

Unlocking Student Voices: Social Support And Authentic Interaction As Catalysts of English Speaking Engagement in Islamic Higher Education - Indonesia

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Abstract. This study investigates how environmental factors, authentic speaking activities, and affective conditions influence students' English-speaking engagement at an Islamic Higher Education institution in West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, where English is treated as a foreign language. Although the pedagogical benefits of speaking practice are well documented, many students remain reluctant to speak English due to anxiety, unsupportive environments, and limited opportunities for authentic communicative interaction. Using a qualitative descriptive methodology, the study triangulated data from semi-structured interviews, three-week campus observations, and supporting documentation. Ten English Education students who joined the English-speaking club participated, selected purposively based on their varied involvement in extracurricular speaking activities. Findings show that students speak English only when emotionally and socially safe, drawing heavily on peer encouragement, supportive communities, and real-world communication contexts. The study concludes that speaking participation is socially co-constructed and constrained by affective factors such as fear of mistakes, low vocabulary control, and anxiety. The results reinforce Vygotsky's Social Constructivism and Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, demonstrating that supportive environments significantly lower anxiety and enhance willingness to communicate. Pedagogical implications include the need for institutional redesign of speaking ecosystems, integration of authentic communicative opportunities, and structured scaffolding for emotional safety in Islamic Higher Education contexts.

Keywords: Speaking Engagement; Environmental Support; Affective Barriers; Social Constructivism; Islamic Higher Education.

INTRODUCTION

The use of TL in classroom instruction is well known as an important factor in successful foreign language learning, especially in speaking skills. This is because students can practice what they have learned in context through real communication, rather than learning only in theory. Thus, speaking activities provide opportunities for learners to actively practice language, develop confidence, and lower affective filters during performance [1]. Research has shown that speaking practice develops the fluency and accuracy necessary for communicative use of the target

language. In this respect, speaking will not be a secondary skill but rather an integral part of developing language proficiency. Engaging oneself in spoken interaction involves comprehension of input, articulation of ideas, negotiation of meaning, and co-construction of interpretations with others. Processes of this type turn speaking into a cognitive and social enterprise that calls for deeper linguistic processing. Empirical evidence has also shown that the more students are engaged in speaking classes, the higher their attainment of oral proficiency will be compared to those with minimal participation. Despite this noted value, several students in Islamic High

schools remain somewhat reluctant to participate actively in speaking activities due to anxiety, low self-confidence, and an unsupportive learning environment, all of which limit their oral performance. Hence, the central research problem is: Why are students still unwilling to speak during activities, and what environmental and instructional factors influence students' willingness to communicate in the classroom?

Generally, classroom speaking engagement is not an isolated factor but is strongly influenced by environmental supports such as peer encouragement, lecturer facilitation, and institutional values. How safe students feel and how successful they are at expressing themselves in English alongside others are shaped by the learning environment [2]. In a psychologically safe environment, learners are more likely to take risks, feel comfortable moving and engaging with others, and bring their ideas to the forefront. In contrast, if emotional support is not provided in the environment, anxiety, silence, and resistance to speaking activities may be produced, which could undermine language-learning motivation [3]. Among the most cited inhibitions are students' fear of negative peer evaluation or judgment, which, in turn, deters them from participating orally [4]. In this regard, it is the responsibility of lecturers to design pedagogical communicative tasks that are meaningful and provide scaffolding to mitigate speaking anxiety while supporting language learning [5]. In addition, English clubs, debate teams, English seminars, and a digital dialogue platform can further enhance speaking practice beyond the classroom [6]. These are opportunities for students to connect with real language users and experience English in genuine communication settings. In such environments, speaking is a major factor that drives an individual towards success in communication, rather than a stressor or duty. Thus, environmental aid is an essential requirement for successfully speaking up.

Environmental support is critical in Indonesian Islamic educational institutions, particularly in Islamic education settings where students are rarely exposed to English. In these kinds of situations, students are also insecure about speaking in public, since they have so few natural opportunities for genuine English conversation. Modesty and anxiety about being wrong are cultural factors that lead learners to avoid speaking. Formal classroom structures are too strict, preventing students from practising English in a com-

