

## Assessing Speaking Skills in English Matriculation Classes: Challenges and Strategies

<sup>1</sup>Nurma Atalsa Sofansyah, <sup>2</sup>Siti Mafulah\*, <sup>3</sup>Agus Sholeh, <sup>4</sup>Maria Cholifah,  
<sup>5</sup>Siti Mutmainnah

<sup>1,2,3,4,5</sup>Universitas PGRI Kanjuruhan Malang  
Malang, Indonesia

[nurma.atalsa@gmail.com](mailto:nurma.atalsa@gmail.com), \*[siti\\_mafulah@unikama.ac.id](mailto:siti_mafulah@unikama.ac.id),  
[sholeh\\_agus@unikama.ac.id](mailto:sholeh_agus@unikama.ac.id), [maria\\_cholifah@unikama.ac.id](mailto:maria_cholifah@unikama.ac.id),  
[sitimutmainnah2510@gmail.com](mailto:sitimutmainnah2510@gmail.com)

**Abstract.** This research revealed two main issues regarding speaking assessment, that is students' low speaking confidence and low vocabulary mastery. These two issues hampered students in delivering their ideas fluently and do not speak well in the speaking assessment. To solve the problems, the researcher employed some strategies. This study aimed at describing the problems of the learners and the approaches used by the teacher in carrying out speaking tests in a matriculation class of MAN 1 Blitar. Qualitative descriptive approach with 34 students as subject, the data was collected by conducting class observation, conducting interview with English teacher and some students, and analysing students' speaking performance tasks. The result showed that some students were reluctant to speak because of fear of making mistakes, lack of self-confidence, and lack of vocabulary. The teacher used three strategies which are providing vocabulary support, conducting group discussion, and providing formative feedback to help students in doing speaking assessments. The result showed that some students were reluctant to speak because of fear of making mistakes, lack of self-confidence, and lack of vocabulary. The teacher used three strategies which are providing vocabulary support, conducting group discussion, and providing formative feedback to help students in doing speaking assessments. This research reveals the students' problems in speaking assessment and the teacher's strategy in conducting speaking assessments in matriculation class. The teacher's scaffolding strategy helps students in delivering ideas fluently and speaking well. The result demonstrates the importance of considering both effective and linguistic factors in conducting speaking assessment. The result might be used as the reference for English teacher to conduct better speaking assessment.

**Keywords:** Speaking Assessment; Matriculation Class; Student Confidence; Bilingual Education; Teacher Strategies

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author: Siti Mafulah, [siti\\_mafulah@unikama.ac.id](mailto:siti_mafulah@unikama.ac.id)

## Introduction

Speaking is very important in learning a language because it reflects the learners' ability to communicate and use the language in a meaningful manner (Lubis et al., 2024; Rana & Shaikh, 2024; Sybing, 2021). Among the four English skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, speaking is considered the most difficult part for the learners, particularly in academic or formal (Lubis et al., 2024; Pratiwi et al., 2020). As one of the language skills, speaking in the English language teaching (ELT) context is not only a product but also a complex process involving the psychological, social, and linguistic factors of the speakers. Hence, speaking proficiency should be assessed on the basis of the learners' speaking performance and the conditions under which the performance is produced (Huriyah, 2024; Jahrani & Listia, 2023; Moon & Grace Kim, 2024; Sybing, 2021).

English, as a foreign language, is taught at all levels of education in Indonesia. In senior high schools, English becomes more challenging for the learners, particularly in programs with higher exposure to English, such as bilingual (Saud et al., 2023; McCrae et al., 1998; Trigueros et al., 2024) or matriculation classes (Pratiwi et al., 2020), in which opportunities and experiences for academic and global communication are considered. As (Alim, 2023; Ayiz & Tauchid, 2025; Goodarzi & Namaziandost, 2025; Mcwilliam et al., 2025) point out, learners' speaking performance is frequently hindered by affective barriers such as anxiety and self-doubt (Hitches et al., 2022), particularly during formal assessments. Matriculation classes aim to bridge students' readiness for higher-level content delivery in English. However, the reality in many Indonesian classrooms indicates that students still face considerable difficulties in speaking, especially when assessed formally (Liu, 2024; Pratiwi et al., 2020; Saud et al., 2023). This situation poses a challenge for English teachers in conducting fair (Ayiz & Tauchid, 2025; Goodarzi & Namaziandost, 2025), effective (Naibaho, 2023), and meaningful speaking assessments (Huriyah, 2024; Rae & Cochrane, 2008). Therefore, teachers need to integrate confidence-building tasks and pre-task vocabulary scaffolding to enhance learners' oral production in classroom settings (Mafulah & Hariyanto, 2015; Mohammadi et al., 2024; Noyan et al., 2025; Putra et al., 2023).

