

BEYOND THE SILENCE: PSYCHOLOGICAL, SOCIAL, AND LINGUISTIC
BARRIERS TO ENGLISH SPEAKING CONFIDENCE

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
ARTICLE INFO Received: November 17, 2025 Revised: December 24, 2025 Accepted: December 27, 2025 Published: December 30, 2025 Keywords: Speaking Skills Self-Confidence Affective Barriers Linguistic Anxiety EFL Classroom	Speaking English requires not only linguistic knowledge but also sufficient confidence to take communicative risks. However, some beginning EFL learners remain silent, avoid interaction, and experience anxiety when asked to speak publicly. This study explored the self-confidence barriers experienced by seventh-grade students in English speaking at SMP Muhammadiyah 1 Palu. A descriptive qualitative design was employed with all seven students in the class and one English teacher as a key informant. Data were collected through a ten-item closed-ended questionnaire, a ten-question semi-structured teacher interview, classroom observation, and documentation. The data were analyzed through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification, supported by triangulation across the data sources. The findings indicate that students' confidence problems were shaped primarily by the interaction of social, psychological, and linguistic barriers. Although most students felt relatively comfortable with the teacher's structured questioning and 71.43% reported that pictures or videos reduced nervousness, all students considered regular speaking practice beneficial and all preferred small-group speaking to individual performance. At the same time, 100% reported that fear of grammatical mistakes could make them remain silent, while 85.7% experienced sudden vocabulary loss when being observed by peers. In addition, 71.4% lacked confidence to maintain eye contact, 85.7% experienced physical symptoms such as trembling or a racing heart, and 71.4% preferred silence when they did not know an English word. The study suggests that speaking instruction should prioritize psychologically safe interaction, frequent low-stakes practice, visual scaffolding, and flexible communication strategies. Keywords: Speaking confidence; speaking anxiety; affective barriers; EFL learners; cooperative learning. This is an open access article under the CC BY-SA license.
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INTRODUCTION

Speaking is a central component of English language learning because it enables learners to exchange ideas, express opinions, and participate in authentic communication. Nevertheless, the ability to speak does not depend only on knowledge of vocabulary,

grammar, and pronunciation. Learners also need the confidence to initiate communication, tolerate mistakes, and continue speaking when their linguistic resources are incomplete. In EFL classrooms, therefore, speaking competence is closely connected with affective conditions such as anxiety, self-efficacy, fear of negative evaluation, and willingness to communicate (MacIntyre et al., 1998; Peng & Woodrow, 2010; Teimouri et al., 2019).

Foreign language anxiety can make an ordinary speaking activity feel like a high-risk performance. Horwitz et al. (1986) conceptualized foreign language classroom anxiety as a situation-specific form of anxiety involving communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Subsequent research has shown that speaking anxiety may fluctuate according to task, classroom environment, interlocutor, and learners' perceptions of their own competence. For example, Matsuda and Gobel (2004) and Abrar et al. (2022) found that students may hesitate to speak when they anticipate errors or evaluation, while recent research has continued to identify anxiety, low confidence, limited vocabulary, and fear of mistakes as important barriers to classroom communication (Jannah et al., 2022; Syahrani et al., 2024).

Self-confidence is similarly important because students who believe they can communicate are more likely to take opportunities to use English. The relationship between confidence and willingness to communicate has been documented across in-class, out-of-class, and digital settings (Lee & Hsieh, 2019). In Indonesian EFL contexts, confidence, anxiety, and motivation have also been linked to students' willingness to communicate (Lee & Hsieh, 2020). Self-efficacy is particularly relevant because learners' beliefs about their capability can shape how much effort they invest in challenging communication tasks and how they respond to setbacks (Bandura, 1997; Redifer et al., 2021). When learners doubt their linguistic resources, technical problems such as limited vocabulary, grammar uncertainty, and pronunciation difficulties can become psychological barriers as well as linguistic ones (Suryanto et al., 2021; Kurnia et al., 2023).

The classroom social environment is another important dimension. Speaking in front of the whole class can expose young learners to peer judgment, embarrassment, and the possibility of making mistakes publicly. Cooperative learning and peer interaction can instead create a safer communicative space in which learners receive support from classmates and have more opportunities to rehearse language before public performance. Recent studies report that collaborative and peer-group activities can help reduce speaking anxiety and encourage participation (Meilasari et al., 2023; Marlia, 2023; Anshar et al., 2024). This perspective is consistent with the willingness-to-communicate framework, which views communication behavior as an interaction between individual psychological factors and situational conditions (MacIntyre et al., 1998).

