

ENGLISH SPEAKING BARRIERS IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION: A STUDY OF SMK SPP SNAKMA STUDENTS

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Abstract

The English-speaking skills of students at SMK SPP SNAKMA remain underdeveloped due to specific challenges in using the language within a vocational context. This study explores and analyzes these barriers to understand the underlying factors that hinder effective English communication among vocational students. Employing a qualitative approach, the research gathers data through interviews, observations, and questionnaires to capture students' perspectives and real-time experiences with English language use. Findings reveal four primary obstacles: limited vocabulary, grammatical difficulties, speaking anxiety, and insufficient practice opportunities. These factors collectively impact students' confidence and fluency in speaking English, which is critical in vocational settings where practical language skills are increasingly required. The study suggests that a more communicative teaching approach, combined with structured and frequent speaking practice, could significantly address these challenges. By focusing on interactive and supportive teaching methods, educators can create an environment that encourages active language use, helping students overcome barriers and develop essential English-speaking skills for their careers.

Keywords: *barriers, speaking English, grammatical difficulties; speaking anxiety*

1. Introduction

The proverb "language shows a nation" signifies that language reflects one's identity, revealing character, thought patterns, habits, and even intelligence (Rosida, 2024). Mastering English, especially in a globalized world, is an extension of expressing identity, particularly vital for vocational students preparing for professional environments. Learning English is essential as it has become an integral part of daily life globally, often functioning as a second language for many (Fadly, 2019).

Speaking English effectively, however, can be challenging. While some students possess basic speaking skills, many struggle with fluent and accurate communication. For SMK students, fluency requires dedicated practice, particularly in mastering vocabulary, which is foundational to developing effective speaking abilities. The more vocabulary students acquire, the greater their fluency, which is critical for professional communication (Efrizah et al., 2024). In vocational contexts, a robust vocabulary

foundation not only enhances clarity but also builds the confidence needed for active engagement.

Vocational school teachers play a crucial role in facilitating English-speaking skills, as career readiness depends heavily on practical speaking abilities. Employing interactive and context-based learning methods can increase student motivation and provide necessary speaking practice. However, motivation remains essential; without genuine interest, the learning process may be less effective, regardless of teaching methods (Sari, 2023).

English proficiency is increasingly valuable in both educational and professional settings, especially for vocational school students who often transition directly into the workforce. Yet, students at SMK SPP SNAKMA face specific challenges, such as limited vocabulary, grammar difficulties, speaking anxiety, and insufficient practice opportunities. Given these challenges, this study aims to explore and address the barriers to English speaking faced by SMK SPP SNAKMA students, proposing actionable strategies to enhance their language skills and overall career preparedness.

2. Literature Review

Speaking is a fundamental skill in communication, essential for expressing thoughts, ideas, and feelings across various contexts, including academic settings. In academic discourse, speaking enables the exchange of ideas through structured formats such as presentations, seminars, and formal discussions (Yunus, 2020). Classified as an active language skill, speaking ranks second only to listening and serves as a primary method for effective interaction (Abdurahman, 2017).

Effective speaking requires mastery of multiple components, including vocabulary, confidence, and the physical capacity for articulation. Suhendar (2021) highlights that producing sounds accurately, using appropriate stress, tone, pauses, and intonation, is essential for clear communication. Confidence also plays a pivotal role, as it helps overcome psychological barriers like shyness and anxiety, allowing speakers to communicate naturally. Mastery of these elements is key to developing fluent and authentic speaking skills, which necessitates continuous practice.

Vocabulary is particularly foundational to speaking proficiency, directly influencing fluency, confidence, and clarity. Without a solid vocabulary, students often struggle to articulate ideas and participate fully in conversations, especially in a second language. Classroom environments that offer limited interaction hinder vocabulary acquisition, making it challenging for students to express their thoughts in English (Ali, 2021; Fitriani et al., 2023). Vocabulary limitations significantly impact learners' capacity to communicate ideas clearly, as emphasized by Nation (2001). In ESL contexts, a robust vocabulary is crucial for improving fluency and confidence, as it equips learners with the language tools necessary for effective communication (Zhang & Jin, 2021).

English-speaking barriers can stem from vocabulary deficiencies, but psychological factors also play a crucial role. Anxiety and low confidence often hinder students from speaking openly. Muneera's (2023) research identifies high levels of anxiety as a significant barrier in ESL classrooms, where fear of judgment and making mistakes can deter participation. To address this, tailored teaching strategies that promote a supportive, low-pressure environment can help reduce speaking anxiety. Similarly, Alrashidi (2023) points out that low confidence is another major obstacle, often discouraging students from engaging in spoken communication. Confidence-

building activities such as role-play and small-group discussions gradually help students become more comfortable in speaking situations, enhancing their self-efficacy and reducing hesitancy in both formal and informal contexts.

