

BEYOND GRAMMAR: UNDERSTANDING EFL STUDENTS' CHALLENGES IN OPINION-BASED SPEAKING ACTIVITIES

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the challenges faced by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in opinion-based speaking activities. Although previous studies have emphasized vocabulary limitations and grammatical difficulties as the primary barriers to speaking performance, limited research has specifically examined the challenges that emerge when students are required to express opinions, an activity that demands idea generation, argument construction, and spontaneous communication in English. This study employed a quantitative descriptive survey design involving 278 students of SMAN 6 Kediri selected through simple random sampling. Data were collected using a Likert-scale questionnaire covering five aspects of speaking challenges: linguistic limitations, pronunciation concerns, fear of negative evaluation, cognitive load, and contextual classroom barriers. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, and mean scores. The findings revealed that students experienced speaking challenges at a moderate level overall. However, pronunciation concerns, grammar uncertainty, and cognitive load emerged as the most dominant challenges. The results indicate that students' difficulties in expressing opinions are not solely related to linguistic accuracy but also to concerns about being understood by listeners and their ability to manage ideas and information simultaneously during communication. Therefore, opinion-based speaking activities require pedagogical support that focuses not only on linguistic competence but also on students' cognitive readiness and communicative effectiveness.

Keywords: *EFL students; opinion-based speaking; speaking challenges; pronunciation concerns; cognitive load*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menginvestigasi tantangan yang dihadapi siswa English as a Foreign Language (EFL) dalam kegiatan berbicara berbasis opini (opinion-based speaking activities). Meskipun berbagai penelitian sebelumnya menekankan keterbatasan kosakata dan tata bahasa sebagai hambatan utama dalam keterampilan berbicara, masih terbatas penelitian yang secara khusus mengkaji tantangan yang muncul ketika siswa diminta mengemukakan pendapat, yaitu aktivitas yang menuntut kemampuan mengembangkan ide, menyusun argumen, dan menyampaikan pandangan secara spontan dalam bahasa Inggris. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain survei deskriptif kuantitatif dengan melibatkan 278 siswa SMAN 6 Kediri yang dipilih melalui teknik simple random sampling. Data dikumpulkan menggunakan kuesioner skala Likert yang mencakup lima aspek tantangan berbicara, yaitu keterbatasan linguistik, kekhawatiran terhadap pelafalan, ketakutan terhadap evaluasi negatif, beban kognitif, dan hambatan kontekstual di kelas. Data dianalisis menggunakan statistik deskriptif berupa frekuensi, persentase, dan skor rata-rata. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa siswa mengalami tantangan berbicara pada tingkat sedang secara keseluruhan. Namun, kekhawatiran terhadap pelafalan, ketidakpastian tata bahasa, dan beban kognitif muncul sebagai tantangan yang paling dominan. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa kesulitan siswa dalam mengemukakan pendapat tidak hanya berkaitan dengan akurasi bahasa, tetapi juga dengan kekhawatiran untuk dipahami oleh pendengar serta kemampuan mengelola ide dan informasi secara simultan saat berkomunikasi. Oleh karena itu, kegiatan berbicara berbasis opini memerlukan dukungan pedagogis yang tidak hanya berfokus pada aspek linguistik, tetapi juga pada kesiapan kognitif dan efektivitas komunikasi siswa.

Kata Kunci: *siswa EFL, kegiatan berbicara berbasis opini, tantangan berbicara, pelafalan, beban kognitif*

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INTRODUCTION

Speaking is widely recognized as one of the most essential skills in English language learning because it enables learners to communicate ideas, opinions, and information in real-life situations. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, speaking is not only regarded as a learning objective but also as a means through which students demonstrate their language competence. However, speaking remains one of the most challenging skills for EFL learners due to the need to simultaneously process linguistic knowledge, organize ideas, and interact with others in real time. Consequently, many students experience difficulties when participating in oral communication activities, particularly those that require spontaneous responses and critical thinking.

One speaking activity that has received increasing attention in English language classrooms is expressing opinions. Opinion-based speaking activities require students to communicate personal viewpoints, justify arguments, respond to different perspectives, and engage in meaningful discussions. Unlike simple question-and-answer tasks, expressing opinions involves more complex communicative demands because learners must generate ideas, organize supporting reasons, and convey their thoughts coherently in English. These requirements often create additional pressure for EFL learners, especially when they are expected to communicate spontaneously in front of their classmates. As a result, many students experience challenges that may hinder their participation and speaking performance.