In this context, the present study was conducted at MAN 1 Blitar, a prominent Islamic senior high school that implements a bilingual program for selected students. A matriculation class is arranged in the school, and in grade 11, the class is expected to develop the students' English proficiency through higher exposure and opportunities for English use. Despite the structured program and prepared teaching materials, students usually produce poor speaking tests. Initial classroom observation and informal discussions with the English teacher showed that the two major obstacles were lack of confidence and lack of vocabulary mastery. Speaking performance was mostly affected by these two factors. Most answers were limited with hesitations, lack of fluency, and little elaboration.

Lack of confidence in speaking emanates from the fear of mistakes, peers' judgment, and fear of speaking in a foreign language in front of others (Alim, 2023; Aubrey et al., 2020; Nety et al., 2020). In some cultures, speaking is taboo, and even a simple error may be considered a failure (Alim, 2023; Dalyono, 2024). As a result, students are usually silent instead of exposing their speaking

mistakes (Alim, 2023). On the other hand, lack of vocabulary hinders their ability to express ideas (Aubrey et al., 2020; Nety et al., 2020). Without adequate vocabulary, students are seldom able to expand their ideas, answer questions, or participate in interactive speaking tests (Mafulah et al., 2023, 2025; van Braak et al., 2021). Besides affecting performance, these problems also hinder language development. Lack of lexical resources and fear of negative evaluation are the two factors that most frequently accounted for students' avoidance of speaking activities (Körkkö et al., 2024; Moon & Grace Kim, 2024; Saud et al., 2023)

Furthermore, teacher should carry out speaking tests is challenging. The teacher should consider how to create a safe atmosphere, give enough input, and apply fair and flexible assessment criteria (Gao, 2025; Jong et al., 2025; Yin et al., 2024). The teacher is also supposed to use techniques that have both assessment and teaching purposes, making the speaking test one of the learning experiences. Knowing the problems and the appropriate strategies to apply are important in improving the speaking teaching and testing process (Franchisca et al., 2024)

Regarding the effectiveness of speaking and the obstacles in English speaking ability, some studies have been conducted as Pratiwi et al., (2020) that explored students' point of view on speaking in immersion program. The findings show negative perception on their English such as English is difficult and it is supported by the learning process in academic situation, moreover, their needs were how to increase their low self-confidence and poor speaking performance. Besides, study conducted by (Ayiz & Tauchid, 2025) show that peer teaching method is effective way in improving students' public speaking (pronunciation accuracy, vocabulary usage, and fluency). The finding also revealed that through peer teaching raises students' confidence levels and lowering speaking anxiety.

Moreover, Wang et al., (2024) experimenting the effect of speaking fluency and accuracy on students' emotional intelligence (EI), creative thinking(CT), and academic enthusiasm(AE). The findings show that high EI, CT, and AE contributed to the speaking ability, they improve their speaking performance. The reasons are high EI students can control their emotion so that they produce clear and fluent speaking, high CT students have better problem-solving, and high AE students have higher desire and engagement.

Based on the previous studies, study Pratiwi et al., (2020) students have negative perception on the speaking in academic situation, but the study dig the information before the students joining the immersion program. The result will be different if the perception survey is given during the program. Besides, teachers' point of view did not study so that it is needed to conduct present study. Moreover, students can improve their public speaking through peer teaching and speaking can be caused by emotional intelligence (EI), creative thinking (CT), and academic enthusiasm (AE). Motivation did not include in this study so that it is a need to be conducted in the present study whether it also affects to the speaking skill. Therefore, this study aimed at describing the problems of the learners in speaking and the strategies used by the teacher in carrying out speaking tests in a matriculation class of MAN 1 Blitar as the following research questions:

1. What challenges do the students face in speaking during the matriculation

class?

