, mentioned by 11 students. Three additional students stated that they became shy when they made mistakes in front of classmates. The remaining six participants reported that they did not experience considerable shyness during English-speaking activities.

Lack of confidence was reported by 8 students. These participants consistently linked low confidence with limited vocabulary. They explained that they became hesitant when they could not remember English words, construct sentences, or pronounce vocabulary correctly. Meanwhile, 12 students did not report substantial confidence-related barriers.

Lack of motivation was the least frequent barrier, reported by 6 students. These participants referred to limited support, unsuitable learning conditions, lack of interest, or incompatibility with

the teacher's approach as factors that reduced their motivation to speak English. In contrast, 14 students stated that they did not experience serious motivational barriers.

Contextual Factors Shaping Students' Speaking Experiences

The second objective of this study was to examine how students' speaking barriers were shaped by the bilingual Islamic boarding school context. Interview data showed that students' English-speaking experiences were closely connected to their daily use of Indonesian and Arabic, their limited opportunities to use English spontaneously, and the types of speaking activities provided within the institution.

Participants repeatedly described Indonesian and Arabic as more familiar languages for daily interaction. This familiarity influenced their choice of language during English-speaking activities. When students encountered vocabulary difficulties, they tended to return to Indonesian or Arabic, consult a dictionary, or seek help from peers. The data therefore show that students' reliance on familiar languages was closely related to their limited readiness to maintain English communication when they encountered lexical difficulties.

Table 2 presents the main contextual and coping patterns reported by students during English-speaking activities.

Table 2. Contextual and Coping Patterns Reported by Students

Contextual or coping pattern	Frequency	Percentage	Description
Preference for Indonesian or Arabic in daily communication	20	100%	All participants reported greater comfort using familiar languages.
Use of a dictionary when forgetting an English word	18	90%	Dictionary use was the dominant response to vocabulary problems.
Use of a vocabulary book when forgetting an English word	2	10%	A small number of students used vocabulary books as an alternative resource.
Discussion with peers when unable to express ideas	12	60%	Peer discussion was used to obtain ideas or vocabulary before speaking.
Use of paraphrasing, approximation, or circumlocution	0	0%	No participant reported using alternative communication strategies.
Preference for muhadhoroh as a speaking activity	15	75%	Muhadhoroh was identified as the most motivating activity for practicing public speaking.

The findings also identified muhadhoroh as an important contextual resource for speaking development. Fifteen students, or 75% of the participants, identified muhadhoroh as the activity that most encouraged them to speak English. In this context, muhadhoroh refers to a structured public-speaking activity in which students deliver speeches, presentations, or religious talks before an audience. Students described this activity as meaningful because it provided repeated opportunities to prepare, perform, and speak in front of peers and teachers.

In addition to muhadhoroh, students mentioned debates, speeches, and language games as activities that encouraged English speaking. However, the interview data showed that these activities could produce different responses. For some students, public-speaking activities increased confidence and motivation; for others, especially those with limited vocabulary or high levels of shyness, they triggered anxiety and hesitation. Thus, the same institutional speaking activity could

function either as a source of practice or as a challenging performance situation, depending on students' linguistic readiness and emotional condition.

Overall, the results show that English-speaking barriers among ninth-grade students were multidimensional. Linguistic limitations, particularly limited vocabulary and reliance on the mother tongue, represented the most dominant pattern. These linguistic difficulties were accompanied by challenges in expressing ideas spontaneously, participating voluntarily, and maintaining communication when students could not retrieve the required vocabulary.

The findings further show that affective barriers were strongly associated with formal speaking tasks. Shyness and anxiety were particularly visible during debates, speeches, and teacher-directed oral questioning. Nevertheless, most students remained motivated to improve their English-speaking ability, especially through culturally meaningful activities such as *muhadhoroh*. These findings provide the empirical basis for the subsequent discussion of how linguistic, affective, and contextual factors interact in shaping students' English-speaking experiences.

Discussion

This study examined the multidimensional barriers experienced by ninth-grade students when speaking English. The findings indicate that speaking difficulties were not attributable to a single linguistic weakness or psychological condition; instead, they emerged from the interaction among linguistic limitations, affective responses, classroom participation patterns, and restricted communication strategies. The most dominant barrier was the use of the mother tongue combined with limited vocabulary, reported by all 20 participants. This was followed by students' inability to express ideas spontaneously (85%), shyness during debates or speeches (70%), and anxiety in formal speaking situations (65%). Low or uneven participation was also evident, as 60% of students tended to speak only when prompted by the teacher. By contrast, lack of motivation was the least frequent barrier, suggesting that most students retained an interest in improving their English-speaking ability despite experiencing substantial linguistic and emotional constraints. These findings directly address the study objective by showing that ninth-grade students' speaking problems are fundamentally multidimensional and require integrated instructional responses.

