FOSTER JELT
Journal of English Language Teaching

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Vol.7, No. 2, April 2026
***e*-ISSN: 2723-4126**
***p*-ISSN: 2776-8880**

VOCATIONAL STUDENTS' SPEAKING CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES FOR EMPLOYABILITY: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the challenges vocational students encounter in developing English-speaking skills and self-efficacy, and explores the learning strategies and classroom practices they perceive as helpful for global employability. Employing a qualitative research design with thematic analysis following the Miles and Huberman interactive model, data were collected through in-depth interviews with seven vocational students and classroom observations at a vocational school in Indonesia. The interview protocols captured students' linguistic, affective, and environmental challenges, as well as their perceptions of helpful strategies and practices. The findings revealed eight major speaking challenges: linguistic difficulties in spontaneous speech production; pronunciation and vocabulary barriers; affective barriers including anxiety, fear, and lack of confidence; fear of negative evaluation; peer influence on speaking willingness; insufficient classroom speaking opportunities; limited out-of-class practice; and resource limitations. Students identified eight helpful strategies: utilization of digital media for independent learning; repetition and preparation strategies; pair work and group discussions; structured speaking activities; supportive teacher practices; authentic communication opportunities; supportive classroom environments; and integration of vocational contexts. Classroom observations confirmed limited speaking practice time, student hesitation, and the effectiveness of pair work and teacher modeling. This study contributes to understanding speaking development in vocational contexts by highlighting the interconnected nature of linguistic, affective, social, and environmental challenges. The findings offer practical implications for teachers, curriculum developers, and policymakers seeking to enhance vocational students' oral communication skills for global workforce participation.

Keywords: Global Employability, Language Anxiety, Speaking Skills, Self-Efficacy, Speaking Strategies

INTRODUCTION

The globalization of labor markets has fundamentally repositioned English speaking proficiency from a supplementary academic skill to a core vocational competency. Across the tourism, hospitality, technology, and manufacturing sectors that absorb the majority of Indonesian vocational school graduates, oral English communication is increasingly required for interaction with international clients, navigation of English medium technical

FOSTER JELT
Journal of English Language Teaching

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Vol.7, No. 2, April 2026
***e*-ISSN: 2723-4126**
***p*-ISSN: 2776-8880**

documentation, and participation in globally networked professional environments(British Council, 2023). Indonesia's vocational education reform agenda, most recently articulated in the Merdeka Belajar framework (Kemendikbudristek, 2022; Safira & Azzahra, 2022), explicitly targets the development of graduates capable of contributing competitively to the global workforce, a goal that makes English oral communication structurally essential rather than merely desirable.

Despite this policy emphasis, the gap between aspiration and classroom reality remains wide. Vocational students across Indonesia consistently graduate with passive reading comprehension that far exceeds their productive oral competence (Apsari et al., 2022; Konstantinidou et al., 2022). This disparity is not simply a matter of instructional time or curriculum design. It reflects a complex web of intersecting cognitive, affective, social, and environmental barriers that are inadequately addressed by prevailing pedagogical practices. Research consistently documents that vocational English classrooms in Indonesia prioritize grammar instruction and written exercises over oral production, leaving students systematically under practiced in the very skill most critical for their professional futures (Anwas et al., 2022, 2024). In regional contexts such as Tana Toraja, where English exposure beyond the classroom is minimal and digital infrastructure is limited, these structural constraints are substantially more acute (Anshori et al., 2022; Handayani & Hidayat, 2025).

Speaking is widely recognized as the most cognitively and affectively demanding of the four language skills. Unlike reading or writing, spoken communication requires simultaneous real time processing across multiple stages: selecting communicative intentions, encoding grammatical structures, and executing phonological articulation (Chen & Hwang, 2022; Fan & Chen, 2023). When learners lack automatized linguistic knowledge, this concurrent processing load exceeds available cognitive capacity, producing the hesitation, self-correction, and breakdown characteristic of novice second language speakers (Razkane et al., 2026). For vocational students in regional Indonesian schools with limited English learning histories, this processing bottleneck manifests earlier and more severely than among university level learners studied in better resourced urban contexts (Pithers & Lim, 2021).

