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## Exploring the challenges and strategies in learning to speak English: The lived experiences of EFL students

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### Abstract

This study examines the challenges and strategies that EFL students face in learning to speak English in Batang Hari, Indonesia. Employing a phenomenological approach, the study investigates the lived experiences of six students from the English Tadris Department at a private university. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal that students face significant difficulties, including limited vocabulary, low confidence, and pronunciation issues, which hinder their speaking proficiency. To overcome these challenges, students utilized strategies such as peer support, self-recording, and the use of multimedia tools. These strategies helped improve their speaking abilities and build greater confidence. This study highlights the importance of incorporating supportive learning strategies and a positive environment to enhance English speaking skills. The findings provide valuable insights for educators seeking to address speaking challenges in rural EFL contexts and inform future teaching practices.

### Keywords

Challenges, EFL students, speaking English, strategies,

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## Introduction

Learning to speak English as a foreign language (EFL) is a vital skill for students in countries where English is not the native language. In Indonesia, where English is taught as a foreign language, speaking proficiency remains a vital skill for students, particularly in countries where English is not the native language, as one of the most challenging aspects for many students (Harmer, 2015). This challenge is particularly pronounced in rural areas, such as Batang Hari, where students have limited exposure to English outside the classroom, often leading to insufficient practice opportunities (Susanto & Kurniawan, 2018). The differences in the phonological systems of Bahasa Indonesia and English, as well as the limited resources, further exacerbate these challenges (Sutarno, 2020).

Despite these challenges, speaking is essential not only for academic success but also for personal and professional growth in an increasingly globalized world (Rao, 2019). Effective English communication can provide Indonesian students with enhanced educational and career opportunities, particularly since English has become the global lingua franca (Crystal, 2019). Consequently, understanding the barriers EFL students face and the strategies they employ to overcome them is vital for improving teaching methodologies and supporting student learning.

The impact of technological advancements on language learning in rural areas has also been a topic of increasing interest. EFL students can now practice speaking outside of the classroom more easily thanks to the rise of digital tools and online resources. Research has shown that integrating multimedia tools, such as language-learning apps and online language exchange platforms, can significantly enhance students' speaking skills by providing authentic contexts and diverse practice opportunities (Sundari & Pramudya, 2021). Despite the great potential of these technologies, their effectiveness in rural regions with limited internet access remains a significant concern. This study, therefore, also explores how students in Batang Hari perceive and use technology to enhance their speaking abilities alongside traditional methods.

Previous research has highlighted several key challenges for EFL students in developing speaking proficiency. These challenges include a lack of confidence, limited vocabulary, and difficulty with pronunciation, all of which can hinder effective communication in English (Tuan & Mai, 2015). Additionally, the classroom environment plays a crucial role in fostering speaking skills, with peer interaction and teacher support essential for promoting student engagement and fluency (Littlewood, 2014).

While a growing body of research exists on the challenges faced by EFL students, studies specifically examining the experiences of rural students in Indonesia remain limited. Most studies focus on urban settings or larger educational institutions, where students typically have greater access to resources and opportunities to be exposed to English (Mulyadi & Suparno, 2020). Therefore, we continue to under-explore the experiences of students in rural areas, such as Batang Hari. This gap in the literature suggests a need for research that examines the unique challenges and strategies students face in rural contexts.

This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the lived experiences of EFL students in Batang Hari. Using a phenomenological approach, the study examines the challenges these students face in learning to speak English and the strategies they use to overcome these

difficulties. By focusing on the perspectives of students from a private university in Batang Hari, this research offers helpful information about the factors that influence speaking proficiency in rural EFL contexts. The findings of this study are expected to inform pedagogical practices, offering practical recommendations for teachers and policymakers to better support speaking development in similar rural settings.

## Literature Review

### *The concept of lived experience in phenomenology and its application in education*

The concept of lived experience originates from phenomenology, a philosophical approach that emphasizes understanding human experiences as they are lived, before theoretical explanations or abstract categorizations are applied. Phenomenology focuses on the direct, subjective experience of individuals, seeking to uncover the essential meanings embedded in the way people perceive and interact with their world. According to Van Manen (2017), phenomenology treats everyday life as the "lifeworld," where meaning is not derived from detached, abstract analysis but from the lived, embodied interactions with one's surroundings. This viewpoint contests the conventional, objective examination of human experience by emphasizing the subjective, emotional, and sensory aspects of living reality.

