

FACTORS SHAPING EFL STUDENTS' SPEAKING DIFFICULTIES DURING ROLE PLAY ACTIVITIES: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Marsha Aulia Rahmani¹, Mansyur Srisudarso², Yuna Tresna Wahyuna³

^{1,2,3} English Education FKIP Universitas Singaperbangsa Karawang

¹12210631060093@student.unsika.ac.id, ² mansyur.srisudarso@fkip.unsika.ac.id,

³ yuna.tresna@fkip.unsika.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Speaking difficulties remain one of the major challenges faced by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, particularly during communicative activities such as role play that require spontaneous interaction. This study aimed to explore the factors shaping students' speaking difficulties during role play activities in an Indonesian senior high school EFL classroom. A qualitative approach using a basic qualitative study design was employed. Seven eleventh-grade students were selected through criterion-based purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and non-participant classroom observations and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis. The findings revealed three major factors shaping students' speaking difficulties during role play activities: linguistic factors, including limited vocabulary, grammatical difficulties, and pronunciation problems; psychological factors, including nervousness, fear of making mistakes, and lack of confidence; and environmental factors, including audience behavior, peer reactions, peer support, and limited opportunities to practice English. The findings suggest that speaking difficulties are influenced by linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors. Therefore, communicative speaking activities should be designed to support students' linguistic competence, psychological readiness, and supportive classroom environments.

Keywords: *speaking difficulties, role play, linguistic factors, psychological factors, environmental factors*

ABSTRAK

Kesulitan berbicara masih menjadi salah satu tantangan utama yang dihadapi pembelajar bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing (EFL), khususnya dalam kegiatan komunikatif seperti role play yang menuntut interaksi secara spontan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi faktor-faktor yang membentuk kesulitan berbicara siswa selama kegiatan role play di kelas EFL tingkat sekolah menengah atas di Indonesia. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain basic qualitative study. Tujuh siswa kelas XI dipilih melalui criterion-based purposive sampling. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dan observasi kelas non-partisipan, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik Braun dan Clarke (2022). Hasil penelitian mengungkapkan tiga faktor utama yang membentuk kesulitan berbicara siswa selama kegiatan role play, yaitu faktor linguistik yang meliputi keterbatasan kosakata, kesulitan tata bahasa, dan masalah pengucapan; faktor psikologis yang meliputi rasa gugup, takut melakukan kesalahan, dan kurang

percaya diri; serta faktor lingkungan yang meliputi perilaku audiens, reaksi teman sebaya, dukungan teman sebaya, dan terbatasnya kesempatan untuk berlatih bahasa Inggris. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kesulitan berbicara dipengaruhi oleh faktor linguistik, psikologis, dan lingkungan. Oleh karena itu, kegiatan berbicara komunikatif perlu dirancang untuk mendukung kompetensi linguistik, kesiapan psikologis, dan lingkungan belajar yang suportif.

Kata Kunci: kesulitan berbicara, role play, pembelajar EFL, faktor linguistik, faktor psikologis, faktor lingkungan

A. Introduction

Speaking is a crucial productive ability in the study of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) since it allows students to articulate thoughts, share knowledge, and interact successfully across a range of academic and social situations. It also reflects learners' communicative competence, as successful oral communication requires the appropriate use of vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and fluency during real-time interaction (Brown, 2004; Harmer, 2007). Regardless of its significance, verbal communication continues to be one of the most difficult language abilities for numerous EFL students since they need to concurrently handle their language knowledge while replying intuitively during interactions. Consequently, many learners experience speaking difficulties that limit their ability to communicate effectively. Recent studies have suggested that these difficulties are influenced not only by learners' linguistic competence but also by psychological and environmental factors that shape their speaking performance (Alvarez et al., 2024; Anggraini et al., 2025).

To facilitate students' speaking development, English teachers frequently employ communicative learning activities, one of which is role play. Role play provides opportunities for learners to practice English through simulated real-life situations that encourage meaningful interaction and spontaneous communication with peers (Ne'matova & Porsayeva, 2024). However, role play also places considerable communicative demands on learners. During role play activities, students are required to retrieve vocabulary, construct grammatically appropriate utterances, pronounce words accurately, and respond spontaneously while maintaining the flow of interaction. These simultaneous demands may reveal various speaking difficulties that are less visible in controlled speaking tasks, making role play an appropriate context for exploring the factors shaping students' speaking difficulties in EFL classrooms.