2. What strategies does the teacher use to help students overcome these speaking challenges?

### **Method**

This research used descriptive qualitative research design in order to explore the problems faced by students toward speaking assessment and the strategy used by teacher in conducting speaking assessment in English matriculation class. This is one of the appropriate research designs to reveal what happened in the classroom since researchers can observe phenomenon in the context of real situation or social setting and interpret meaning of phenomenon based on the participant's experience.

The research was conducted at MAN 1 Blitar. This school is one of Islamic senior high schools in East Java, Indonesia. The school implements bilingual programs for some students. This study took 11th grader science class bilingual program as the objective since this class included in the English matriculation program. This program allows students to have more exposure in learning English especially speaking skill.

The participants in this research were 34 students of 11th grader science class bilingual program and English teacher who is responsible for English matriculation class. The research participants selected by using purposive sampling where the participants were selected based on the relevancy of the research problems and the position of the participant to assess speaking skill in English matriculation class. By using this sampling technique, researchers can select information-rich cases for an in-depth study of a phenomenon.

The types of data used in this research are primary and secondary data. Primary data consists of the results of interviews with school community data sources consisting of the principal, deputy curriculum 4 subject teachers, secondary data obtained from documentation studies of learning plans (teaching modules) and assessment data.

Instrument used in this study was observation and interview. Observation was done to find out the students' speaking fluency, hesitation, vocabulary used, and scaffolding techniques applied by the teacher. Observation guide was applied to focus the researcher's attention on the teacher's strategy in assessing speaking skill. In addition, a semi-structured interview was done with the English teacher and six students. Teacher was interviewed to get information about the problems and the strategies used in assessing students' speaking. The other six students were interviewed to obtain students' experience in facing problems during speaking tasks, students' perception about problems, and students' feeling during speaking tasks.

The thematic approach was applied to analyze the data. According to Braun and Clarke (2021), the thematic approach involves coding, categorizing, and identifying patterns or theme from the data. This approach is one of the most appropriate ways to analyze qualitative data to organize the rich data into coherent findings which reflect the participants' realities. In considering the ethical aspects by obtaining permission from the research participants to conduct the research. All of participants gave informed consent and their names and identity were kept confidential.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **Challenges on speaking during the matriculation class faced by the students of MAN 1 Blitar**

The findings of this research revealed information related to the challenges and strategies conducted by the teacher in carrying out speaking assessments of the English matriculation class for grade 11 in MAN 1 Blitar. Based on the result of classroom observation, interviews with the teacher and some students, and analyses of the documents. There were two emerging challenges in conducting speaking assessments. First, there was low confidence of students in conducting speaking tests. Second, there was lack of mastery of vocabulary. Meanwhile, I am the teacher who conducted some strategies, namely vocabulary scaffolding, group discussion and peer rehearsal, and formative feedback. These results were presented as follows.

#### **a. Low Students' Confidence in Speaking Performance**

The results of data analysis revealed that most of the students were anxious and did not have confidence when doing speaking assessments. The results of classroom observations showed that the students were often hesitant, and stalls did not make eye contact, whispered or did not speak at all. All of those behaviors were signs of stress or low confidence, which prevented them from speaking in English. Also, data obtained from student interviews also revealed similar results. Some students stated that they were afraid of making mistakes, looking stupid, being laughed at, or losing face in front of their classmates. Students also stated that they were afraid if I could see that they could not speak English. One of the students said:

"I'm afraid my friends will laugh if I pronounce the word incorrectly. That's why I choose to be silent." (S2)

"Even though I have something to say, when you call me, my mind goes blank." (S6)

This phenomenon supported Mcwilliam et al., (2025)' study that stated that foreign language classroom anxiety is a strong predictor of reduced oral performance. Students were likely to experience performance anxiety when they were tested orally or required to give presentations. This was why they found it difficult to retrieve vocabulary (Green, 2020.), formulate grammatically accurate sentences (Sahiruddin, 2018), and speak fluently (Ayiz & Tauchid, 2025). In light of these results, most of the students showed less confidence when they were called to answer questions. This also happened during classroom observation. The students were more likely to be afraid of being tested one by one in speaking or oral tests compared to speaking in groups or informal conversations. This result support Putra et al., (2023)'s finding that stated learning outside classroom enhance students' ability. In addition, Alim (2023) also found, students' problem in speaking is lack of confident, moreover, the speaking is in public (Ayiz & Tauchid, 2025). The results were in line with the teacher's reflection; some students were not usually reluctant to answer questions by writing. On the contrary, when it was tested by speaking, they were often frozen out.