Lived experience is not simply a collection of isolated events; rather, it is a synthesis of embodied, spatial, temporal, relational, and material dimensions that contribute to how individuals make sense of their world (Van Manen, 2017). These dimensions, referred to as "existentials," provide a framework for understanding the complexity of human experience. Van Manen (2017) identifies five key existentials—body, space, time, relationships, and objects—as universal structures that allow us to comprehend lived experiences. These existentials serve as the foundation for reflective analysis, helping researchers interpret participants' narratives holistically.

### *The lived body*

The body is a central concept in phenomenology; through it, individuals engage with the world around them. The lived body is not merely a biological entity but the fundamental medium through which humans experience and perceive reality. Zahavi (2018) describes the body as both subject and object, serving as the vessel for perception and action. It is the embodied self that perceives, acts, and experiences the world. The lived body is inseparable from human experience, as it provides the means for individuals to feel emotions, sensations, and physical movements that define their engagement with the world (Grosz, 1994).

In the context of language learning, the embodied experience has a major impact on learners' confidence, self-perceptions, and interactions with others. Anandari (2015) demonstrated that students' anxiety and shyness while speaking English were closely tied to bodily sensations such as trembling, sweating, and physical paralysis. This illustrates the value of the lived body in language acquisition, as it reflects emotional struggles and deeply influences learners' experiences. The embodied experience is not merely a passive reception

of the world; it actively influences students' learning experiences, especially in speaking, where bodily sensations can either facilitate or hinder self-expression.

For language learners, the body is a site of both struggle and potential. By becoming more attuned to bodily experiences—such as relaxation techniques or embodied speech practice—learners can enhance their speaking abilities, gain confidence, and transform their relationship with the language they are learning (Miller & Fox, 2020).

### *Lived space*

In phenomenological terms, space is never neutral; it is always infused with meaning, identity, and memory. "Lived space" refers to the ways in which individuals experience and interpret their surroundings, beyond mere physical dimensions. Space is not simply where things occur but also how those spaces are inhabited and made meaningful by the people who occupy them (Basnet, 2022). In educational settings, environments like classrooms, libraries, and homes carry emotional weight, influencing students' feelings of comfort, safety, and anxiety.

Studies have demonstrated that learners' spatial experiences affect their performance and engagement in educational activities. Haun and Tononi (2019) stress that the body always mediates spatial experiences. For example, the way students sit, the distance between them, and even the classroom's layout can all impact how they feel and learn. In this way, space is an essential component of learning environments, influencing everything from classroom participation to anxiety levels.

In EFL contexts, the configuration of physical space can influence students' opportunities to engage in speaking practice. For instance, seating arrangements that facilitate peer interaction or group discussions can enhance the collaborative nature of language learning, while traditional, static seating patterns might inhibit meaningful communication. The lived experience of space, therefore, is a critical factor in shaping how students interact with each other and their learning environment (Haun & Tononi, 2019).

### *Lived time*

Lived time is another existential dimension that contributes significantly to the development of human experience. Unlike objective time, which is measured by clocks and calendars, lived time refers to the subjective flow of temporality—the way individuals perceive and experience time in their daily lives (Giorgi, 2017). Lived time encompasses memory, anticipation, and the rhythm of everyday experiences, framing how individuals make sense of continuity and change in their lives.

Schulz (2017) notes that social representations of time, such as deadlines, expectations, and life transitions, deeply influence how individuals experience stress, motivation, and personal growth. In the context of language learning, students often interpret time through the lens of pressure (e.g., limited preparation time for exams) or anticipation (e.g., future goals or career aspirations). Time, therefore, has a significant impact on learners' perceptions of their language-learning journey, affecting their motivation, self-efficacy, and anxiety levels (Choi & Lee, 2019).

Moreover, temporal disruptions, such as delays or accelerated demands in language learning, further shape students' lived educational experiences. For example, the time constraints often imposed on EFL students in rural areas, where learning opportunities may be scarce, create pressure and stress, which in turn influence their perceptions of their language proficiency and progress.

