

Linguistic and Non-Linguistic Barriers to Maritime English-Speaking Proficiency: A Qualitative Investigation at Barombong Merchant Marine Polytechnic

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ABSTRACT

Maritime English-speaking proficiency is a critical competency for seafarers to ensure safe and effective international maritime communication. However, speaking performance among vocational maritime cadets in Indonesia routinely falls below required global standards. This qualitative descriptive study, employing a narrative inquiry approach, investigated the specific English-speaking difficulties and underlying influencing factors among twenty purposively selected fourth-semester Marine Engineering cadets at Barombong Merchant Marine Polytechnic. Data collected via in-depth interviews and non-participant classroom observations were systematically analyzed utilizing the Miles and Huberman framework. The findings reveal that cadets confront severe linguistic barriers (restricted vocabulary, pronunciation errors, and grammatical deficiencies) alongside profound psychological hurdles (debilitating anxiety, low self-confidence, and fear of making mistakes). Furthermore, these difficulties are compounded by an interplay of internal and external factors, including socio-economic backgrounds, conventional instructor pedagogy, substandard language facilities, senior peer pressure, and exhaustive physical training schedules. Collectively, these multi-dimensional constraints severely impede communicative competence. This study underscores the urgent need for targeted pedagogical interventions, curriculum alignment, and institutional policy reforms to enhance Maritime English proficiency and ensure global maritime workforce readiness.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Effective communication in English constitutes an indispensable competency in the contemporary era of globalization, particularly within the maritime industry, where international and cross-cultural interaction is a daily operational necessity (Dhanan, 2024; Saridaki, 2023; Tchkonja et al., 2019). The International Maritime Organization

(IMO) has established maritime English as the lingua franca of the sea through the Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping (STCW) Convention (Dirgayasa, 2022; Simanjuntak et al., 2026), rendering English-speaking proficiency not merely an academic aspiration but a fundamental professional and safety requirement for all seafarers.

Within this context, maritime higher education institutions in Indonesia bear the responsibility of producing graduates who are communicatively competent in Maritime English (Aeni et al., 2018; Sulistiono et al., 2025). Barombong Merchant Marine Polytechnic (*Polteknepel Barombong*), situated in Makassar, South Sulawesi, offers a Diploma III program in marine engineering and serves as a primary training ground for future seafarers in Eastern Indonesia (Ruing & Hading, 2021). Despite institutional initiatives such as English Club activities, English Camp, and weekly English Day programs, preliminary observations indicate that a substantial proportion of cadets—exceeding 50%—fail to meet the minimum standard of English-speaking proficiency, particularly in the areas of pronunciation, grammatical accuracy, vocabulary range, and communicative fluency.

The significance of English-speaking competence in maritime contexts has been well documented in international literature. Gbedava and Hu (2025) and Mönnigmann and Čulić-Viskota (2017) highlighted that communication failures attributable to limited English proficiency remain a persistent contributing factor in maritime accidents. Ahmmed et al. (2020) further underscored that English language competence functions as a core professional prerequisite for seafarers. Despite this international urgency, empirical investigation into the specific barriers confronting Indonesian maritime cadets—particularly within the contextual and institutional realities of polytechnic maritime education—remains limited.

Prior research into English speaking difficulties among EFL learners in higher education has generally identified two broad categories of factors: linguistic factors, encompassing vocabulary limitations, pronunciation difficulties, and grammatical inadequacies (Monib, 2025; Saragih et al., 2024; Tayyab et al., 2023); and non-linguistic or psychological factors, including anxiety, low self-confidence, and fear of making mistakes (Phethousy et al., 2026; Ross & Stuckler, 2025). However, investigations specifically targeting maritime cadet populations in Indonesian polytechnic settings are scarce, and the contextual nuances of maritime training environments—such as the influence of military-style discipline, seniority culture, and physical training demands—have been largely overlooked in the existing literature.

This study therefore seeks to address this gap by providing an in-depth qualitative account of the speaking difficulties and their underlying determinants as experienced by Diploma III Marine Engineering cadets at Polteknepel Barombong. The findings are expected to generate theoretically grounded and practically applicable insights for curriculum developers, language instructors, and institutional administrators engaged in maritime English education. The present study is guided by two research questions: (1) What speaking difficulties do Diploma III Marine Engineering cadets at Polteknepel

Barombong encounter when using English? (2) What internal and external factors influence their English-speaking ability?