Compounding these cognitive demands, foreign language anxiety represents one of the most consistently documented barriers to speaking development. Sun established foreign language anxiety as a distinct affective state associated with reduced willingness to communicate and impaired oral performance (Ariyanti et al., 2023; Sun et al., 2026). More recent empirical work has confirmed that anxiety does not merely correlate with lower performance but actively suppresses speaking attempts through a cycle of avoidance: students who experience anxiety avoid speaking, limited speaking reduces practice opportunities, reduced practice sustains low self-efficacy, and low self-efficacy reinforces anxiety (Luo & Xiong, 2025; Xu & Zhang, 2025). Self-efficacy theory illuminates the psychological mechanism sustaining this cycle: students who interpret their anxiety as evidence of incompetence become progressively less willing to attempt speaking tasks, even when their linguistic knowledge would technically allow them to do so (Hoang, 2026; S. Wang et al., 2026).

FOSTER JELT
Journal of English Language Teaching

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Vol.7, No. 2, April 2026
***e*-ISSN: 2723-4126**
***p*-ISSN: 2776-8880**

The social environment of the classroom further shapes speaking development in ways that are frequently underestimated in pedagogical design. Peer interaction can simultaneously facilitate and constrain speaking willingness: while collaborative small group configurations reduce the social exposure of whole class performance and enable mutual scaffolding (Martinez-Buffa, 2026). fear of negative peer evaluation can produce systematic avoidance of linguistic risk taking even within ostensibly supportive collaborative formats (Hussain et al., 2025; Mahan & de Zarobe, 2025). In Indonesian vocational classrooms, where face saving concerns are culturally salient, this tension between the theoretical benefits of peer work and its realized outcomes has received insufficient empirical attention.

Notwithstanding the growing international literature on second language speaking, three significant research gaps justify the present study. First, the overwhelming majority of empirical studies have examined university level academic English learners in well-resourced institutional settings (Cain et al., 2026; Gilchrist et al., 2026), leaving vocational students in developing country regional contexts substantially underrepresented. Second, speaking challenges and helpful strategies have typically been studied as separate phenomena rather than as elements of a single interconnected ecological system, obscuring the self-reinforcing dynamics that sustain barriers to speaking development over time. Third, no study has specifically investigated the intersection of cognitive, affective, social, and environmental speaking challenges among Indonesian SMK students in highland regional settings such as Tana Toraja, where the combination of limited infrastructure, minimal out of school English exposure, and culturally specific social dynamics produces a qualitatively distinct learning context. These three gaps collectively constitute the scholarly justification for this inquiry.

This study addresses these gaps by investigating vocational students' English speaking challenges and effective learning strategies at SMK Tira Rantetayo, Tana Toraja, Indonesia. Two research questions guide the inquiry: (1) What challenges do vocational students encounter in developing English speaking skills and self-efficacy? (2) What learning strategies and classroom practices do vocational students perceive as most helpful in improving their speaking skills for global employability? By centering students' lived experiences through qualitative inquiry and triangulating interview data with classroom observation, this study provides a comprehensive, ecologically grounded account of speaking development barriers and enabling conditions in Indonesian vocational English education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Speaking as a Complex Skill: Cognitive Dimensions

The cognitive complexity of second language speaking has been most influentially conceptualized by Levelt, whose speech production model identifies three sequential but overlapping processing stages: conceptualization, formulation, and articulation. Each stage imposes demands on working memory, and for second language speakers whose linguistic representations are not yet automatized, the concurrent load across stages regularly exceeds

FOSTER JELT
Journal of English Language Teaching

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Vol.7, No. 2, April 2026
***e*-ISSN: 2723-4126**
***p*-ISSN: 2776-8880**

processing capacity (Wu & Liu, 2025). Cognitive fluency and utterance fluency are distinct dimensions that respond differently to pedagogical conditions such as pre-task planning time and topic familiarity, while working memory capacity significantly moderates the relationship between task complexity and oral performance, with lower-capacity learners disproportionately affected by cognitively demanding speaking tasks. Taken together, these findings indicate that effective speaking pedagogy must reduce unnecessary cognitive load while simultaneously building the automatized linguistic knowledge that enables fluent real-time production (Suzuki & Kormos, 2025).

