

STUDENTS' ENGLISH LANGUAGE CHALLENGES AND IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES AT POLITEKNIK ELBAJO COMMODUS, LABUAN BAJO: A DESCRIPTIVE SURVEY STUDY

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Diterima: 03/06/2026; Direvisi: 30/07/2026; Diterbitkan: 31/07/2026

ABSTRAK

Kemampuan berbahasa Inggris merupakan kompetensi penting bagi mahasiswa pendidikan tinggi vokasi, khususnya di kawasan pariwisata, namun penelitian yang mengkaji secara bersamaan tantangan penggunaan bahasa Inggris dan strategi peningkatannya berdasarkan persepsi mahasiswa pada konteks vokasi masih terbatas. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengidentifikasi tantangan utama penggunaan bahasa Inggris serta menganalisis strategi yang diharapkan mahasiswa untuk meningkatkan kemampuan berbahasa Inggris. Penelitian menggunakan desain survei deskriptif dengan pendekatan mixed methods. Data dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner terbuka yang diberikan kepada 86 mahasiswa dari delapan program studi di Politeknik eLBajo Commodus dan dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik yang didukung statistik deskriptif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa tantangan utama meliputi kurangnya rasa percaya diri dan takut melakukan kesalahan (68%), keterbatasan kosakata (63%), kelemahan tata bahasa (41%), kurangnya lingkungan berbahasa Inggris (37%), serta kesulitan pelafalan dan menyimak (26%). Mahasiswa mengusulkan peningkatan praktik berbicara, penerapan penggunaan bahasa Inggris secara konsisten di kampus, pembentukan klub percakapan, dan penguatan peran dosen. Penelitian ini menawarkan pemetaan terpadu mengenai hambatan psikologis, linguistik, dan lingkungan beserta strategi perbaikannya sebagai dasar pengembangan pembelajaran komunikatif dan kebijakan institusi untuk meningkatkan kompetensi berbahasa Inggris mahasiswa vokasi.

Kata Kunci: *Tantangan Berbahasa Inggris, Kecemasan Berbahasa, Keterbatasan Kosakata, Kompetensi Komunikatif, Lingkungan Berbahasa Inggris.*

ABSTRACT

English proficiency is an essential competency for vocational higher education students, particularly in tourism destinations; however, studies simultaneously examining students' English language challenges and improvement strategies within vocational contexts remain limited. This study aims to identify the major challenges encountered by students in using English and analyze the strategies they expect to improve their English proficiency. A descriptive survey employing a mixed-methods approach was conducted with 86 students from eight study programs at Politeknik eLBajo Commodus. Data were collected through open-ended questionnaires and analyzed using thematic analysis supported by descriptive statistics. The findings reveal that the primary challenges include lack of confidence and fear of making mistakes (68%), limited vocabulary (63%), weak grammar skills (41%), lack of a supportive English-speaking environment (37%), and pronunciation and listening difficulties (26%).

Students recommended increasing speaking practice, implementing consistent English use on campus, establishing conversation clubs, and strengthening lecturers' encouragement during classroom interaction. This study offers a comprehensive mapping of psychological, linguistic, and environmental barriers alongside students' proposed improvement strategies, providing evidence for developing communicative learning practices and institutional policies to enhance English proficiency in vocational higher education.

Keywords: *English Language Challenges, Language Anxiety, Vocabulary Limitation, Communicative Competence, English-Speaking Environment.*

INTRODUCTION

English plays a strategic role in vocational higher education, particularly in preparing graduates for careers in hospitality, tourism, business, and professional communication. As globalization continues to reshape labor market demands, English proficiency has become more than an academic requirement. An essential professional competency that enhances graduates' employability and career readiness. This need is particularly evident in vocational education, where students are expected to demonstrate practical communication skills applicable to authentic workplace contexts. Among the four language skills, speaking occupies a central position because it enables learners to perform essential professional functions such as providing customer service, participating in negotiations, delivering presentations, and interacting effectively with colleagues and international clients.