Literature Review

The Role of English Speaking in Maritime Education

Speaking constitutes one of the four fundamental language skills—alongside listening, reading, and writing—and is widely regarded as the most complex productive skill due to its real-time cognitive and sociolinguistic demands (Munawir et al., 2022; Razaq et al., 2022). For maritime cadets, speaking ability is not merely an academic skill but a vocational safety-critical competency. The IMO Model Courses and the STCW Convention explicitly require seafarers to communicate effectively in English during bridge operations, emergency procedures, cargo handling, and interactions with port authorities and multinational crews (Karahalil et al., 2025; Yi et al., 2025). Failure in communication attributable to language barriers has been identified as a causal or contributory factor in numerous maritime incidents.

Within the Indonesian maritime education system, English is a compulsory subject across all diploma programs in maritime polytechnics (Sartini et al., 2025). Nevertheless, the transition from passive classroom English to active, professionally contextualised speaking performance remains a persistent challenge, exacerbated by the predominantly Bahasa Indonesia-medium academic and social environment outside formal English lessons.

Theoretical Framework: Linguistic Barriers

Linguistic barriers to English-speaking proficiency encompass difficulties rooted in the structural properties of language. Normawati et al. (2023) and Yan et al. (2024) categorized speaking errors among tertiary-level EFL learners into four domains: (1) pronunciation errors (including segmental and suprasegmental features); (2) lexical errors (inappropriate word choice or lexical gaps); (3) fluency disruptions (frequent self-correction and hesitation); and (4) interactional breakdown (difficulty sustaining meaning-making in discourse). Chung et al. (2024), in their survey of Hong Kong tertiary students, similarly found that grammatical accuracy and oral fluency constituted the primary linguistic concerns in academic speaking contexts.

Vocabulary is widely recognized as the foundational resource for language production. Siregar et al. (2021) argued that insufficient vocabulary not only impedes message formulation but also induces cognitive overload, which in turn exacerbates psychological inhibitions during speaking. In the maritime domain, the specialized lexical register of maritime English adds an additional layer of complexity, as cadets must concurrently develop both general English and domain-specific terminology (Kegalj & Tominac Coslovich, 2025; Pasyah & Anggraini, 2025).

Theoretical Framework: Non-Linguistic and Psychological Barriers

Non-linguistic factors, particularly psychological variables, have received considerable scholarly attention in EFL-speaking literature. Luo (2025) introduced the

construct of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA), conceptualizing it as a situation-specific anxiety syndrome characterized by communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Subsequent research consistently identified anxiety as one of the most powerful inhibitors of oral language performance (Bielak, 2025; Ma, 2022).

In the domain of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) pedagogy, learners' oral production is significantly moderated by a complex interplay of affective and psychological constraints, which Elov et al. (2025) synthesized into five core interrelated constructs: fear of making mistakes, shyness, anxiety, low self-confidence, and deficient motivation. The apprehension regarding committing errors is fundamentally rooted in the dread of negative evaluation by peers and instructors, frequently compelling learners to deploy avoidance strategies such as prolonged silence or minimal classroom participation, while shyness functions as an inhibitory emotional state that suppresses voluntary verbal engagement within formal instructional environments (Elov et al., 2025; Shi & Shakibaei, 2025). This reticence is further exacerbated by low self-confidence, which triggers communicative withdrawal due to self-perceived incompetence, and suboptimal motivation, which manifests as an insufficient internal drive that stagnates proficiency development. Operating alongside these generalized constructs, foreign language anxiety (Mierzwa-Kamińska, 2025) serves as a pervasive sense of apprehension that seriously disrupts oral fluency, an issue further expanded by Papi and Khajavy (2023), who underscored that the fear of public speaking frequently induces severe cognitive interference—colloquially experienced as the "mind going blank"—during real-time oral performances. Ultimately, this situational anxiety is compounded by intrinsic learner characteristics; as Wang et al. (2024) observed, learner reticence is often inextricably linked to introverted personality traits, which, in collaborative or group-learning environments, become particularly salient and cause students to withdraw from active verbal negotiation, thereby impeding the development of communicative competence.