The prominence of vocabulary limitations and mother-tongue dependence suggests that students' speaking difficulties begin at the point of lexical retrieval. When students could not recall appropriate words quickly, they tended to hesitate, remain silent, seek help from peers, or rely on Indonesian and Arabic. Consequently, limited vocabulary did not operate as an isolated linguistic deficit; it also affected confidence, participation, idea generation, and anxiety. The high frequency of the "nothing to say" barrier further indicates that students lacked not only vocabulary items but also accessible expressions, discourse routines, and spontaneous speaking strategies. Their predominant reliance on dictionaries, rather than paraphrasing, approximation, gesture, or circumlocution, demonstrates that they had not yet developed compensatory communication strategies that could sustain interaction when precise lexical knowledge was unavailable.

These findings are broadly consistent with recent global research on foreign language anxiety, communicative competence, and willingness to communicate. Zhou et al. (2020) demonstrated that the relationship between second-language competence and willingness to communicate is moderated by foreign language anxiety. This perspective helps explain why students in the present study often remained silent despite having some English knowledge: linguistic competence alone was insufficient when students anticipated embarrassment, negative evaluation, or linguistic failure.

Similarly, Bai (2023) found that foreign language anxiety and boredom predicted willingness to communicate among struggling EFL learners. The present findings extend this argument by showing that anxiety among ninth-grade students was especially situational. Students were more anxious when delivering speeches, participating in debates, or being suddenly called upon by the teacher than during informal interaction. Therefore, anxiety should not be interpreted merely as an individual trait; rather, it is shaped by task demands, peer visibility, perceived linguistic preparedness, and the evaluative nature of classroom interaction.

Notably, the present findings also reveal a more nuanced pattern than studies that portray anxiety as wholly debilitating. Although eight students explicitly reported fear of making mistakes, twelve students described mistakes as a reason to study harder. This suggests that errors may produce different reactions depending on students' resilience, prior speaking experience, and the emotional climate of the classroom. Such variation is important because it indicates that speaking anxiety cannot be reduced simply by removing all performance pressure. Instead, teachers need to transform errors into manageable learning opportunities by establishing feedback practices that distinguish between communicative effort and linguistic accuracy. In this respect, the study supports recent work emphasizing that willingness to communicate is influenced not only by anxiety but also by learners' capacity to regulate emotions and recover from everyday academic difficulties (Lin et al., 2025).

The findings also align with recent studies conducted in Indonesia. Hanafiah et al. (2022) examined vocabulary learning, speaking skill, and speaking anxiety simultaneously among Indonesian EFL learners, indicating that these dimensions are closely connected in instructional practice. The present study supports this relationship qualitatively: students consistently identified vocabulary limitations as the main source of insecurity, anxiety, and difficulty in responding spontaneously. Likewise, Abrar et al. (2024) found that EFL speaking anxiety is influenced by vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, fluency, low self-esteem, motivation, lecturers, classmates, and unfamiliar topics. These factors are strongly reflected in the current findings, particularly students' concern about pronunciation, grammar, peer reactions, and formal speaking situations. The similarity suggests that speaking anxiety in Indonesian EFL contexts is commonly produced by the convergence of linguistic gaps and socially evaluative classroom conditions rather than by limited motivation alone.

However, the present study also contributes a distinct contextual insight. Unlike studies focusing on university students or out-of-class communication, this research involved ninth-grade students who were still developing foundational English vocabulary and oral-expression routines. Their use of Indonesian and Arabic reflects a multilingual educational environment in which the first language functions as both a communicative resource and a potential barrier to sustained English production. Recent Indonesian research has suggested that code-switching may reduce anxiety by allowing students to preserve interaction when their English resources are insufficient (Sholikhah & Isnaini, 2024). Nevertheless, the present findings indicate that unrestricted dependence on the mother tongue may also prevent students from experimenting with alternative English communication strategies. Thus, the pedagogical issue is not whether students should be prohibited from using their first language, but how teachers can gradually move them from reliance on translation toward strategic English expression. The importance of public-speaking activities such as

muhadhoroh, speeches, debates, and games further suggests that students are motivated when speaking tasks are meaningful and socially recognizable, even when those tasks also generate anxiety.