The importance of speaking competence extends beyond linguistic accuracy. Brown and Yule (1983) argue that successful speaking involves not only producing grammatically correct utterances but also conveying meaning effectively in real-life communicative situations. Accordingly, speaking competence requires learners to achieve fluency, clarity, interactional competence, and the ability to adapt language to different social and professional contexts. This perspective suggests that English instruction in vocational higher education should emphasize functional communication rather than focusing exclusively on grammatical knowledge.

The need for communicative English proficiency is particularly relevant in Labuan Bajo, one of Indonesia's Super Priority Tourism Destinations. The rapid development of the tourism and hospitality industries has significantly increased the demand for graduates who can communicate effectively in English with international tourists, business partners, and other global stakeholders. In this context, English proficiency serves as a strategic professional asset that supports workforce competitiveness and contributes to regional economic development. Consequently, vocational institutions in Labuan Bajo are expected to equip students with communicative competence that reflects the linguistic demands of the tourism industry.

Despite the growing importance of English communication skills, many vocational students continue to experience considerable difficulties in developing speaking proficiency. Classroom observations and previous studies indicate that learners often participate passively in speaking activities, hesitate to express their ideas, and rely heavily on their first language during classroom interaction. Ur (1991) identifies several common barriers to classroom speaking, including fear of making mistakes, limited opportunities for participation, insufficient ideas to express, and excessive dependence on the mother tongue. Although these challenges were identified several decades ago, they remain relevant in many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms and continue to be reported in recent empirical studies.

Current research demonstrates that learners' speaking performance is influenced by the complex interaction of linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors. Among these,

foreign language anxiety (FLA) has consistently been recognized as one of the strongest predictors of oral communication performance. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) conceptualized FLA as a situation-specific form of anxiety associated with foreign language learning. Extending this foundational framework, a recent meta-analysis by Botes et al. (2020) confirms that foreign language anxiety negatively affects speaking performance, classroom participation, willingness to communicate, and overall language achievement. Similarly, Teimouri, Goetze, and Plonsky (2019) found that learners experiencing higher levels of anxiety tend to avoid speaking opportunities because they fear making grammatical mistakes, mispronouncing words, possessing insufficient vocabulary, or receiving negative evaluation from teachers and peers.

Another important psychological factor is speaking self-confidence, which strongly influences learners' willingness to communicate. Students with greater confidence are more likely to participate actively in classroom interaction, initiate conversations, and use English in authentic communicative situations. Conversely, learners with low self-confidence often remain silent despite possessing sufficient linguistic knowledge. Positive classroom experiences and foreign language enjoyment have also been shown to enhance learners' confidence while reducing the negative effects of anxiety, thereby encouraging greater engagement in oral communication (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Botes et al., 2022).

From a linguistic perspective, vocabulary knowledge constitutes a fundamental foundation for speaking proficiency. Learners with limited vocabulary frequently encounter difficulties expressing ideas accurately and fluently, resulting in hesitation, communication breakdowns, and reduced confidence during oral interaction (Webb, 2020; Nation, 2022). In addition, the language learning environment plays a crucial role in shaping speaking development. Supportive teacher feedback, collaborative learning, authentic communicative tasks, and psychologically safe classroom environments have been shown to enhance learners' motivation, confidence, and willingness to communicate (MacIntyre et al., 2020). Consequently, communicative and task-based instructional approaches are widely recommended in vocational education because they provide authentic workplace communication experiences that facilitate the development of professional communication skills (Ellis et al., 2020).

Although previous studies have extensively investigated the effects of language anxiety, vocabulary knowledge, self-confidence, and learning environments on English speaking performance, most have been conducted in general EFL contexts at secondary schools or comprehensive universities. Comparatively little empirical research has examined these issues within vocational higher education, where English learning is expected to support workplace communication and professional practice rather than general language proficiency. Furthermore, limited attention has been given to tourism-oriented regions such as Labuan Bajo, where English proficiency constitutes a strategic competency for employment in the tourism, hospitality, and business sectors. More importantly, few studies have simultaneously explored both the obstacles encountered by vocational students in using English within the campus environment and the learning strategies they perceive as effective for improving their speaking proficiency. This gap underscores the need for context-specific evidence that can inform English language teaching practices in vocational institutions located in tourism-based regions.