External and Environmental Factors

Beyond individual psychological variables, external and environmental factors constitute a second major domain of influence on EFL speaking development. Suratin and Sribayak (2025) proposed a multidimensional framework of factors affecting adult EFL speaking, encompassing socio-cultural background, prior educational experiences, peer group dynamics, and instructional quality. Yan et al. (2024) emphasized that the learning environment—including classroom climate, availability of authentic communication opportunities, and access to language learning resources—significantly moderates the development of oral proficiency.

Within maritime polytechnic institutions, environmental factors assume distinctive characteristics. The quasi-military structure of maritime training, which includes mandatory physical drills, ceremonial activities, and strict seniority hierarchies, creates a high-pressure environment that may conflict with the conditions of psychological safety necessary for language learning risk-taking (Guo et al., 2026). Rahimi and Ong

(2023) underlined the pivotal role of instructor competency and pedagogical approach in facilitating or constraining learner speaking opportunities.

2. METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive design with a narrative inquiry approach. Qualitative inquiry was selected as the most appropriate methodological framework because the study aimed to develop a detailed and contextualised understanding of participants' experiences, perceptions, and the social conditions shaping their English-speaking difficulties, rather than to test pre-specified hypotheses or establish statistical generalisability. The narrative approach enabled participants to articulate their learning experiences in their own voices, thereby foregrounding the subjective dimensions of language learning that are often obscured in quantitative survey designs.



Figure 1. Narrative Inquiry Approach

The study was conducted at Poltekel Barombong, a state maritime polytechnic accredited by the Indonesian Ministry of Transportation, located in Makassar, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. The institution provides vocational maritime education at the Diploma III level across three study programmes: Marine Engineering, Nautical Studies, and Maritime Transport Management. Participants were purposively selected from the Diploma III Marine Engineering Study Programme (*Prodi PMK*), fourth semester, academic year 2023/2024. Twenty cadets were included in the study. Purposive sampling was deemed appropriate given the study's focus on generating rich, context-specific insights rather than representative population estimates. Selection criteria required that participants: (1) were actively enrolled in the fourth-semester Maritime English course; (2) had been resident at the polytechnic for a minimum of one academic year; and (3) provided written informed consent to participate.

Data was collected through two complementary methods. First, non-participant classroom observation was conducted across six Maritime English-speaking sessions over a period of three months (*January–March 2024*). Observational data were recorded in structured field notes documenting cadet participation patterns, instances of communication breakdown, instructor feedback strategies, and the overall classroom interactional dynamic. Second, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted individually with all 20 participants. Interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to minimise linguistic barriers to participant expression, audio-recorded with participant

consent, and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Each interview lasted between 30 and 50 minutes.

An interview guide comprising open-ended questions was developed based on a review of the relevant literature and refined through a pilot interview with two cadets outside the main sample. The guide addressed the following thematic domains: (a) self-assessment of English-speaking ability; (b) perceived difficulties in speaking English; (c) psychological experiences during English speaking tasks; (d) perceptions of institutional and instructional support; and (e) suggestions for improvement.

Qualitative data were analysed using interactive model, which encompasses three concurrent analytical activities: (1) data condensation, involving the systematic reduction, coding, and categorisation of raw data; (2) data display, involving the organisation and presentation of condensed data in a structured format to facilitate pattern recognition and comparison; and (3) conclusion drawing and verification, involving the iterative derivation and confirmation of thematic interpretations grounded in the data. Thematic coding was conducted inductively, commencing with open coding of interview transcripts and field notes, followed by axial coding to identify relationships between codes, and selective coding to consolidate overarching themes. Member checking was employed as a credibility strategy: emergent themes were presented to a sub-sample of five participants for verification and refinement. Triangulation across interviews and observational data sources further enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Analysis of interview transcripts and classroom observation data yielded two overarching thematic findings corresponding to the two research questions: (1) the typology of speaking difficulties encountered by cadets, and (2) the internal and external factors influencing their English-speaking ability.

Speaking Difficulties Encountered by Cadets

Linguistic Difficulties

Three principal linguistic difficulties were identified across participant accounts and substantiated through classroom observations.

