

Exploring Factors Contributing to Speech Delay and the Use of Effective Strategies in An Indonesian Adolescent EFL Learner: A Case Study

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Abstract

This qualitative case study explores the factors that influence speech delay and selective communicative engagement in a 13-year-old Indonesian teenager who is learning English as a foreign language (EFL). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and naturalistic observations, then analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2019) thematic analysis. Findings indicate that emotional anxiety, limited parental interaction, and minimal social exposure significantly affect the participant's verbal fluency and self-confidence. Despite these challenges, the adolescent demonstrated adaptive strategies such as interest-based discussions, independent speaking practice, and selective interaction with patient conversation partners. These strategies align with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis and the Oxford Social-Affective Strategy Theory, highlighting the vital role of emotional comfort and motivation in supporting language development. This study contributes to understanding how affective and environmental factors interact in adolescent speech delays and emphasizes the importance of creating a supportive and interest-driven learning environment in the context of learning English as a foreign language (EFL)

Keywords: *Affective factors, communicative engagement, English as a foreign language (EFL) learners, interest-based learning, speech delay*

Introduction

Speech and language development play an important role in shaping a person's cognitive, social, and academic abilities. Language skills not only serve as a means of communication but also play a role in concept formation, emotional regulation, and social interaction. However, in reality, some individuals experience obstacles in language acquisition, known as speech delay. Speech delay is a condition of delayed receptive and expressive language development without any obvious neurological or sensory disorders (McLaughlin, 2011). This condition requires serious attention because it can have a long-term impact on children's literacy skills, self-confidence, and academic success NS. (2023)

Speech delay is multifactorial and cannot be viewed as a linguistic disorder alone. According to Sunderajan and Kanhere. (2019), biological factors such as hearing impairment, low birth weight, history of asphyxia, and certain neurological conditions can contribute to speech delay. However, environmental factors, especially language stimulation and social interaction at home, also have a significant influence on language development. This is in line with the findings of Logrieco et al. (2024), which show that from the age of three months, early communication behaviors such as eye contact and gestures are important indicators of subsequent linguistic development. Although these difficulties often emerge in early childhood, their impact can persist into adolescence, affecting learners' confidence and participation in classroom communication.

In addition to biological and environmental factors, family support also plays a crucial role in language acquisition. Zuccarini et al. (2020) emphasize that interactive activities such as dialogic book reading and responsive communication can accelerate the expressive language development of learners who are classified as late talkers. Dunst et al. (2016) add that interest-based learning environments can increase learners' involvement in the communication process. When learners engage in activities that match their interests, the frequency of interaction increases, which ultimately enriches their vocabulary and language structure.

Social and emotional aspects also play an important role in speech development. Some individuals with speech delays tend to speak only in certain situations or on certain topics that they find interesting or comfortable. This phenomenon is related to social-cognitive abilities such as Theory of Mind and emotional regulation (Abbot-Smith et al., 2023). This condition shows that even though their linguistic abilities are adequate, their use is greatly influenced by affective factors and the context of communication. In some cases, this behavior even resembles the symptoms of selective mutism, a condition in which individuals can speak but choose to remain silent in certain situations (Driessen et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, individuals with speech delay often develop specific communication strategies to adapt to their limitations. For example, they choose familiar conversation partners, talk about topics they like, or use nonverbal means to maintain smooth communication. This shows that they apply various strategies to overcome their speech

difficulties. Oxford (1990) categorizes language learning strategies into three types, namely cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, and social-affective strategies. These strategies can be used to understand how individuals with speech delay adapt and strive to develop their communication skills. In the context of learning English as a foreign language (EFL), the challenges faced by adolescents with speech delays become more complex. Not only do they have limitations in their first language, but they also face anxiety when having to use English in an academic environment. In Indonesia, where EFL learning emphasizes speaking skills, this condition often makes students with speech delay appear passive or less confident. Therefore, understanding the factors that cause speech delay and the strategies used to overcome it is very important so that educators and parents can provide appropriate support.