Accordingly, this study aims to (1) identify the major obstacles encountered by vocational students in using English within the campus environment and (2) analyze students' preferred strategies for improving their English speaking proficiency. The findings are expected

to contribute to the development of evidence-based institutional policies and communicative pedagogical practices that better align English language instruction with the professional communication needs of vocational higher education, particularly in tourism-based regions such as Labuan Bajo.

METHODS

This study employed a descriptive survey design using a qualitative approach supported by descriptive quantitative analysis. The study aimed to identify students' perceived challenges in using English within the campus environment and explore the strategies they considered effective for improving their English-speaking proficiency. A descriptive survey was considered appropriate because the study focused on describing students' experiences and perceptions rather than examining causal relationships or evaluating the effects of an intervention.

The target population consisted of 150 active students enrolled at Politeknik eLBajo Commodus across eight study programs. To ensure sufficient English learning experience, only students who were enrolled in the third, fifth, or seventh semester and had completed at least one compulsory English course were included. Based on these criteria, 86 students were eligible and all participated in the study; therefore, total population (census) sampling was employed. The distribution of participants is presented in Table 1. Data were collected through an online open-ended questionnaire administered via Google Forms. The questionnaire consisted of two questions exploring students' English language challenges and their suggested strategies for improving English-speaking proficiency. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained before data collection, and all responses were anonymized to ensure confidentiality.

Table 1. Distribution of Participants by Study Program

Study Program	n	%
Bachelor of Applied Hospitality Management	18	20.9
Diploma III in Hospitality	12	14.0
Bachelor of Applied International Marketing Management	15	17.4
Bachelor of Applied Tax Accounting	12	14.0
Diploma III in Ecotourism	8	9.3
Diploma III in Information Technology	8	9.3
Bachelor of Applied English for Business and Professional Communication	8	9.3
Bachelor of Applied Human Resource Management	5	5.8
Total	86	100.0

To ensure that participants possessed sufficient experience in learning and using English, the study included only students who met the following inclusion criteria: (1) were actively enrolled in the third, fifth, or seventh semester, and (2) had completed at least one compulsory English course offered in their respective study program. These students were considered capable of providing informed perspectives on the challenges they encountered in using English within the campus environment and the strategies they perceived as effective for improving their English-speaking proficiency.

The qualitative responses were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. First, all responses were read repeatedly to achieve data familiarization. Second, open coding was

conducted by assigning descriptive codes to meaningful statements related to students' challenges and proposed improvement strategies. Third, similar codes were grouped into categories and refined into broader themes through constant comparison. Because participants were allowed to report multiple challenges and strategies, a single response could receive more than one code. After the coding process was completed, the frequency and percentage of each theme were calculated to indicate its prevalence across participants' responses.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the coding framework and thematic categories were independently reviewed by a second researcher with expertise in English language education. Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion until consensus was achieved. The findings were subsequently interpreted by relating the identified themes to established theories and recent empirical studies, while an audit trail documenting the coding and theme development process was maintained to improve the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transparency of the analysis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Main Challenges Faced by Students

To identify the major challenges encountered by students in using English within the campus environment, participants were asked to describe the difficulties they experienced through an open-ended questionnaire. Their responses were coded and grouped into six major themes. The frequency and percentage of each identified challenge are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of Students' Difficulties in Using English (n = 86)

No	Category of difficulty	Number of Respondents	Percentage
1	Lack of Confidence/fear of making mistakes	59	68%
2	Limited vocabulary	54	63%
3	Weak grammar skills	35	41%
4	Lack of speaking environment/partners	32	37%
5	Pronunciation and listening difficulties	22	26%
6	Social factors (fear of being judged or mocked)	18	21%

As shown in Table 2, the most frequently reported challenge was lack of confidence and fear of making mistakes, mentioned by 59 students (68%). This was followed by limited vocabulary (63%), weak grammar skills (41%), and the lack of an English-speaking environment or speaking partners (37%). Other challenges included pronunciation and listening difficulties (26%) and social factors, such as fear of being judged or mocked by peers (21%). Because participants were allowed to report more than one challenge, the total percentage exceeds 100%, indicating that many students experienced multiple difficulties simultaneously.