### *Lived relationships*

Relationships are central to human existence, and lived relation encompasses the ways individuals connect with others, whether through intimacy, distance, empathy, or conflict. Relationships are not only social in nature but are also deeply emotional and culturally significant. Human beings cannot exist in isolation; intersubjectivity, or the shared understanding between people, always mediates our experiences.

Empirical studies have demonstrated that interpersonal relationships, whether between peers, teachers, or family members, have a significant impact on students' learning experiences and identity formation. Diana et al. (2024) found that EFL students' speaking anxiety was exacerbated by the fear of judgment from peers, while supportive relationships helped reduce anxiety and build resilience. These findings highlight that learning is not just a cognitive process, but also an emotional and social experience. The quality of relationships within the classroom or learning environment can either hinder or foster the development of speaking skills.

### *Lived objects*

In phenomenology, objects are not passive entities; they actively shape human experience. Recent studies of material culture have demonstrated that objects possess symbolic value, memory, and utility (Hodder, 2018). Consequently, lived objects shape individuals' spatial and temporal orientation, interpersonal interactions, and comprehension of their environment. In educational contexts, objects such as books, digital devices, and classroom tools become more than mere instruments of learning—they acquire personal and collective significance.

Griswold et al. (2020) argue that words, bodies, and objects interact within space to mediate meaning-making. For EFL students, objects such as textbooks, smartphones, and even language-learning apps have a significant impact on their language acquisition journey. These objects are not just tools, but also symbols of identity, status, and memory, which impact how learners perceive themselves and their progress in learning English. In this sense, objects are not mere passive instruments but active participants in shaping learners' lived experience (Hodder, 2018).

### **Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing a phenomenological approach, to explore the lived experiences of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students in learning to speak English. The phenomenological approach was chosen because it enables

an in-depth understanding of how individuals perceive, experience, and make sense of their learning process in a real-world educational context (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 2017). This approach is particularly suitable for capturing the depth and complexity of individual experiences, especially in educational settings where subjective interpretations of learning are central to understanding the challenges and strategies involved.

### *Participants*

The participants in this study were six undergraduates from the English Education Department (TBI) at a private university in Batang Hari. They were selected using purposive sampling, a non-random sampling method, to ensure that the participants met specific criteria. The selection criteria included having completed at least four semesters of study in the English Education Department and having actively participated in English-speaking classes. These participants were considered to have sufficient experience and reflection in learning to speak English, making them ideal candidates for the study.

The purposive sampling method enabled the researcher to focus on participants who had a relatively advanced level of engagement with the learning process, ensuring that their experiences would provide extensive information about the challenges and strategies they encountered during their English-speaking development.

### *Data collection*

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allow for flexibility, enabling the interviewer to follow up on responses and explore unexpected insights, while still adhering to the core set of interview questions. This approach was particularly beneficial in exploring the personal experiences of students, as it provided an opportunity for them to share their feelings, challenges, and reflections in a way that was comfortable and natural.

Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and was conducted in a quiet, private setting to ensure the participants' comfort and focus. The interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent to capture the full range of responses, allowing for accurate transcription and analysis. All recordings were transcribed verbatim, ensuring that the data accurately reflected the participants' original voices and experiences.

The interview questions were open-ended, designed to encourage participants to express their thoughts freely and reflect on their experiences without limitations. Questions focused on various aspects of their speaking learning process, including the challenges they faced, the strategies they used to overcome them, and the role of teachers, peers, and the learning environment in shaping their speaking skills.

### *Data analysis*

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, based on van Manen's (2017) existential themes, which provide a framework for interpreting lived experiences in relation to five key dimensions: lived space, lived body, lived time, lived relation, and lived things/materiality.

These themes help frame the analysis by offering a holistic approach to understanding how students interact with their learning environments and how these interactions shape their experiences.

Thematic analysis was conducted in several steps. First, the researcher reads the data to familiarize themselves with the content and context of the participants' responses. The transcripts were then reread to identify significant statements that directly related to the research questions. These statements were coded to identify emerging themes and patterns that captured the essence of the participants' experiences.