Previous studies have consistently reported that EFL students' speaking difficulties are influenced by multiple factors. Pamungkas (2023) found that senior high school students experienced vocabulary limitations, grammatical difficulties, pronunciation problems,

and low confidence when speaking English. Similarly, Alvarez et al. (2024) emphasized that speaking performance is shaped by linguistic, affective, and contextual factors rather than linguistic competence alone. In terms of communicative learning activities, Tran et al. (2025) reported that authentic role play improved students' speaking performance despite the persistence of linguistic challenges during interaction. Likewise, Shamail et al. (2025) discovered that participating in role play boosted learners' self-assurance and enthusiasm while decreasing certain mental obstacles to verbal communication. Collectively, these studies indicate that students' speaking difficulties are multidimensional and influenced by various linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors.

Although previous has provided important information regarding challenges in speaking and the use of role play, the majority have concentrated on either recognizing common speaking issues or evaluating the success of role play in enhancing speaking skills. There has been relatively minimal focus on elucidating how linguistic, psychological, and environmental elements uniquely influence students' speaking challenges during role play scenarios from the perspectives of the students themselves. Furthermore, limited evidence is available from Indonesian senior high school EFL classrooms, where students' speaking experiences are influenced by unique classroom contexts and limited

opportunities to use English outside school. This gap highlights the need to explore the factors shaping students' speaking difficulties during role play activities within this educational context.

As a result, this research intends to investigate the elements influencing learners' challenges in speaking while engaging in role play exercises within an EFL classroom at a senior high school in Indonesia. Using a qualitative approach with a basic qualitative study design and thematic analysis, this study seeks to identify the linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors underlying students' speaking difficulties during role play activities. The findings are expected to contribute to the growing body of literature on EFL speaking difficulties by providing contextual evidence of how multiple factors shape students' speaking experiences during communicative classroom activities. The findings are also expected to provide practical implications for English teachers in designing communicative speaking activities that better support students' linguistic development, psychological readiness, and supportive classroom environments.

B. Research Method

This study employed a qualitative approach using a basic qualitative study design to explore the factors shaping students' speaking difficulties during role play activities in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. A basic qualitative study was considered appropriate

because it aims to understand how individuals interpret and make meaning of their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The study was conducted at a private senior high school in Karawang, West Java, Indonesia. The participants were seven eleventh-grade students who had previously participated in English role play activities and experienced speaking difficulties during the activities. They were selected through criterion-based purposive sampling to obtain rich and relevant information regarding the phenomenon under investigation

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and non-participant classroom observation. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data source because they enabled participants to describe their experiences in depth, while classroom observation provided supporting evidence of students' speaking behaviors during the preparation and performance stages of role play activities. Each interview lasted approximately 20–30 minutes and was conducted in Indonesian to facilitate participants' responses.

The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis, which involved data familiarization, coding, theme development, theme review, and report writing. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, methodological triangulation was employed by comparing interview and observation data, and member checking was conducted to ensure

that the interpretations accurately reflected participants' experiences.

C.Results and Discussion

The thematic analysis identified three major factors shaping students' speaking difficulties during role play activities: linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors. These themes are presented separately to explain the different factors influencing students' speaking difficulties, the results demonstrate that they often interact throughout the students' speaking experiences. The sections that follow provide a detailed examination of each factor.

1. Linguistic Factors

Observation and interview data consistently indicated that linguistic factors were among the primary contributors to students' speaking difficulties during role play activities. Classroom observations showed that during the preparation stage, several students required assistance in finding appropriate vocabulary, frequently asked their classmates for translations, and spent considerable time constructing sentences before rehearsing their dialogues. During the performance stage, students often paused because they forgot vocabulary or parts of their dialogues. Pronunciation difficulties were also observed, as several students mispronounced words such as remove, itinerary, nurse, and suggestion. These findings suggest that vocabulary limitations, grammatical difficulties, pronunciation problems, and sentence construction hindered students' ability to

communicate effectively during role play activities. These findings suggest that vocabulary limitations, grammatical difficulties, pronunciation problems, and sentence construction hindered students' ability to communicate effectively during role play activities. Because role play requires students to respond spontaneously during interaction, these linguistic difficulties became more visible when students attempted to maintain the flow of conversation without relying entirely on memorized dialogues.