Students' Expected Strategies

In addition to identifying their challenges, participants were asked to propose strategies that they believed could improve their English-speaking proficiency. The responses were categorized into five major themes. The distribution of the suggested strategies is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Proposed Strategies for Improving English Proficiency

No	Strategy	Percentage
1	Increase speaking practice	72%
2	Mandatory use of English on Campus	48%
3	Conversation clubs/study groups	44%
4	Stronger enforcement by lecturers in using English	39%
5	Additional classes/specialized practice session	31%

As presented in Table 3, increasing speaking practice was the most frequently suggested strategy, reported by 72% of the participants. Other commonly proposed strategies included the mandatory use of English on campus (48%), the establishment of conversation clubs or study groups (44%), and stronger encouragement from lecturers to use English during classroom activities (39%). Additionally, 31% of the participants recommended providing additional classes or specialized speaking practice sessions. Since respondents could suggest more than one strategy, the total percentage exceeds 100%.

Discussion

Lack of Confidence and Fear of Making Mistakes

Lack of confidence and fear of making mistakes emerged as the most dominant challenge, reported by 68% of the participants. Many students stated that they felt nervous when speaking English, worried about making grammatical errors, and feared being laughed at or negatively judged by their classmates. These findings indicate that psychological barriers exert a greater influence on students' willingness to communicate than linguistic deficiencies alone. One possible explanation is that students have relatively few opportunities to use English in authentic communicative situations. Consequently, they tend to perceive speaking as a performance that demands grammatical perfection rather than as a process of conveying meaning. This perception increases communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation, leading students to avoid speaking opportunities even when they possess adequate linguistic knowledge. This finding supports Horwitz et al.'s (1986) theory of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), which identifies communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation as the primary sources of anxiety in foreign language learning. Recent bibliometric evidence also indicates that speaking anxiety remains one of the most extensively investigated issues in English language education (Arsalan et al., 2025).

The present findings are consistent with those reported by Botes, Dewaele, and Greiff (2020), whose meta-analysis demonstrated that foreign language anxiety significantly reduces speaking performance, classroom participation, willingness to communicate, and overall language achievement. Likewise, recent systematic reviews have consistently identified fear of making mistakes, fear of negative evaluation, and limited speaking opportunities as the dominant sources of speaking anxiety among EFL learners (Gunawan, 2026). Likewise, Teimouri et al. (2019) found that learners experiencing high anxiety are more likely to avoid oral interaction because they fear making mistakes and receiving negative evaluations from teachers and peers. Similar conclusions were reported by Paraguas (2025), who identified fear of making mistakes, low confidence, and classroom anxiety as recurring factors influencing EFL students' speaking performance.

Nevertheless, this study contributes additional insights by examining foreign language anxiety within vocational higher education in Labuan Bajo, where English functions not merely

as an academic subject but as a professional communication skill required in tourism, hospitality, and business industries. In this context, low self-confidence may negatively affect not only classroom participation but also students' workplace readiness and employability. This pattern is also consistent with findings reported by Pratiwi et al. (2026), who emphasized that speaking anxiety in higher education is shaped by both psychological and instructional factors.

These findings imply that improving speaking proficiency requires more than grammar instruction alone. Similar recommendations have been proposed for vocational learners, emphasizing supportive classroom environments and increased speaking opportunities to reduce anxiety (Styfany & Pusparini, 2025). Lecturers should create psychologically supportive classrooms by implementing communicative and task-based learning, workplace simulations, collaborative learning, and constructive feedback that encourages students to take communicative risks without excessive fear of making mistakes. At the institutional level, English-speaking zones, conversation clubs, English Days, peer mentoring, and extracurricular communication programs may foster a supportive environment for developing students' confidence and communicative competence.

