



Junior High Students' Perception and Need In English Speaking Classes

Dedy Ahsan Muttaqin

Teaching Faculty, Islamic Teaching Department, STIT Al Aziziyah Kapek Gunungsari, Indonesia

Email: dediahsan@gmail.com

Abstract-This study showed how junior high school students in Indonesia feel and what they need in English-speaking classes. Even though the national curriculum stresses communicative competence, students often struggle with severe anxiety, low self-esteem, and a limited vocabulary, which makes them less engaged and less able to do well. Psychological problems, like shyness and performance anxiety, are often harder to deal with than cognitive problems when it comes to making progress. Purposive sampling was used to select 30 eighth-grade students from a public junior high school in West Lombok for this study, which used a qualitative descriptive methodology. Open-ended questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and non-participant classroom observations were used to carefully collect data. Thematic analysis, bolstered by triangulation, ensured the robustness and depth of the findings. According to the findings, which are in line with Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), students view speaking classes as both essential and intimidating, mostly because they are terrified of making mistakes and receiving a poor grade. Additionally, monotony, an overemphasis on grammar, and a lack of opportunities for genuine communication are common characteristics of instructional practices. Crucially, students expressed a strong desire for dynamic, real-life activities like role-plays, games, and storytelling. They also underlined how important it is to have teachers who are encouraging and create a culture that accepts mistakes. This study emphasises how urgently student-centered pedagogical approaches are needed to foster speaking development that is more efficient and empowering.

Keywords: Students' Perception, Junior High, Speaking, English, Communicative.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the Indonesian EFL context, speaking skills are widely recognized as one of the most crucial yet most challenging components of English language learning. Among junior high school students, speaking English is often associated with anxiety, lack of confidence, and insufficient vocabulary, resulting in low performance and limited classroom engagement (Diana, Renandya, & Dahliana, 2024; Sulistyaningsih, Juniardi, & Rachmawati, 2024). Despite the national curriculum's emphasis on communicative competence, the reality in many classrooms falls short of fostering an environment that supports effective speaking practice (Afidawati, Arrasyid, & Ikawati, 2024).

Speaking is one of the core components of communicative competence, alongside listening, reading, and writing. It is often considered the most complex and demanding language skill because it requires grammatical and lexical competence and sociolinguistic and strategic knowledge (Canale & Swain, 1980). Brown (2014) defines speaking as an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving, and processing information. Unlike writing, speaking usually happens in real-time, requiring learners to organize their thoughts quickly and respond appropriately in dynamic communicative contexts. In EFL (English as a Foreign Language) settings like Indonesia, the development of speaking proficiency is particularly challenging. One of the main issues is the limited exposure to authentic English use in daily life. As Richards (2008) notes, many EFL learners do not have sufficient opportunities to use the target language outside the classroom, which hinders the internalization of language patterns and reduces their speaking fluency. This lack of natural language input often leads to fossilization and communication breakdowns (Ellis, 1994).

Moreover, traditional classroom practices in EFL contexts tend to prioritize grammar, reading, and test preparation over speaking. As a result, students may develop a strong foundation in passive skills but remain hesitant or incapable of using the language actively (Ur, 1996; Nunan, 2003). The dominance of teacher-centered instruction, the absence of communicative tasks, and the fear of negative evaluation further contribute to learners' reluctance to speak (Woodrow, 2006). To address these issues, researchers advocate for implementing communicative language teaching (CLT) approaches, emphasizing interaction, fluency, and authentic materials (Littlewood, 2007). Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Project-Based Learning (PBL) are also recommended to enhance speaking performance, as they provide meaningful contexts for learners to engage in real-world communication (Willis & Willis, 2007; Ellis, 2003).

Numerous studies in Indonesia and other EFL contexts have revealed that students' negative perceptions toward speaking classes are strongly linked to language anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and lack of speaking opportunities (Woodrow, 2006; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Hanifa, 2018). Junior high school students particularly struggle with psychological barriers such as shyness and performance anxiety, which often lead to avoidance of speaking tasks (Jabar, Hidayati, & Supriyono, 2023; Sari, 2023; Lamasigi, Tuerah, & Rombepajung, 2024). This anxiety is also closely related to students' perceived low competence, especially regarding vocabulary mastery and pronunciation (Simanungkalit, 2024; Daflizar,



2022; Suparlan, 2021). Research has shown that when students are not actively engaged in meaningful and relevant speaking tasks, their motivation and progress decrease significantly (Damayanti & Listyani, 2020; Plantika & Adnan, 2021). Speaking classes that rely solely on rote repetition and textbook exercises fail to address learners' communicative needs and preferences (Rachmawati & Jurianto, 2020). Thus, identifying students' perceptions and needs is essential for creating a more inclusive and responsive learning environment.