“Even some of the best students, they cannot speak or remain silent,” (T)

This result depicted how the students were not confident in speaking; this could be cause of lack of vocabulary.

### **b. Lack of Mastery of Vocabulary**

This study also identified the second major challenge—that is, the students’ lack of mastery of vocabulary. When they were given speaking tasks, the students found it difficult to find the words in order to express their ideas. Many students kept on resorting to the medium of Indonesian. This is in line with (Gablasova, 2015) that stated L1 influences the way of thinking. Besides, they also resorted to overly general words. For example, in answering about the problem of pollution, instead of saying “pollution,” almost all students used “bad air” or “dirty air” over and over again. This condition was also supported by the results of document analysis of speaking tests. Most students got low scores in the aspects of lexical resource and coherence. Their answers were always short, repeated, and too general without any description or explanation. From the rubric, most of the students were able to express their ideas just sufficiently, but they were not sufficient in elaborating or using precise words. This barrier was also found by (Nety et al., 2020); students cannot express idea because of lack of vocabulary.

The lack of lexical resources made it difficult for the students to elaborate, answer follow-up questions, or make extended discourse. In this way, the students were unable to meet the criteria of successful speaking performance, such as fluency, clarity, and organization (Jahrani & Listia, 2023; Moon & Grace Kim, 2024; Pratiwi et al., 2020)

“They know words if we learn them in class. But at the test time, they suddenly forget. It’s like they are having a panic attack and lose control of their memory.” (T)

### **Teacher strategies to help students overcome the challenges on speaking during the matriculation class faced by the students of MAN 1 Blitar**

As a response to low students’ confidence and low mastery of vocabulary in speaking performance, I conducted some strategies in order to make the students more confident and better in vocabulary mastery for speaking assessments. These strategies were vocabulary scaffolding, group discussion and peer rehearsal, and formative feedback.

#### **a. Vocabulary Scaffolding**

Before carrying out speaking tests, students were given a list of relevant words related to the topic of speaking tests, including key words, new words, sample phrases, and sentence starters. Then, they have to review vocabulary in the class. For example, she conducted a short quiz or delivered vocabulary through games. In the introduction of the article, this strategy was designed so the students could use the words they already had when they were taking the test. this strategy is good for students to be ready in speaking. This is in line with (Jiang et al., 2020; Z. Wang et al., 2024) that found teacher should provide scaffolding for the students. Besides, this strategy also gave positive results. Students reported that they were able to recall the words and speak (without pauses) by seeing the list

first. This advantages similar to (Wulandari, 2021) that found using scaffold and fun activities help students to remember the vocabulary.

“When I saw the vocabulary first, I was able to think of the ideas. I could remember the words and speak more.” (S4)

From the students’ statement, it can be inferred that by seeing the list of vocabulary before her turn to speak can raise the ideas of what the topic, elaborate the word into the sequence of her speaking topic.

### **b. Group Discussion and Peer Rehearsal**

Another strategy to increase the students’ confidence in speaking was group discussion and peer rehearsal. To make the students more relaxed and less stressed when facing speaking assessments. The students were asked to discuss speaking tasks in groups or pairs. Test prompt was distributed to the students and let the students discuss in groups or pairs. This strategy gave the students the chance to practice fluency speaking and helped them build confidence and self-esteem. This findings is in line with (Hitches et al., 2022) that stated when the students are confident, they will easily master the lesson. Moreover, this raise students self- esteem or self- regulated learning will raise with this strategy (Andriani et al., 2024), and self-awareness through peer teaching (Ayiz & Tauchid, 2025)

Based on classroom observations carried out by the researcher, the students seemed to be more relaxed and active in practicing speaking in groups than when they were tested in front of the class. They were also confident in speaking since they had already practiced speaking in groups. The findings were in line with the stipulation (Gherghel et al., 2023) that collaborative speaking tasks would not only develop language production but also build a safer space for students to speak. In addition, through asking students working in group also raise teacher-students’ interaction. Teacher-students interaction make students engage in the classroom (Mafulah et al., 2023)

### **c. Formative Feedback**

A strategy to help the students know their strengths and weaknesses in the speaking performance was giving formative feedback. After each speaking task, I provided the students with constructive feedback or comments on the aspects of vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, fluency, and idea development. This feedback was not only about scoring but also about what students had done well. I also provided remediation or suggestion comments. As recommended by (Zhang & Hyland, 2018), formative assessment with supportive feedback will foster learner confidence and motivation. In the results of the interview, the students stated that they were happy (and willing to try) with such a form of assessment.