The interview findings supported the observation data. Several participants identified grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation as the most challenging aspects of speaking English. One participant explained, "Kalau aku lebih ke grammar yang masih kurang, jadi kadang bingung pas nyusun kalimat" (P5), while another stated, "Vocabulary sama grammar masih kurang, jadi kadang bingung mau ngomong apa" (P6). Other participants also reported uncertainty in pronunciation because English words are often pronounced differently from how they are written, making them hesitate during role play. These responses indicate that limited linguistic competence affected students' ability to organize ideas and maintain spoken interaction during role play activities. Rather than affecting language accuracy alone, these linguistic limitations also reduced students' ability to sustain spontaneous communication, particularly when immediate

responses were required during role play interaction.

Overall, the findings suggest that linguistic factors, particularly vocabulary limitations, grammatical difficulties, pronunciation problems, and sentence construction, played a significant role in shaping students' speaking difficulties during role play activities. This finding supports Brown (2004), who argues that effective speaking requires learners to integrate vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation to communicate meaning successfully. Similarly, Harmer (2007) emphasizes that successful spoken communication depends on learners' ability to use linguistic resources appropriately in communicative situations, while Thornbury (2005) highlights that limited vocabulary and grammatical knowledge often reduce learners' fluency during speaking. The present findings are also consistent with recent studies reporting that vocabulary limitations, grammatical difficulties, and pronunciation problems remain the dominant linguistic barriers affecting EFL learners' speaking performance (Nazri et al., 2025; Anggraini et al., 2025). These similarities indicate that linguistic competence continues to play a fundamental role in supporting students' participation in communicative speaking activities such as role play.

However, the present study further demonstrates that these linguistic difficulties became particularly evident during role play activities, where students were

required to retrieve vocabulary, organize grammatical structures, and produce understandable pronunciation while maintaining spontaneous interaction with their peers. This finding suggests that communicative speaking activities such as role play do not automatically eliminate linguistic difficulties. Instead, they provide opportunities for teachers to identify specific linguistic challenges that require additional instructional support before students engage in authentic classroom communication.

2. Psychological Factors

Observation and interview data consistently indicated that psychological factors were another major contributor to students' speaking difficulties during role play activities. Classroom observations showed that several students appeared nervous before performing, hesitated when starting their dialogues, avoided eye contact with their classmates, and spoke in low voices during the performance stage. Although some students had prepared their dialogues beforehand, they still displayed signs of anxiety when performing in front of the class. These observations suggest that emotional responses influenced students' willingness to participate in role play activities. These observations suggest that emotional responses influenced students' willingness to participate in role play activities. Because role play required students to perform in front of their classmates, feelings of nervousness and fear became more visible during classroom interaction.

The interview findings further supported the observation data. Many participants reported feeling nervous when speaking English in front of their classmates because they were afraid of making mistakes or forgetting their dialogues. One participant stated, "Kalau di depan kelas jadi gugup, takut salah ngomong" (P4), while another explained, "Takut kalau pengucapannya salah terus diketawain teman" (P1). These responses indicate that nervousness, fear of making mistakes, and lack of confidence reduced students' confidence in speaking during role play activities. Students tended to focus on avoiding mistakes rather than communicating their ideas effectively, which made them hesitate while speaking. These responses indicate that nervousness, fear of making mistakes, and lack of confidence reduced students' confidence in speaking during role play activities. Students tended to focus on avoiding mistakes rather than communicating their ideas effectively, which made them hesitate while speaking. Furthermore, these psychological barriers limited students' willingness to respond spontaneously, even when they had prepared their dialogues beforehand.

Overall, the findings suggest that psychological factors, particularly nervousness, fear of making mistakes, and lack of confidence, played an important role in shaping students' speaking difficulties during role play activities. This finding is consistent with Brown (2004), who explains that affective factors influence learners'

speaking performance because emotional conditions affect their willingness to communicate. Likewise, Harmer (2007) argues that learners' confidence influences their participation in communicative speaking activities. Recent studies have also reported that speaking anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and low self-confidence remain significant psychological barriers affecting EFL learners' speaking performance (Wariyati et al., 2025; Anggraini et al., 2025). These similarities suggest that psychological readiness is an important factor in supporting students' participation in communicative speaking activities such as role play. However, the present study further demonstrates that psychological factors became particularly evident during role play activities because students were expected to perform in front of their classmates while responding in English. Although role play is designed to encourage meaningful communication, the requirement to speak publicly heightened students' awareness of making mistakes and being evaluated by others. This finding suggests that communicative speaking activities should be accompanied by supportive classroom practices that help reduce students' anxiety and build their confidence before performance.