Needs analysis is pivotal in aligning instructional practices with learners' goals, expectations, and challenges (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; He, 2013). In the context of junior high school, several studies indicate that students prefer interactive, real-life communication activities such as role plays, games, storytelling, and digital media integration (Putri & Refnaldi, 2020; Rusdin & Purwati, 2023). They also value teacher support and a non-threatening classroom atmosphere where errors are treated as part of learning rather than failure (Zannah et al., 2022; Suciati, 2020).

Moreover, understanding students' needs is not only about what they lack, but also what they want and what motivates them (Horwitz et al., 1986; Pratolo, Habibie, & Setiawan, 2019). According to Syahbani (2021), junior high students are more likely to participate in speaking tasks if they perceive them as useful, relevant, and enjoyable. Therefore, integrating learners' voices into the planning of speaking classes can help reduce anxiety and improve communicative performance. This study focuses on junior high school students studying in a *pesantren*-based educational setting, specifically Pondok *Pesantren* Al-Aziziyah in Kapek, Gunungsari, West Lombok. As a traditional Islamic boarding school with a formal junior high school program, Al-Aziziyah provides a distinctive educational context where English is taught alongside religious subjects. Understanding students' perceptions of English-speaking classes in such a context is vital, as it offers a glimpse into how language learning is experienced in an environment that integrates both spiritual and academic goals.

Perception plays a critical role in the language learning process. In educational psychology, perception refers to how learners interpret and make sense of their learning environment, tasks, and experiences. According to Barcelos (2003), learners' beliefs and perceptions about language learning shape their motivation, behavior, and emotional responses in the classroom. When students perceive speaking in English as threatening or beyond their capacity, they tend to withdraw from participation, which hampers language acquisition. Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), a concept introduced by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), is often cited in studies discussing learners' negative perceptions of speaking. It refers to the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, particularly oral production. Learners who experience FLA often report physical symptoms (e.g., sweating, rapid heartbeat) and cognitive barriers (e.g., blanking out, fear of negative evaluation), which directly impact their willingness to communicate (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

A study by Woodrow (2006) found that students' perception of their linguistic competence significantly influenced their speaking anxiety. Learners who considered themselves linguistically weak tended to avoid speaking tasks, even with sufficient vocabulary and grammar knowledge. Similarly, He (2013) noted that in Asian EFL contexts, cultural factors such as the emphasis on saving face and avoiding public mistakes intensified students' fear of speaking.

Positive perceptions, on the other hand, can enhance learner engagement and speaking performance. When students perceive speaking tasks as relevant, meaningful, and supportive, they are more likely to take risks, participate actively, and persevere through challenges (Dörnyei, 2005). Therefore, teachers must design speaking activities that align with students' interests, provide clear goals, and create a non-threatening classroom atmosphere (Harmer, 2007). In this regard, Needs Analysis, as proposed by Hutchinson and Waters (1987), becomes an important tool to understand learners' gaps and goals in language learning. By involving learners in curriculum design and giving them a voice in classroom decision-making, teachers can help shape more positive and empowering perceptions of learning (Nation & Macalister, 2010). Lamb (2017) emphasized, students who feel that their opinions are respected and their efforts appreciated are more likely to develop intrinsic motivation and take ownership of their learning journey.

This study aims to explore junior high school students' perceptions and needs in English-speaking classes. Specifically, it investigates (1) how students perceive their speaking class experiences, (2) the challenges they face, and (3) the types of instructional practices and materials they believe would support their development. This study seeks to contribute to more effective, student-centered English language teaching practices in Indonesian secondary schools by identifying these aspects.



2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore junior high school students' perceptions and needs in English-speaking classes. As Creswell (2013) explains, qualitative research is particularly effective for examining social and emotional aspects of learning, such as anxiety, motivation, and student expectations. This approach allowed the researcher to capture the students' authentic experiences and thoughts in their own words and in the context of their daily learning environment. The research was carried out at *Pondok Pesantren Al-Aziziyah* in Kapek, Gunungsari, West Lombok. This *pesantren* combines formal junior high school education with Islamic boarding school traditions, providing a unique setting for English language learning. The participants were 30 eighth-grade students, consisting of 14 girls and 16 boys, aged between 13 and 15 years. All participants had attended English-speaking classes for at least one semester. They were selected through purposive sampling based on specific criteria, including regular attendance in English classes, variation in speaking proficiency, and willingness to participate voluntarily.