Recent research has examined how vocabulary knowledge, grammatical accuracy, and phonological encoding each contribute to speaking fluency, converging on the conclusion that partial competence in any single dimension can constrain overall oral performance even when other dimensions are adequate. Furthermore, pronunciation difficulties specifically generate a self-reinforcing cycle of avoidance: learners who fear mispronunciation avoid speaking, and avoidance limits the phonological practice necessary for improvement. For Indonesian vocational students whose English phonological system differs substantially from their first language, this pronunciation anxiety layer compounds the general cognitive demands of L2 speaking in ways that require dedicated instructional attention (Chan et al., 2024; Fitria, 2020).

Foreign Language Anxiety and Self-Efficacy in Speaking Development

Foreign language anxiety is negatively associated with speaking performance, willingness to communicate, and overall achievement. Enjoyment and anxiety function as independent dimensions: high anxiety suppresses speaking attempts, while high enjoyment buffers anxiety's negative effects on performance (Luo & Xiong, 2025). Classroom environment and peer relationship quality moderate the anxiety-willingness relationship, with high-quality contexts maintaining willingness even under elevated anxiety (Chan et al., 2024). Self-efficacy theory explains why anxiety becomes self-sustaining: students who attribute difficulties to stable incompetence develop low self-efficacy, reducing practice and confirming initial beliefs (Ahad et al., 2025). Four self-efficacy pathways exist: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and reinterpretation of physiological states (Zhou et al., 2023).

Peer Interaction and Collaborative Learning in Speaking Development

Peer interaction supports speaking development through collaborative small-group configurations that generate co-constructed meaning, mutual scaffolding, and increased speaking time (Handayani R., 2025).Speaking fluency requires extended meaning-focused output practice, which peer interaction provides more consistently than teacher-led instruction (Idris et al., 2025; Namaziandost & Çakmak, 2026). Peer collaboration also satisfies needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, sustaining intrinsic motivation (Anwas et al., 2024; Zhu et al., 2023). However, benefits depend on relationship quality and task design: fear of negative peer evaluation can produce collaborative silence, negating theoretical benefit (Swearing, 2025). Peer interaction quality shared task orientation,

FOSTER JELT
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Vol.7, No. 2, April 2026
***e*-ISSN: 2723-4126**
***p*-ISSN: 2776-8880**

mutual encouragement, and positive affect is the primary determinant of speaking gains (Hung & Pawan, 2026).

Vocational English, ESP, and Employability-Oriented Pedagogy

ESP approaches linking language instruction to professional domains are associated with stronger motivation and durable skill development in vocational learners (Novikova & Suima, 2025; Syaheera et al., 2024). Vocational learning is most effective when it mirrors authentic workplace practices, enabling learners to perceive alignment between classroom activities and professional futures (Villabona & Cenoz, 2022).Vocational relevance aligns with self-determination theory: students who perceive English speaking as connected to career aspirations invest more effort and engage in self-directed practice (Liu et al., 2023). Indonesian vocational students report higher motivation when career connections are made explicit, yet such integration remains inconsistent across SMK practice (Cahyono & Perdhani, 2022; Wang & Guo, 2023; Wang & Liu, 2026) Without motivationally relevant opportunities, learner agency for self-directed development is severely constrained (Liu et al., 2025).

Positioning the Present Study

The existing literature predominantly examines university-level learners in well-resourced contexts, studies cognitive and affective dimensions in isolation from social and environmental conditions, and largely excludes Indonesian vocational students in regional highland settings (Lau et al., 2025; Negari, 2023). The present study addresses this gap by examining the full ecological complexity of speaking development barriers and enabling strategies among vocational students in Tana Toraja, South Sulawesi. Through qualitative inquiry triangulating student self-reports with classroom observation, the study provides context-specific evidence that extends and challenges findings from more resourced educational environments.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate vocational students lived experiences in developing English-speaking skills. Qualitative methods are epistemologically appropriate for this inquiry because the research questions concern the meanings, interpretations, and contextually embedded experiences that students attach to their speaking challenges and strategies phenomena that resist quantitative operationalization and require 'participant meaning-making' as the primary analytical orientation. Creswell & Poth (2018) specifically advocate qualitative approaches for educational research examining complex phenomena within their natural institutional settings, where rich contextual description is essential for understanding the mechanisms that produce observed patterns.

