

## THE ESSENCE OF 'SAFE SPACE' FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS: THE ROLE OF ENGLISH COURSES IN REDUCING PRONUNCIATION ANXIETY AND BUILDING SPEAKING CONFIDENCE IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

Ahdan Labarata Sagala<sup>1</sup>, Neni Afrida Sari Harahap<sup>2</sup>, Karunia Devi Frida<sup>3</sup>  
[ahdansagala@gmail.com](mailto:ahdansagala@gmail.com)<sup>1</sup>, [neni\\_harahap@yahoo.com](mailto:neni_harahap@yahoo.com)<sup>2</sup>, [krndvyfrd@unimed.ac.id](mailto:krndvyfrd@unimed.ac.id)<sup>3</sup>  
Universitas Negeri Medan

### ABSTRACT

*This article aims to investigate the role of English courses as a 'safe space' for elementary school students to reduce pronunciation anxiety and build speaking confidence. Employing a mixed-methods design, data were collected from 14 fifth and sixth-grade students at the Cambridge English Course using questionnaires, interviews, classroom observations, and question-and-answer sessions. The analysis revealed that while 64% of students experience nervousness when speaking English, they demonstrate courage, indicating a manageable affective filter. Pronunciation was identified as the primary barrier for 57% of students, a challenge directly addressed by the course's instructional strategies. The findings prove that the course functions as a 'safe space' due to a supportive environment fostered by shared student goals and a focused learning atmosphere. Effective strategies include drilling (favored by 79% of students) for pronunciation accuracy, games (valued by 64%) for reducing anxiety, and collaborative pair/group work (preferred by 93%) for building confidence. The implications suggest that intentionally designed English courses can significantly mitigate speaking anxiety and foster linguistic development by prioritizing psychological safety and targeted pedagogical strategies.*

**Keywords:** *Safe Space, Pronunciation Anxiety, Speaking Confidence, English Courses, Elementary Students.*

### INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, the ability to communicate in English has become a fundamental competency that needs to be mastered from an early age. For fifth and sixth-grade elementary school students, English extends beyond being merely another academic subject; it represents a crucial pathway to broader knowledge acquisition, cross-cultural communication, and the development of self-assurance necessary for future educational endeavors. Among the four fundamental language competencies listening, reading, writing, and speaking oral communication is frequently regarded as the most authentic indicator of an individual's language mastery. For young learners, the capacity to articulate thoughts, emotions, and ideas verbally in English constitutes a meaningful accomplishment that enhances both their motivation and self-worth. The cultivation of speaking confidence in English during childhood is essential, as it establishes the groundwork for effective communication while nurturing positive dispositions toward language acquisition (Rampeng et al., 2025).

However, examining classroom realities for upper elementary students reveals numerous interconnected challenges that transform English speaking into a demanding and occasionally anxiety-inducing experience. These difficulties encompass both psychological dimensions and linguistic mechanics. Anxiety emerges as one of the most prevalent and formidable obstacles, with pronunciation anxiety significantly impeding the oral proficiency development of English as a Foreign Language learners (Yousif, 2025). This refers specifically to the apprehension and self-consciousness learners experience when required to produce foreign language sounds, particularly in public or evaluative contexts. Research

conducted in Indonesian contexts reveals generally low speaking abilities among children; for instance, an investigation in Karanganyar Village documented that children aged 8-9 years demonstrated poor oral skills, frequently lacked confidence, and exhibited speech repetition when attempting to express opinions (Wulansari & Hardianto, 2025).

Based on preliminary observations conducted with fifth and sixth-grade elementary students, significant findings emerged regarding their psychological disposition toward English speaking. The data indicated that 64% of participants acknowledged feeling "somewhat nervous yet courageous" when requested to speak before classmates, while notably, not a single student reported feeling "relaxed and confident." This complete absence of full assurance suggests that generalized unease constitutes a common experience within English classrooms. Beyond these emotional and psychological barriers, students contend with technical linguistic aspects of speaking, with over half of the students (57%) indicating that pronunciation constitutes their primary difficulty. For young Indonesian learners, sounds absent from Bahasa Indonesia, such as the "th" phoneme or distinctions between prolonged and abbreviated vowels, present considerable mastery challenges. The second most frequently cited barrier, selected by 29% of students, involves apprehension regarding grammatical errors.