Overall, these insights highlight that developing effective speaking skills in English requires addressing both linguistic and psychological barriers. A focus on vocabulary acquisition, alongside confidence-building strategies, is essential for overcoming common obstacles faced by ESL learners, particularly in academic and professional settings.

3. Research Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to investigate the specific barriers students face in speaking English. This approach is appropriate for examining the complex, human-centered challenges in English-speaking skills, as it allows for a comprehensive exploration of students' experiences and perceptions (Creswell, 2016). According to Creswell (2016), qualitative research enables a deep understanding of the meanings that individuals or groups assign to social issues, making it particularly useful for uncovering the factors that hinder effective English communication in a vocational context. Bhandari (2024) further emphasizes that qualitative research relies on data collected in non-numeric forms, such as textual and visual sources, to gain detailed insights into human behaviors, social interactions, and contextual factors.

Data for this study were collected through three primary methods: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and questionnaires, each serving a distinct purpose. Semi-structured interviews provided personal insights into students' perceived challenges in speaking English, allowing students to express their perspectives on vocabulary limitations, grammar issues, and other individual difficulties. Classroom observations offered a real-time view of students' interactions in English, helping identify behavioral patterns and obstacles in an authentic learning environment. Additionally, questionnaires were used to capture broader perceptions and trends among students regarding their speaking difficulties, adding depth and breadth to the data.

The analysis process involved a thorough coding procedure. Data from the interviews, observations, and questionnaires were initially coded to identify specific barriers. These initial codes were then grouped into categories based on recurring themes, such as vocabulary deficiency, grammar constraints, speaking anxiety, and lack of practice opportunities. The coding process continued with categorizing and refining these themes, resulting in the main categories of identified barriers.

To ensure methodological rigor, data were reviewed and cross-verified across the different collection methods to enhance accuracy and consistency in the findings. Each method contributed unique insights—interviews revealed personal perspectives, observations provided contextual behavioral insights, and questionnaires highlighted overall patterns, collectively allowing for a well-rounded understanding of the barriers faced by students in English-speaking contexts.

4. Discussion

The study highlights multiple barriers experienced by students at SMK SPP SNAKMA in speaking English, specifically in vocabulary deficiency, grammar constraints, speaking anxiety, and limited speaking opportunities. These findings reflect

the complexity of language learning challenges and underscore the need for targeted interventions to enhance students' language skills.

4.1 Vocabulary Deficiency

Students often struggle to articulate their thoughts due to a limited vocabulary repertoire, which impedes effective communication. Vocabulary deficiency not only restricts their ability to express ideas with clarity but also diminishes their confidence in public speaking. Studies have shown that vocabulary knowledge is crucial for language fluency, as it directly impacts a learner's capacity to engage in natural and spontaneous interactions (Nation, 2013). Limited exposure to varied vocabulary in daily life, both in school and at home, exacerbates this challenge, as students are not consistently exposed to English outside structured classroom settings.

Example: In a classroom observation, a student hesitated multiple times when describing a recent school event because she struggled to find the right words, often substituting simpler vocabulary to complete her sentences. This not only made her narrative less detailed but also increased her self-consciousness in front of her peers.

Solution: To address vocabulary limitations, educators can adopt interactive and context-based approaches such as project-based learning and role-play activities. Research supports these strategies, highlighting that students retain vocabulary better when it is learned in real-life contexts (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2013). By engaging in scenario-based learning, students can practice and internalize new words in meaningful ways. Furthermore, integrating multimedia resources, such as podcasts or English-language films with subtitles, can provide students with richer vocabulary exposure, allowing them to encounter colloquial and formal language in varied contexts.

4.2 Grammar Constraints

Grammar constraints significantly impact students' speaking confidence, as errors in grammar lead to self-doubt and fear of miscommunication. Often, students learn grammar in isolation from spoken language, which makes it challenging for them to apply grammatical rules in real-time conversations. This issue is compounded by the tendency of traditional grammar instruction to focus on correctness rather than fluency, which can discourage students from speaking freely.

Example: During a class discussion, several students hesitated to participate due to concerns about grammatical errors, with one student explicitly stating, "I'm afraid my sentence won't be correct." Such concerns limit participation and the opportunity to practice language skills in meaningful ways.

Solution: The communicative approach, which emphasizes grammar in conversational contexts, could mitigate this issue. This method encourages students to learn grammar through dialogues, role-plays, and other speaking exercises where grammatical accuracy is gradually refined rather than strictly enforced. Studies have shown that communicative methods not only improve students' fluency but also enhance their ability to use grammar effectively in spontaneous conversations (Richards, 2006). Regular group discussions where students focus on conveying ideas without fear of

correction can also create a more encouraging environment for practicing grammar in a low-pressure setting.

4.3 Speaking Anxiety

Speaking anxiety is prevalent among students, especially when speaking in front of the class. This anxiety often arises from a fear of making mistakes, coupled with concern over peers' potential reactions. Such anxiety can hinder even those with adequate language skills from engaging in speaking activities. Horwitz et al. (1986) note that foreign language anxiety can have a debilitating effect on students' participation and willingness to communicate, which in turn impacts language acquisition.