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at SMK Tira Rantetayo, a vocational school in Tana Toraja Regency, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. The school serves students from the broader Tana

FOSTER JELT
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Vol.7, No. 2, April 2026
***e*-ISSN: 2723-4126**
***p*-ISSN: 2776-8880**

Toraja district, a region characterized by limited English-language infrastructure and sparse opportunities for authentic English communication outside formal schooling. Seven vocational students participated in in-depth interviews, selected through purposive maximum variation sampling, with criteria including enrollment in vocational programs, experience of English-speaking instruction, and willingness to share experiences openly. Maximum variation sampling was selected to ensure representation across diverse speaking proficiency levels, genders, and program specializations, enabling the capture of a broad range of speaking challenges and strategy use (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2024).

The sample size of seven participants is consistent with qualitative conventions for in-depth interview research and was determined by the principle of data saturation, the point at which additional interviews yield no substantively new themes. Saturation was reached after the sixth interview, with the seventh confirming rather than extending the thematic structure. This validates small, purposively selected samples in qualitative research where the goal is transferable theoretical insight rather than statistical generalizability (Campbell et al., 2020).

Data Collection

Data were collected through two complementary methods. First, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with all seven participants using a protocol developed through comprehensive review of the speaking development literature and validated through pilot testing with two students not included in the main sample. The protocol covered four thematic areas: (a) experiences of English-speaking challenges in classroom and real-world settings; (b) perceptions of specific linguistic, affective, and social barriers; (c) strategies employed for independent speaking improvement; and (d) classroom practices perceived as most helpful. Sample interview questions included: 'Can you describe a situation when you found it difficult to speak in English? What happened?'; 'What do you do outside of class to practice your English speaking?'; 'What does your teacher do that helps you feel more willing to speak?' Interviews were conducted in Indonesian to enable full and natural expression (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2021), lasted 45–60 minutes each, and were audio-recorded with informed consent.

Second, classroom observations were conducted across multiple sessions using a structured observation instrument documenting student speaking behaviors, teacher instructional practices, peer interactions, activity structures, and time allocation. Field notes captured contextual details and non-verbal cues following (Murchison, 2026) guidelines for systematic field note documentation. Observations served both a corroborating function (triangulating interview self-reports) and a contextual enrichment function (documenting classroom conditions that students described but could not fully articulate in interview).

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed (Saldaña, 2021) interactive model comprising three concurrent analytical activities. Data condensation involved verbatim transcription of all interviews, repeated reading for familiarization, and systematic coding using NVivo 12. Initial coding employed both deductive codes derived from the theoretical framework (speaking

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Vol.7, No. 2, April 2026
***e*-ISSN: 2723-4126**
***p*-ISSN: 2776-8880**

challenges, strategy types, affective factors) and inductive codes emerging from the data (Saldaña, 2021). Codes were refined iteratively through constant comparison across transcripts and organized into categories through axial coding and thematic synthesis. Data display involved construction of thematic matrices presenting themes, key findings, and representative quotations enabling visual pattern recognition across participants. Conclusion drawing and verification involved interpretation of cross-case patterns, active searching for disconfirming evidence, and member checking with five of seven participants who reviewed thematic summaries and confirmed representational accuracy.

Trustworthiness and Ethics

Trustworthiness was established through multiple strategies following (Noble & Smith, 2025) criteria. Credibility was addressed through prolonged engagement with the research site, triangulation of interview and observation data, and member checking. Transferability was supported through thick description of the research context, participant characteristics, and analytical procedures. Dependability was enhanced through an audit trail documenting analytical decisions and a reflexive journal maintained throughout data collection and analysis (Campbell et al., 2020). Confirmability was strengthened through peer debriefing with two colleagues external to the project. Inter-coder reliability was assessed through independent coding of two transcripts by a second researcher, yielding 83% initial agreement with full consensus achieved through discussion. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional authority, informed consent was secured from all participants, and pseudonyms (S1–S7) were assigned throughout.

RESULTS

Thematic analysis of interview data from seven vocational students, triangulated with classroom observations, revealed two major finding categories: speaking challenges and effective strategies. To enhance analytical focus and reduce fragmentation, the original eight themes identified in each category have been consolidated into six analytically coherent themes per category. Together, the findings illuminate the multidimensional, interconnected nature of speaking barriers in this Indonesian vocational context and the active adaptive agency students exercise in responding to them.