Linguistic Challenges in English Speaking

Limited Vocabulary

The second most frequently reported challenge was limited vocabulary, identified by 63% of the participants. Students explained that they often understood spoken English but were unable to respond appropriately because they lacked the vocabulary needed to express their ideas. Others reported difficulty producing spontaneous utterances, resulting in hesitation, long pauses, or switching to Indonesian during conversations.

This finding may be explained by the imbalance between receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge. Although students recognize many words while reading or listening, they frequently experience difficulty retrieving and using them during real-time communication. Such lexical limitations reduce fluency and increase speaking anxiety. These findings are consistent with Webb (2020) and Nation (2022), who argued that vocabulary knowledge is one of the strongest predictors of speaking proficiency because it enables learners to communicate meaning accurately and fluently. Both vocabulary breadth and depth are essential for sustaining spontaneous interaction.

Unlike students in general academic settings, vocational students require not only general English vocabulary but also specialized terminology relevant to tourism, hospitality, business, and customer service. Consequently, inadequate vocabulary may reduce their ability to perform authentic workplace communication tasks. Therefore, lecturers should integrate industry-specific vocabulary into communicative activities such as role plays, case studies, project-based learning, and workplace simulations. Previous research has also demonstrated that technology-assisted language learning can simultaneously improve vocabulary mastery, speaking performance, and reduce speaking anxiety (Hanafiah et al., 2022). Institutions can further strengthen vocabulary acquisition by providing English-rich learning resources and opportunities for authentic interaction with industry practitioners and international visitors.

Weak Grammar Skills

Weak grammar skills were identified by 41% of respondents as another major challenge affecting oral communication. Students admitted that they often hesitated before speaking because they were afraid of producing grammatically incorrect sentences.

This tendency appears to result from learning experiences that emphasize grammatical accuracy more strongly than communicative effectiveness. Consequently, students become overly concerned with correctness and postpone speaking until they believe their sentences are grammatically perfect.

The present findings support Brown (2007), who argued that excessive attention to grammatical accuracy may inhibit communicative fluency. Likewise, Ellis et al. (2020) emphasized that grammar instruction is more effective when integrated into meaningful communication than when taught as isolated rules. Within vocational education, grammatical competence should function as a means of supporting effective workplace communication rather than becoming an obstacle to interaction. In professional settings, successful communication depends primarily on conveying meaning clearly and appropriately, even when minor grammatical inaccuracies occur.

Accordingly, lecturers should integrate grammar instruction into authentic communicative tasks, workplace simulations, presentations, negotiations, and customer-service interactions while providing constructive feedback that balances grammatical accuracy with communicative fluency.

Creating a Supportive English Learning Environment

Lack of a Supportive English-Speaking Environment

A lack of a supportive English-speaking environment was reported by 37% of participants. Students explained that they rarely had opportunities to practice English because their classmates, families, and surrounding communities predominantly communicated in Indonesian or local languages. One possible explanation is that language acquisition requires continuous exposure and meaningful interaction beyond classroom instruction. When English is practiced only during scheduled lessons, learners have limited opportunities to reinforce newly acquired knowledge through authentic communication.

This finding is consistent with MacIntyre et al. (2020), who emphasized that psychologically supportive learning environments characterized by positive teacher feedback, collaborative learning, and authentic communication significantly enhance learners' willingness to communicate and reduce language anxiety.

The importance of a supportive learning environment becomes even greater in vocational institutions located in tourism destinations such as Labuan Bajo. Students preparing for careers in tourism, hospitality, and international business require continuous exposure to authentic English communication to develop workplace readiness. Therefore, institutions should establish English-speaking zones, conversation clubs, English Days, peer mentoring, collaborations with tourism industries, and international exchange activities to create sustainable opportunities for meaningful English communication beyond the classroom.