The gap between the demands of English proficiency and the reality of students' difficulties creates an urgent need for teachers to find effective strategies that can help students overcome speaking anxiety, particularly in pronunciation. This research aims to investigate how English courses can function as "safe spaces" that specifically address pronunciation anxiety while building speaking confidence in young learners. Specifically, this study seeks to analyze and prove, based on field data and a literature review, the role of English courses in helping students improve their speaking skills. It aims to answer why courses can have a significant impact on students' language skills, with one reason being that all students share the same goals and interests in the same class, even though they are in different grades. Furthermore, students are focused on the same learning environment, thus enhancing their language skills. The research also aims to answer the reasons why students experience pronunciation anxiety and to discuss how to build students' speaking confidence, with one strategy being that they share the same motivation in the classroom.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This investigation employed a mixed-methods design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches within a single study to collect both numerical data and detailed explanatory information from participants. The research was conducted at Cambridge English Course, an English language course center, with data collected from 14 fifth and sixth-grade students selected due to their active engagement in speaking skill development. The participants represented a diverse range of speaking abilities and came from different elementary schools, sharing the common goal of improving their English proficiency through course participation.

Four primary instruments were employed for data collection. The first instrument was a questionnaire containing 10 questions addressing English speaking difficulties, focusing on pronunciation challenges, vocabulary limitations, speaking confidence, error apprehension, and speaking fluency. Each question offered four response options, and following collection, responses were tabulated and analyzed to identify the most common problems. The questionnaire was designed to be simple and easy to understand, ensuring that students could answer comfortably without feeling overwhelmed.

The second instrument involved interviews conducted with several students and the English teacher. Student interviews explored reasons for speaking apprehension, factors

complicating speaking, and strategies enhancing confidence. Teacher interviews examined professional observations regarding student speaking abilities, common classroom problems, and instructional strategies for improving oral skills. The interviews were conducted in a relaxed situation to encourage honest and open responses from participants. The third instrument was classroom observation, conducted during the learning process to document student participation during speaking activities, pronunciation when responding, confidence when speaking before classmates, and interactions with teachers and peers. Detailed notes were taken during observations to record important findings, allowing for comparison with questionnaire and interview results. The observations provided authentic insight into student conditions beyond what could be captured through self-report measures alone.

The fourth instrument was a question-and-answer session integrated into classroom activities, featuring simple, enjoyable questions about daily activities, hobbies, favorite foods, and personal experiences. This activity revealed response speed, hesitation patterns, pronunciation clarity, and apparent confidence during spontaneous speaking. The Q&A session created a more natural speaking situation because students answered directly without preparing long sentences, allowing researchers to observe students' real speaking ability in a relaxed, enjoyable atmosphere that encouraged comfortable English speaking. Data analysis proceeded systematically through multiple stages. Questionnaire results were calculated and categorized by themes including pronunciation, confidence, and vocabulary, with percentages calculated to identify the most prevalent problems among students. Interview responses were transcribed and analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and insights from both student and teacher perspectives. Observation findings were recorded and analyzed to identify patterns in student behavior, participation, and confidence levels. Q&A sessions were evaluated for spontaneous speaking ability, including response speed, hesitation patterns, pronunciation clarity, and apparent confidence. By combining quantitative and qualitative data from four different instruments, the research ensured that findings were consistent, reliable, and provided a comprehensive understanding of students' speaking difficulties and the effectiveness of instructional strategies.

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## **RESULTS**

The findings are presented in three main areas: students' perceptions, teacher's perspective, and observational data.