However, to date, most research on speech delay has focused on early childhood and has been conducted in a clinical or speech therapy context. Very few studies have examined cases in adolescents, especially in the context of foreign language learning. In addition, research that simultaneously examines the causal factors and strategies used by individuals with speech delay is also limited. This gap has led to a research gap in understanding how adolescents with speech delay face communicative challenges in the learning environment. Based on this gap, this study focuses on two main aspects, namely factors that influence the occurrence of speech delay in adolescents learning EFL, and strategies used by speech delayers in overcoming daily communication challenges. Through a qualitative case study approach, this study is expected to provide an in-depth understanding of the interaction between these two aspects and contribute to the development of more adaptive communication and learning strategies in the Indonesian educational context. Accordingly, here are the research questions: 1) What factors influence the speech delay of the adolescent EFL learner in this study? Dan 2) What strategies does the speech-delayed adolescent use to cope with communication and language learning challenges?

Literature Review

Speech delay is one of the most common language development disorders in childhood and can persist into adolescence. This condition is characterized by a delay in the individual's achievement of expressive and receptive language skills according to their age, although cognitive, sensory, and emotional aspects may develop typically. According to the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (2023), speech delay must be distinguished from broader language disorders and from selective mutism (SM), a condition in which individuals are capable of speaking but choose to remain silent in certain social contexts. This distinction is crucial because intervention strategies differ depending on the underlying causes and communicative context (McLaughlin MR, 2011).

While speech delay is often identified during early childhood, many adolescents continue to experience its impact, particularly in academic and social communication. Persistent speech delay in adolescence can influence language learning, self-confidence, and classroom engagement. A number of studies highlight that speech delay results from a complex interaction of biological, environmental, and psychological factors. Biologically, hearing impairments, premature birth, and neurological factors have been shown to contribute to language development delays (McLaughlin, 2011). However,

biological explanations alone are insufficient. Socioeconomic conditions and parental education also influence adolescents' language skills through the quality of language stimulation at home. Research in Indonesia has shown that parental involvement and daily communication habits are key predictors of language development, and that parent-based interventions significantly improve vocabulary and expressive abilities (Goodwin Cartwright BM, 2024; Ji et al., 2022; Rosdiana, 2024; Frelinger et al, 2023).

In adolescents, the implications of speech delay extend beyond language development, affecting both academic performance and social competence. Longitudinal research by Lewis et al. (2015) found that teenagers with unresolved speech delay often show lower reading comprehension and written expression skills, impacting their overall academic achievement. Similarly, Ek et al. (2012) reported that adolescents with speech and language impairments exhibit ongoing social communication difficulties and reduced participation in classroom interactions.

In the Indonesian context, language difficulties among adolescents are closely related to EFL learning challenges. Zahro. (2024) identified selective mutism behavior in a junior high school student, finding that anxiety and fear of making mistakes led to verbal withdrawal during speaking activities. Rif'atul et al. (2023) also found a significant relationship between self-confidence and speaking anxiety among seventh-grade students; low self-confidence increased students' tendency to remain silent in classroom communication.

Psychological and emotional factors also play an important role in speech delays in adolescents. The American Speech Language Hearing Association (2023) and Renk et al. (2025) identify selective mutism as a condition that frequently overlaps with mild speech delays, where social anxiety becomes a major barrier to communication. Pereira et al. (2023) emphasize that this barrier is not caused by linguistic inability but by emotional reactions to stressful social situations. In Indonesia, Fajarwatiningtyas. (2025) highlighted how cultural norms emphasizing politeness and quietness can exacerbate silent behavior among adolescents, often misinterpreted as shyness rather than communicative difficulty.

Recent studies also demonstrate a strong relationship between motivation, personal interests, and communicative engagement. Dunst et al. (2016) introduced the concept of interest-based learning, in which activities tailored to learners' interests increase verbal participation and social interaction. When adolescents engage with enjoyable and personally relevant topics, their emotional barriers are lowered, leading to more active communication. This aligns with Jannah et al. (2024), who found that interest-based activities such as storytelling can enhance communication in Indonesian learners with speech delay.