The present study was conducted in a seventh-grade class at SMP Muhammadiyah 1 Palu after preliminary observation indicated that several students were reluctant to participate in English speaking activities and displayed visible signs of nervousness. The original thesis focused on the challenges to students' self-confidence when speaking English. For journal publication, the study is reframed to emphasize the interaction of psychological, social, and linguistic barriers rather than treating self-confidence as an isolated individual trait. This

framing is important because the findings show a contrast: students generally recognized the usefulness of speaking practice and supportive teaching, yet they still avoided spontaneous communication when exposed to public evaluation. The study therefore addresses the following research question: What psychological, social, and linguistic barriers shape seventh-grade students' confidence in speaking English at SMP Muhammadiyah 1 Palu?

The study contributes a contextual, learner-centered account of speaking confidence among beginning junior-high EFL learners in an Indonesian school setting. Rather than measuring speaking anxiety through a standardized scale or testing an intervention, it triangulates students' self-reports with teacher testimony, classroom observation, and documentation. The resulting account highlights how grammatical fear, vocabulary retrieval problems, peer observation, physical anxiety, and classroom task structure can reinforce one another and produce silence. The findings may help teachers design speaking activities that reduce social risk while maintaining meaningful opportunities for oral practice.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design. The design was selected because the purpose was to describe and interpret the difficulties students experienced when attempting to speak English rather than to test a causal relationship between variables. Qualitative description is appropriate when researchers seek a close account of participants' experiences in a natural educational setting. The study was conducted at SMP Muhammadiyah 1 Palu, Central Sulawesi, in May 2026 during the second semester of the 2025–2026 academic year.

The participants consisted of all seven seventh-grade students in the selected class, using a total sampling approach, and one English teacher who served as the key informant. The students were selected because preliminary classroom observations indicated difficulties with confidence during speaking activities. The teacher was included because of her continuous observation of classroom participation, speaking behavior, and students' responses to instructional practices.

Four data sources were used. First, students completed a ten-item closed-ended questionnaire with Yes/No responses. The items addressed five dimensions: (1) media comfort and responsiveness, (2) social environment and practice frequency, (3) student initiatives and interactions, (4) linguistic and technical barriers, and (5) psychological and affective symptoms. Second, the researcher conducted a semi-structured interview with the teacher using ten main questions concerning teaching methods, visual aids, speaking practice, group work, student initiative, grammar anxiety, vocabulary loss, eye contact, physical anxiety, and students' coping responses. Third, non-participant classroom observation was conducted using a ten-indicator checklist. Fourth, documentation, including classroom activity records and photographs, was used to support the other sources.

Data collection followed several stages. The researcher first obtained permission from the school and coordinated the research schedule with the teacher. A face-to-face teacher interview was then conducted and recorded with consent. Next, questionnaires were distributed to the seven students. Classroom observations were carried out during regular

English lessons, with attention to participation, hesitation, eye contact, physical signs of anxiety, and responses to speaking tasks. Finally, the researcher compared information from the questionnaire, interview, observation, and documentation to identify converging patterns.

Data analysis followed the interactive process of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Raw responses were first selected and condensed according to the research focus. The data were then organized into thematic descriptions corresponding to the five indicators. Finally, patterns were interpreted by comparing student responses, teacher statements, and observed behavior. Triangulation was used to strengthen credibility by checking whether the same phenomena appeared across different sources. The analysis was descriptive; the percentages reported in the findings summarize the seven questionnaire responses and are not treated as inferential statistics.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Summary of the five indicators of speaking-confidence barriers

Indicator	Key evidence	Response pattern	Interpretation
Media comfort and responsiveness	6/7 comfortable with current teaching; 5/7 calmer with pictures/videos	85.71% and 71.43% positive	Supportive teaching/media; not a primary barrier
Social environment and practice	7/7 value regular speaking practice; 7/7 prefer small groups	100% and 100%	Public individual performance increases social risk
Initiative and interaction	0/7 confident to volunteer; 5/7 avoid eye contact	28.6% maintain eye contact	Passivity and avoidance
Linguistic/technical barriers	7/7 fear grammar errors; 6/7 experience word loss	100% and 85.7% affected	Grammar fear and retrieval blocks
Psychological/affective symptoms	6/7 physical anxiety; 5/7 prefer silence when lacking a word	85.7% and 71.4% affected	Somatic anxiety and withdrawal