To gather the data, the researcher used three instruments: open-ended questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and non-participant classroom observations. The questionnaires were designed to explore students' general perceptions, challenges, and preferences regarding speaking English in class. An example question asked students what made them feel comfortable or uncomfortable when speaking English. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted with ten selected students to explore their responses in more depth. These interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to ensure clarity and emotional comfort, and were recorded with the participants' consent. Finally, classroom observations were conducted three times over two weeks. These observations focused on how teachers delivered speaking lessons, how students responded, and what types of interaction occurred during classroom activities. To ensure ethical standards, all participants were informed about the objectives of the study and gave their consent to participate. Their identities were kept confidential, and no personal data were shared. Participation was entirely voluntary, and students could withdraw at any time without consequence.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process involved familiarizing with the data, coding responses, identifying key themes, reviewing and defining them, and finally interpreting the results. Themes such as speaking anxiety, classroom interaction, student preferences, and instructional needs emerged from the data. To improve validity, data from the questionnaires, interviews, and observations were triangulated. Member checking was also conducted by sharing initial findings with some participants to confirm the accuracy of interpretation.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Students' Perceptions of English Speaking Classes

The analysis revealed that students generally perceived English-speaking classes as important yet intimidating. The majority of participants reported experiencing significant anxiety, especially when asked to speak spontaneously or perform in front of the class. Common expressions included fear of making grammatical mistakes, being laughed at by peers, or being unable to pronounce words correctly. These findings align with Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's (1986) concept of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), which describes a situation-specific anxiety linked to using a second language, particularly in speaking contexts.

Students often associate speaking tasks with performance pressure, leading to avoidance behavior and minimal participation. This reflects the findings of Woodrow (2006) and Sari (2023), who found that students with low self-perceived linguistic competence are likelier to avoid oral tasks, regardless of their knowledge. The psychological barriers—such as shyness, fear of embarrassment, and perfectionism—were more disabling than the cognitive challenges, emphasizing the affective dimension of language learning. Despite these challenges, students expressed positive attitudes toward speaking when activities were engaging and relevant. They favored learning environments that were supportive, interactive, and non-threatening. Activities such as storytelling, games, role plays, and peer dialogues were seen as enjoyable and motivating. These preferences support the findings of Syahbani (2021) and Putri and Refnaldi (2020), who emphasized the role of enjoyable and contextualized learning tasks in reducing anxiety and enhancing participation.

3.2 Challenges in Speaking Instruction

In addition to affective barriers, students identified several instructional and systemic challenges. These included a lack of vocabulary, difficulty constructing sentences, and infrequent speaking opportunities in the classroom. A dominant concern was the monotonous and grammar-focused approach many teachers took, where speaking was limited to reading dialogues



or answering scripted questions. Such practices fail to promote honest communication and do not meet students' communicative needs (Damayanti & Listyani, 2020; Rachmawati & Jurianto, 2020). Classroom observations reinforced these perceptions. Teaching was teacher-centered, mainly, and communicative tasks were rare. Students hesitated to speak unless prompted directly, and few opportunities were provided for authentic interaction. As Ellis (2003) and Littlewood (2007) suggest, this lack of communicative exposure limits students' fluency development and contributes to the fossilization of errors. Moreover, the absence of an error-tolerant classroom culture discouraged experimentation and risk-taking. When mistakes were met with correction rather than encouragement, students became more reserved. This aligns with He's (2013) observation in Asian EFL contexts, where saving face and avoiding mistakes are deeply ingrained cultural norms that influence classroom behavior.

3.3 Students' Needs and Expectations

Students unanimously desired more interactive and practical speaking activities when asked about their preferences. They favored tasks that involved collaboration, creativity, and real-life simulation, such as debates, interviews, and role plays. In line with findings from Rusdin and Purwati (2023), students also wished to integrate digital tools, including video recording, language learning apps, and online games, to make speaking practice more dynamic and accessible. Furthermore, students emphasized the need for supportive teacher attitudes, where errors are viewed as a natural part of learning rather than failures. They hoped for teachers who encourage participation, give constructive feedback, and create a relaxed environment. Zannah et al. (2022) and Suciati (2020) have shown that teacher empathy and classroom climate significantly influence students' willingness to speak. Interestingly, several students suggested the establishment of extracurricular English clubs, informal discussion groups, or online English forums to extend their practice beyond the classroom. This is consistent with Nation and Macalister's (2010) assertion that language input and use must be extensive, meaningful, and learner-driven for sustainable acquisition.