Once the themes were identified, they were further refined and grouped into broader categories that reflected the core aspects of the students' lived experiences in learning to speak English. The final step involved interpreting the meanings of these themes and relating them to the theoretical framework, allowing the researcher to offer a more profound understanding of the students' challenges and strategies in language learning. This interpretive process aims to highlight both the personal and social dimensions of their experiences.

### ***Trustworthiness and validity***

To ensure trustworthiness and validity of the findings, several strategies were employed. Member checking was used to validate the accuracy and relevance of the interpretations. After the initial analysis, participants were invited to review the findings and provide feedback, ensuring that their perspectives had been accurately captured. This process also allowed for any necessary adjustments to the data interpretation.

Detailed contextual descriptions were included in the analysis to provide a clear understanding of the participants' experiences within their specific educational context. This transparency helps ensure that the findings are grounded in the realities of the participants' lived experiences, thereby enhancing the study's credibility.

Additionally, an audit trail was maintained throughout the research process. This included documentation of the decision-making process during data collection and analysis, allowing for transparency and ensuring that the research methods could be traced and reviewed.

### ***Ethical considerations***

This study followed ethical guidelines to protect the rights and privacy of the participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews, and they were informed of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Participants were also informed that their answers would be kept confidential and private.

To further protect participant privacy, all identifying information was removed from the transcripts, and pseudonyms were used in place of real names. Data were stored securely and used solely for the purposes of this academic research. These ethical safeguards were implemented to ensure that the participants' rights were respected and that the research was conducted in an ethical manner.

## Findings

### *EFL students' experiences in learning to speak English*

The findings of this study, derived from in-depth interviews with EFL students at a private university in Batang Hari, reveal several key themes related to their lived experiences in learning to speak English. Van Manen's (2017) existential framework organizes these themes: lived body, lived space, lived time, lived relation, and lived things/materiality. The findings highlight the challenges students face, the strategies they adopt, and the significant role of their emotional, physical, relational, and material environments in their development as English speakers.

### *Emotional, physical, and motivational experience of EFL learning speaking*

The concept of the lived body refers to the embodied, subjective experience through which individuals interact with the world. Participants in this study reported a range of emotional and physical experiences that directly affected their ability to speak English. One common challenge reported was vocabulary loss, which made it difficult for students to express themselves fluently. As Participant 1 (P1) shared, "I often lost my words when speaking English. I tried to find it in Bahasa, but I couldn't find the related word to express it." This lack of vocabulary often led students to remain silent or disengage from communication altogether, as indicated by Participant 3 (P3): "I remain silent when I don't know how to express my thoughts."

Another emotional challenge that emerged was the feeling of discomfort during communication, particularly when students experienced blocks in their speech. Participant 2 (P2) recalled, "When I explained something and got stuck, I felt shy and explained another topic. I stopped my explanation about that. I felt my heart race, and my face felt hot." These bodily sensations—such as a racing heart, blushing, and physical tension—illustrate how emotions can disrupt the speaking process and undermine a student's confidence.

Despite these challenges, many students reported that perfect pronunciation was not a major concern in their learning. Participant 4 (P4) stated, "Since my lecturer and my friend nodded and understood my explanation, I don't care about the grammar error." This suggests that feedback from listeners, whether teachers or peers, played a crucial role in boosting students' confidence and managing their bodily anxiety during speaking activities.

In coping with these challenges, students employed various strategies, such as watching English videos or movies, taking notes on unfamiliar words, and using new vocabulary in sentences. Others practiced by mirroring themselves, pretending to speak in front of peers, or recording their voices to self-evaluate their pronunciation and fluency. These strategies reflect an active effort to manage anxiety and enhance their speaking abilities.

Motivation was also a significant factor influencing students' speaking experiences. Two primary sources of motivation emerged: internal and external factors. Internally, students were motivated by a personal desire to learn international languages. As Participant 1 (P1) explained, "I wanted to learn English seriously because now it's used everywhere, even on social media

and in job requirements." Externally, encouragement from others—such as friends, family, and mentors—also played a role in students' motivation. One participant (P4) shared, "I was invited by my cousin, who studied here first. She said it's fun, and the lecturers help a lot." These external motivators helped reinforce the students' academic decisions and fostered a sense of belonging in their educational environment.

