

Tackling the Essentials : Student Needs In English speaking skill development in SMA Al Iman

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to identify the English speaking proficiency levels and analyze the specific learning needs of Grade XI students at SMA Al-Iman Sidenreng Rappang. Using a qualitative descriptive method, ten students were selected randomly as research informants. Data were collected through a structured speaking assessment and a needs-analysis questionnaire adapted from Brown (2004) and Hutchinson & Waters (1987). The speaking assessment measured five components: fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and comprehension. The results showed that 50% of students were at the Beginner level, 30% at the Elementary level, and 20% at the Intermediate level, with no students reaching the Advanced level. These findings indicate that students generally have limited speaking proficiency and require targeted support to improve communicative competence.

Needs analysis data revealed that students highly recognize the importance of English speaking skills for academic, professional, and communicative purposes. However, they face significant challenges in fluency, vocabulary mastery, grammatical accuracy, pronunciation, and confidence. Students also expressed strong motivation to enhance their speaking skills through interactive activities, constructive feedback, and increased opportunities for authentic communication. Based on these findings, the study emphasizes the need for a learner-centered and needs-based instructional approach to support effective speaking skill development in secondary education contexts.

INTRODUCTION

English plays a vital role in global communication, education, and professional development, making it one of the most significant foreign languages learned in many non-English speaking countries, including Indonesia. Although English is neither the national nor official language, it is formally taught from elementary to higher education levels and is widely used in academic, technological, and professional contexts. The rapid expansion of globalization and digitalization has further increased the need for strong communicative competence, particularly in speaking skills, which are essential for students to participate effectively in various academic and real-world interactions. However, despite years of exposure to English instruction, many Indonesian students still struggle to achieve adequate oral proficiency, especially in rural and Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) environments where exposure to digital learning tools may be limited.

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning in Indonesia is characterized by a formal instructional setting where students use English mainly within the classroom. Unlike English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts, EFL learners typically have limited opportunities for authentic interaction with native speakers or real-life communication situations. Consequently, speaking skills become more challenging to develop because they require not only linguistic knowledge but also practical experience in expressing ideas, negotiating meaning, and interacting naturally with others. According to Nunan (1991), speaking is often considered the most important indicator of language mastery, as learners' ability to use the language orally reflects their overall competence. Yet, it is also the skill most influenced by psychological factors such as anxiety, self-confidence, and motivation.

In the Indonesian secondary school curriculum, speaking is included as one of the core competencies that students are expected to master. Nevertheless, the development of speaking proficiency varies widely across schools due to differences in teaching quality, resource availability, instructional materials, and classroom practices. The EF English Proficiency Index (2024) reports that Indonesia ranks 80th out of 116 countries, indicating a decline in national English proficiency levels. This decline highlights the need for more effective language instruction strategies, particularly in speaking. Challenges commonly reported in previous studies include limited vocabulary, grammatical inaccuracy, poor pronunciation, difficulty expressing ideas spontaneously, and lack of confidence in public speaking situations.

SMA Al-Iman Sidenreng Rappang represents a unique educational environment, as it operates within an Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) system where students live, study, and engage in various activities within a highly regulated setting. One of the most distinctive regulations is the restriction on students' access to technology, including smartphones, computers, and internet-based devices. While this policy aims to maintain discipline and religious focus, it inadvertently limits students' exposure to digital media, interactive language learning platforms, and authentic English-speaking environments that many other schools commonly utilize. For instance, while students in public schools may use applications such as YouTube, Wordwall, Duolingo, or video-based speaking assessments, students at SMA Al-Iman continue to rely on more traditional methods such as printed materials, teacher-centered instruction, and manual examinations.

The limited technological exposure raises important questions about how students develop speaking skills in such constrained contexts. Preliminary observations conducted by the researcher revealed that many students experience difficulty speaking English, even at a basic conversational level. During informal interviews, several students expressed feelings of shyness, fear of making mistakes, and uncertainty about grammar and pronunciation. These challenges are consistent with the concept of "affective barriers," which influence learners' willingness to speak and participate in communicative activities. Additionally, the lack of consistent English-speaking practice within their learning environment significantly affects

their fluency and confidence.

Considering these conditions, needs analysis becomes a crucial step in understanding the level of students' speaking proficiency and identifying the specific areas requiring pedagogical intervention. Needs analysis, as emphasized by Hutchinson and Waters (1987), involves examining learners' necessities, lacks, and wants. Necessities refer to what students must know to function effectively in the target language situation; lacks refer to the gap between their current proficiency and required competencies; and wants reflect students' personal preferences and motivations regarding language learning. Conducting a needs analysis in the context of SMA Al-Iman is particularly important because it allows teachers and curriculum developers to tailor instruction methods to the students' actual conditions rather than relying solely on generalized approaches.