1. Media Comfort and Responsive Teaching

The first indicator shows that the instructional environment was not itself the dominant source of students' low confidence. Six of the seven students (85.71%) reported that the teacher's current way of teaching made them sufficiently comfortable to begin speaking. The teacher explained that she usually asked students one by one so that other students could prepare their answers before their turns. This predictable routine appears to reduce the suddenness of oral performance and gives learners time to formulate what they want to say. The finding is important because it indicates that low confidence should not automatically be attributed to ineffective teaching. Instead, the structure of the speaking task can influence how much psychological preparation learners have before speaking.

2. Social Safety and Speaking-Practice Opportunities

The strongest positive pattern concerned opportunities for practice and the social arrangement of speaking tasks. All seven students (100%) reported that having substantial time to practice speaking was helpful. The teacher confirmed that speaking practice was

provided in every lesson. Repeated practice is important because confidence develops through successful experiences and gradual exposure rather than through one-time performance. The finding also aligns with research showing that speaking confidence and willingness to communicate are shaped by repeated opportunities to use English in supportive settings (Lee & Hsieh, 2019; Banunaek et al., 2026).

All seven students (100%) also reported feeling more confident speaking in small groups than speaking alone in front of the class. This result provides a particularly strong indication that the social organization of speaking tasks matters. Individual performance places the learner at the center of peer attention, whereas small-group work distributes attention and creates opportunities for rehearsal, assistance, and shared responsibility. Research on cooperative learning similarly suggests that collaborative tasks can reduce the psychological pressure associated with speaking in a foreign language (Meilasari et al., 2023; Marlia, 2023). Thus, the problem is not simply that students lack confidence; the level of social risk embedded in the task can either activate or suppress the confidence they possess.

3. Limited Initiative and Avoidance of Interaction

The third indicator reveals a pronounced behavioral manifestation of low confidence. None of the seven students reported feeling confident enough to raise their hands voluntarily to answer questions. The teacher similarly stated that only a few students took initiative without prompting and that most students had to be called upon. In addition, five students (71.4%) reported that they did not feel confident enough to maintain eye contact with the teacher or classmates while speaking. These patterns suggest that self-confidence was not merely an internal feeling; it was visible in students' classroom behavior. Avoiding eye contact, waiting for teacher prompts, and remaining silent can function as protective strategies when learners anticipate embarrassment or negative evaluation.

The finding is consistent with the willingness-to-communicate literature, which emphasizes that learners may possess linguistic knowledge yet still avoid communication when psychological or situational conditions are unfavorable (MacIntyre et al., 1998; Peng & Woodrow, 2010). Fear of negative evaluation can be particularly influential because students may perceive an English speaking task as a public test of their competence. In this context, the absence of voluntary participation should be interpreted as a communication-avoidance response rather than simply as a lack of motivation.

4. Linguistic Barriers and Cognitive Blocking

Grammar and vocabulary emerged as closely connected to students' confidence. All seven students (100%) reported that fear of making grammar mistakes could make them prefer to remain silent. The teacher also observed that only a few students could answer or express opinions fluently. This finding suggests that grammar was not experienced merely as a technical language component; it became a perceived standard against which students feared being judged. When learners believe that every utterance must be grammatically correct, the cognitive demands of planning content, retrieving vocabulary, and monitoring form may compete with the ability to maintain spontaneous interaction.

Vocabulary retrieval created another barrier. Six students (85.7%) reported that they sometimes suddenly forgot words when nervous and when classmates were watching. The teacher confirmed that students sometimes forgot their words and needed assistance. This finding illustrates the interaction between affect and language processing: social pressure may interfere with the retrieval of language that students know under less stressful circumstances. Similar relationships between vocabulary limitations, speaking difficulties, and anxiety have been reported in Indonesian EFL research (Gusviyanti et al., 2022; Handini et al., 2021; Suryanto et al., 2021). The present findings extend this perspective by showing how vocabulary retrieval difficulty can become part of a self-protective cycle: anxiety disrupts retrieval, the resulting pause increases embarrassment, and embarrassment further discourages speaking.