Speaking Challenges

Table 1. Consolidated themes in vocational students' English speaking challenges (n = 7)

Theme (Consolidated)	Core Finding	Representative Quotation
Cognitive-Linguistic Overload (Spontaneous Speech & Vocabulary)	Real-time speech production overwhelms processing capacity; vocabulary gaps silence students under communicative pressure.	"I know the meaning, but when I have to say it quickly, my mind goes blank and the words just disappear." (S3)
Pronunciation Anxiety & Avoidance	Fear of mispronunciation generates embarrassment and systematic avoidance, creating a self-reinforcing barrier to oral practice.	"I am scared to speak because my pronunciation is not good. I think my friends will laugh." (S1)

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Vol.7, No. 2, April 2026
***e*-ISSN: 2723-4126**
***p*-ISSN: 2776-8880**

Affective Barriers: Anxiety, Fear & Low Self-Efficacy	Physical and psychological anxiety symptoms inhibit speaking willingness. Low self-efficacy produces avoidance that sustains incompetence beliefs.	"My heart beats fast when the teacher asks me to speak in front of the class. I want to answer but I cannot." (S5)
Fear of Negative Evaluation	Peer and teacher judgment functions as a powerful social threat that suppresses speaking attempts, even when partial linguistic knowledge is available.	"Even if I know a little, I prefer to be quiet. If I make a mistake, everyone will see." (S7)
Insufficient Practice Opportunities (In-class & Out-of-class)	Grammar and written exercises dominate class time; no English-speaking community exists outside school to sustain independent practice.	"In class we mostly write and memorize grammar rules. We almost never really speak English." (S2)
Environmental & Resource Constraints	Limited internet, absence of language laboratory, and inadequate digital tools compound disadvantages and restrict both instruction and self-directed practice.	"Our school does not have a language lab. Sometimes there is no internet, so we cannot use apps to practice." (S6)

Note. Participant pseudonyms S1–S7. Quotations translated from Indonesian by the research team and verified through member checking.

The six consolidated themes span cognitive-linguistic, affective, social, and environmental dimensions. Two themes Cognitive-Linguistic Overload and Pronunciation Anxiety represent the primary linguistic barriers, with both exhibiting a self-reinforcing quality: limited vocabulary and pronunciation competence generate anxiety, and anxiety further impairs real-time retrieval and articulation. This bidirectional relationship between cognitive difficulty and affective response distinguishes speaking from other language skills and explains why isolated grammar instruction, which reduces cognitive demand without building affective resilience, fails to develop communicative confidence.

Affective Barriers and Fear of Negative Evaluation constitute the central social-psychological obstacles. The physical manifestations of anxiety described by participants heart palpitations, mental blanking, voice trembling reflect the somatic dimension of foreign language anxiety documented by (MacIntyre et al., 2022) are consistent with neurobiological accounts of threat response activation under socially evaluative conditions (Schumann et al., 2026). The fear of negative evaluation from peers emerges as a particularly powerful suppressant of speaking attempts: participants reported remaining silent even when they possessed sufficient linguistic resources to respond, prioritizing social face-protection over communicative practice. This finding is consistent with (Khajavy et al., 2021); large-scale study demonstrating that fear of negative evaluation is the strongest single predictor of L2 speaking avoidance.

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Journal of English Language Teaching

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Vol.7, No. 2, April 2026
***e*-ISSN: 2723-4126**
***p*-ISSN: 2776-8880**

The fifth theme Insufficient Practice Opportunities bridges individual and institutional levels of explanation. Classroom observations confirmed participants' self-reports: speaking practice constituted approximately 15–20% of observed lesson time, with grammar instruction and written exercises accounting for the remainder. This practice deficit is particularly consequential because, as (Newton, 2024) emphasize, fluency requires repeated, time-extended practice under meaning-focused communicative conditions that cannot be compressed or substituted. The sixth theme Environmental and Resource Constraints contextualizes the challenge within the material conditions of regional Indonesian vocational education, were limited infrastructure compounds individual and pedagogical obstacles.