Previous studies have identified various factors contributing to speaking difficulties among EFL learners. Normawati et al. (Normawati et al., 2023) reported that limited vocabulary and grammatical knowledge frequently hinder students' ability to communicate effectively in English. Similarly, (Putri et al., 2020) found that fear of making mistakes, low self-confidence, and anxiety negatively influence students' willingness to speak in classroom settings. Other studies have emphasized pronunciation difficulties as an important factor affecting speaking performance because students often worry about producing intelligible speech and being understood by listeners (Marwan, 2016). These findings suggest that speaking difficulties are influenced by both linguistic and psychological factors.

The phenomenon can also be explained through the concept of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA). Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) define FLA as a distinct form of anxiety associated with language learning situations, particularly those involving oral communication. Foreign language anxiety may emerge through communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and concerns regarding language performance. When students experience anxiety during speaking activities, they may struggle to retrieve vocabulary, organize ideas, and express themselves effectively. Consequently, speaking tasks become more demanding and may negatively affect learners' confidence and participation.

Despite the growing body of research on speaking anxiety and speaking difficulties, most previous studies have focused on speaking performance in general classroom contexts. Existing literature predominantly highlights vocabulary limitations, grammatical difficulties, and self-confidence issues as the primary barriers to speaking. However, such findings may not fully explain the challenges encountered in opinion-based speaking activities. When expressing opinions, learners are required not only to use English accurately but also to formulate ideas, construct arguments, justify viewpoints, and communicate them spontaneously. These additional demands suggest that challenges in opinion-expression activities may extend beyond traditional linguistic difficulties and involve greater concerns related to comprehensibility and cognitive processing.

Furthermore, limited studies have specifically examined the relative importance of pronunciation concerns, grammar uncertainty, and cognitive load in shaping students' difficulties during opinion-based speaking activities. While vocabulary and grammar are frequently discussed in previous studies, less attention has been given to the possibility that learners may be more concerned about being understood by listeners or managing multiple cognitive processes simultaneously while speaking. Therefore, investigating these challenges is necessary to provide a more comprehensive understanding of students' experiences in opinion-expression activities.

Understanding students' challenges in opinion-based speaking activities is important because such activities are increasingly emphasized in contemporary English language teaching. The ability to express opinions enables learners to participate in discussions, present arguments, and engage in critical thinking processes that are essential for academic and real-world communication. Identifying the specific challenges encountered by students can help teachers design more effective instructional strategies that support both linguistic development and communicative competence.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the challenges faced by EFL students in opinion-based speaking activities. Specifically, the study focuses on pronunciation concerns, grammar uncertainty, and cognitive load as the dominant challenges experienced by students when expressing opinions in English. The findings are expected to contribute to the literature on EFL speaking difficulties and provide pedagogical insights for improving speaking instruction in English language classrooms.

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative descriptive survey design to investigate the challenges faced by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in opinion-based speaking activities. The design was chosen because it enables researchers to describe and interpret participants' responses regarding specific phenomena without manipulating variables. The study focused on identifying the dominant challenges experienced by students when expressing opinions in English, particularly those related to pronunciation concerns, grammar uncertainty, and cognitive load.

The study was conducted at SMAN 6 Kediri, East Java, Indonesia, during the 2025/2026 academic year. The participants consisted of 278 students from grades X, XI, and XII. The respondents were selected using simple random sampling to ensure that every student had an equal opportunity to participate in the study. The sample represented students from different grade levels and provided a comprehensive overview of the challenges experienced by senior high school EFL learners.

The data were collected using a structured questionnaire designed to measure students' challenges in opinion-based speaking activities. The questionnaire consisted of 15 items categorized into five aspects of speaking challenges: linguistic limitations, pronunciation concerns, fear of negative evaluation, cognitive load, and contextual classroom barriers. All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5).

Prior to data collection, the questionnaire was reviewed to ensure the clarity and relevance of the items to the research objectives. The instrument was designed based on the concepts of Foreign Language Anxiety and speaking challenges identified in previous studies.