Furthermore, Brown (2004) highlights that speaking assessment should include several components such as fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and comprehension. These elements provide a comprehensive measurement of speaking proficiency and help identify which aspects students struggle with most. Based on the preliminary assessment carried out by the researcher, many students fall into the Beginner or Elementary levels of speaking proficiency, indicating that they require structured support to improve their communicative competence.

The significance of this study lies not only in understanding students' speaking proficiency but also in exploring their learning needs within the constraints of a pesantren-based educational system. By identifying their challenges and expectations, this research aims to provide insights that can help teachers at SMA Al-Iman design instructional strategies that are more relevant, engaging, and aligned with the students' learning context. For example, even without technology, teachers can still promote speaking development through interactive activities such as role-plays, debates, storytelling, peer conversations, or guided discussions. The development of English speaking skills among SMA Al-Iman students is influenced by various linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors. Limited technological access, traditional learning methods, and minimal exposure to authentic communication contribute to the students' struggles in speaking. Therefore, identifying their proficiency levels and understanding their specific needs is essential for designing effective instructional interventions. This study seeks to address these issues by examining students' speaking ability and their necessities, lacks, and wants in learning English, ultimately aiming to enhance their communicative competence within the unique educational context of SMA Al-Iman.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The development of English speaking skills is influenced by various linguistic, psychological, and contextual factors that determine a learner's overall communicative competence. As speaking is often considered the most challenging language skill to master, numerous theories in applied linguistics emphasize the importance of systematic instruction, learner involvement, and needs-based pedagogy. This chapter discusses relevant theoretical concepts related to needs analysis and speaking skill development, supported by previous research findings. Needs analysis is a foundational component in curriculum design and language program development. It refers to a systematic process of identifying learners' requirements, difficulties, and expectations in acquiring a target language. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) define needs analysis as the process of determining the necessities, lacks, and wants of learners, particularly within the framework of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). According to their model, *necessities* describe what learners must know to function effectively in a target situation; *lacks* refer to the gaps between learners' current proficiency and what is required; and *wants* represent learners' personal preferences or desires in the learning process.

This tripartite model remains one of the most widely used frameworks in both ESP and general EFL settings.

Furthermore, Brindley (1989) distinguishes between objective needs and subjective needs. Objective needs refer to externally identifiable information about learners such as their proficiency level, language tasks, or academic requirements, whereas subjective needs relate to learners' motivations, attitudes, preferences, and personal expectations. A comprehensive needs analysis should incorporate both perspectives to ensure that instructional practices are responsive and learner-centered.

Brown (1995) also emphasizes needs analysis as a vital step for generating relevant course objectives and selecting appropriate teaching materials. He argues that effective curriculum design must be grounded in accurate data about learners' backgrounds, previous learning experiences, and communicative demands. In the context of secondary education, needs analysis functions not only as a diagnostic tool but also as a guiding principle to improve teaching quality and enhance student learning outcomes. Speaking is a productive skill that requires the integration of linguistic knowledge and communicative ability. Nunan (1991) states that speaking is often regarded as the most important skill because it visibly reflects learners' language mastery. It involves not only forming grammatically correct structures but also organizing ideas fluently and interacting naturally in real-time communication.

Brown (2004) identifies five key components of speaking proficiency: grammar, vocabulary, fluency, pronunciation, and comprehension. Grammar and vocabulary provide the linguistic foundation needed to construct meaningful utterances. Fluency involves the ability to produce speech smoothly without unnecessary pauses. Pronunciation concerns clarity and intelligibility, ensuring that speech is understandable to listeners. Comprehension demonstrates learners' ability to understand spoken language and respond appropriately. These components are widely used as assessment indicators in language testing and classroom-based evaluation.

Learners' speaking development is often hindered by psychological barriers such as anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and low self-confidence. Kaur and Abdul Aziz (2020) highlight that many students hesitate to speak because they feel shy or fear negative evaluation. Limited vocabulary, grammatical weaknesses, and poor pronunciation also contribute to communication breakdowns (Octaberlina et al., 2022). Therefore, speaking instruction must incorporate strategies that reduce anxiety and increase learner engagement, such as interactive activities, peer collaboration, and positive feedback. The integration of communicative language teaching (CLT) principles has been shown to enhance students' speaking performance by emphasizing real-life communication, authentic tasks, and student-centered activities. However, in contexts with limited access to technology or authentic stimuli—such as Islamic boarding schools—teachers must creatively adapt instructional practices to maintain learner motivation and ensure adequate practice.

Several studies have explored needs analysis and speaking skill development across different educational contexts. Juan (2014) examined the classification of needs in language learning and emphasized the importance of aligning curriculum design with learners' linguistic and contextual needs. Yan et al. (2024) integrated situated learning in VR environments to improve speaking skills, demonstrating how contextual immersion enhances performance—although such technology is not always accessible in traditional or rural schools. Ismilia (2021) found that rubric-based performance assessment through video improved students' speaking ability, while Kasmiani et al. (2023) reported that action learning strategies significantly enhanced learner participation and oral proficiency.