fortable, judgment-free environment [7]. As such, speaking is seen as a high-risk performance rather than an opportunity to learn, which further minimises participation and motivation. However, some studies on English for teaching (EFT) students have found that a substantial proportion depend on supportive environments for the development of speaking skills through other exposure outside formal learning contexts [8]. There are localised communities whose primary language is reported as not English who regularly attend and participate in events such as informal speaking spaces, English clubs, debate groups, and translation communities. They also communicate with foreign tourists or become members of an international online forum; these especially apply to West Nusa Tenggara, a tourism area. Such experiences mitigate the fear of making mistakes, provide an incentive for communicative competence, and enhance authentic English exposure [9]. As a result, the environment is a crucial mediating factor in both speaking ability and willingness to communicate. Apart from community-based approaches, learners are adopting a multimedia approach using online and digital media to improve speaking competence outside of class. Big language-learning opportunities can be supported by digital platforms like YouTube, TikTok, WhatsApp voice notes, Zoom, Instagram Reels, and podcasts for all kinds of pronunciation practice and fluency-building. Students may find these tools foster instinctive learning through repetition, imitation, and the free flow of interaction, through which natural communication strategies may be acquired [10]. The media also gives learners access to various accents, a very natural use of the target language, and authentic, informal expressions that occur in real conversation.

Nevertheless, Muslim students are not making the most of these resources due to internal resistance such as a lack of self-esteem, self-control and unsupportive school culture. These psychological variables account for the substantial difference between high- and low-involved students in speaking tasks. Hence, learning how the environment supports speaking participation becomes increasingly important in addressing these challenges. Speaking is positively linked to students' motivation and perseverance in learning [11]. Identifying influential factors allows educators to design interventions to reduce anxiety and increase classroom participation. Therefore,

investigating these processes is essential to providing more inclusive speaking lessons.

The problem of support is more serious because English is considered a foreign language in academic and spoken community culture, as well as in Islamic Higher Education. Common tensions that surface include resistance to speaking in academic settings, discomfort with open performance, and worry about lecturer and peer judgment. These issues not only lead to classroom silence but also exacerbate the achievement gap between fluent and less confident students. To overcome these differences, studies on environmental support and speaking can help explore the pedagogical principles that are sensitive towards Muslim learners' cultural backgrounds. A welcoming environment provides equal rights to use English, build a communicative identity, and speak without stigma. Opportunities that foster student voice can promote speaking persistence, willingness to communicate, and participation. These points highlight the value of powerful ecological learning contexts that support oral language development and minimise biased access to speaking opportunities. This is a reminder for universities to recognise the importance of institutional support in shaping student success in language learning. Creating such contexts aligns with national educational goals to enhance university students' communicative competence.

The theoretical framework of this study is Vygotsky's social constructivism [12], which states that learning is constructed through genuine interaction and social support. Vygotsky asserts that people function at higher levels of ability despite their actual developmental level by interacting in cooperative activities with those who are capable within their ZPD. Scaffolding is needed in Islamic Higher Education because many students are linguistically insecure and have few speaking opportunities beyond transmission instruction in classroom settings. Safe social spaces for students to experiment with language production, identity, and error make a difference. Such contexts also contribute to linguistic resilience and confidence, as well as to the emergence of a communicative identity that drives ongoing learning. In this view, social support not only serves as a source of external motivation but also as an internal generator of self-confidence, which enhances speaking willingness. As such, this paper explores how environmental factors shape the level of speaking participation among Muslim university students. The investigation will de-

termine which environmental factors enhance successful engagement and which barriers hinder communication progress. In the end, it is hoped that the findings will lead to the design of more inclusive speaking exercises and ecosystems in Indonesian Islamic Higher Education. This emphasis also underscores the strategic role of environmental support in successful foreign language learning.

METHOD

This researcher employed a qualitative, descriptive design to examine students' experiences during English classes. It was a descriptive qualitative study design, as the researcher intended to focus on students' lived experiences with realities without dependence, manipulation, or interventions. As a result, the students were able to speak and share detailed, descriptive experiences. The research was conducted at one of the Islamic Higher Education Institutions in West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, which perceives and teaches English as a foreign language and has limited speaking opportunities, as the classroom environment predominantly controls speaking practice. The institution's setting provides a unique context for the combination of scholarly, spiritual, and multicultural aspirations, which influences the approach one takes to oral English Fluency.

The study aimed to assess students' attitudes and willingness to speak English as a function of a positive attitude toward speaking, opportunities to speak, a supportive environment for speaking, and social support. The researchers' focus was more on understanding students' lived experiences that enabled them to speak, rather than on their speaking skills as a whole. A descriptive qualitative approach was most appropriate as the study concerned the participants' focal experiences [13].