The data collection process was conducted during regular school activities. The researcher first obtained permission from the school administration and coordinated with English teachers. The questionnaire was then distributed to the selected participants. Before completing the questionnaire, students were informed about the purpose of the study and assured that their responses would remain confidential. After all questionnaires were completed, the responses were collected and prepared for statistical analysis.

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Frequency, percentage, and mean scores were calculated to identify the level of challenges experienced by students in opinion-based speaking activities. The mean scores were interpreted using the following criteria: 1.00–1.80 (Very Low), 1.81–2.60 (Low), 2.61–3.40 (Moderate), 3.41–4.20 (High), and 4.21–5.00 (Very High). The results were then interpreted to determine the dominant challenges faced by EFL students when expressing opinions in English.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study aimed to investigate the challenges experienced by EFL students during opinion-based speaking activities. To identify the most significant difficulties, the questionnaire responses were analyzed using mean scores and ranked according to their level of prominence. Table 1 presents the five highest-rated challenges reported by the participants. These findings provide an overview of the specific difficulties that most strongly influenced students when expressing opinions in English..

Tabel 1. Highest Challenges Experienced by EFL Students in Opinion-Based Speaking Activities

Challenge Item	Mean
Worry that classmates do not understand pronunciation	3.55 (H)
Uncertainty about grammatical correctness	3.48 (H)
Forgetting ideas when expressing opinions quickly	3.43 (H)
Fear of making mistakes when expressing opinions	3.38 (M)
Difficulty organizing ideas before speaking	3.35 (M)

As shown in Table 1, the highest-rated challenge was students' concern that their classmates might not understand their pronunciation ($M = 3.55$). This was followed by uncertainty about grammatical correctness ($M = 3.48$) and difficulty remembering ideas when expressing opinions quickly ($M = 3.43$). In addition, fear of making mistakes and difficulty organizing ideas before speaking were also identified among the five most prominent challenges experienced by students.

The findings indicate that students' difficulties in opinion-based speaking activities were associated not only with linguistic accuracy but also with communication effectiveness and cognitive processing. To gain a deeper understanding of these challenges, the following sections discuss pronunciation concerns, grammar uncertainty, and cognitive load in greater detail.

The most dominant challenge identified in this study was students' concern that their classmates might not understand their pronunciation ($M = 3.55$). This finding indicates that comprehensibility became a major source of difficulty during opinion-based speaking activities. When expressing opinions, students were not merely concerned about producing correct English forms but also about ensuring that their intended message could be understood by listeners. Since opinion-expression activities require learners to communicate personal viewpoints, provide arguments, and respond to others' perspectives, successful communication depends heavily on listeners' understanding of the speaker's message.

This finding is consistent with Chand (Chand, 2021), who reported that pronunciation difficulties remain one of the common challenges experienced by EFL learners in speaking activities. The study found that some students avoided using certain English words because they were unsure how to pronounce them correctly, even when they understood the meaning of those words. Similarly, Inggit Herlina Lestari & Indra Nugraha, n.d. (2023) reported that EFL students often encounter difficulties in speaking due to linguistic limitations and concerns about language performance. The finding is also supported by Suparlan (2021), who identified speaking anxiety as being associated with students' fear of speaking English and concern about their language performance in front of others.

In the present study, students appeared to be particularly concerned about whether their pronunciation could be understood by classmates when expressing opinions. This concern may reduce their confidence and discourage them from participating actively in speaking activities. Since opinion-based speaking requires students not only to speak English but also to communicate personal viewpoints and arguments,

the ability to be understood becomes an important aspect of successful communication. As a result, students may prioritize comprehensibility over linguistic perfection when expressing their opinions.

An interesting finding of this study is that pronunciation concerns emerged as a more dominant challenge than grammar uncertainty. This result differs from Chand, (2021), who reported that grammatical deficiencies were among the most prominent speaking difficulties experienced by EFL learners. While Chand's participants mainly struggled with tense usage, sentence construction, and grammatical accuracy, the students in the present study appeared to be more concerned about whether their spoken messages could be understood by their classmates. One possible explanation is that opinion-based speaking activities place greater emphasis on communicating ideas and viewpoints than on producing grammatically perfect sentences. Consequently, students may perceive comprehensibility as more important than grammatical accuracy when expressing opinions in English.