Previous studies have consistently shown that speech delay is multifactorial, involving interactions between biological, environmental, and socio-emotional dimensions. Sunderajan and Kanhere (2019) identified biological factors such as hearing impairment, low birth weight, history of asphyxia, and certain neurological conditions. However, environmental factors, particularly the amount of language stimulation and social interaction at home, also have a significant impact on children's communication development. Similarly, Logrieco et al. (2024) emphasize that early communicative

behaviors such as eye contact and gestures, which can be observed from the age of three months, are strong predictors of later linguistic competence. In addition to biological and environmental aspects, family support and motivation are equally important. Zuccarini et al. (2020) highlight that responsive parent-child interactions and dialogic reading activities can accelerate expressive language growth in children who are late talkers. Furthermore, Dunst et al. (2016) show that interest-based learning, where activities are tailored to the personal interests of learners, encourages higher verbal participation and increases the frequency of interaction, which in turn enriches vocabulary and linguistic structure.

Moreover, social-emotional aspects are essential in understanding speech delay. Some individuals with speech delay exhibit selective communicative engagement, communicating only in certain contexts or on topics that feel emotionally safe or interesting. Abbot-Smith et al. (2023) explain that this behavior relates to social-cognitive abilities such as Theory of Mind and emotional regulation. Adolescents may have adequate linguistic abilities, but their communicative performance is influenced by affective and contextual factors. Overall, these findings suggest that speech delay involves a dynamic interaction between biological, environmental, and emotional dimensions. This holistic understanding is essential for designing interventions and learning strategies that are responsive to the individual needs and socio-cultural contexts of learners.

Various strategies have been developed to support students with speech delays. Interest-based learning has been shown to reduce affective barriers and increase verbal engagement by incorporating topics that students enjoy (Dunst et al., 2016). Parental responsiveness is also a critical factor, as a warm and supportive communication environment can increase students' willingness to participate (Alper et al., 2021; Levickis et al., 2023). Furthermore, culturally responsive approaches in the Indonesian EFL context, such as integrating traditional games, storytelling, and local cultural elements, can increase emotional comfort and verbal confidence (Fajarwatiningtyas, 2023; Jannah, 2024). Overall, these findings suggest that effective interventions for speech delay should combine interest-based learning, parental responsiveness, and culturally contextual strategies to address both the linguistic and affective dimensions of communication.

Method

This study used a qualitative approach with a single case study design. This design was chosen because it is most suitable for exploring and understanding in depth the phenomena of speech delay and selective communicative engagement in a child in a real-life context. (Creswell, 2018). This approach focuses on describing the factors that influence speech delay while explaining how topics that match the child's interests can increase their communicative participation. Case studies were chosen because they provide a holistic and contextual understanding of unique individual experiences without the aim of generalization (Yin, 2014).

This study was conducted in Yosodadi, Metro Timur District, Lampung Province. This location was chosen considering its accessibility and the researcher's close relationship

with the participants, so that data collection could take place naturally and openly. The main participant in this study, referred to as participant F, was a 13-year-old with speech delay and selective communicative engagement. Participant F tended to show limited verbal expression in certain social contexts but became more communicative when discussing topics that interested him. This participant was deliberately chosen as a single case because his condition closely represents the focus of this study and provides meaningful insights into how topics based on interest and emotional comfort influence communicative engagement.

