When Silence Speaks: Exploring English-Speaking Skills of Introverted Learners

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This study explores the English-speaking challenges and coping strategies of introverted learners in an Indonesian senior high school EFL context. Using a qualitative descriptive design, ten eleventh-grade students at SMAN 1 Wonomulyo were purposively selected based on a personality assessment identifying them as introverted. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, a speaking test, and questionnaires. The findings reveal that introverted students commonly face difficulties in speaking tasks due to fear of judgment, discomfort in group settings, hesitation in expressing ideas, and slow verbal processing. These psychological and linguistic barriers significantly affect their classroom participation and oral performance. However, the students also demonstrated adaptive strategies such as memorizing prepared texts, managing their preparation time effectively, and responding positively to motivational support from teachers and peers. Additionally, they expressed a preference for game-based and relaxed learning environments that reduce performance pressure. The study highlights the need for inclusive and responsive language teaching practices that cater to diverse learner personalities. It contributes to the growing understanding of how personality traits influence language learning and provides practical implications for fostering speaking confidence among introverted learners in EFL classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

In the landscape of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, speaking remains a core skill that defines learners' communicative competence and overall language proficiency. Mastery of speaking is not only essential for academic achievement but also critical for real-world engagement in contexts such as travel, professional communication, and global interaction. Among the four key language skills, listening, speaking, reading, and writing, speaking is often regarded as the most complex to acquire due to its real-time cognitive demands and the social pressure it entails (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021; Nurmiati et al., 2024; Toro et al., 2018). Despite its central role in language learning, many students continue to struggle with speaking, particularly those with introverted personality traits.

Introverted learners often face distinctive challenges in oral communication. Characterized by a preference for quiet, introspective, and less stimulating environments, introverted students may find speaking tasks in EFL classrooms particularly daunting. These learners frequently experience anxiety, reluctance to speak in groups, and fear of negative evaluation, which hinder their willingness to participate in speaking activities (Erlina et al., 2023; Farooqi, 2021; Muthmainnah et al., 2025). Understanding the psychological and behavioral tendencies of introverted learners is therefore essential for teachers aiming to foster an inclusive and supportive language learning environment.

A growing body of research has addressed the intersection of personality traits and speaking performance in EFL settings. Several studies have explored the differences in speaking abilities between extroverted and introverted learners (Hardiyanti et al., 2021; Khotimah & Saputri, 2022), while others have examined how social support and classroom atmosphere influence the participation of shy or reserved students (Farooqi, 2021; Siddiquei & Khalid, 2018). Emirza and Sahril (2021) observed that introverted learners tend to perform lower in speaking assessments compared to their extroverted peers, largely due to hesitation and lack of verbal

spontaneity. Similarly, Paradilla et al. (2021) highlighted that introverted learners often withdraw from classroom discourse, especially when the learning environment lacks psychological safety or adaptation to their communication styles.

However, the majority of these studies employed either quantitative or mixed method approaches and typically included both extroverted and introverted learners in their sample. As a result, the unique challenges and adaptive strategies of introverted students are often generalized or overlooked. Furthermore, prior research has largely focused on university-level learners or adult language users, leaving a gap in understanding the experiences of introverted students at the secondary education level, particularly within the context of Indonesian senior high schools. There remains a need for more focused, qualitative investigations that capture the lived experiences of introverted students in classroom-based speaking activities.

To address this gap, the present study explores the speaking challenges and coping strategies of introverted learners in an EFL senior high school setting in Indonesia. Specifically, this research examines how personality-related traits influence the speaking performance of eleventh-grade students at SMAN 1 Wonomulyo. Through a qualitative descriptive design involving observations, interviews, speaking tests, and questionnaires, the study investigates the difficulties these learners face, their perceptions of speaking tasks, and the strategies they employ to enhance their oral communication skills.

This research contributes to the growing literature on learner diversity and language instruction by shedding light on a relatively marginalized group in language classrooms, introverted students. By focusing exclusively on introverted learners, the study not only highlights their unique needs but also provides practical insights for teachers aiming to support their speaking development more effectively. The findings underscore the importance of differentiated instruction, motivational support, and the use of learner-friendly activities, such as games and peer collaboration in promoting speaking competence among introverted students. Ultimately, this study aims to inform more inclusive pedagogical practices that recognize and respond to the diverse personality traits of EFL learners, thereby advancing both theoretical and practical understandings in the field of language education.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the English-speaking challenges and strategies of introverted learners in a senior high school EFL context. The qualitative approach was chosen for its ability to capture in-depth insights into the participants' lived experiences, behaviors, perceptions, and coping mechanisms. Specifically, a case study methodology was adopted to allow for a comprehensive and context-sensitive analysis of a small group of students within their natural classroom environment (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants and Setting

The study was conducted at SMAN 1 Wonomulyo, a public senior high school located in West Sulawesi, Indonesia. Participants were drawn from Class XI MIPA 5 during the second semester of the 2022/2023 academic year. An initial personality assessment was administered to 28 students using a standard introversion–extroversion inventory. Although the specific test name is not provided here, it followed indicators based on Jungian personality theory and common traits associated with introversion, such as preference for solitude, internal processing, and low sociability. Based on the results, ten students who scored consistently within the introverted range were purposively selected as the subjects of the study.

Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

Data were collected through four qualitative instruments: (1) classroom observation checklists, (2) semi-structured interviews, (3) speaking performance tests, and (4) open- and close-ended questionnaires. These instruments were designed to gather triangulated data to ensure the credibility and richness of the findings.

1. Classroom Observation: Two observation sessions were conducted over two days (April 13–14, 2023) during English-speaking lessons. The researcher used a structured observation checklist that included six indicators reflecting introverted traits, such as preference for working alone, reluctance to speak in groups, and passive classroom behavior. Observations focused on how introverted learners interacted, participated in speaking tasks, and responded to peer and teacher input.

2. Interviews: To explore participants' perceptions of their difficulties and preferences in speaking English, semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with each of the ten selected students. The interview protocol consisted of five open-ended questions addressing issues such as reluctance to speak, challenges in group collaboration, and factors contributing to speaking anxiety. Interviews were conducted in a private classroom setting, audio-recorded with consent, and later transcribed for thematic analysis.

3. Speaking Test: A speaking assessment was conducted to evaluate the learners' actual oral proficiency. The task required students to respond to questions related to a familiar topic, "TikTok," in an interactive, face-to-face format. Each student was asked six questions, with performance evaluated using an adapted version of Helmanda and Nisa's (2018) speaking rubric. The rubric assessed four components: grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency.

4. Questionnaire: Following the speaking test, participants completed a questionnaire designed to probe their learning strategies and preferences for overcoming speaking-related challenges. The questionnaire included both Likert-scale items and open-ended questions. Items focused on memorization habits, time management, learning environment preferences, motivational factors, and preferred classroom activities.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Miles and Huberman (1994) model, which includes three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Observation checklists and speaking tests were analyzed descriptively and tabulated to identify common patterns. Interview transcripts and open-ended questionnaire responses were coded and categorized into themes using inductive thematic analysis. Recurrent ideas and experiences were grouped under major themes such as "speaking anxiety," "lack of confidence," "preparation strategies," and "preferred learning activities." Patterns emerging from multiple data sources were compared to ensure internal consistency and validity through triangulation.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the school administration prior to data collection. Informed consent was secured from all participants and their guardians. Participation was voluntary, and students were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. All data were used solely for academic purposes.

FINDINGS

This study aimed to explore the English-speaking challenges experienced by introverted students and the strategies they used to overcome such difficulties. Data were obtained from classroom observations, interviews, a speaking test, and questionnaires. The results are presented thematically in line with the instruments used.

Student Characteristics Based on Observation

Classroom observations were conducted to examine student behavior in speaking activities and to verify the presence of introverted characteristics as identified in the initial personality test. The observation checklist consisted of six indicators that align with common traits of introverted learners.

Table 1. Summary of Observation Results

No	Observation Indicator	YES (n)	NO (n)	YES (%)	NO (%)
1	Prefer to be quiet, calm, and self-contained	8	2	80%	20%
2	Prefer to work independently or in small groups	10	0	100%	0%
3	Better at solving problems reflectively	8	2	80%	20%
4	Have difficulty establishing rapport with others	8	2	80%	20%
5	Possess an active inner world or introspective nature	10	0	100%	0%
6	Tend to be passive in classroom speaking activities	5	5	50%	50%

The data in Table 1 show that most participants consistently exhibited traits associated with introversion. All students preferred working alone or in small groups (100%), and the majority were described as quiet and reflective (80%). Interestingly, while half of the students were passive in classroom discussions, the other half demonstrated an ability to adapt and participate actively when conditions allowed. This suggests a spectrum of behavioral expressions even within an introverted profile, likely influenced by task type, classroom dynamics, and personal comfort levels.

Students' Perceived Challenges in English Speaking (Interview Results)

The semi-structured interviews revealed five major themes related to the speaking difficulties experienced by introverted learners. Each theme is illustrated with representative student responses and followed by interpretative analysis.

Fear of Rejection and Judgment

Many students expressed anxiety about how their peers might react to their opinions, which often led them to avoid speaking altogether.

"I don't want to speak up because I'm afraid my friends will laugh at me." (Student 3)

"Sometimes I think my answer is wrong and everyone will disagree with me." (Student 6)

"I just stay quiet. I feel uncomfortable when everyone looks at me." (Student 9)

These responses suggest that social evaluation plays a strong role in students' reluctance to speak. The fear of making mistakes in public or being judged harshly suppresses their willingness to participate in speaking tasks.