Pronunciation and Listening Difficulties

Finally, pronunciation and listening difficulties were reported by 26% of respondents. Students stated that they often struggled to understand different English accents and were uncertain about how words should be pronounced correctly. These challenges reduced their confidence and discouraged them from participating in conversations. This finding may be attributed to limited exposure to authentic spoken English. Classroom materials often provide simplified dialogues, whereas real-life communication involves diverse accents, varying speech rates, and natural conversational features.

Previous studies have shown that listening comprehension and pronunciation develop through regular exposure to authentic spoken language. Without sufficient authentic input, learners experience greater communication breakdowns, which further increase speaking anxiety and reduce willingness to communicate.

In vocational education, these competencies are particularly important because graduates are expected to communicate effectively with international tourists, clients, and business partners from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Accordingly, lecturers should increase students' exposure to authentic spoken English through podcasts, videos, workplace simulations, guest speakers, and industry collaborations. Such initiatives will strengthen students' listening comprehension, pronunciation, confidence, and overall communicative competence in professional contexts.

Mandatory Use of English on Campus

Nearly half of the participants (48%) suggested implementing a policy requiring students to use English more frequently on campus. Students believed that regular exposure to English in daily academic interactions would encourage them to develop confidence and reduce their dependence on Indonesian or local languages. This finding reflects students' awareness that language learning requires consistent practice within authentic social environments. When English becomes part of everyday communication rather than remaining confined to classroom instruction, learners have greater opportunities to reinforce their linguistic knowledge and develop automaticity in speaking.

The findings support previous research emphasizing that sustained exposure and meaningful interaction are essential components of successful second language acquisition (MacIntyre et al., 2020). English-speaking environments also reduce communication anxiety by increasing learners' familiarity with using the language in everyday situations, while enjoyable and supportive learning experiences further strengthen learners' confidence and willingness to communicate (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). For vocational institutions, establishing an English-speaking campus environment is particularly relevant because students are preparing for professions requiring frequent interaction with international clients. A campus culture that encourages English communication can therefore bridge the gap between classroom learning and workplace expectations. Institutions may consider implementing English-speaking zones, English Days, bilingual campus services, and extracurricular activities that encourage students to communicate in English naturally and consistently.

Conversation Clubs and Study Groups

Another frequently recommended strategy was the establishment of conversation clubs and study groups, proposed by 44% of the participants. Students believed that practicing English with peers in informal settings would reduce anxiety and provide greater opportunities to improve their speaking ability. One possible explanation is that collaborative learning environments create lower levels of psychological pressure than formal classroom situations. Students may feel more comfortable making mistakes and experimenting with language when interacting with classmates rather than being evaluated by lecturers.

Previous studies have demonstrated that collaborative learning promotes communicative competence by increasing interaction, peer support, and learners' willingness to communicate. Such environments also contribute to reducing foreign language anxiety while enhancing speaking confidence. Within vocational education, conversation clubs can simulate

workplace teamwork and collaborative communication, both of which are essential professional competencies. Regular interaction with peers also enables students to develop interpersonal communication skills required in tourism, hospitality, and business contexts.

Accordingly, institutions should facilitate conversation clubs, peer mentoring programs, English communities, and collaborative learning activities that provide students with meaningful opportunities to practice English beyond scheduled classroom instruction.

Stronger Enforcement by Lecturers in Using English

Approximately 39% of respondents expected lecturers to encourage and consistently require students to use English during classroom activities. Students perceived lecturers as playing a central role in creating a learning atmosphere that motivates them to communicate actively.

This finding suggests that students require structured guidance and consistent expectations to develop positive language-learning habits. When lecturers consistently model English use and encourage students to communicate in English, learners become more accustomed to using the language in academic settings.

The literature on communicative language teaching emphasizes the importance of teachers as facilitators who create supportive learning environments while maximizing students' opportunities for meaningful interaction. Consistent teacher encouragement and constructive feedback can substantially increase learners' confidence and classroom participation.

Within vocational education, lecturers should function not only as language instructors but also as facilitators of workplace communication. Therefore, English should be integrated consistently into classroom interaction, discussions, presentations, and practical activities that reflect professional communication contexts.