3. Environmental Factors

Observation and interview data consistently indicated that environmental factors contributed to students' speaking difficulties during role play activities. Classroom

observations showed that audience behavior, peer reactions, peer support, and limited opportunities to practice speaking influenced students' speaking experiences. During role play performances, some classmates laughed at pronunciation mistakes, while others provided encouragement through applause before and after the presentations. The observations also indicated that opportunities to practice speaking English during classroom activities were limited. These findings suggest that the classroom environment influenced students' confidence and participation in role play activities. Because role play requires students to interact with peers and perform before an audience, classroom responses became an important contextual factor shaping students' speaking experiences. The interview findings supported the observation data. Several participants reported that audience behavior affected their confidence while speaking. One participant explained,

"Kalau audiensnya nggak merhatiin atau ngobrol sendiri jadi agak down dan kurang semangat ngomongnya" (P2),

while another stated:

"Kadang kalau ada yang ngobrol sendiri itu bisa ngaruh ke mental" (P7).

Other participants also reported that negative peer reactions, such as being laughed at after making mistakes, reduced their confidence during speaking activities. However, peer support was perceived positively, as several students explained that

encouragement from classmates increased their confidence and willingness to participate in role play.

In addition, participants reported that opportunities to practice speaking English in the classroom were still limited, making them less confident when required to communicate spontaneously during role play activities. These responses indicate that environmental factors influenced students' speaking experiences in both supportive and challenging ways. Rather than functioning merely as the setting for classroom activities, the learning environment influenced how students perceived and responded to communicative speaking tasks during role play.

Overall, the findings suggest that environmental factors, including audience behavior, peer reactions, peer support, and limited speaking opportunities, played a significant role in shaping students' speaking difficulties during role play activities. This finding is consistent with Richards and Rodgers (2014), who argue that language learning is influenced by the social and communicative environment in which learning takes place. Likewise, (Roslan et al., 2025) emphasize that supportive classroom environments encourage learners to participate more actively in speaking activities, whereas negative classroom interactions may reduce students' confidence and willingness to communicate. Recent studies have also reported that classroom interaction, peer support, and

opportunities to practice English remain important environmental factors influencing EFL learners' speaking performance (Anggraini et al., 2025; Wariyati et al., 2025). These findings indicate that creating a supportive classroom environment and providing sufficient opportunities for speaking practice are important for helping students participate more confidently in communicative speaking activities. However, the present study further demonstrates that environmental factors became particularly evident during role play activities because students were required to interact with peers and perform before an audience. While supportive peer responses encouraged students to participate more confidently, negative classroom reactions and limited opportunities to practice English reduced students' willingness to communicate spontaneously. These findings highlight the importance of creating supportive classroom environments that not only facilitate language practice but also promote students' confidence during communicative speaking activities.

Overall, the findings indicate that students' speaking difficulties during role play activities were shaped by three major factors: linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors. Linguistic factors constrained students' ability to express ideas accurately, psychological factors influenced their willingness and confidence to communicate, and environmental factors shaped the classroom conditions in which

speaking activities occurred. Although these factors are presented separately for analytical purposes, the findings collectively demonstrate that speaking difficulties during role play are multidimensional and context-dependent. Therefore, English teachers are encouraged to design communicative speaking activities that provide sufficient linguistic support, reduce students' speaking anxiety, and foster supportive classroom environments that encourage meaningful interaction.

D. Conclusion

This study explored the factors shaping students' speaking difficulties during role play activities in an Indonesian senior high school EFL classroom. The findings revealed three major factors contributing to students' speaking difficulties: linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors. Linguistic factors included limited vocabulary, grammatical difficulties, and pronunciation problems, which constrained students' ability to communicate effectively during role play activities. Psychological factors, including nervousness, fear of making mistakes, and lack of confidence, reduced students' willingness to speak. Meanwhile, environmental factors, such as audience behavior, peer reactions, peer support, and limited opportunities to practice English, also influenced students' speaking experiences during role play activities. This study contributes to the existing literature by providing contextual evidence of the factors

shaping students' speaking difficulties specifically during role play activities in an Indonesian senior high school EFL classroom.

These findings suggest that students' speaking difficulties during role play activities should be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors rather than by linguistic competence alone. Therefore, English teachers are encouraged to design communicative speaking activities that not only strengthen students' linguistic competence but also foster supportive classroom interactions and provide sufficient opportunities for meaningful speaking practice. Such learning environments may help students participate more confidently in classroom communication.

Future research may investigate similar factors in different educational contexts or explore instructional strategies that effectively address linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors affecting students' speaking during communicative classroom activities.

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