Reluctance in Group Settings

Some students reported discomfort with group learning activities, particularly when dynamics were imbalanced or peers failed to collaborate.

"In my group, I feel like only one person is working while the rest are silent." (Student 2)

"My ideas are not taken seriously, so I just follow the group." (Student 7)

"I don't like group tasks. I feel awkward and prefer working alone." (Student 10)

Such statements highlight a mismatch between introverted students' communication preferences and typical classroom practices that rely heavily on group interaction. Their tendency to withdraw stems from perceived lack of control or respect within group environments.

Difficulty Verbalizing Ideas

Several students acknowledged having thoughts to share but struggled to express them orally due to vocabulary limitations or hesitation.

"I understand the topic, but I don't know how to say it in English." (Student 4)

"My ideas are different, and I don't know the words to explain." (Student 1)

"I'm afraid I'll use the wrong words, so I just keep quiet." (Student 8)

These accounts indicate that linguistic insecurity is a central barrier. The internalization of ideas without outward expression reflects a disconnect between cognitive readiness and language performance.

Anxiety in Collaborative Activities

Students gave mixed responses regarding group work. While some acknowledged benefits, many reported feelings overwhelmed or emotionally drained during collaboration.

"Sometimes I like group work, but other times it gives me stress." (Student 5)

"It's hard when we don't agree. It makes me feel anxious." (Student 9)

"Group work is okay when my friends are kind, but I still prefer doing things myself." (Student 6)

These responses reflect fluctuating emotional comfort levels based on context. Introverted learners seem more receptive to group tasks when interpersonal dynamics are supportive and respectful.

Delayed Responses in Class

A majority of students attributed their hesitation or slow response time to difficulties in understanding instructions or processing spoken English.

"I often don't understand the teacher's explanation the first time." (Student 2)

"It takes time for me to think about what I want to say." (Student 4)

"I need quiet to think, but the class moves too fast." (Student 10)

This theme points to cognitive processing differences and the need for slower paced, more reflective learning opportunities that accommodate students' thought patterns.

Speaking Proficiency Assessment

A speaking test was administered to measure students' actual oral communication skills using a rubric adapted from Helmanda and Nisa (2018), assessing grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency.

Table 2. Speaking Test Results (N = 10)

Component	Common Issues Identified	Students Affected (n)
Grammar	Frequent errors affecting meaning	6
Vocabulary	Limited word choice, hindering clarity	5
Pronunciation	Difficult to understand; required repetition	6
Fluency	Hesitations, long pauses, reduced verbal flow	7

The test results indicate that the majority of introverted students faced significant linguistic barriers during oral production. Grammar and pronunciation were the most problematic areas, with six students in each category displaying performance issues that disrupted communication. Fluency was also a major concern, as seven students showed signs of hesitancy, likely stemming from anxiety and insufficient practice.

Learning Strategies Used by Introverted Students (Questionnaire Results)

The questionnaire findings reinforced the interview results by highlighting the specific strategies introverted learners used to manage their speaking anxiety and prepare for classroom activities.

Text Preparation and Memorization

All ten students stated that they preferred to prepare speaking texts in advance and memorize them before performing.

"I always write and memorize my answer before class." (Student 3)

"It helps me feel less nervous if I already know what to say." (Student 5)

"I don't like improvising, so I prepare my text at home." (Student 7)

This strong reliance on memorization illustrates students' need for predictability and structure in speaking tasks. Pre-writing allows them to gain control over vocabulary and reduce anxiety.

Time Management for Speaking Preparation

Students also reported actively managing their preparation time to reduce pressure during performance.

"I practice in the evening before class." (Student 1)

"I read my text many times before I speak." (Student 6)

"I prepare my assignments early, so I don't panic." (Student 9)

These practices suggest that introverted students compensate for their discomfort with speaking by investing time in repeated rehearsal. This helps build familiarity with the content and increases their readiness.

The Role of Motivation and Support

Eight out of ten students emphasized the importance of positive feedback and motivation from teachers and peers.

"When my teacher supports me, I feel more confident." (Student 4)

"My classmates cheering for me helps me try harder." (Student 8)

"I want to speak more when I get positive comments." (Student 2)

These responses show that emotional encouragement is a crucial factor in increasing participation. Supportive feedback lowers affective filters and creates a more welcoming environment for introverted learners.

Autonomy in Topic Selection

Students also expressed increased interest and motivation when allowed to choose or explore topics independently.

"When I talk about things I like, it feels easier." (Student 5)

"I enjoy learning when I can share my own ideas." (Student 10)

"Picking the topic makes speaking more fun." (Student 1)

This shows that autonomy enhances motivation and gives students a sense of ownership over their learning. Familiar topics also reduce the cognitive burden of generating ideas under pressure.