### **Students' Perceptions of Speaking Ability and Learning Strategies**

The questionnaire results revealed several significant findings regarding students' feelings and barriers in English speaking. Regarding emotional responses when requested to speak English before the class, the majority of students (9 of 14, representing 64%) selected "Agak gugup tapi berani" (Somewhat nervous but courageous). Three students (21%) reported feeling "Sangat takut/panik" (Extremely frightened/panicked), while two students (14%) indicated "Biasa saja" (Neutral). Notably, no students selected "Santai dan percaya diri" (Relaxed and confident). This indicates that while most students experience some nervousness, they nonetheless possess courage to attempt speaking. The absence of fully confident students suggests that speaking anxiety, though not severe, represents a common classroom experience.

When questioned about their greatest English speaking obstacle, the highest number of students (8 of 14, or 57%) identified "Bingung cara mengucapkan kata (pronunciation)" (Confusion about word pronunciation) as their primary barrier. The second most common obstacle was "Takut salah grammar" (Fear of grammatical errors), selected by four students (29%). Only two students (14%) chose "Tidak tahu kosakata" (Vocabulary inadequacy) as

their main problem. Significantly, no students selected "Takut ditertawakan teman" (Fear of peer ridicule). This finding clearly establishes pronunciation as the most significant technical challenge for these students. The absence of peer ridicule fears suggests a relatively safe and supportive classroom environment.

### **Students' Perceptions of Learning Strategies**

The questionnaire additionally explored student preferences regarding various classroom teaching strategies. Regarding role-play activities, the majority of students (9 of 14, or 64%) responded with "Biasa saja" (Neutral). However, five students (36%) stated they "Sangat suka" (Strongly favor) role-play. Importantly, no students expressed dislike for this activity. This indicates that role-play represents an acceptable, non-threatening method for most students, even if not their absolute favorite.

Game-based learning received strong endorsement. Nine students (64%) stated that games "Ya, sangat membantu" (Yes, extremely helpful) in increasing speaking bravery. The remaining five students (36%) considered games "Biasa saja" (Neutral). No students considered games unhelpful. This robust positive response highlights gamification's effectiveness in reducing anxiety and encouraging participation.

Drilling, involving teacher-provided examples before student speaking, was perceived as the most helpful strategy. An overwhelming 11 students (79%) selected "Ya, saya jadi tahu cara mengucapkannya" (Yes, I learn pronunciation through this). The remaining three students (21%) found drilling "Kadang-kadang membantu" (Sometimes helpful). This result strongly supports drilling as a key method for addressing students' primary pronunciation barrier.

Regarding preferred speaking practice activities, students demonstrated clear preference for collaborative work. Seven students (50%) favored "Berbicara dalam kelompok kecil" (Small group discussion), while six students (43%) preferred "Berbicara dengan teman sebangku" (Pair work with desk mates). Only two students (14%) chose "Menjawab pertanyaan guru secara lisan" (Oral response to teacher questions). Significantly, no students selected "Maju ke depan kelas sendiri" (Individual presentation before class). This data strongly indicates that students feel most comfortable practicing speaking in smaller, more private settings rather than performing individually before the entire class.

Concerning topic preferences for speaking activities, the majority of students (9 of 14, or 64%) selected "Iya, lebih suka topik sehari-hari" (Yes, I prefer everyday topics) such as hobbies, holidays, and family. Three students (21%) expressed preference for "Tidak, saya suka topik baru yang menantang" (No, I enjoy new challenging topics), while two students (14%) considered both equally acceptable. This demonstrates that while most students feel more comfortable with familiar subjects, a subgroup appreciates challenging new material.

Regarding willingness to speak despite grammatical inaccuracies, the largest student group (10 of 14, or 71%) stated they were "Kadang-kadang berani" (Sometimes courageous). Four students (29%) reported being "Berani, yang penting bisa bicara" (Courageous, prioritizing communication over perfection). No students indicated complete unwillingness to attempt speaking. This reveals conditional bravery students are willing to take risks, but confidence fluctuates depending on circumstances.

Concerning peer support during speaking practice, most students (8 of 14, or 57%) perceived the atmosphere as "Biasa saja" (Neutral). Five students (36%) considered their friends "Ya, teman-teman supportive" (Yes, classmates are supportive). Only one student reported experiencing negative behavior, selecting "Tidak, ada yang suka menertawakan" (No, some classmates laugh at others). This confirms that the classroom environment is generally positive and conducive to learning.