This study used semi-structured interviews, which were conducted primarily with adolescent participants to explore their experiences, perceptions, and challenges related to communication and language learning. In addition, limited input was obtained from parents to provide contextual triangulation, ensuring data credibility and a more comprehensive understanding of the participants' communication background. The semi-structured format allowed researchers to explore emerging themes while maintaining flexibility (Cohen, 2018)

To support this process, several tools were developed, including a semi-structured interview guide adapted from previous studies on speech delay (McLaughlin, 2011) and selective communicative engagement (Renk et al., 2025), as well as an observation checklist designed to record nonverbal indicators such as gestures, facial expressions, and pauses during speech. Additional supporting tools, such as smartphone recorders (with parental consent), notebooks for field notes, and laptops for data transcription and thematic organization, were also used.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2019). This method emphasizes the identification of patterns of meaning or themes from the results of interviews, observations, and documentation. The analysis process included thorough reading of the data, initial coding, grouping codes into themes, and reviewing to ensure that the resulting themes are consistent with the data obtained from the field. Each theme that is successfully formed is then interpreted to explain the relationship between the factors that cause speech delay and the type of communicative engagement of the subject.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

This chapter presents the findings derived from the thematic analysis of the participants' interview data and provides a comprehensive discussion that integrates the results with relevant theories and previous research. The findings are divided into two main categories in accordance with the research questions:

- (1) the factors influencing the participant's speech delay, and
- (2) the strategies employed by the participant to cope with communication and language learning challenges.

Table 1. Factors Influencing Speech Delay

Theme / Code	Sample Excerpt (Indonesian)	Sample Excerpt (English Translation)
Biological and Emotional Factors	<i>"Takut salah... kadang diem dulu, mikir." / "Dulu kesel, sekarang udah biasa."</i>	"Afraid of making mistakes... sometimes I stay silent first, think." / "I used to get frustrated, but now I'm used to it."
Environmental and Family Support Factors	<i>"Ibu jauh... kerja di luar negeri." / "Bapak kadang bantu, pas kerja." / "Gak ada temen main."</i>	"My mom works abroad." / "My father helps me sometimes, when working." / "I don't have friends to play with."
Social-Communicative Engagement Patterns	<i>"Kalau rame banget aku diem aja, berisik." / "Lebih suka yang tenang, biar bisa mikir dulu." / "Kalau orangnya sabar, aku bisa lancar."</i>	"If it's too noisy, I stay quiet." / "I prefer calm situations, so I can think first." / "If the person is patient, I can speak fluently."

As shown in Table 1, three main themes emerged as the dominant factors contributing to the participant's speech delay: "emotional insecurity, limited environmental and familial support, and selective communicative engagement.

Emotionally, participants showed hesitation and anxiety when speaking, especially in unfamiliar or evaluative situations. The statement "*Takut salah... kadang diem dulu, mikir*" (Afraid of making mistakes... sometimes I stay silent first, think) reflects a fear of failure and a tendency to monitor oneself. This behavior is very much in line with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982), which states that anxiety and low self-confidence act as psychological barriers that hinder the effective processing of linguistic input. Over time, participants developed partial emotional adaptation, as indicated by "*Dulu kesel, sekarang udah biasa*" (I used to get frustrated, but now I'm used to it), showing resilience but residual self-consciousness in verbal contexts.

The environmental and family context also plays a crucial role. The participant's mother works abroad, and daily interaction with the father is limited to specific tasks. This situation, expressed in the sentence "*Ibu jauh... kerja di luar negeri*" (My mother works abroad), indicates a lack of consistent language stimulation at home. This finding supports Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), which emphasizes that language develops through meaningful social interaction. The lack of parental support in the learning process reduces opportunities for dialogic learning, thereby slowing verbal progress.

Socially, the participant's communication patterns are selective. She prefers to speak in quiet and supportive environments and avoids group or noisy environments, saying,

“*Kalau rame banget aku diem aja, berisik*” (If it’s too noisy, I stay quiet). This behavior reflects the characteristics of selective mutism, in which emotional discomfort suppresses verbal output despite linguistic ability (Abbot-Smith et al., 2023; Renk et al., 2025). Overall, these themes indicate that the participants' speech delays result from the interplay of emotional tension, social isolation, and environmental constraints, rather than purely linguistic deficits.