(a) Limited Vocabulary

The most frequently reported linguistic barrier was insufficient vocabulary, cited by all 20 participants. Cadets reported that lexical gaps impeded their ability to formulate complete, coherent utterances, often resulting in pauses, code-switching to Bahasa Indonesia, or communicative abandonment. In classroom observations, vocabulary deficiency manifested as incomplete sentence production, inappropriate word choice, and reliance on first-language substitution strategies. One cadet articulated this difficulty as follows:

“I do not have a sufficient foundation for speaking English, and sometimes I feel nervous and not confident. So, it is very difficult for me to speak English, ma’am.”
(C12, Interview)

(b) Pronunciation Errors

Systematic pronunciation difficulties were observed and reported by 17 of the 20 participants. Common segmental errors included mispronunciation of consonant clusters, vowel substitution, and inaccurate stress placement on multi-syllabic words. Suprasegmental difficulties, including inappropriate intonation patterns and inadequate linking, were also observed. These errors frequently led to communicative misunderstandings during role-play exercises simulating bridge-to-bridge radio communication.

(c) Inadequate Grammar Knowledge

Grammatical inadequacies, particularly in tense usage, prepositions, and sentence construction, were identified in 16 participants. One participant reported:

“Yes, I have problems understanding grammar and pronunciation. Since before, since senior high school and junior high school, English learning was insufficient, so for me it is quite difficult.” (C11, Interview)

Non-Linguistic (Psychological) Difficulties

Three principal psychological barriers were identified.

(a) Anxiety

Heightened anxiety during English speaking tasks was reported by 18 of the 20 participants. Anxiety manifested as physical symptoms (trembling voice, increased heart rate) and cognitive symptoms (difficulty recalling vocabulary, inability to formulate responses under pressure). Classroom observations corroborated these self-reports: several cadets exhibited avoidance behaviour, including delayed response initiation and minimal voluntary participation.

(b) Low Self-Confidence

Seventeen participants reported low self-efficacy in English speaking, attributing this to their limited prior English exposure and a self-perceived gap between their proficiency and the expectations of the academic context. Several participants indicated that they chose to remain silent rather than risk producing incorrect or incomprehensible utterances.

(c) Fear of Making Mistakes

Fear of negative evaluation—from both peers and instructors—was identified as a significant inhibitor of voluntary participation in 16 participants. Participants reported concerns about being ridiculed by classmates if they produced incorrect English, a finding consistent with the fear-of-negative-evaluation construct documented in the FLCA literature.

Factors Influencing English Speaking Ability

Internal Factors (Psychological)

The internal factors influencing speaking ability were found to be co-constitutive with the psychological difficulties described above. Anxiety, low self-confidence, and fear of mistakes collectively form a self-reinforcing cycle: limited speaking practice due to avoidance behaviour perpetuates low self-efficacy, which in turn amplifies anxiety in subsequent speaking situations. Motivational deficits were reported by 14 participants, who described an absence of intrinsic drive to practise English outside the formal classroom, partly due to the limited perceived instrumentality of English in their immediate peer environment.

External Factors

(a) Family Background and Socio-Economic Conditions

Most participants (n = 15) reported coming from families with limited exposure to English, with parents predominantly engaged in non-English-medium occupations. This limited access to English-language interactions in the home environment reduced participants' prior language socialisation and restricted their vocabulary development relative to peers from more English-exposed backgrounds.

(b) Prior Educational Background

Participants frequently cited the inadequate quality of English instruction at the secondary school level as a formative factor. Several cadets described their secondary school English curriculum as predominantly reading- and grammar-translation-oriented, with minimal provision for speaking practice or communicative language activities. This finding is consistent with broader critiques of Indonesian secondary English education.

(c) Instructor Pedagogy and Institutional Facilities

While participants generally expressed positive regard for their English instructors, several noted that class sizes—averaging 30 cadets per session—limited the opportunity for individual oral practice. The absence of a dedicated language laboratory and insufficient access to authentic English-language audio-visual materials were also cited as inhibitory institutional factors.

(d) Institutional Environment: Seniority Culture and Physical Training Demands

A contextually distinctive finding pertained to the influence of the maritime polytechnic's quasi-military institutional culture. Participants reported that the seniority system—wherein junior cadets are expected to demonstrate deference to senior cadets—created a social environment in which speaking errors were perceived as sources of embarrassment and loss of face. Additionally, the substantial time demands of compulsory physical drills, ceremonial activities, and residential duties were reported to significantly reduce cadets' discretionary time for independent English study and speaking practice.

(e) Limited Authentic Practice Opportunities

The predominance of Bahasa Indonesia as the social and operational language within the campus environment meant that cadets encountered few natural opportunities to use

English communicatively outside formal English lessons. Fourteen participants reported an absence of English-speaking peers or interlocutors with whom to practise, a factor that significantly curtailed informal speaking development.