The purpose of the research questions was to gain an understanding of the enabling and hindering elements of classroom engagement. This emphasis situated the research within a social constructivist paradigm, in which learning was perceived as socially constructed. Therefore, the whole research process was designed to collect and analyse narrative data to illuminate how the social world structures the conditions for speaking participation.

The participants were 10 active members of the speaking club at the Islamic Higher Education institution during the data collection period, recruited and nominated by the institution. At this stage, the institutions were nominating students who could be recognised as participants or were acquainted with some English-speaking activities. Using this criterion-referenced sampling technique, it was possible to assess speaking experience from a more profound perspective rather than a shallow one. The prospective participants' details were obtained first through the lecturers' referrals, and subsequently through informal classroom and English club observations. Frequent speakers were recruited for this study for several reasons, including English circle participants (i.e., the total number of students who joined the English community) and foreign speaker participants. The researchers explained the study's purpose, procedures, and ethical issues to all participants. Informed consent forms were signed, and they were assured that their identities and all identifying details would be kept confidential and that pseudonyms would be used throughout the study. Participants were informed that they could choose not to respond to any questions and could leave the study at any point without any negative consequences.

Semi-structured interviews were employed for data collection. Semi-structured interviews offer flexibility and spontaneity while allowing for moderation. An interview guide was developed that included the research questions, the theoretical framework of social constructivism, and prior research on the availability of speaking opportunities. Open-ended questions were constructed regarding the participants' speaking experiences, the contexts and activities, the perceived instructional support, and the challenges they encountered. The interview guide included follow-up questions to encourage respondents to elaborate on their specific experiences, the actions and emotions they encountered, and the reasoning behind their actions or emotions. In preparation for the main data collection, one of the interview guides was pilot-tested with two participants who were not part of the final sample to evaluate the guide's clarity, duration, and relevance. A few minor adjustments were made to the interview guides following the pilot interviews. These included simplifying some questions and introducing prompts on using digital speaking activities and speaking with people from other countries.

The principal interviews were organised with the participants at their convenience.

Before each session, informed consent, including assent to recording conversations, was sought from the participants. The interview sessions were conducted in Indonesian to ease the conversation. Interviews took approximately 40 to 50 minutes each. The interviewer tried to create a non-threatening environment. Thus, the participants could feel safe and comfortable sharing their thoughts. During interviews, the researcher made field notes containing contextual information, subjective impressions, and remarks that might later be useful for analysis. Additional data were gathered through brief observations outside the classroom and relevant documents to ensure triangulation of information sources. The observations targeted student engagement in speaking activities, peer mediation of interactions, and recruitment of peers during oral tasks. The collection of documents also focused on the cross-sectional context of each interlocutor (task sheets, promotional documents, and announcements concerning clubs and activities in English) to better appreciate the background. The questionnaires for participants were supplemented with interviews, which were also recorded and transcribed in full for accuracy. The researchers, having noted the first step of thematic analysis, engaged with the data set as a whole to build familiarity; to that end, they read the transcripts, observation notes, and documents numerous times. In the familiarity stage, some rough thoughts were noted in the margins regarding apparent structures, sets of themes, unexplained gaps, and so on. The interplay of different data sources meant that the researchers could not base their interpretations solely on one evidence type for students' oral engagement. This convergence of evidence enhanced the findings' descriptive validity and, in turn, their trustworthiness. Instead of relying on a single data-collection method, we used interviews, observations, and documents to triangulate the data and further enhance our understanding of students' perceptions of their constructive environment and the speaking tasks they were assigned.

The researcher employed thematic analysis, following the steps proposed [14], and used data triangulation to enhance the analysis's credibility. The researchers immersed themselves in the data, progressing carefully to the first cycle of coding, where coding, defining, and tagging text excerpts were related to speaking tasks, envi-