Teacher assistance needs were evenly divided. Seven students (50%) reported requiring help "Sering sekali (setiap kali bicara)" (Very frequently/every speaking occasion), while the remaining seven students (50%) reported needing assistance "Kadang-kadang" (Sometimes). Notably, no students felt they could practice "Jarang (bisa mandiri)" (Rarely/independently). This finding underscores the critical, ongoing role of teachers in facilitating speaking practice.

### **Teacher's Perspective and Observation Results**

Interviews with the English teacher (Sir Hariawan) provided valuable insights complementing student data. Regarding main barriers, the teacher confirmed pronunciation as the most significant problem, noting that students hesitate because they recognize words but lack pronunciation knowledge. He also noted psychological factors including shyness, particularly during individual speaking, despite questionnaire results indicating low peer ridicule fears. Concerning most effective strategies, the teacher identified games as paramount, sharing an example of a typically quiet student who spontaneously spoke English during team games, momentarily forgetting fear while focused on helping teammates win.

Regarding group work dynamics, the teacher highlighted small groups' primary advantage as providing "safe" environments for practice without center-stage attention. However, he noted challenges: students sometimes revert to native language and may permit one or two dominant students to monopolize discussion. Concerning topic selection, he explained his strategy of mixing everyday and challenging topics, beginning with familiar subjects to build confidence, then introducing a "challenge corner" for students seeking additional stimulation while continuing support for others with familiar material. Regarding teacher dependency versus independence, he observed that students demonstrate greatest teacher dependence when beginning new topics, particularly for pronunciation modeling, while beginning to display independence during pair work and games after practicing material.

## **DISCUSSIONS**

### **Students' Psychological State and Speaking Anxiety**

The finding that 64% of students feel "somewhat nervous but courageous" while no students feel "relaxed and confident" aligns with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis. The affective filter prevents input from being utilized for language acquisition, and students' nervousness constitutes a low-level affective filter. While not completely blocking speaking attempts—they remain courageous—it prevents attainment of complete confidence and relaxation optimal for language acquisition. Instructors must create environments conducive to acquisition featuring low anxiety, positive teacher rapport, and friendly peer relationships, as without such conditions, acquisition becomes impossible (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). The teacher's observation that students appear confident when speaking collectively but not individually further supports this, as peer presence may lower individual affective filters. This finding underscores the critical importance of creating safe spaces where students feel emotionally secure enough to take linguistic risks, a condition that English courses are uniquely positioned to provide through their focused learning environment.

### **The Dominant Barrier: Pronunciation**

The finding that pronunciation constitutes the main barrier for 57% of students represents a key research outcome. While grammar and vocabulary are frequently considered primary hurdles, this study demonstrates that for these young learners, phonological aspects of speaking prove most daunting. Pronunciation anxiety significantly impedes oral proficiency development among EFL learners (Yousif, 2025), referring to

apprehension and self-consciousness experienced when required to articulate foreign language sounds, particularly in public or evaluative contexts. This finding aligns with the work of Wulansari and Hardianto (2025), who documented that pronunciation difficulties and speaking reluctance constitute principal factors hindering learners' speaking abilities. The English course setting addresses this barrier by providing concentrated attention to pronunciation through systematic instruction and practice opportunities not always available in regular classroom settings, where time constraints and large class sizes may limit individualized pronunciation work.

### **Effectiveness of Learning Strategies**

Students' strong positive responses to games (64% very helpful) and drilling (79% very helpful) confirm these strategies' effectiveness in young learner classrooms. Learning incorporating game elements has been proven to generate student happiness and excitement during learning processes (Safitriani & Jayadi, 2021). Games' success can be explained through their capacity to lower affective filters, as noted by the teacher that students "forget their fear" because attention focuses on game objectives rather than speaking acts. Oral expression and communication games reduce error-related fears while boosting confidence, leading to improved speaking outcomes (Wulansari & Hardianto, 2025). Drilling's high rating directly addresses students' primary pronunciation barrier by providing necessary modeling and repetition for practicing correct mouth movements and sounds. This finding validates continued drilling use, particularly when integrated with more communicative activities, serving as a bridge to accurate, confident production. The English course environment, with its focused instructional time and shared student goals, provides optimal conditions for implementing these strategies consistently and effectively.