Grammar uncertainty emerged as the second most significant challenge experienced by students ($M = 3.48$). The findings indicate that students frequently hesitated because they were unsure whether their sentences were grammatically correct when expressing opinions. This finding is consistent with Chand (2021), who reported that learners often experience difficulties in using appropriate tense structures and sentence patterns during speaking activities. Similarly, Lestari and Nugraha (2023) found that grammatical difficulties remain one of the major challenges experienced by EFL students when speaking English. Normawati et al. (2023) also reported that limitations in grammatical knowledge can hinder students' ability to communicate ideas effectively and confidently.

In opinion-based speaking activities, grammar plays an important role because students are expected to formulate arguments, provide explanations, and justify their viewpoints clearly. However, despite being categorized as a high-level challenge, grammar uncertainty was still less dominant than pronunciation concerns. This finding suggests that students were more concerned about delivering understandable messages than achieving complete grammatical accuracy. Therefore, the results support the argument that speaking challenges in opinion-based activities extend beyond grammar and involve broader communicative demands. This finding is reflected in the title of this study, *Beyond Grammar*, which emphasizes that students' difficulties in expressing opinions cannot be explained solely through grammatical limitations.

The third most prominent challenge identified in this study was students' difficulty remembering ideas when expressing opinions quickly ($M = 3.43$). This finding suggests that students experienced challenges not only in language production but also in managing and organizing their thoughts during speaking activities. Unlike pronunciation concerns and grammar uncertainty, this challenge was closely related to the process of generating and communicating ideas under time pressure.

This finding is consistent with Suparlan (2021), who found that students often experience anxiety when they are required to speak without sufficient preparation. The study reported that many learners became nervous and panicked when they had to respond spontaneously in English. Similarly, the participants in the present study reported difficulty remembering ideas when expressing opinions quickly, indicating that spontaneous speaking situations may increase both cognitive pressure and speaking anxiety.

One possible explanation is that opinion-based speaking activities require students to perform multiple tasks simultaneously. Students must generate ideas, organize arguments, retrieve vocabulary, apply grammatical knowledge, and communicate their viewpoints within a limited amount of time. As a result, learners may struggle to maintain their train of thought while speaking. This situation becomes more challenging when students are expected to provide reasons, examples, or justifications for their opinions rather than simply answering short questions.

The finding can also be explained through the concept of Foreign Language Anxiety proposed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986). According to the theory, anxiety may interfere with learners' cognitive processes and reduce their ability to retrieve information effectively during communication. Consequently, students may forget ideas, lose track of their arguments, or become confused while speaking, even when they already know what they want to say. In the context of opinion-expression activities, this challenge becomes particularly significant because learners are expected to communicate personal viewpoints in a clear and organized manner.

Interestingly, difficulty remembering ideas emerged as one of the three highest-rated challenges, indicating that students' speaking difficulties were not limited to linguistic factors alone. While previous studies often emphasize grammar, vocabulary, or pronunciation problems, the present study suggests that idea management and spontaneous thinking also play an important role in opinion-based speaking activities. This finding highlights the importance of providing students with sufficient planning time and structured speaking opportunities before asking them to express opinions publicly.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that students' challenges in opinion-based speaking activities extend beyond traditional linguistic difficulties. Pronunciation concerns, grammar uncertainty, and difficulty remembering ideas when speaking spontaneously emerged as the three most dominant challenges experienced by the participants. These findings suggest that effective speaking instruction should not only focus on improving linguistic competence but also provide opportunities for idea planning, structured argument development, and gradual speaking practice. Such support may help students communicate their opinions more confidently and effectively in English.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the challenges experienced by EFL students in opinion-based speaking activities. The findings revealed that students encountered various difficulties when expressing opinions in English, with pronunciation concerns, grammar uncertainty, and difficulty remembering ideas when speaking spontaneously emerging as the three most dominant challenges. Among these challenges, pronunciation concerns received the highest mean score, indicating that students were more concerned about whether their spoken messages could be understood by others than about producing grammatically perfect sentences.

The findings suggest that speaking difficulties in opinion-based activities extend beyond traditional linguistic limitations. In addition to language accuracy, students must manage communication effectiveness and idea organization while expressing opinions. This result highlights the importance of viewing speaking challenges from a broader perspective rather than focusing solely on grammatical competence. Therefore, English teachers are encouraged to provide learners with opportunities to improve pronunciation, organize ideas before speaking, and participate in structured opinion-sharing activities. Such support may help students communicate their opinions more confidently and effectively in English.

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