5. Psychological and Affective Symptoms

The fifth indicator provides the clearest evidence that speaking anxiety was experienced physically as well as psychologically. Six students (85.7%) reported trembling hands or a racing heart when asked to speak at the front of the class. The teacher confirmed that some students displayed signs of anxiety and needed a moment to compose themselves. Such somatic reactions are consistent with the broader literature on foreign language anxiety, in which speaking can trigger physiological arousal, worry, and avoidance (Horwitz et al., 1986; Bai, 2023; Syahrani et al., 2024).

The final questionnaire item examined students' coping responses when they did not know an English word. Five students (71.4%) preferred to remain silent rather than mix English with another language, while two students (28.6%) were more willing to use code-mixing. The teacher reported that students sometimes switched to Indonesian when they did not know an English word. The contrast between silence and code-mixing is pedagogically meaningful. Code-mixing can serve as an adaptive communication strategy that keeps interaction moving, whereas complete silence removes the communicative opportunity altogether. Teachers may therefore need to distinguish between strategic language support and withdrawal, allowing beginning learners to use limited first-language resources while gradually increasing English output.

6. Integrated Discussion: Why Confidence Collapses

Taken together, the five indicators show that students' low confidence cannot be explained by one factor. The classroom contained several supportive features: the teacher used a predictable questioning routine, visual materials helped many students feel calmer, and speaking practice occurred regularly. Yet these supports were not sufficient to overcome the social and psychological risk of individual public performance. The strongest barriers appeared when students had to speak while being watched, when they anticipated grammatical errors, or when they experienced vocabulary retrieval problems.

This pattern supports an interactional view of speaking confidence. Self-confidence is partly an individual belief, but its expression is highly sensitive to context. A learner who can respond in a small group may become silent when asked to perform alone. Similarly, a student who knows a word may fail to retrieve it under peer observation. This interpretation is compatible with the L2 confidence and willingness-to-communicate framework (MacIntyre

et al., 1998) and with research showing that anxiety and confidence interact with classroom conditions (Lee & Hsieh, 2019; Syafitri et al., 2025). Recent work with junior secondary learners also indicates that motivational and classroom interventions can influence confidence, anxiety, and willingness to communicate over time (Ye & Hu, 2025).

The study therefore points toward a low-risk-to-high-risk progression for speaking instruction. Teachers can begin with pair or small-group rehearsal, visual prompts, short predictable responses, and repeated practice before moving to individual presentations. Such scaffolding does not mean avoiding challenging speaking tasks; rather, it creates a developmental pathway in which students experience manageable success before facing more public communication. Cooperative learning research supports this direction because group interaction can provide a psychologically safer environment for learners who fear speaking in front of peers (Meilasari et al., 2023; Anshar et al., 2024).

The findings also have implications for feedback. If grammar correction is perceived as public judgment, correction may unintentionally strengthen silence. Feedback should therefore distinguish between errors that impede meaning and errors that can be addressed later. Teachers can model that mistakes are expected during language development and encourage students to continue communicating even when their grammar or vocabulary is incomplete. This approach is particularly relevant for young EFL learners whose self-confidence is still developing and whose fear of negative evaluation can suppress participation (Jia & Yue, 2023; Andriani et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

This study found that seventh-grade students' confidence in speaking English at SMP Muhammadiyah 1 Palu was shaped by an interconnected set of psychological, social, and linguistic barriers. The teacher's structured questioning, visual materials, and regular speaking practice were generally perceived as supportive rather than as major sources of the problem. Nevertheless, students experienced a sharp reduction in confidence when speaking became a public performance involving peer observation and the possibility of making mistakes.

The most prominent barriers were fear of grammatical errors, vocabulary retrieval problems under pressure, avoidance of eye contact, limited spontaneous participation, physical symptoms of anxiety, and a tendency to remain silent when linguistic resources were insufficient. At the same time, the unanimous preference for small-group speaking demonstrates that students' confidence is context-sensitive and can emerge when the social risk of communication is reduced.

Pedagogically, English teachers should provide frequent low-stakes speaking practice, prioritize pair and small-group interaction before individual performance, use visual scaffolding, normalize errors as part of language learning, and permit strategic communication support such as limited code-mixing when necessary. Future research could investigate these barriers longitudinally or test specific interventions, such as cooperative

learning, project-based learning, peer support, or drama-based speaking activities, with larger samples and multiple schools.

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