Effective Strategies and Classroom Practices

Table 2. Consolidated themes in helpful speaking strategies and classroom practices (n = 7)

Theme (Consolidated)	Core Finding	Representative Quotation
Digital Self-Directed Learning (YouTube, Films, Apps)	Authentic digital media provide pronunciation models, contextual vocabulary, and autonomous practice beyond classroom constraints.	"I watch English YouTube videos and try to imitate how they speak. It helps my pronunciation more than the textbook." (S4)
Collaborative Speaking Activities (Pair & Group Work)	Reduced social threat in small configurations increases courage to speak, enables peer scaffolding, and provides more individual practice time.	"When I practice with one friend, I am not afraid to make mistakes. We help each other and I speak much more." (S1)
Structured Tasks & Preparation Strategies	Pre-task preparation and structured formats (dialogues, games, role-play) reduce cognitive load by pre-activating linguistic resources.	"If I can prepare first, I feel more ready and my speaking is better. I don't go blank as much." (S5)
Supportive Teacher Practices (Modeling, Encouragement, Patience)	Teacher modeling before required performance and consistent positive feedback are identified as foundational for confidence-building.	"When the teacher shows us first how to say it, then asks us to try, I feel braver. And when she says 'good try,' I want to speak again." (S3)
Vocational Context Integration (Career-connected Activities)	Embedding English in occupational simulations activates career-oriented motivation and makes language learning immediately purposeful.	"When we practice English for hotel situations or talking to customers, I understand why I need it. I want to work internationally." (S7)
Authentic Communication & Supportive Classroom Climate	Aspirations for real-world English use and non-judgmental classroom norms both function to interrupt the anxiety-avoidance cycle.	"If the classroom feels safe, if nobody laughs, I am willing to try speaking even if I make mistakes." (S6)

Note. Participant pseudonyms S1–S7. All quotations translated and member-checked.

FOSTER JELT
Journal of English Language Teaching

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Vol.7, No. 2, April 2026
***e*-ISSN: 2723-4126**
***p*-ISSN: 2776-8880**

A structurally significant pattern emerges across all six strategy themes: each strategy functions primarily by interrupting or mitigating the anxiety-avoidance cycle that constitutes the central dynamic of speaking barrier maintenance. Digital self-directed learning reduces social exposure anxiety by enabling private practice with authentic models. Collaborative activities reduce performance threat through shared responsibility. Structured tasks lower cognitive load through linguistic scaffolding. Supportive teacher practices build self-efficacy through mastery experience facilitation and social persuasion. Vocational integration activates intrinsic motivation that can override anxiety-driven avoidance. And supportive classroom climate creates the psychological safety conditions under which all other strategies become viable.

This convergence suggests that the most important pedagogical priority is not any specific instructional technique but the creation of conditions in which the anxiety-avoidance cycle is systematically weakened—through multiple, reinforcing mechanisms operating simultaneously rather than sequentially.

Classroom Observation Findings

Table 3. Key patterns from classroom observations

Observation Theme	Finding
Speaking Time Allocation	Speaking practice constituted approximately 15–20% of observed lesson time; grammar instruction and written tasks dominated. This confirms students' self-reports of insufficient oral practice.
Hesitation & Avoidance Behaviors	Observable hesitation, prolonged silence, downward gaze, and minimal response were consistently documented during spontaneous speaking prompts, corroborating affective barrier findings.
Effectiveness of Pair Work & Teacher Modeling	Pair work activities generated notably higher participation rates. When teachers demonstrated first, more students attempted the same task—consistent with students' identification of modeling as critical.
Employability Framing by Teachers	Teachers regularly contextualized speaking activities within vocational career goals, explicitly connecting oral English to future employment, which increased observable student engagement.

Classroom observations provided independent corroboration for all major interview themes. The documented 15–20% allocation of lesson time to speaking practice directly confirms participants' reports of insufficient classroom speaking opportunities. Observable hesitation and avoidance behaviors prolonged silence, downward gaze, minimal responses—were most pronounced during unstructured spontaneous speaking prompts, corroborating the affective barrier findings. Pair work activities generated measurably higher participation rates, with more students speaking simultaneously and for longer durations, consistent with the strategy themes. The consistent employability framing by teachers explicitly connecting English speaking to vocational career outcomes was observed

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Journal of English Language Teaching

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Vol.7, No. 2, April 2026
***e*-ISSN: 2723-4126**
***p*-ISSN: 2776-8880**

to increase student engagement, providing ecological validation for the vocational relevance strategy theme.

