



An Analysis of Students' Difficulties in Speaking English through Narrative Texts among Tenth-Grade Students at State Senior High School 1 Simpang Empat in the 2025/2026 Academic Year

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ABSTRACT

Speaking English remains challenging for many English as a Foreign Language learners, particularly when they are required to communicate ideas through narrative texts. This study aimed to identify and analyze the speaking difficulties experienced by tenth-grade students when presenting narrative texts at State Senior High School 1 Simpang Empat during the 2025/2026 academic year. The study employed a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study design, involving 30 students from Class X IPA 2 selected through total sampling. Data were collected through classroom observation, speaking tests, and interviews and analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model. The findings revealed that inhibition was the most prevalent difficulty (67%), followed by mother tongue use (60%), having nothing to say (47%), and low participation (37%). These difficulties were associated with psychological barriers, particularly low self-confidence and fear of making mistakes, as well as linguistic barriers related to limited vocabulary. The findings indicate that students' speaking difficulties arise from interconnected affective and linguistic factors. Therefore, small-group work, storytelling, and role-play activities can provide more supportive opportunities for students to reduce affective barriers and develop their English-speaking ability.

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INTRODUCTION

English serves as a global language that plays a significant role across various domains of life, including education, technology, and intercultural communication. In Indonesia, educational institutions have incorporated English as a compulsory subject across different levels of schooling, making the classroom a primary setting in which students practice and develop their English proficiency (Hmelo-Silver, 2004; Putri et al., 2020). Among the four core language skills—listening, reading, writing, and speaking—speaking occupies a particularly important position because individuals often demonstrate their communicative competence through their ability to use language orally. Oral communication enables individuals to interact directly, convey meaning, and respond to others in real time. Consequently, speaking proficiency constitutes an important indicator of successful language learning (Suhartono et al., 2025; Vermunt & Vermetten, 2004).

Despite its importance, speaking remains one of the most challenging English language skills for students to master, particularly at the senior high school level. Preliminary observations conducted among tenth-grade students at State Senior High School 1 Simpang Empat indicated that many students encountered difficulties in recalling and organizing storylines sequentially, demonstrated limited vocabulary, and frequently incorporated Indonesian expressions when communicating in English (Wardani & Atin, 2024). When asked to retell narrative texts orally, many students displayed anxiety and hesitation, while some were reluctant to speak in front of the class. Previous studies have similarly reported that senior high school students in Sumatra experience speaking difficulties related to inhibition and limited vocabulary. These difficulties are also closely associated with low classroom participation and excessive reliance on the mother tongue (Anggara et al., 2018; Sari, 2022).

From a theoretical perspective, speaking proficiency extends beyond the ability to pronounce words and encompasses the capacity to communicate opinions, ideas, and imagination clearly and appropriately (Normawati et al., 2023). Speaking involves five interrelated components: comprehension, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency. These components collectively determine the effectiveness and comprehensibility of oral communication.



Students who struggle to develop these components simultaneously may experience cumulative difficulties in producing coherent and effective spoken English. Addressing such difficulties therefore requires structured and targeted instructional interventions that respond to students' specific speaking needs (Daulay et al., 2022).

Speaking difficulties can be classified into four major categories: inhibition, having nothing to say, low participation, and mother tongue use. Psychological barriers, including anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and lack of self-confidence, constitute major factors that can impede the development of students' speaking proficiency (Tampubolon et al., 2024). A low-anxiety classroom environment can help address these barriers by creating conditions in which students feel psychologically secure enough to take communicative risks. Fear of negative peer evaluation may discourage students from voluntarily participating in spoken classroom interactions. Previous research has demonstrated that such psychological and social factors can substantially influence students' willingness to speak in English as a Foreign Language classrooms (Aryanti et al., 2024; Latifah et al., 2025).

In learning narrative texts, students are expected to reconstruct and communicate the content of a story orally through a coherent sequence and clear expression. Narrative text presents a sequence of events through a structured organization that typically comprises orientation, conflict, and resolution. Retelling a narrative text orally requires students to possess sufficient vocabulary, organize ideas sequentially, and demonstrate confidence when speaking before an audience (Qatrinada & Apoko, 2024). Narrative texts can therefore present particular challenges for English as a Foreign Language learners because oral retelling requires the simultaneous activation of linguistic, cognitive, and affective resources. Insufficient development of these interconnected resources may hinder students from producing organized, comprehensible, and effective oral communication in English (Reskiawan et al., 2019).