ronmental facilitators and inhibitors, emotional effects, participation, and the driving and restraining factors. The authors distributed manual coding of data and used simple spreadsheet documents, attaching a sample text to each code as it was established. The codes derived from interviews, classroom observations, and documents were compared and grouped into a first set of candidate themes that captured the data. They integrated these themes and reconsidered the data to assess whether they were substantiated by another set of distinct data points that were consistent and interconnected. The researchers used the member checking technique to enhance the credibility of the themes, sharing the primary interpretive themes with a subset of participants to verify whether they believed the themes reflected the essence of their lived experiences. The authors utilised this constructive critique to refine the lexicon further, deepen the thematic exploration, and ensure congruence between the data representation, the respondents' experiences, and the themes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Triangulated evidence from interviews and observations clearly demonstrates that students' willingness to use English depends strongly on the social and emotional environment in which they are placed. Students repeatedly stated that they speak English only when they feel comfortable and socially supported. For example, AS explained, *"I speak in English only with my close friends... depending on the environment and the topic."* Another student emphasised peer influence, saying, *"Sometimes, but when they can speak English, I tend to use English with them."* Similarly, NP reported lack of environmental support as a deterrent: *"I rarely speak English outside the classroom because my environment and friends do not support practising English."* MHA confirmed the same condition: *"I speak with my friends in English almost every day when the environment supports it, especially on campus."* These findings showed that students' willingness to speak English is not essentially based on linguistic ability but on levels of social and emotional safety available within an environment. Students participate more when they are supported, accepted, and unjudged—especially in interactions with trusted peers.

On the other hand, unsupportive settings hinder participation and lead students to avoid using

English. Thus, the decision to speak English is socially constructed and context-dependent, suggesting that supportive peer relationships are necessary for engaging students in speaking. Observational evidence further reinforced the same pattern. Students stopped speaking English when unsupportive peers approached. One student said, *"Okay, but I still don't know how to say this part correctly,"* and switched to Indonesian when a hesitant peer joined the group, indicating that emotional safety determines persistence in speaking. Another observation data noted a student admitting: *"I want to speak, but sometimes I'm afraid I will say something wrong,"* followed by peer reassurance, *"Just say it. It's okay to be wrong."* This interaction directly shows how supportive peer dynamics enable sustained willingness to communicate. Supporting documentation, such as promotional posters from English clubs, provides evidence of institutional support for building conversation communities, which indirectly validates the hypothesis that formal and informal environmental structures influence speaking participation. These observations highlight that students' willingness to continue speaking English is highly influenced by emotional safety and peer reactions. If they perceive the environment as unsupportive, they immediately retreat from speaking and retreat to their first language.

On the other hand, when peers offer encouragement, students speak more bravely and persistently despite mistakes. This fact indicates that supportive peer dynamics are a very strong motivator for communication, whereas negative or unsure reactions immediately shut down participation. Institutional initiatives, such as the English clubs, also make this contention valid—that both formal and informal structures are imperative in shaping opportunities and confidence for practice in English speaking.

The convergence of interview, observation, and documentation data indicates that speaking engagement among students is a socially constructed phenomenon shaped primarily by environmental affordances. Supportive peer interactions reduce psychological risk and enable learners to engage in English more confidently, whereas unsupportive environments trigger silence and avoidance. This finding confirms that willingness to communicate is context-dependent rather than ability-dependent, consistent with Vygotsky's argument that performance develops within socially mediated interaction. Thus, peer en-

couragement and safe learning ecosystems are foundational for speaking engagement, and institutions must cultivate them intentionally. The convergence of interview, observation, and documentation data indicates that speaking engagement among students is a socially constructed phenomenon shaped primarily by environmental affordances. Supportive peer interactions reduce psychological risk and enable learners to engage in English more confidently, whereas un-supportive environments trigger silence and avoidance. This finding confirms that willingness to communicate is context-dependent rather than ability-dependent, consistent with Vygotsky's argument that performance develops within socially mediated interaction. Thus, peer encouragement and safe learning ecosystems are foundational for speaking engagement, and institutions must cultivate them intentionally.

The data show students used a variety of authentic and multimodal speaking practices outside the classroom, which heavily influenced their communicative competence. As described, varied informal speaking exposure, such as "doing conversation, singing English songs, and watching movies." AFA highlighted interaction in real communicative contexts: "*Interacting with international people helps me enhance my speaking skills.*" In addition, another participant pointed to speaking assignments: "*I have assignments to interview foreign tourists, which enables two-way conversations in English.*" L supported collaborative involvement: "*I join some English clubs outside the faculty.*" These findings lead to the view that students develop speaking competence best through authentic, real-life communicative experiences outside the classroom. It is such multimodal and experiential learning opportunities that provide meaningful input and immediate communicative purpose, catalysing development beyond those offered by traditional classroom activities. Authentic engagement, hence, plays a very important role in driving speaking improvement and provides evidence that language growth is strongest when practice is embedded in authentic social contexts. These findings imply that authentic speaking opportunities should be deliberately integrated into language programs by institutions and educators through the creation of structured platforms for real interaction, such as collaborations with tourism centres, speaking corners, digital language exchanges, and community-based English clubs. Classroom instruction should not be limited, but rather

complemented by controlled practice through experiential participation. By embedding real speaking experiences into the curriculum, universities can further enhance students' communicative competence and prepare them for more practical language use.