Cross-Cutting Pattern: The Anxiety-Avoidance Cycle

The most analytically significant cross-cutting pattern to emerge from integrated analysis of interview and observation data is the anxiety-avoidance cycle. Students who reported high speaking anxiety in interviews were consistently the same students observed remaining silent, offering minimal responses, or refusing eye contact with the teacher during classroom observations. This behavioral confirmation of self-reported affective experience establishes the cycle's reality as more than subjective perception: it is a structurally entrenched behavioral pattern with observable classroom manifestations. The cycle operates as follows: speaking anxiety produces avoidance of oral participation; avoidance limits cumulative practice; limited practice maintains and reinforces low self-efficacy and sustained anxiety. Each element of the cycle is both cause and consequence of the others, creating a 'negative affective spiral' that pedagogical intervention must specifically target (Chen & Hwang, 2022).

DISCUSSION

Linguistic Challenges and Cognitive Load

The linguistic challenges in spontaneous speech production and difficulties with pronunciation and vocabulary align with speech production models and recent research demonstrating that limited linguistic resources significantly impair fluency and increase cognitive load during spontaneous speech. The specific difficulties with pronunciation support the emphasis on its critical role in communicative confidence: learners who fear mispronunciation often avoid speaking altogether, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of limited practice and continued difficulty (Friede et al., 2026). This finding has significant implications for vocational English instruction, suggesting that explicit attention to pronunciation and vocabulary building must be systematically integrated with speaking practice rather than treated as isolated components of instruction (Hoang, 2026; Suzuki & Kormos, 2025).

Affective Barriers: Anxiety, Fear, and Negative Evaluation

The prevalence of affective barriers anxiety, fear, and lack of confidence strongly supports the conceptualization of foreign language anxiety and neurobiological research demonstrating that language anxiety activates threat responses that impair cognitive processing (Li et al., 2025; Pasoloran Pongsapan, 2025). The physical symptoms described by participants heart palpitations when asked to speak reflect the somatic manifestations of anxiety well-documented in language learning contexts (Önem, 2022). The fear of negative evaluation from peers, identified as a distinct theme, aligns with perfectionism research which found that learners with high perfectionism experience greater anxiety and avoidance (Yan, 2026). For vocational students who may already doubt their academic capabilities, this

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Journal of English Language Teaching

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Vol.7, No. 2, April 2026
***e*-ISSN: 2723-4126**
***p*-ISSN: 2776-8880**

fear of judgment can be particularly debilitating, as failure in front of peers carries social stakes beyond the linguistic (Boretti, 2026).

Peer Dynamics and Self-Efficacy

The powerful bidirectional influence of peer behavior on speaking willingness supports self-efficacy theory, particularly the role of vicarious experiences. When students witness peers being laughed at or criticized, their own self-efficacy diminishes. Conversely, supportive peer environments create the zone of proximal development, where collaborative learning enables achievement beyond individual capacity (Mels, 2026). Research on peer interaction confirms that positive peer relationships significantly enhance speaking willingness and language development (Tang, 2026). The finding that students feel more confident in pair work and group discussions supports work on collaborative dialogue, demonstrating that small-group configurations reduce anxiety and increase speaking opportunities, simultaneously addressing both affective and practice dimensions of the speaking challenge (Ariyanti et al., 2023).

Practice Opportunities and Contextual Affordances

The insufficient speaking opportunities reported by students, corroborated by classroom observations, reflect what fluency development requires: substantial time devoted to meaning-focused output. When classroom time is dominated by grammar instruction and written exercises, students lack the practice opportunities necessary to automatize linguistic knowledge and build speaking confidence (Nguyen, 2025). The limited out-of-class practice opportunities highlight what has been termed 'contextual affordances' environmental resources that enable or constrain learning. Without access to English-speaking communities or practice partners, opportunities for speaking development remain severely limited, and the weight of development falls entirely on the already-constrained classroom. The resource and facility limitations identified by students reflect broader challenges in Indonesian vocational education, where the digital divide creates inequities in learning opportunities that compound existing disadvantages (Case, 2026).