Based on these conditions, this study aims to comprehensively analyze the speaking difficulties experienced by tenth-grade students when working with narrative texts. Specifically, the study addresses three research questions: (1) What forms of English-speaking difficulties do tenth-grade students experience when working with narrative texts? (2) What factors contribute to these speaking difficulties? and (3) What possible solutions can be implemented to address the identified speaking barriers? By addressing these questions, the study seeks to provide a clearer understanding of the linguistic and psychological challenges that affect students' oral performance in narrative-text learning. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of more effective and contextually relevant instructional strategies for teaching speaking, particularly within the Indonesian senior high school context.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study design to investigate students' difficulties in speaking English through narrative texts. The researchers selected a descriptive qualitative approach because it enables a contextual description, interpretation, and elaboration of the research phenomenon based on conditions observed in the field. Qualitative research facilitates an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives through the collection of rich and detailed data. The case study design enabled the researchers to examine students' English-speaking difficulties within a specific instructional context and develop a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon (Septiani et al., 2022; Varpio et al., 2020).

The participants comprised all 30 students of Class X IPA 2 at State Senior High School 1 Simpang Empat during the 2025/2026 academic year, selected through a total sampling technique. The researchers selected this class because all students actively participated in English learning activities and demonstrated varying levels of speaking proficiency. This variation provided an appropriate context for examining the range of difficulties students experienced when speaking English. The study was conducted at State Senior High School 1 Simpang Empat, located on Jalan Benteng, Sipaku Village, Simpang Empat District, Asahan Regency, North Sumatra. Data collection took place from February to April 2026.

The researchers collected data using three instruments: structured observation, a speaking test, and interviews. First, they conducted structured observation on April 1, 2026, to examine the English learning process and students' verbal interactions in the classroom, particularly during narrative-speaking activities, using an observation sheet based on the four indicators of speaking problems proposed by Ur (1996). Second, they administered a speaking test on April 2, 2026, in which each student orally retold the narrative text entitled "Malin Kundang"; the researchers recorded each performance and assessed it according to the four indicators proposed by Ur (1996). Third, the researchers interviewed all 30 students to explore their perceptions, experiences, and perspectives regarding the difficulties they

encountered when speaking English. The integration of these three instruments enabled the researchers to examine the phenomenon from multiple sources of evidence.

The researchers analyzed all data qualitatively using Miles and Huberman's interactive model, which comprises three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. During data reduction, the researchers summarized, selected, and organized information relevant to the research focus, while data display involved systematically presenting the information to facilitate interpretation and conclusion drawing. The final stage involved drawing and verifying conclusions by examining recurring patterns and findings across the collected data. The researchers also applied source triangulation by comparing evidence obtained through classroom observation, speaking tests, and student interviews. This triangulation strengthened the credibility of the findings by allowing the researchers to examine the consistency of evidence across the three data collection methods.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Students' Difficulties in Speaking English in Narrative Texts

The speaking test was administered on Thursday, April 2, 2026, and involved all 30 students of Class X IPA 2. Each student was asked to orally retell the narrative text entitled "Malin Kundang" in front of the researcher. The researchers analyzed students' performances using the four indicators of speaking difficulties proposed by Penny Ur (1996): inhibition, having nothing to say, low or uneven participation, and mother tongue use. The findings showed that students experienced varying forms and combinations of speaking difficulties during their oral performances (Zulfirman, 2022). Among the four indicators, inhibition emerged as the most frequently observed difficulty, affecting 20 students (67%).

Students who experienced inhibition demonstrated shyness, nervousness, and discomfort when speaking English during the test. Many students spoke in very low voices, avoided eye contact with the researcher, and frequently paused in the middle of sentences because they appeared nervous. Some students explicitly expressed their discomfort before performing by stating, "Oh Miss, I'm shy" or "I can't do it, Miss." These responses illustrate the affective barriers students experienced when they were required to perform individually in English. The findings suggest that inhibition restricted students' ability to express their ideas confidently during their speaking performances.

Mother tongue use constituted the second most frequently observed difficulty, affecting 18 students (60%). When students could not retrieve appropriate English words, they frequently switched to Indonesian to continue narrating the story. This language switching occurred across different components of the narrative, including the orientation, complication, and resolution. The frequent use of Indonesian indicates that students encountered difficulties in sustaining their narratives entirely in English, particularly when they lacked the vocabulary required to communicate specific ideas. Insufficient vocabulary therefore appeared to contribute to students' reliance on their first language and interrupted the continuity of their spoken English.