Table 2. Strategies to Cope with Communication and Language Learning Challenges

Theme / Code	Sample Excerpt (Indonesian)	Sample Excerpt (English Translation)
Interest-Based and Affective Strategies	“ <i>Main bola suka, sering.</i> ” / “ <i>Seneng kalo dibales chat.</i> ”	“I like playing soccer, often.” / “I’m happy when my chat gets a reply.”
Adaptive Communication Strategies	“ <i>Kadang latihan ngomong depan kaca.</i> ” / “ <i>Diam dulu, mikir, terus lanjut lagi.</i> ” / “ <i>Kalau orangnya sabar, aku bisa lancar.</i> ”	“Sometimes I practice speaking in front of the mirror.” / “I pause first, think, then continue speaking.” / “If the person is patient, I can speak smoothly.”

Table 2 reveals two main strategies used by participants to manage their speech and communication challenges: interest-based affective engagement and adaptive self-regulation.

The first strategy emphasizes emotional engagement as a facilitator of speech fluency. The participant's statement “*Main bola suka, sering*” (I like playing football, often) indicates that when discussing enjoyable topics, he speaks more confidently and spontaneously. Similarly, “*Seneng kalo dibales chat*” (I’m happy when my chat gets a reply) highlights the motivational power of social recognition. These findings are in line with Dunst et al. (2016) who argue that interest-based learning reduces anxiety and encourages verbal participation by associating communication with pleasure rather than pressure.

The second strategy, adaptive communication behavior, demonstrates participants' self-awareness and metacognitive control. Practicing alone in front of a mirror and pausing before speaking illustrate the Oxford (1990) metacognitive and socio-affective strategies, in which learners consciously monitor, plan, and adjust their communicative behavior. His preference for patient conversation partners (“*Kalau orangnya sabar, aku bisa lancar*”) reflects emotional intelligence, which enables him to manage stress and choose an environment that is supportive and conducive to speech production.

Discussion

This section discusses how the findings relate to previous studies and theoretical frameworks. The findings of this study indicate that speech delay and selective communicative engagement in participants cannot be separated from the interaction



between psychological, environmental, and affective factors. Unlike most previous studies that focused on childhood, this case shows that such problems can continue into adolescence, especially when the emotional and social context is not supportive.

In the context of learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in Indonesia, where speaking is often emphasized as a key skill, adolescents with speech delays may experience higher anxiety due to fear of negative judgment. This fear limits their willingness to speak, as also explained by Rif'atul (2023) in her study on self-confidence and speaking anxiety. In addition, the participants' limited exposure to interactive communication at home reinforces their dependence on specific contexts or trusted individuals, in line with the Interactionist view that language develops through socially mediated experiences.

From a pedagogical perspective, these results show that an interest-based and emotionally supportive learning environment can significantly help students with speech difficulties. Teachers are encouraged to integrate students' personal interests, such as sports, music, or visual media, into speaking tasks to reduce affective barriers. Additionally, fostering patient, empathetic, and responsive classroom interactions can enhance communicative confidence among students with similar challenges.

Finally, participants' adaptive behaviors highlight the importance of learner autonomy and emotional resilience. Self-initiated practices, such as mirror exercises and strategic pauses, show that even learners with communication limitations can develop their own mechanisms for managing speech difficulties. These findings align with the broader perspective of social-emotional strategy theory (Oxford, 1990), which emphasizes that successful communication is not only linguistic but also emotional and strategic.

Conclusion

This study concludes that speech delays in adolescents are influenced by emotional anxiety, limited parental interaction, and a preference for quiet social contexts, which together affect their engagement in selective communication. Despite facing these challenges, they demonstrate resilience through adaptive strategies such as interest-based communication, independent practice, and emotional regulation, which are consistent with Affective Filter Theory and Social-Affective Strategies. These findings highlight the importance of supportive, interest-based learning environments to boost the confidence of students with speech delays. Future studies are recommended to incorporate multiple perspectives from parents, teachers, and peers to provide a more holistic understanding of how environmental and emotional factors interact in speech development.

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