When faced with setbacks, such as moments of embarrassment or hesitation, motivated students often reframed these challenges as opportunities for growth. Participant 5 (P5) remarked, "I felt bad after being laughed at when I said a word wrong, but I told myself, If I never try, I'll never improve." This resilience and willingness to try again underscore the role of motivation in overcoming the emotional barriers to speaking English.

### ***Relationality experiences and the impact on EFL speaking proficiency***

The lived experience of relationships with peers, lecturers, and the social environment was another significant theme that emerged. Positive relationships with lecturers, who offered encouragement and created safe learning environments, were associated with greater student confidence in speaking. Conversely, students often avoid speaking activities due to peer pressure or fear of ridicule.

Participant 2 (P2) described that speaking in informal settings often involved simple exchanges, such as greetings, where students code-switched between English and Bahasa Indonesia: "How are you? *Sudah makan siang?* Take lunch, *yuk*." This informal interaction was considered less intimidating and served as a steppingstone toward greater fluency.

In more formal settings, such as presentations or class speeches, students faced higher levels of anxiety. Participant 6 (P6) mentioned, "The lecturer and classmates support me a lot and sometimes give me clues when I get stuck in speaking." This support system was crucial in reducing anxiety and building confidence during performance-based speaking tasks.

However, one challenge highlighted was the difficulty of finding consistent speaking partners. Several students reported feeling isolated and unwilling to speak for fear of judgment. Participant 1 (P1) explained, "I become more confident to speak in English when the lecturer is friendly and doesn't immediately interrupt me when I make a mistake." This highlights the importance of creating safe and supportive environments that promote speaking confidence.

To overcome these relational barriers, students employed various strategies, including initiating conversations with classmates, joining online discussion groups, or enrolling in private English courses. These strategies allow students to maintain regular speaking practice and receive feedback in a less judgmental context.

### ***Time speaking experiences: a pathway to mastery and proficiency***

In learning to speak English, time was a critical factor. Several participants reported struggling with fluency, particularly at the beginning of their studies. Participant 6 (P6) shared, "In the beginning, my English skills were quite limited. I struggled with vocabulary and had poor pronunciation, particularly when speaking. It was difficult for me to express my thoughts. Now, I feel that my English has improved." This quote illustrates how time, or the gradual process of improvement, plays a crucial role in language mastery.

Participants reported spending varying amounts of time on their speaking practice. Participant 3 (P3) mentioned, "I practice it about one to two hours a day, using my cell phone, recording my voice, or practicing my speaking in front of the mirror." Others, like Participant 4 (P4), stated, "I often practice my speaking with my cousin and my online friends from other countries." These practices were integral in building students' confidence and competence over time.

As they progressed through their semesters, students reported noticeable improvements in their speaking skills. Participant 1 (P1) highlighted, "I can watch videos on YouTube without subtitles." This reflects how exposure to English content outside the classroom, combined with regular practice, contributed to their development.

### ***Environmental experiences: influence on speaking practice in EFL classrooms***

The lived space of the classroom—both physically and social—played a significant role in shaping students' speaking experiences. Participants emphasized that the classroom should be a comfortable and distraction-free environment for optimal language learning. Participant 4 (P4) noted, "Learning English speaking needs a comfortable classroom environment. For example, when the lecturer asks us to speak English, the lecturer can hear our sentence clearly without any distraction from outside."

However, several participants also highlighted environmental discomforts, such as poor lighting, noise, and uncomfortable seating arrangements. Participant 5 (P5) shared, "A classroom disarranged properly causes trouble in learning, the lighting is insufficient, and cleanliness matters." These physical discomforts were found to negatively impact concentration and engagement in speaking practice.

Additionally, students reported challenges in practicing English outside the classroom. Participant 2 (P2) explained, "When I went home, I never had a real conversation using English. It made no one understand my words. Since I live in a rural area, they always use the local language rather than Bahasa or, moreover, English." This lack of opportunities for real-world practice outside the classroom further hindered their ability to apply what they had learned in class.