Preference for Relaxed Learning Environments

Most students favored activities that felt low-pressure, interactive, and engaging.

"Games make me more active and relaxed." (Student 3)

"I like quizzes because they're fun, not stressful." (Student 7)

"Outdoor class feels more comfortable than in the classroom." (Student 6)

Students' preferences reveal a desire for learning environments that minimize performance anxiety. Informal, interactive tasks foster greater involvement and reduce fear of failure.

DISCUSSION

This study set out to explore the English-speaking challenges faced by introverted learners and the strategies they employ to manage those challenges in an EFL senior high school context. Drawing upon observation, interviews, speaking assessments, and questionnaire data, the research offers a comprehensive understanding of the learners' psychological, social, and linguistic struggles in classroom communication, as well as their adaptive learning preferences. The findings revealed that introverted students often experience anxiety and hesitation when speaking in class, primarily due to fear of judgment, discomfort in group settings, and limited confidence in their verbal abilities. These learners tend to avoid participation in speaking tasks, struggle to express their ideas, and require more time to process and respond to prompts. However, despite these challenges, the study also uncovered proactive strategies employed by students, such as memorizing speaking texts, preparing content in advance, and relying on supportive classroom environments. They showed a preference for interactive yet low-pressure learning activities, including games and relaxed discussion formats, which helped to reduce their speaking anxiety and boost engagement.

These results align with and extend previous research. For instance, Farooqi (2021) and Erlina et al. (2023) similarly emphasized the role of psychological factors, particularly anxiety and fear of negative evaluation in suppressing introverted students' willingness to speak. Hardiyanti et al. (2021) and Khotimah and Saputri (2022) demonstrated how personality traits, particularly introversion, negatively correlate with oral performance in EFL contexts. However, unlike earlier studies that often-compared introverts and extroverts or applied quantitative designs, the current study adopted a purely qualitative lens focused solely on introverted learners. This methodological choice allowed for a deeper, more nuanced exploration of their internal experiences, including emotional barriers and coping behaviors that are often underrepresented in broader personality-based analyses. In addition, this study's findings reinforce several studies that have noted the effectiveness of motivational support and game-based strategies and digital tools in encouraging reluctant speakers to improve English language skills (Gusmuliana et al., 2021; Isma et al., 2022, 2024; Yudha & Mandasari, 2021). Yet, this research contributes further by situating those strategies within the context of students' introspective tendencies. It highlights that for introverted learners, speaking performance is closely linked not only to language proficiency but also to emotional safety and autonomy over learning content.

The implications of these findings are significant for language teachers, curriculum designers, and education policymakers. Teachers need to recognize that introverted students require more than just language input, they need psychologically safe spaces, time for preparation, and encouragement tailored to their personality traits. Designing instruction that includes optional individual tasks, reflective practices, and gradual speaking exposure may foster better participation. Moreover, allowing students to choose discussion topics or express themselves through memorized scripts can build a sense of control and confidence. Classroom culture must also promote mutual respect and reduce the fear of peer judgment to encourage more inclusive participation. Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. The sample was limited to ten students from a single class in one Indonesian high school, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. The personality assessment used for participant selection was not elaborated in psychometric detail, which limits interpretative precision. Additionally, the study did not account for the potential influence of

teacher personality, classroom dynamics, or cultural background on students' speaking behaviors. Future research could expand to larger and more diverse populations, integrate longitudinal tracking, and investigate how digital or blended learning environments affect introverted students' speaking development.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the English-speaking challenges and coping strategies of introverted learners in a senior high school EFL context. Through qualitative methods, including classroom observations, interviews, a speaking test, and questionnaires, the research revealed that introverted students face multidimensional barriers in speaking activities. These barriers include fear of negative judgment, discomfort in group interactions, difficulty verbalizing thoughts, and delayed processing of language input. Such challenges often lead to low participation and reduced confidence in classroom communication. Despite these difficulties, the findings also demonstrated that introverted students actively develop strategies to navigate their learning experiences. The most common strategies include preparing and memorizing texts before speaking tasks, managing their time through early preparation, and seeking supportive learning environments. Students reported that motivational feedback from teachers and peers, as well as game-based or relaxed activities, significantly enhanced their confidence and willingness to participate. These insights underscore the importance of teaching approaches that align with the psychological and social needs of introverted learners. The study contributes to the existing literature by providing a focused, in-depth look at introverted learners' experiences in speaking English, an area often overshadowed in broader personality or performance studies. It highlights the need for more inclusive, differentiated language instruction that empowers all types of learners, especially those who are less vocal but equally capable. Educators are encouraged to create classroom environments that are psychologically safe, flexible, and responsive to learner diversity, particularly in speaking activities where introverted students may otherwise remain silent. Future research is encouraged to explore similar themes in larger and more diverse settings to validate and expand upon these findings.

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