Example: In a survey conducted as part of this study, a student reported, "I get very nervous and sometimes forget words when everyone is looking at me." This response highlights the psychological barrier that speaking anxiety imposes on language learners.

Solution: Creating a supportive and inclusive classroom environment can significantly alleviate speaking anxiety. Teachers can introduce collaborative learning models and group activities that allow students to practice speaking in a less formal setting, where mistakes are normalized as part of the learning process. Encouraging students to engage in peer feedback sessions and using positive reinforcement can also reduce anxiety by promoting a growth mindset. Additionally, mindfulness techniques, such as deep-breathing exercises before speaking activities, have been shown to help reduce anxiety (Gregersen et al., 2014).

4.4 Lack of Opportunities for Speaking Practice

In many educational settings, the curriculum often prioritizes reading and writing skills for exam preparation, leaving limited room for oral practice. This imbalance means that students seldom have the opportunity to develop their speaking skills, which require consistent practice and real-time feedback. Without sufficient speaking opportunities, students' ability to apply language skills in conversational contexts remains underdeveloped.

Example: One student commented, "We mostly learn grammar and read texts in English class. We rarely get to speak." This lack of focus on spoken language creates a gap between knowledge and application, making it difficult for students to gain confidence in speaking English.

Solution: Teachers can improve speaking practice by incorporating more oral activities into the curriculum, such as structured debates, presentations, and class discussions. Research has shown that engaging in regular speaking activities not only enhances language proficiency but also builds confidence and communication skills (Thornbury, 2005). Additionally, extracurricular programs like debate clubs, English drama, or language exchange partnerships with native speakers can provide further avenues for students to practice English in a supportive setting.

4.5 Comprehensive Implications and Future Directions

The findings of this study have broader implications for curriculum developers, educators, and policymakers. Addressing these barriers effectively could contribute to

more holistic language education that not only prepares students for academic success but also equips them with practical communication skills crucial for their future professional lives. Language proficiency is often a key determinant in accessing global opportunities, and thus, overcoming these challenges is vital to expanding students' prospects beyond the classroom.

Future research could focus on exploring the impact of digital tools and language learning apps on overcoming vocabulary limitations and grammar constraints. Furthermore, longitudinal studies examining the effects of anxiety-reducing techniques in classroom settings could provide insights into sustainable methods for building confidence in language learners. Additionally, research on the effectiveness of immersive language experiences, such as short-term English immersion camps or virtual language exchanges, could offer practical solutions for schools with limited resources for English language instruction.

4.6 Reflexivity

This analysis acknowledges the dynamic nature of language learning, recognizing that students' challenges are influenced by various individual, cultural, and institutional factors. As researchers and educators, it is essential to approach these issues with empathy and an understanding of the personal experiences of language learners. By incorporating student perspectives and adapting teaching methods to address specific needs, educators can create more responsive and impactful learning environments.

5. Conclusion

This study underscores several key barriers that impede students at SMK SPP SNAKMA from achieving proficiency in spoken English. These barriers—specifically limited vocabulary, grammar constraints, speaking anxiety, and a lack of practice opportunities—highlight the need for strategic interventions that go beyond conventional language instruction. Vocabulary limitations restrict students' ability to express themselves clearly, while grammar constraints often result in hesitation and fear of mistakes, especially in real-time conversations. Additionally, speaking anxiety, fueled by concerns over peer judgment and self-doubt, further diminishes students' willingness to actively participate in spoken interactions. Compounding these issues, the lack of structured opportunities for speaking practice within the curriculum reduces students' exposure to essential conversational skills, leaving them less prepared for practical language use. To address these challenges, a communication-centered teaching approach is recommended. This method should emphasize fluency, allowing students to engage in conversation without an overwhelming focus on grammatical accuracy. Incorporating informal, low-pressure speaking activities—such as role-play, group discussions, and interactive exercises—can provide students with meaningful practice, enabling them to gradually overcome language-related anxiety. By regularly integrating these activities into classroom settings, educators can create a more supportive learning environment that normalizes mistakes as part of the learning process and encourages students to speak more freely. In addition, cultivating a positive, inclusive atmosphere in the classroom is essential. When students feel supported and engaged in an environment that values their contributions, they are more likely to take risks with language, thereby building both competence and confidence in their speaking abilities. By prioritizing practical and engaging speaking interactions, educators not only support language acquisition but also equip students with essential communication skills that

will serve them in academic, professional, and social contexts. Ultimately, this approach can help bridge the gap between language learning and real-world application, preparing students for success beyond the classroom. Future research should continue exploring innovative strategies, such as the integration of digital tools and immersive experiences, to support students in overcoming these barriers and achieving meaningful progress in English language proficiency.

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