## **Discussion**

The results of this study provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of EFL students in Batang Hari, shedding light on the complex challenges and strategies that shape their journey toward achieving English proficiency. As seen from participants' experiences, learning to speak English is not only a cognitive process but also deeply emotional, physical, and relational and is influenced by the broader environmental context. These findings are consistent with previous studies on language acquisition that highlight the multidimensional nature of learning (Songkhro et al., 2024; Zhang, 2024). This discussion will examine the findings in relation to the core themes of emotional, physical, and motivational experiences; relationality; time; and environmental experiences—all of which play a crucial role in shaping students' language-learning experiences.

### *Emotional, physical, and motivational experience of EFL learning speaking*

The concept of the lived body is central to this study, and the findings underscore how bodily sensations, such as anxiety, physical discomfort, and emotional reactions, impact students' speaking abilities. Previous studies have shown that language learning is often accompanied by emotional barriers, particularly anxiety, which can manifest physically (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012). In this study, participants experienced anxiety during speaking activities, which was linked to bodily sensations such as racing heartbeat, blushing, and nervousness. These findings align with those of Anandari (2015), who observed that anxiety, in the form of bodily sensations, is a significant barrier to effective speaking. The impact of these bodily experiences on fluency highlights the importance of addressing emotional and physical discomfort in language-learning environments. As Zahavi (2018) suggests, the body is not merely a vessel but a key medium for human perception and action, particularly in communicative tasks such as speaking.

Despite the challenges, students demonstrated resilience by using adaptive strategies to manage anxiety and build confidence. Participants in this study used self-recording, mirroring, and peer interaction to practice speaking. These strategies reflect self-regulated learning, as defined by Zimmerman (2016), as the process by which learners control their own learning behaviors. By actively seeking opportunities to practice, students are better equipped to overcome the anxiety and discomfort that hinder their speaking. This finding is consistent with Boudah and McLaughlin (2022), who argue that self-reflection and repeated practice are essential for overcoming language anxiety and improving language fluency.

Motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic, also emerged as a key factor influencing students' speaking experiences. The findings show that students who are internally motivated, driven by a personal desire to master English, tend to persist through challenges and seek opportunities to practice speaking. This motivation was supported by external factors, such as encouragement from family members, peers, and teachers. This dual-source motivation model aligns with Gardner's (2020) socio-educational model of motivation, which posits that both personal goals and social and cultural contexts influence the motivation of language learners. In rural settings like Batang Hari, external encouragement from family and peers plays a significantly more important role in maintaining motivation, particularly when opportunities for language use outside the classroom are limited.

The role of social support in motivating learners has also been highlighted in other studies. Diana et al. (2024) found that EFL students' anxiety was significantly alleviated when they received support from peers and lecturers. Similarly, in this study, students reported that positive feedback from peers and lecturers reduced anxiety and encouraged them to continue practicing despite initial failures. Dörnyei (2020) emphasized the importance of creating a motivating environment for language learners, one that includes both internal and external motivational factors to sustain engagement and promote success.

### *Relationality experiences and the impact on EFL speaking proficiency*

The lived relationality theme emphasized the significant impact of interpersonal relationships on students' speaking experiences. Students in this study were strongly influenced by their relationships with peers and lecturers, as well as the social dynamics within their learning environment. Positive relationships with lecturers, characterized by encouragement and constructive feedback, significantly improved students' speaking confidence. Haun and Tononi (2019) argue that a supportive classroom environment, where students feel comfortable making mistakes and receiving feedback, is essential for fostering language proficiency. In contrast, negative relational experiences, such as peer pressure or fear of judgment, contributed to increased speaking anxiety and avoidance behavior, as students were reluctant to speak due to the fear of ridicule.

The students in this study also demonstrated that peer relationships facilitate language practice. Many students reported feeling more comfortable speaking English with peers in informal settings. As Participant 2 (P2) stated, speaking English was often a casual transaction, typically involving simple exchanges such as greetings and personal inquiries, and often included code-switching between Bahasa Indonesia and English. This observation underscores the importance of relationality in promoting regular and informal language use, which is essential for developing speaking fluency (Vygotsky, 1978).