These studies generally highlight the importance of contextualized instruction, interactive learning, and clear assessment frameworks. However, research specifically examining speaking development in low-technology environments remains limited, making the

context of SMA Al-Iman particularly relevant. With minimal access to digital tools and authentic exposure, students rely heavily on classroom interaction and teacher guidance, reinforcing the need for a targeted needs analysis to design appropriate pedagogical strategies.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design aimed at identifying students' English speaking proficiency levels and analyzing their specific learning needs. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for a detailed exploration of students' experiences, challenges, and perceptions related to speaking skill development within their natural learning environment. A descriptive format was used to present the findings systematically without manipulating variables, focusing on interpreting the existing conditions of learners at SMA Al-Iman Sidenreng Rappang. This design aligns with the purpose of needs analysis, which seeks to understand learners' necessities, lacks, and wants as proposed by Hutchinson and Waters (1987).

The research was conducted at SMA Al-Iman Sidenreng Rappang, an Islamic-based high school with a unique pesantren learning environment. The school restricts students' access to technological devices such as smartphones and internet-based tools, which directly influences their exposure to English learning resources. This context is essential for understanding how limited technology affects the development of speaking skills. The study focused on Grade XI students, as they are expected to have achieved intermediate speaking competence according to the national curriculum. Their proficiency levels and learning needs provide important insights for improving instructional strategies at the school.

The participants of this study consisted of ten Grade XI students selected through simple random sampling. This technique was used to ensure that every student had an equal chance of being chosen, thereby reducing researcher bias and increasing the representativeness of the sample. The selected students served as key informants who provided detailed information about their speaking abilities and learning needs. The sample size is considered adequate for qualitative descriptive research, which emphasizes depth of information rather than broad generalization.

Data were collected using two main instruments: a structured speaking test and a needs-analysis questionnaire. The speaking test was adapted from Brown's (2004) framework, assessing five key components of speaking proficiency: grammar, vocabulary, fluency, pronunciation, and comprehension. Students were asked to perform short oral tasks such as describing pictures, expressing opinions, and responding to situational prompts. Their performances were evaluated using an analytic scoring rubric to ensure systematic assessment. The needs-analysis questionnaire, adapted from Hutchinson and Waters (1987) and Brindley (1989), consisted of items related to students' necessities, lacks, and wants, including motivation, challenges, preferred learning

strategies, and expectations regarding speaking instruction.

The data collection procedures involved three stages: preparation, implementation, and documentation. During the preparation stage, the researcher validated the instruments through expert judgment and conducted preliminary observations at the research site. The implementation stage included administering the speaking test individually and distributing the questionnaire to all selected participants. The researcher also conducted informal interviews to deepen understanding of the students' responses. All data were recorded, transcribed, and organized systematically for analysis. Ethical considerations were observed by obtaining consent from the school, ensuring voluntary participation, and maintaining confidentiality of all participants.

Data analysis was conducted through three steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, following Miles and Huberman's (1994) framework. Data reduction involved selecting, simplifying, and focusing the raw data obtained from assessments and questionnaires. The reduced data were then displayed in descriptive tables and narrative summaries to facilitate interpretation. Finally, conclusions were drawn by identifying patterns, comparing results with theoretical frameworks, and linking the findings to the objectives of the study. This analytical process ensured that the study produced valid, reliable, and meaningful insights regarding students' speaking proficiency and their specific learning needs.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study revealed significant variations in the English speaking proficiency levels of Grade XI students at SMA Al-Iman. Based on the structured speaking test adapted from Brown's (2004) framework, students were classified into four proficiency categories: Beginner, Elementary, Intermediate, and Advanced. The results indicated that most students were still at the lower levels of speaking competence, with limited mastery of vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency. These findings reflect the current learning environment and instructional practices within the school.

The first major finding showed that 50% of the students were categorized as Beginner. Students in this level demonstrated difficulty forming simple sentences, frequent pauses, and heavy reliance on Indonesian during the speaking task. Their pronunciation tended to be unclear, making communication difficult without repetition or clarification. Their comprehension of prompts was also limited, requiring additional explanation from the examiner.

The second group, constituting 30% of the students, belonged to the Elementary level. These students were able to produce short and simple sentences but still struggled with accuracy and coherence. They possessed a basic vocabulary range but often paused to search for appropriate words. Their grammar was inconsistent, especially in using tenses and subject-verb agreement. Despite these challenges, students at this level demonstrated greater confidence compared to Beginners.

Only 20% of the students reached the Intermediate level, indicating partial ability to communicate ideas with moderate accuracy. Students at this level produced more coherent responses, used a broader vocabulary range, and showed better control over grammar. Their pronunciation was generally understandable, although still influenced by the mother tongue. Fluency was more consistent, though occasional pauses remained noticeable.