Having nothing to say represented the third most frequently identified difficulty and was observed in 14 students (47%). These students encountered difficulties in recalling and organizing the sequence of events in the narrative text, causing some to stop in the middle of the story or present only the orientation without proceeding to the complication and resolution. During the interview, one student stated, "Miss, I cannot retell the story in English because my vocabulary is still limited." This response indicates that limited vocabulary constrained the student's ability to develop and communicate ideas orally, while the speaking performances also revealed difficulties in organizing the narrative sequence. The findings therefore suggest that difficulties in generating spoken content involved both linguistic limitations and challenges in organizing ideas coherently.

Low or uneven participation was the least frequently observed difficulty, occurring among 11 students (37%). Although all 30 students participated in the speaking test, the quantity and elaboration of their spoken production varied considerably. Some students produced only two or three simple sentences, whereas others presented more detailed narratives containing a greater proportion of the story. This variation demonstrates differences in students' ability to sustain oral production despite completing the same speaking task. Table 4.1 summarizes the distribution of the four speaking difficulties identified during the speaking test.

Table 1. Results of the Speaking Test Based on Penny Ur's (1996) Indicators

No.	Student	Inhibition	Nothing to Say	Low/Uneven Participation	Mother Tongue Use
1	AS	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
2	AIP	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
3	ASS	No	Yes	Yes	No
4	AAB	Yes	No	No	Yes
5	BPP	No	No	Yes	No
6	CDR	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
7	DS	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
8	DPR	No	Yes	No	No
9	FS	No	No	No	No
10	FR	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
11	HA	No	No	Yes	Yes
12	HSM	Yes	No	No	No
13	KCAM	Yes	No	No	Yes
14	NA	Yes	No	No	Yes
15	NSBA	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
16	RSS	No	No	No	No
17	RJ	No	No	Yes	No
18	RAN	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
19	RA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
20	RHBP	No	Yes	No	No
21	RA	Yes	No	Yes	No
22	SD	Yes	Yes	No	No
23	SI	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
24	S	No	No	No	No
25	ST	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
26	SN	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
27	SR	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
28	SG	No	No	No	No
29	WY	Yes	No	No	Yes
30	ZS	Yes	No	No	Yes
Total		20 Students	14 Students	11 Students	18 Students
Percentage		67%	47%	37%	60%

Note: Yes = the difficulty was observed; No = the difficulty was not observed.

The distribution presented in Table 4.1 demonstrates that students experienced multiple and potentially overlapping difficulties when retelling the narrative text in English. Inhibition represented the most prevalent difficulty (67%), followed by mother tongue use (60%), having nothing to say (47%), and low or uneven participation (37%). These findings indicate that students' speaking difficulties were not limited to their ability to generate oral content but also involved affective barriers and reliance on their first language. The simultaneous occurrence of several indicators among individual students further suggests that speaking difficulties may interact rather than operate independently during narrative retelling. These results provide the empirical basis for examining the factors underlying students' speaking difficulties in the subsequent analysis.

Factors Causing Speaking Difficulties

The interviews with all 30 students provided deeper insights into the factors underlying their difficulties in speaking English. The findings identified two major dimensions contributing to these difficulties: psychological and linguistic factors. Psychological factors primarily involved fear of making mistakes, fear of negative peer reactions, and low self-confidence, whereas linguistic factors were predominantly associated with limited vocabulary. These two dimensions appeared to interact in shaping students' willingness and ability to communicate orally in English. The interview findings therefore provide a more detailed explanation of the difficulties identified through the speaking test.

From a psychological perspective, most students reported that they were afraid of being laughed at by their classmates when they made mistakes in pronunciation or word choice. This fear discouraged them from speaking and contributed to silence and passivity during classroom speaking activities. Several students who demonstrated negative attitudes toward speaking English explicitly described their experiences and concerns. The following statements illustrate the psychological barriers experienced by the students:

"I do not like speaking English in class because I am afraid of making mistakes in front of my friends. I have no confidence at all." (Student 3).

"I do not like English lessons. In my opinion, it is the most difficult subject at school because I do not understand and do not know what to say." (Student 11).

These statements indicate that fear of making mistakes and low self-confidence constituted major psychological barriers that restricted students' active participation in speaking activities. The students' responses also demonstrate how concerns about peer reactions can discourage them from expressing their ideas orally. Such psychological barriers may explain the high level of inhibition identified during the speaking test. Students who lack confidence may hesitate, remain silent, or avoid participating when they perceive speaking English as a potentially embarrassing experience.