Pedagogical Strategies for Improving Speaking Proficiency **Increasing Speaking Practice**

The most frequently proposed strategy was increasing opportunities for speaking practice, recommended by 72% of the participants. Students believed that regular speaking activities would help them become more fluent, confident, and accustomed to using English in everyday communication. Many respondents emphasized that speaking proficiency can only be improved through frequent practice rather than by studying grammar or vocabulary in isolation. One possible explanation for this finding is that students recognize the gap between their knowledge of English and their ability to use it in real communicative situations. Although they have learned English for several years, they have relatively limited opportunities to practice speaking in authentic contexts. Consequently, they perceive increased speaking practice as the most effective way to develop fluency and confidence.

These findings are consistent with the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), which emphasize that language proficiency develops through meaningful interaction and purposeful communication (Ellis et al., 2020). Previous studies have also shown that frequent oral practice enhances learners' communicative competence, confidence, and willingness to communicate. Within vocational higher education, increased speaking practice is particularly important because graduates are expected to communicate effectively with clients, tourists, and business partners. Therefore, classroom activities should closely resemble authentic workplace communication rather than focusing primarily on linguistic knowledge.

The findings suggest that lecturers should incorporate role plays, workplace simulations, presentations, discussions, problem-solving tasks, and project-based learning into English courses. Institutions should also provide opportunities for students to participate in authentic communication activities beyond the classroom to strengthen their professional communication skills. Recent evidence further suggests that AI-supported conversational practice can effectively increase speaking confidence while reducing learners' anxiety (Ding & Yusof, 2025).

Additional Classes or Specialized Practice Sessions

Finally, 31% of participants suggested providing additional classes or specialized practice sessions focusing specifically on speaking development. Students believed that supplementary learning opportunities would allow them to improve aspects of English that receive limited attention during regular classroom instruction. One possible explanation is that students recognize individual differences in language proficiency and believe that additional support is necessary for learners who require more intensive practice. Specialized sessions may also provide opportunities to focus on pronunciation, fluency, workplace communication, and public speaking.

Previous studies have indicated that intensive and targeted language practice contributes significantly to improving speaking proficiency, particularly when instruction is tailored to learners' specific needs and professional goals. Such programs are especially beneficial in vocational education, where English learning should support workplace readiness.

Accordingly, higher education institutions should consider offering supplementary speaking courses, English clinics, pronunciation workshops, workplace communication training, and industry-based English programs. These initiatives would provide students with additional opportunities to strengthen their communicative competence while better preparing them for future professional careers.

CONCLUSION

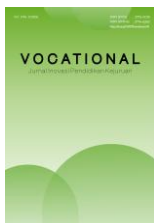
This study concludes that vocational students at Politeknik eLBajo Commodus experience English-speaking difficulties arising from the interaction of psychological, linguistic, and environmental factors rather than from a single source of difficulty. Among the identified challenges, lack of confidence and fear of making mistakes were the most frequently reported (68%), closely followed by limited vocabulary (63%), indicating that psychological and linguistic factors are equally important in shaping students' willingness and ability to communicate in English. Other challenges, including weak grammar skills, the lack of a supportive English-speaking environment, pronunciation and listening difficulties, and social concerns about negative peer evaluation, further hinder students' communicative performance both inside and outside the classroom.

The findings also reveal that students strongly prefer communicative and practice-oriented learning approaches to improve their English proficiency. Increasing opportunities for speaking practice, establishing an English-speaking campus environment, organizing conversation clubs, and encouraging more consistent use of English during classroom activities were identified as the most desirable strategies. These findings suggest that improving English proficiency in vocational higher education requires an integrated approach that combines the development of linguistic competence with pedagogical strategies that strengthen students' confidence and expand opportunities for authentic communication. At the institutional level,

creating a supportive English-speaking environment through consistent language policies and extracurricular communication activities may better prepare students for the professional communication demands of the tourism, hospitality, and business sectors.

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