No participants reached the Advanced level. This suggests that students still require substantial improvement to attain high-level communicative competence, particularly in spontaneous expression and complex sentence construction. The absence of students in this category reflects the limited exposure to English-speaking environments within the school setting.

The needs-analysis questionnaire further supported these findings by identifying students' perceptions regarding their necessities, lacks, and wants. Results showed that 90% of students believed speaking English is essential for academic success and future careers. However, 80% expressed that they lacked confidence, 75% struggled with vocabulary, and 70% found pronunciation challenging. These results indicate that students require targeted support in both linguistic and psychological aspects of speaking.

Students also expressed strong preferences for interactive learning strategies. The majority requested more speaking activities such as conversation practice, role-play, games, storytelling, and teacher feedback. They believed that increasing opportunities for speaking during lessons would significantly improve their confidence and fluency. This highlights the importance of learner-centered approaches in the speaking curriculum.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study highlight the challenges faced by students in developing speaking skills within an environment that limits their exposure to authentic English communication. The high proportion of Beginner-level students suggests that traditional instructional methods currently used at SMA Al-Iman may not provide sufficient practice for oral communication. This aligns with Nunan's (1991) view that speaking requires consistent exposure, meaningful interaction, and opportunities for real-time communication, which are limited in this context.

The dominance of Beginner and Elementary categories further indicates gaps in vocabulary mastery, pronunciation, and grammatical accuracy. Brown (2004) emphasizes that these components form the foundation of speaking competence. The low scores in these areas reflect the need for a more systematic approach to strengthening linguistic knowledge before students can develop greater fluency and confidence. This finding is consistent with Octaberlina et al. (2022), who noted that vocabulary and grammar deficiencies are major obstacles for EFL learners.

The limited number of Intermediate-level students suggests that only a small portion of learners have developed the ability to communicate ideas with sufficient clarity and coherence. This reinforces the importance of providing differentiated instruction tailored to students' varying

proficiency levels. Such an approach would allow teachers to address individual learning needs more effectively, as recommended by Hutchinson and Waters (1987).

The absence of Advanced-level students emphasizes the impact of the pesantren's restrictions on digital technology. Unlike students in technology-rich environments who benefit from a variety of multimedia resources, SMA Al-Iman students rely heavily on textbooks and teacher-led instruction. Studies such as Yan et al. (2024) have shown that immersive learning environments significantly enhance speaking performance. The lack of such exposure likely contributes to the slower development of oral skills in this context.

The needs analysis data clearly show that students understand the importance of speaking English but feel limited by psychological barriers such as fear of making mistakes and low self-confidence. This supports Kaur and Abdul Aziz's (2020) findings that anxiety is one of the strongest inhibitors of speaking performance. Addressing affective factors should therefore be a priority in designing speaking activities, particularly through positive reinforcement and safe learning environments.

Students' preference for interactive learning strategies indicates that they desire more engaging and communicative classroom experiences. Activities such as role-plays, storytelling, and peer dialogues are aligned with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) principles, which emphasize authentic communication and learner participation. Implementing these methods may help improve fluency and confidence even in low-technology settings.

Overall, the study underscores the need for a more learner-centered and needs-based speaking curriculum at SMA Al-Iman. Teachers must integrate interactive activities, provide consistent speaking practice, and address students' linguistic and affective barriers. By aligning instruction with students' necessities, lacks, and wants, the school can better support the development of communicative competence despite environmental limitations.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the English speaking proficiency levels and learning needs of Grade XI students at SMA Al-Iman Sidenreng Rappang. The findings revealed that the majority of students were still at the Beginner and Elementary levels, with only a small proportion achieving Intermediate proficiency. None of the participants reached the Advanced level, indicating that students require substantial improvement in vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, fluency, and comprehension. These results reflect the limited exposure to English communication and the traditional learning environment within the pesantren setting.

The needs-analysis data further showed that students highly value the importance of speaking English for academic and future career purposes, but they struggle with confidence, vocabulary limitations, and pronunciation difficulties. Psychological barriers such as anxiety and fear of making mistakes also negatively influenced their willingness to speak. Students expressed a strong

preference for interactive learning activities such as discussions, role-plays, conversations, and storytelling, as these methods motivate them and provide more opportunities to practice speaking. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that developing students' speaking skills requires a more needs-based and learner-centered instructional approach. Teachers should incorporate interactive strategies, provide regular speaking opportunities, and offer constructive feedback to address students' necessities, lacks, and wants. Despite the school's technological limitations, meaningful speaking practice can still be fostered through creative classroom activities. By aligning teaching methods with students' learning needs, SMA Al-Iman can enhance students' communicative competence and better prepare them for real-world English communication.

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