Theoretically, the findings extend Ur's (2012) framework of speaking barriers and Juhana's (2012) psychological barriers by demonstrating that linguistic, psychological, and strategic difficulties are interconnected rather than independent categories. Limited vocabulary and mother-tongue reliance appear to function as upstream barriers because they constrain idea generation and fluency, which subsequently intensify inhibition, shyness, anxiety, and low participation. The findings also complement the willingness-to-communicate perspective by illustrating that students' readiness to speak is situationally shaped by perceived competence, emotional safety, and task format. In this sense, speaking competence should be conceptualized not merely as grammatical knowledge or pronunciation accuracy but as a dynamic capacity to retrieve language, manage emotional pressure, and maintain interaction despite imperfect linguistic resources.

Pedagogically, teachers should combine systematic vocabulary instruction with frequent low-stakes speaking practice. Students need lexical chunks, sentence starters, topic-specific expressions, and explicit instruction in communication strategies such as paraphrasing, approximation, asking for clarification, and using simple alternative expressions. Pair work, small-group rehearsal, role-play, and gradual movement from prepared to spontaneous tasks may reduce anxiety before students engage in debates or formal speeches. Feedback should prioritize message clarity and communicative effort before detailed correction of grammar or pronunciation. At the policy level, schools should support speaking-friendly environments through regular English clubs, muhadhoroh programs, peer-support routines, and teacher professional development focused on anxiety-sensitive instruction. Although this study did not directly examine social media use, online identity, or mental-health outcomes, school policy should also promote responsible use of digital speaking tools, such as recorded practice, vocabulary applications, and moderated peer-feedback platforms, while protecting students from humiliating public correction and negative online comparison.

The novelty of this study lies in its integration of two complementary theoretical perspectives to identify nine categories of English-speaking barriers among ninth-grade students. Rather than treating inhibition, lack of ideas, low participation, mother-tongue use, fear of mistakes, anxiety, shyness, low confidence, and motivation as separate problems, the findings demonstrate how they operate as a connected system. Methodologically, the study contributes a qualitative interpretation of frequency-based findings by showing why barriers emerge and how students attempt to cope with them. The study also offers a contextually grounded contribution by identifying the dual role of Indonesian and Arabic, peer discussion, dictionary use, and muhadhoroh activities in shaping students' English-speaking experiences. These findings expand current knowledge by demonstrating that improving speaking performance requires both linguistic scaffolding and emotional support.

This study has several limitations. First, the findings were based on interviews with 20 students from one ninth-grade context; therefore, the results should not be generalized to all Indonesian EFL learners. Second, the study relied primarily on students' self-reported experiences, which may have been influenced by memory limitations, social desirability, or reluctance to disclose personal anxiety. Third, the study did not include direct classroom observation across multiple speaking tasks, standardized vocabulary measurement, or a comparison between students with different proficiency levels. Future research should involve larger and more diverse samples, combine interviews with classroom observation and speaking-performance assessment, and

examine how vocabulary knowledge, communication strategies, anxiety, and willingness to communicate interact over time. Experimental or quasi-experimental studies are also needed to evaluate whether interventions such as structured spontaneous-speaking activities, peer rehearsal, digital vocabulary support, and anxiety-sensitive feedback can improve students' oral participation and communicative confidence.

Conclusion

This study concludes that ninth-grade students at MTs Al-Kautsar School in Pekanbaru face various speaking barriers in their English language learning. Based on interview findings, nine barriers were identified. The most common barrier was the use of the mother tongue combined with limited vocabulary, which was experienced by all participants, indicating that linguistic factors remain a fundamental challenge. Affective barriers such as the inability to express ideas spontaneously, shyness, and anxiety were also highly prominent among the majority of participants. Meanwhile, a lack of motivation to speak was found to be the least common barrier, experienced by only six participants.

Overall, the barriers identified in this study are primarily rooted in affective and linguistic factors, which are closely interrelated. Students' limited vocabulary leads to a lack of confidence, which in turn triggers anxiety and difficulties in speaking situations. Based on these findings, several recommendations are proposed. For English teachers, it is recommended to create a more supportive and non-pressured classroom environment, incorporate engaging speaking activities such as muhadhoroh, debates, and games, and provide systematic vocabulary-building exercises to help students gradually overcome these barriers. For students, it is encouraged to practice speaking English more actively both inside and outside the classroom and to use alternative communication strategies rather than relying solely on dictionaries when facing vocabulary difficulties. For future researchers, it is suggested to conduct similar studies using a larger sample or a mixed-methods approach that also incorporates classroom observation data, in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of speaking barriers in EFL contexts.

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