Records of observational notes supported these practices. In the English Club, for example, one participant stated, "*I want to be a tour guide, so speaking like this helps me prepare,*" while demonstrating authentic use based on career needs. Another observation recorded independent self-regulation, "*Today I want to practice pronunciation, especially difficult words,*" by a student recording their voice to monitor pronunciation. Furthermore, a student practising with AI stated, "*The AI corrects my sentences so I feel more confident to speak.*" Documentation of public posters promoting 'Speaking Corner' and English Club meetings further supported the notion that there is consistent extracurricular access to real-life speaking opportunities.

Triangulating these findings, the researcher found that students draw on authentic communicative contexts—such as tourist encounters, English clubs, digital media, voice recordings, and AI-mediated practice—as resources in developing fluency and confidence. These extracurricular language engagements add an experiential and performative dimension to classroom learning. Thereby, curriculum-institutional design has to go beyond textbook-based speaking activities and deliberately integrate such authentic communicative experience as part of core learning. The universities should systematically offer structured opportunities for genuine conversation, including partnerships with the tourism industry, digital language exchange projects, speaking clubs, and communication platforms with AI support.

The third theme indicates that student participation is guided by affective factors such as confidence, anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and personal motivation. In the interview data, strong emotional constraints on participation were signalled. One student said, "*Most of all, we're afraid to make mistakes.*" Another described cognitive disruption from anxiety, "*Maybe some words suddenly go blank.*" NL indicated emotional tension, stating, "*Mostly I do not have enough vocab... so I am afraid of talking.*" AH highlighted gradual confidence building: "*Yeah, I feel confident enough to talk as I push myself to try.*"

Observation notes confirmed this affective dynamic: One of the students revealed, "I don't speak English outside class because my friends cannot speak English, and they laugh when someone tries." Another followed, "That's why speaking English here is difficult." From these interactions, it would appear that anxiety is socially rather than linguistically prompted. Conversely, after talking with a tourist, a student mentioned, "I was nervous because I forgot some vocabulary, but it was a great experience," suggesting that confidence is achieved through exposure rather than by shying away from it. Supporting documentation included lesson plans focused on speaking performance and club posters that encouraged open participation, thereby demonstrating institutional recognition of emotional obstacles.

The findings from this study indicate that the supportive environment, authenticity of interaction, and affective condition are all critical determinants of students' willingness to engage in English-speaking activities within Islamic Higher Education. Results strongly support the earlier literature review: speaking is essentially a product of a learning environment and social interaction rather than an isolated individual capability. According to [1], speaking can provide learners with opportunities to actively practice the language, build confidence, and lower affective filters. The triangulated results supported previous studies reported [2, 3]: speaking participation emerges when students perceive the environment as emotionally safe and socially supportive.

The dominance of social and environmental influences in shaping students' speaking behaviour confirms Vygotsky's social constructivist view [12] that learning is socially mediated and constructed through interaction. According to Vygot-

sky, learners perform beyond their independent capabilities when supported by more competent peers, as observed. Environmental scaffolding thus transforms identity, confidence, and linguistic output. According to Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis [15], anxiety, fear, and low self-confidence block language processing, while motivation and security facilitate language acquisition. This study supports the findings reported [6]. An authentic communicative experience provides comprehensible input, as explained by Krashen's Input Hypothesis, which is required for acquisition.

CONCLUSIONS

The study concludes that English-speaking engagement among Islamic Higher Education students is shaped by environmental support, authentic interaction, and affective conditions, rather than by linguistic ability alone. Speaking is a socially co-constructed practice in which peer collaboration and supportive learning contexts determine the willingness to communicate. Authentic speaking activities—including English clubs, interaction with tourists, and digital speech tools—serve as powerful extensions to classroom learning and facilitate fluency, confidence, and identity formation. Conversely, anxiety, fear of mistakes, and unsupportive environments significantly restrict participation. Theoretically, findings validate Vygotsky's social constructivism and Krashen's affective filter hypothesis, emphasising the need for safe scaffolding and low-anxiety input to promote language acquisition. Practically, Islamic Higher Education institutions must restructure speaking ecosystems to offer more authentic, scaffolded, and emotionally safe communicative environments.

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