The findings of this study highlight the complex and emotionally charged experience of learning to speak English among junior high school students in an Indonesian pesantren-based context. Despite the curriculum's emphasis on communicative competence, students often view speaking activities as intimidating and anxiety-inducing. This finding aligns with Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's (1986) theory of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), which suggests that second language learners experience unique anxiety when asked to speak, rooted in fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, and test anxiety.

One of the most prominent themes in this study was students' psychological barriers, particularly shyness, fear of making mistakes, and low self-confidence. These emotional challenges often outweighed linguistic deficiencies, echoing earlier studies by Woodrow (2006) and Hanifa (2018), who found that affective factors played a larger role than cognitive limitations in shaping speaking performance. In Islamic boarding schools like Al-Aziziyah, cultural norms such as respecting authority, avoiding embarrassment, and maintaining social harmony may further intensify students' reluctance to speak, especially in front of peers (He, 2013).

In addition to emotional factors, students also criticized instructional practices, which they described as overly grammar-focused, monotonous, and teacher-centered. Classroom observations confirmed that speaking activities were often limited to scripted dialogues or rote repetition. Such instructional styles fall short of fostering authentic communication and student agency. As Littlewood (2007) argues, for communicative competence to develop, students must engage in meaningful interaction, which includes negotiation of meaning, spontaneous output, and risk-taking in speech. The lack of real-life communication tasks in the observed classrooms not only limits fluency but also diminishes student motivation (Richards, 2008; Ellis, 2003).

Interestingly, while students expressed anxiety and hesitation, they also demonstrated a strong intrinsic desire to speak better English—particularly through interactive, fun, and supportive activities such as role plays, storytelling, games, and digital tools. These findings support Dörnyei's (2005) motivation theory, which emphasizes the importance of relevance, enjoyment, and student voice in promoting second language acquisition. When learners feel that a task is engaging and achievable, they are more likely to participate and persist.

Furthermore, many students in this study requested that their teachers adopt a more empathetic and tolerant stance toward errors, viewing mistakes as part of the learning process rather than a failure. This is consistent with the findings of Zannah et al. (2022) and Suciati (2020), who emphasized that a non-threatening classroom climate significantly boosts students' willingness to speak. A safe emotional environment can shift students from being passive recipients to active participants. The call for more student-centered learning aligns with the principles of Needs Analysis as proposed by Hutchinson and Waters (1987). Rather than focusing solely on what students lack, a well-conducted needs analysis considers what learners



want and how they prefer to learn. In this study, the students' preferences indicated a desire for dynamic, technology-integrated, and context-relevant speaking practices. This matches recent studies in the Indonesian context that advocate for Project-Based Learning (Rusdin & Purwati, 2023), Task-Based Language Teaching (Willis & Willis, 2007), and the integration of digital platforms such as YouTube or TikTok to facilitate informal speaking opportunities (Yuliana & Pratiwi, 2022).

Moreover, the pesantren setting provides a unique blend of religious and academic values that can be leveraged in designing culturally appropriate speaking activities. For instance, storytelling based on Islamic moral stories or debates on contemporary Islamic issues could serve as both language practice and character education. As Harmer (2007) points out, effective language instruction must respect the learners' sociocultural realities while also fostering language growth. Teachers in Islamic schools thus play the role of both linguistic facilitator and cultural mediator, balancing secular language goals with spiritual values (Sari & Fatimah, 2021).

The implications of this study are multifold. First, teacher professional development programs should include training in affective pedagogy, where teachers are equipped not only with methodological knowledge but also with strategies to manage learner anxiety and build a positive classroom climate. Second, curriculum designers must incorporate speaking tasks that are realistic, personalized, and reflective of students' actual communication needs. Third, school administrators should support extracurricular platforms such as English clubs or language cafés to give students additional outlets for speaking practice beyond the formal classroom setting.

Lastly, this study reinforces the idea that learner perception and emotional readiness are as crucial as linguistic competence in shaping speaking performance. Educational stakeholders should recognize that anxiety, motivation, and self-efficacy are not mere side effects of instruction—they are at the heart of successful language learning. By embracing student-centered pedagogy and fostering emotionally supportive environments, educators can transform speaking classes from intimidating experiences into empowering opportunities for personal and academic growth.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This study shows that politeness in *madrasah* language learning comes from a complicated mix of English language strategies and local values based on Islamic teachings and *pesantren* culture. In this case, politeness is not only a way to communicate, but it is also a way to build character and keep the peace in the classroom. The teacher is like a cultural mediator who helps students balance the practical needs of English with their religious beliefs. The polite ways that teachers and students talk to each other show that they know how important it is to keep the other person's face, which is shown by the use of religious greetings, softening direct statements, and stronger forms of negative politeness. But this practice also has a pedagogical