However, the study also revealed a challenge in finding consistent speaking partners. While relationships with peers and lecturers were generally supportive, the lack of consistent speaking practice outside the classroom limited students' opportunities to develop fluency. This challenge is compounded by the fact that Batang Hari, as a rural area, offers limited opportunities for students to engage in authentic, real-world English conversations. Nhan (2024) emphasizes the significance of interaction in language development, particularly in developing speaking skills. In this study, students' inability to practice English in everyday contexts outside the classroom reflects a significant barrier to fluency development, as consistent interaction with proficient English speakers is crucial for improving language skills.

### *Time speaking experiences: A pathway to mastery and proficiency*

Lived time—the way students perceive and experience the passage of time—emerged as an important factor in the development of speaking proficiency. Participants in this study reported struggling with fluency early in their academic careers, particularly in expressing their thoughts clearly. As Participant 6 (P6) noted, "In the beginning, my English skills were quite limited... It was difficult for me to express my thoughts." Over time, however, students observed improvements in their English-speaking abilities, with increased confidence and fluency as they progressed through their semesters. This progression reflects the gradual nature of language learning, where improvement occurs incrementally through consistent practice (Schulz, 2017).

The time dimension also highlighted the importance of regular practice in language learning. As participants reported, daily practice routines—such as speaking for one to two hours a day, recording their voices, and engaging in conversations with peers—made a

significant contribution to their improvement. The findings align with those of Clemens et al. (2021), who argue that consistent exposure and practice are crucial for mastering speaking skills. As students advanced in their studies, they noticed significant improvements in their ability to communicate more confidently and fluently, even outside the classroom.

The participants' experiences further support the notion that language mastery is a long-term process that requires both sustained effort and consistent exposure to the target language. This gradual improvement was reflected in participants' statements, including the ability to understand English media without subtitles and to engage in conversations with greater ease.

### *Environmental experiences: Influence on speaking practice in EFL classrooms*

The physical and social environment in which students learn is critical to their speaking development. This study highlighted how the classroom environment, including factors such as temperature, seating arrangements, and noise levels, can either facilitate or hinder speaking practice. Van Manen's (2017) concept of lived space emphasizes that the environment is not just a neutral backdrop but an active participant in the learning process. In this study, students who experienced comfortable, well-organized classroom spaces felt more confident and engaged in speaking activities. Conversely, students who were exposed to uncomfortable classroom conditions, such as poor lighting or excessive noise, reported greater difficulty in focusing and engaging in speaking tasks.

Additionally, the lack of opportunities for real-world practice outside the classroom further hindered students' ability to apply their speaking skills in authentic contexts. As Sutarno (2020) suggests, limited exposure to English outside the classroom can stifle language development, particularly in rural contexts where opportunities to interact with native speakers are scarce. In this study, students expressed frustration with the limited English-speaking opportunities in their communities, which hindered their ability to practice English outside academic settings. The use of technology—such as online courses, social media, and language-learning emerged as an important strategy for compensating for the lack of real-world practice.

### **Conclusion**

This study reveals that the process of learning to speak English is profoundly shaped by participants' lived experiences across emotional, physical, relational, spatial, and temporal dimensions. Initially, participants faced significant challenges such as vocabulary loss, speaking anxiety, and physical symptoms like racing heartbeats, often triggered by fears of judgment and limited opportunities for practice. Despite these obstacles, the students demonstrated resilience through self-regulated strategies, such as watching English films, taking vocabulary notes, and engaging in mirror practice or conversations with peers and online communities.

Motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic, played a pivotal role in overcoming these challenges. Internal motivation, driven by a desire to learn English for career and personal growth, combined with external support from lecturers and peers, encouraged students to continue practicing. Supportive relationships helped alleviate anxiety, create a safe environment for language practice, and foster confidence.

As time passed, students noticed improvements in their speaking skills, reflecting the idea of lived time, where growth is gradual but significant. Regular practice, increased exposure to English, and reflective self-evaluation contributed to their development. The classroom environment also influenced their speaking performance, as factors like seating arrangements and noise levels affected their ability to engage effectively in speaking activities.

In conclusion, this study emphasizes that English-speaking proficiency is not only developed through formal instruction but also through emotional resilience, motivation, social support, and environmental factors. These elements collectively enhanced participants' speaking competence, enabling them to communicate more confidently in English, both in and out of the classroom. This holistic approach to language learning is essential for promoting long-term success in EFL contexts.

### Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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