“When you tell me what I did right, I feel proud. It gives me the motivation to do better,” (S3)

There was evidence of both internal and external barriers in the students. The internal barrier was low confidence in speaking performance, and the external barrier was limited mastery of vocabulary. However, the strategies conducted by the teacher before, during, and after the speaking assessments attained positive results (Jiang et al., 2020). The barriers that the students faced in speaking were reduced, although there were still some speaking difficulties to some extent. The

combination of vocabulary scaffolding, peer support, and feedback encouraged the students to be more active and confident in speaking (Huriyah, 2024; Jahrani & Listia, 2023; Pratiwi et al., 2020). In this way, speaking assessments were carried out successfully. The results of the research also presented that affective and linguistic dimensions were crucial in speaking instruction and assessment, especially in EFL contexts in Indonesia

The study provides several implications for language teachers, curriculum developers, and school administrator, especially in schools which offer matriculation or bilingual programs. Language teachers are advised to incorporate activities which help to develop student confidence, such as drama, role-play, storytelling, and group presentation. This activity is low stake and safe. The students will have a chance to practice and to gain speaking confidence before speaking tests.

Second, vocabulary development must not be abandoned in speaking instruction. Many activities can be designed to promote vocabulary expansion. Games, collocation, and speaking warm-up are some of the activities that can be done to develop vocabulary. Formative assessment needs to be institutionalized. Formative assessment can be done in the form of feedback session, reflective journal, and peer review. It helps students in tracking and improving their speaking performance. Training for teachers needs to focus on affective management in speaking classes. Language teachers should be familiar with learner anxiety, how to build a supportive classroom culture, and how to recognize students' emotional discomfort during assessment.

## Conclusion

Based on the findings and discussion, challenges and approaches in speaking assessment in an English matriculation grade XI class of 34 students at MAN 1 Blitar have been successfully investigated. Specifically, two of the main difficulties that prevented students from performing exceptionally well in speaking assessments were highlighted, namely lack of self-confidence and lack of mastery of vocabulary. These hampered the fluency, coherence and general quality of their spoken output in the tests, particularly in monologues and semi-structured dialogues. Being in a bilingual program with significant exposure to English, the students also shared some common symptoms of foreign language anxiety, including fear of making mistakes and hesitation, and that their speaking performance was not sufficiently lexicalized, resulting in speech being below the required standard. Such findings concur with a number of recent studies that have explored the complex interplay of affective and linguistic factors in L2 speaking performance.

Furthermore, the teacher employed effective classroom strategies such as pre-task vocabulary scaffolding, group rehearsals and formative feedback that improved students' participation in speaking and their gradual speaking success. These strategies were well in line with principles of formative assessment and learner-centred instruction in that they helped to prioritize learners' growth, affective support, and meaningfulness of language use. The students became increasingly engaged, confident and able to produce more fluent and structured speech over time, although there was still room for further growth. Overall, the study showed that speaking assessment should consider both cognitive and



affective aspects in speaking tests design. Teachers cannot think of what students know, but also of how they feel when performing. By providing scaffolds, reducing test anxiety and giving formative feedback, speaking assessment can become a meaningful learning experience rather than a stressful performance. Pedagogically, this study shows that English teachers, especially those in preparatory or bilingual programmes, should design task types and assessment procedures that reflect real-world communication, offer extensive practice, and build learners' speaking confidence.

Lastly, vocabulary instruction should be integrated into speaking tasks, rather than taught as a separate skill, so that learners can learn and apply new lexis in contexts. Finally, despite its valuable insights, the study was limited to one class in one school. In future research, the same issues could be explored across types of schools, grades, and regions, using quantitative tracking of speaking scores to check for long-term development of speaking competence. Likewise, research could be done on how gender, personality, or learner beliefs impact speaking performance in the assessment situation.

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