Discussion

The findings of this study corroborate and extend the existing literature on EFL speaking difficulties in higher education contexts, while generating contextually specific insights pertaining to maritime polytechnic education in Indonesia. The identification of vocabulary limitation as the most pervasive linguistic barrier aligns with the theoretical position advanced by [María Jiménez-Catalán \(2023\)](#) that lexical resources are the foundational prerequisite for productive oral language use. The compounded demands of Maritime English—which requires simultaneous mastery of general English and domain-specific nautical terminology—render vocabulary development a particularly acute challenge in this educational context ([Đurović et al., 2021](#)). These findings suggest that maritime English curricula should integrate a systematic, corpus-informed approach to maritime vocabulary instruction, prioritizing the high-frequency lexis of IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP).

The prevalence of psychological barriers, particularly anxiety and fear of negative evaluation, is consistent with the robust body of research on foreign language classroom anxiety ([Banani, 2025](#)). However, the present study contributes additional contextual specificity by revealing that anxiety in the maritime polytechnic setting is amplified by institutional factors unique to maritime training environments, most notably the seniority culture and the quasi-military disciplinary framework. This finding parallels Krashen's affective filter hypothesis, which posits that conditions of high affective stress raise the affective filter and impede language acquisition ([Prodanovska-Poposka & Todorova, 2023](#)). Institutional interventions that seek to foster a psychologically safe English-learning environment—including the establishment of anxiety-reducing communicative activities, peer mentorship programs, and explicit instructor training in affective dimensions of language pedagogy—are therefore particularly warranted.

The external factors identified in this study—particularly prior educational background, limited home English exposure, and the absence of authentic speaking opportunities—replicate findings from comparable EFL contexts in Indonesia and the broader Asian EFL literature ([Lee & Kim, 2025](#)). The contextually distinctive finding regarding the negative impact of physical training demands and seniority pressures on English practice time constitutes a novel contribution to the maritime education literature and underscores the importance of adopting holistic, institution-specific perspectives when designing language learning interventions for maritime polytechnic students.

The study also has implications for the design of English language programs at Indonesian maritime polytechnics more broadly. The current predominance of passive, grammar-translation-oriented pedagogy—inherited from secondary education experiences—suggests a need for systematic transition towards communicative language teaching (CLT) approaches that prioritize meaningful interaction, role-play,

and task-based activities simulating authentic maritime communication scenarios. Furthermore, the potential of technology-enhanced language learning—including AI-powered speaking practice platforms and virtual maritime simulation environments—warrants exploration as a means of expanding authentic practice opportunities beyond the formal classroom.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has provided a detailed qualitative account of the linguistic and non-linguistic barriers to Maritime English speaking proficiency among Diploma III Marine Engineering cadets at Poltekpel Barombong. Three primary linguistic difficulties were identified—limited vocabulary, pronunciation errors, and inadequate grammar knowledge—alongside three principal psychological barriers: anxiety, low self-confidence, and fear of making mistakes. These difficulties were found to be produced and sustained by a complex interplay of internal psychological factors and external environmental determinants, including family background, prior educational quality, instructor pedagogy, institutional facilities, the maritime seniority culture, and the heavy burden of physical training activities.

These findings carry significant practical implications. For cadets, deliberate and sustained speaking practice, exposure to authentic English-language maritime communication materials, and participation in extracurricular English activities are recommended. For instructors, the findings underscore the value of adopting communicative, learner-centred pedagogical approaches and of cultivating psychologically safe classroom environments that reduce the affective barriers to participation. For institutional administrators, the study advocates for investment in dedicated language laboratory facilities, reduction of non-academic time burdens that compete with English study, and the integration of Maritime English competence targets into the formal curriculum assessment framework.

The present study is subject to several limitations. The sample was drawn from a single study programme at one institution, limiting the transferability of findings to other maritime polytechnics or study programmes. The exclusive use of self-report interview data and observational field notes, without standardised speaking proficiency assessments, constrains the extent to which objective proficiency levels can be determined. Future research should incorporate mixed-method designs combining qualitative inquiry with standardised speaking tests and digital corpus analysis of cadet spoken language samples, and should extend investigation to multiple institutions and study programmes to generate more generalisable insights into the determinants of Maritime English speaking proficiency among Indonesian maritime cadets.

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