From a linguistic perspective, students most frequently identified limited vocabulary as the primary reason for switching to Indonesian while speaking English. When students could not find appropriate English words, they automatically switched to their first language to continue expressing their ideas. This pattern indicates that students' lexical resources were not yet sufficient to support sustained and fluent oral communication in English. Limited vocabulary also restricted students' ability to develop ideas and maintain the sequence of their narratives. The interaction between linguistic limitations and psychological barriers consequently contributed to the speaking difficulties observed during narrative retelling activities.

Solutions to Overcome Speaking Difficulties

Based on the research findings and the theoretical framework employed in this study, several pedagogical strategies can be recommended to address students' speaking difficulties. Ur (1996) suggests several strategies for speaking instruction, including small-group work, the use of simple language appropriate to students' proficiency levels, the selection of interesting and relevant speaking topics and tasks, and the provision of guidance or training in discussion skills (Azzahra et al., 2019; Kondo & Ratuwongo, 2023). These strategies can provide students with greater opportunities to practice oral communication while reducing the pressure associated with speaking individually in front of the entire class. They can also facilitate the development of vocabulary, idea organization, and confidence through meaningful classroom interaction. Such strategies are particularly relevant to the psychological and linguistic difficulties identified in this study.

Small-group work represents a particularly relevant strategy because it provides a less intimidating environment in which students can practice speaking without feeling observed by the entire class. The interview findings support the relevance of this approach, as students consistently reported feeling more comfortable and confident when speaking in small groups than when performing before the whole class. Teachers can use small-group activities to increase opportunities for participation while gradually developing students' confidence in oral communication. Storytelling and *role play* activities are also relevant because they correspond closely with the characteristics of narrative-text learning and provide structured opportunities for students to express their ideas orally. These activities can encourage students to practice vocabulary, organize narrative sequences, and develop confidence in progressively more demanding speaking situations.

The findings further indicate that successful speaking instruction depends not only on students' linguistic competence but also on their affective conditions and the quality of the learning environment created by the teacher. Teachers need to establish a supportive classroom environment that encourages students to participate without excessive fear of making mistakes. They can foster such an environment by motivating students, treating errors as a natural part of language learning, and providing constructive feedback during speaking activities. These practices can reduce psychological pressure and encourage students to participate more actively in English-speaking activities. Integrating linguistic support with a psychologically supportive classroom environment therefore provides a relevant pedagogical response to the two major dimensions of speaking difficulties identified in this study.

CONCLUSION

This study found that the major difficulties experienced by tenth-grade students of Class X IPA 2 at State Senior High School 1 Simpang Empat when speaking English through narrative texts included inhibition (67%), mother tongue use (60%), having nothing to say (47%), and low or uneven participation (37%). These difficulties were primarily associated with two interrelated dimensions: psychological barriers, particularly low self-confidence and fear of making mistakes,

and linguistic barriers, especially limited vocabulary. The findings demonstrate that successful oral communication in a foreign language depends not only on linguistic competence but also on students' psychological readiness and the availability of a supportive learning environment. Students who experienced affective barriers tended to hesitate or avoid active participation, while limited vocabulary encouraged greater reliance on their mother tongue and constrained their ability to develop ideas orally. From a theoretical perspective, the findings support the relevance of Ur's (1996) framework for identifying and interpreting students' speaking difficulties within the Indonesian English as a Foreign Language context.

English teachers should provide speaking activities that address both the psychological and linguistic barriers identified in this study. Small-group learning can create less intimidating opportunities for students to practice speaking, while storytelling and *role play* activities can support the development of vocabulary, narrative organization, and confidence in oral communication. Teachers should also establish a supportive classroom environment in which students perceive mistakes as a natural part of language learning rather than as a source of embarrassment. Constructive feedback and gradual opportunities to progress from small-group interaction to whole-class speaking can further encourage students to participate more confidently. Future studies may also examine the effectiveness of specific pedagogical interventions in reducing inhibition, strengthening vocabulary mastery, and improving students' participation in English-speaking activities.

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. The participants were limited to 30 students from one class at a single school, which restricts the extent to which the findings can be generalized to students in other educational settings. The study also focused specifically on students' speaking difficulties in narrative-text activities; therefore, the findings may not fully represent the difficulties encountered in other speaking tasks or genres. Future research should involve larger and more diverse samples and compare speaking difficulties across schools with different student characteristics and learning environments. Such research could also employ broader methodological approaches or intervention-based designs to examine more systematically how specific instructional strategies address the psychological and linguistic barriers identified in this study.

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