REFERENCES

- Afidawati, H., Arrasyid, F. I., & Ikawati, L. (2024). Minimizing EFL learners' speaking anxiety in the post-pandemic era. *JEELS*, 11(1), 107–130. DOI: 10.30762/jeels.v11i1.1886
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Daflizar, E. M. L. (2022). Outofclass speaking anxiety among Indonesian EFL students and its relationship with selfperceived speaking skills, vocabulary proficiency, and gender. *JOLLT*.
- Damayanti, M. E., & Listyani, L. (2020). An analysis of students' speaking anxiety in academic speaking class. *ELTR Journal*, 4(2), 152–170. DOI: 10.37147/eltr.v4i2.70
- Diana, M., Renandya, W. A., & Dahliana, S. (2024). Researching factors and coping strategies of EFL students' speaking anxiety. *Englisia: Journal of Language, Education, and Humanities*, 12(1), 250–271. DOI: 10.22373/ej.v12i1.22733
- Hanifa, R. (2018). Factors generating anxiety when learning EFL speaking skills. *Studies in English Language and Education*, 5(2), 230–239. DOI: 10.24815/siele.v5i2.10932
- He, D. (2013). What makes learners anxious while speaking English: Chinese vs Indonesian university context. *Educational Studies*, 39(3), 338–350. DOI: 10.1080/03055698.2013.764819
- Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1986). Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, 70(2), 125–132. DOI: 10.1111/j.15404781.1986.tb05256.x



Journal of English Education, Linguistics, Literature, and Language Learning and Teaching

Vol. 3, No. 1, July 2025, pp. 134-139

ISSN 3025-0323 (Online Media)

DOI 10.56854/jee.v3i1.387

<https://ejurnal.bangunharapanbangsa.id/index.php/jee>

- Jabar, L. A., Hidayati, A. N., & Supriyono, Y. (2023). Exploring junior high school students' foreign language classroom anxiety. *TLEMC*.
- Lamasigi, C., Tuerah, I. J., & Rombepajung, P. (2024). An analysis of students' speaking anxiety in English classroom at SMP Kr. Credo Kolongan. *JoTELL*, 2(4). DOI: 10.36582/jotell.v2i4.6290
- Plantika, S., & Adnan, A. (2021). The correlation between students' speaking anxiety and their speaking ability. *JELT*, 10(1), 121–128. DOI: 10.24036/jelt.v10i1.111680
- Pratolo, B., Habibie, A., & Setiawan, A. (2019). Speaking skill challenges encountered by Indonesian EFL learners. *Proceedings ADICSELSSH*, 28–32. DOI: 10.2991/adics-elssh19.2019.7
- Putri, A., & Refnaldi, R. (2020). The correlation between vocabulary mastery and speaking ability at Grade 8 junior high school. *JELT*, 9(1), 43. DOI: 10.24036/jelt.v9i1.107809
- Rachmawati, D. I., & Jurianto, J. (2020). Investigating English Department students' foreign language speaking anxiety: A case study in Universitas Airlangga. *SHE Journal*, 1(2), 22. DOI: 10.25273/she.v1i2.6624
- Rusdin, R., & Purwati, D. (2023). Speaking up: Comprehensive investigation of EFL secondary students' speaking problems in Indonesia. *Elsya? Journal of English Language Studies*, 5(2), 236–249. DOI: 10.31849/elsya.v5i2.11911
- Sari, T. W. (2023). Speaking anxiety experienced by junior high school students and their strategies to overcome the anxiety. *RETAIN*, 11(01), 99–106.
- Simanungkalit, A. G. (2024). The anxiety in English speaking experienced by students in a designated private junior high school. *SUMIKOLAH: Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan*, 2(1), 18–27.
- Suciati, S. (2020). Speaking anxiety in EFL classroom: Categories and factors. *Edulingua*, 7(1). DOI: 10.34001/edulingua.v7i1.1168
- Sulistyaningsih, S., Juniardi, Y., & Rachmawati, D. (2024). An analysis of EFL students' speaking anxiety: A case study at SMPN 1 Pabuaran, Banten. *LINGUISTICA*, 13(3), 160–171. DOI: 10.24114/jalu.v13i3.62119
- Suparlan, S. (2021). Factors contributing to students' speaking anxiety. *JOLLT*, 9(2), 160. DOI: 10.33394/jollt.v9i2.3321
- Syabhani, T. R. F. M. L. (2021). The correlation between students' speaking anxiety and their performance: *ELTR Journal*, 5(2), 449–458.
- Woodrow, L. (2006). Anxiety and speaking English as a second language. *RELC Journal*, 37(3), 308–328. DOI: 10.1177/0033688206071315