### **Preference for Collaborative Learning**

The strong preference for pair work (43%) and small group work (50%) over individual classroom performance directly supports Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development and scaffolding concepts. According to Vygotsky (1978), learning constitutes social endeavor wherein interpersonal interactions not only support learning processes but also cultivate whole-person development (Moosa et al., 2024). Within small groups or pairs, students can perform at levels exceeding individual capabilities, receiving immediate, low-stakes peer support that facilitates confidence and skill development within their Zone of Proximal Development. Role-play effectiveness in improving elementary students' speaking skills can be strongly explained through Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, demonstrating that language development occurs through social interaction and scaffolding from more competent individuals (Sa'adah & Abid, 2026). The English course setting, where students share similar motivation and goals despite being from different grades, creates an ideal context for collaborative learning, as students are united by common objectives and can support one another without the competitive pressures sometimes present in regular classrooms.

### **Topic Preference and Motivation**

The finding that most students prefer everyday topics relates to the need for relatedness in Self-Determination Theory. Discussing familiar subjects like hobbies and family renders learning experiences more personally meaningful and connected to students' lives, enhancing intrinsic motivation. Learners write and discuss matters largely familiar to them (Nation & Newton, 2009). The teacher's strategy of commencing with such topics to build confidence, subsequently offering "challenge corners," accommodates both the majority's security needs and the minority's competence and growth needs, effectively balancing diverse motivational requirements within single classrooms. This approach is particularly effective in English courses where the learning environment can be more

flexibly structured to address individual student needs and interests.

### **The Indispensable Role of the Teacher**

The finding that all students still require teacher assistance (50% frequently, 50% sometimes) and the teacher's observation that students demonstrate greatest dependence at topic initiation powerfully illustrate scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development. The teacher's role involves providing initial structure, modeling, and support—particularly for pronunciation—enabling students to access new material. As students progress to practice phases (pair work, games), they can operate more independently within their Zone of Proximal Development, relying on initial teacher scaffolding and peer support. The teacher subsequently becomes facilitator and monitor, circulating throughout classrooms, diagnosing problems faced by students experiencing difficulty expressing themselves and achieving language targets, while providing additional speaking practice opportunities (Nation & Newton, 2009). The English course context enhances this teacher role by allowing more individualized attention and consistent instructional approaches across sessions.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

This research concludes that English courses can indeed function as a "safe space" for young learners, playing a crucial role in reducing pronunciation anxiety and building speaking confidence. The study proves that the course environment, characterized by shared student goals and a focused learning atmosphere, creates a psychological safety net that allows students to confront their fears. The students' psychological state, marked by manageable nervousness rather than paralyzing fear, indicates that while an affective filter exists, the supportive environment of the course prevents it from becoming a complete barrier to communication. The dominance of pronunciation as the primary barrier highlights the need for targeted pedagogical strategies, a need that the course successfully meets through its instructional design.

Furthermore, the research demonstrates that the effectiveness of the course as a safe space is realized through specific, intentional strategies. Drilling and games are not just fun activities but are highly effective tools for directly addressing pronunciation difficulties and lowering anxiety by shifting focus away from performance. Collaborative learning through pair and small group work is the preferred mode of practice, as it provides a scaffolded environment where students can build confidence through peer support, operating within their Zone of Proximal Development. The teacher's role is indispensable, acting as a scaffold, model, and facilitator, especially when introducing new material. In essence, the essence of a 'safe space' lies in the deliberate combination of a supportive social environment, shared learner objectives, and targeted, collaborative instructional strategies that collectively empower students to overcome pronunciation anxiety and develop authentic speaking confidence..

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