Effective Strategies: Digital Agency, Collaboration, and Vocational Relevance

Students' utilization of digital media for independent learning reflects 'informal language learning' self-directed acquisition through authentic materials. Students' use of YouTube for pronunciation modeling supports work on metacognitive awareness in language learning, emphasizing the value of authentic input for developing phonological representations (Vandergrift. The repetition and preparation strategies employed reflect the taxonomy of language learning strategies, specifically cognitive and memory strategies that facilitate linguistic processing by pre-activating relevant knowledge structures before speaking tasks (Javorcik et al., 2023; Sunarti & Elfiyanto, 2025)

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Journal of English Language Teaching

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Vol.7, No. 2, April 2026
***e*-ISSN: 2723-4126**
***p*-ISSN: 2776-8880**

The strong preference for pair work and group discussions aligns with the output hypothesis, which posits that language production is essential for acquisition, and with work on peer interaction providing 'collaborative dialogue' that mediates learning. The identification of supportive teacher practices as crucial reinforces a review of teacher feedback, emphasizing that positive, constructive feedback builds what has been termed a 'growth mindset'. The desire for authentic communication opportunities reflects the 'ideal L2 self' the vision of oneself as a competent English user (Isibika et al., 2023). When students can imagine themselves using English in meaningful vocational contexts, they develop what has been called 'motivational agency,' transforming English learning from an academic requirement into a personally meaningful pursuit. Critically, the finding that vocational context integration enhances motivation connects classroom learning to these future aspirations, aligning with self-determination theory's emphasis on perceived value (Truong et al., 2025).

Implications for Theory, Practice, and Policy

Theoretically, these findings extend the existing literature on speaking development by foregrounding the anxiety-avoidance cycle as a central dynamic in vocational students' speaking experiences and by demonstrating how linguistic, affective, social, and environmental factors interact to create mutually reinforcing barriers. This systemic perspective challenges single-factor approaches to speaking instruction and supports ecological models of language learning that account for the full complexity of the learner's environment.

Practically, effective speaking instruction for vocational students must address the multidimensional nature of speaking challenges through several interconnected interventions. First, creating psychologically safe classrooms where mistakes are normalized is not merely beneficial but foundational. Second, speaking practice must be systematically prioritized with adequate time allocation and varied activity structures including pair work, games, and role-play. Third, teachers must be intentional in their feedback practices, consistently emphasizing positive reinforcement and modeling before requiring performance. Fourth, connecting speaking activities to vocational interests and career aspirations enhances both perceived relevance and intrinsic motivation. Fifth, students' engagement with digital media should be leveraged rather than ignored, through structured activities that channel informal learning into skill development. For policymakers, investment in language laboratory infrastructure, professional development for teachers in speaking pedagogy, and curriculum reforms that allocate sufficient time for oral communication practice are urgently needed.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study examined the English-speaking challenges and learning strategies of vocational students in Tana Toraja, Indonesia. Its central contribution is the

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Journal of English Language Teaching

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Vol.7, No. 2, April 2026
***e*-ISSN: 2723-4126**
***p*-ISSN: 2776-8880**

empirical documentation of the anxiety-avoidance cycle, a self-reinforcing dynamic wherein anxiety generates avoidance, avoidance restricts practice, and limited practice perpetuates both low self-efficacy and sustained anxiety. Triangulation of interview data with classroom observation confirmed the behavioral reality of this cycle.

Six interconnected challenge themes cognitive-linguistic, affective, social, environmental, and others function not as isolated factors but as mutually reinforcing components of an ecological system. Accordingly, the six identified strategies are most effective when implemented collectively as an integrated pedagogical ecology rather than in a piecemeal fashion.

The primary practical implication is that teacher practice constitutes the most actionable leverage point. Interactive, modeling-centered, and encouragement-oriented instruction transforms identical learning content from anxiety-provoking into anxiety-buffering experiences. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to assess the durability of speaking gains following cycle interruption, test specific pedagogical interventions using quasi-experimental designs, and conduct multi-site comparative studies across diverse vocational contexts to establish the transferability of these findings.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors wish to convey deep appreciation to SMK Tira Rantetayo, Tana Toraja for allowing this study to be conducted and cooperation provided throughout the research process. The participation and openness of the students were invaluable in providing meaningful insights and data for this study. Their willingness to share their experinces and prespectives has significanctly enriched the research findings. The author highly values the support and collaboration from the institution and hopes that this study can offer useful contributions to the improvement of English language learning, especially in the context of vocational education

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Vol.7, No. 2, April 2026
***e*-ISSN: 2723-4126**
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Journal of English Language Teaching

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Vol.7, No. 2, April 2026
***e*-ISSN**: **2723-4126**
***p*-ISSN**: **2776-8880**

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