



SPEAKING DIFFICULTIES IN ENGLISH DEBATING PRACTICES FOR DEBATING COMPETITION: STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the speaking difficulties encountered by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners preparing for the national round of National University Debating Championship (NUDC) 2025, after passing on the regional round. Employing a qualitative approach, the research analyzed data from observation notes and semi-structured interviews with four debaters from Institut Seni Budaya Indonesia Aceh. The analysis focused on four key themes: fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical accuracy, and pronunciation. Findings indicate that these speaking difficulties function as significant barriers that dictate debating performance. Fluency and coherence emerged as foundational requirements; without them, students experienced cognitive overload and total withdrawal. Lexical gaps triggered fragmented performances where logical depth was undermined by low processing speed. While grammatical accuracy was treated pragmatically, it remained essential for maintaining an intelligibility ceiling. Furthermore, pronunciation acted as a critical persuasion driver, allowing speakers to project authority and mask other linguistic weaknesses. The study concludes that the transition from a survivalist speaker to a strategic debater is only possible when learners move past low thresholds in these four categories. These results suggest that pedagogical interventions should focus on linguistic automaticity and cognitive load management to equip EFL learners for high-pressure competitive debating environments.

Keywords: speaking difficulties, students' perspective, English debating, NUDC

A. INTRODUCTION

Speech production is a complex and multifaceted skill that necessitates communicative competence and a range of interrelated cognitive processes to effectively convey form, structure, and meaning in various communicative contexts (Goh & Burns, 2012 in Chou, 2024). In academic settings, speaking is considered to be the most crucial ability that influences achieving language communication goals (Laililajri et al., 2025). Clear and persuasive communication is vital, students frequently encounter substantial challenges in articulating their ideas in a coherent and convincing manner (Ramdhano et al., 2025). This issue becomes particularly known in competitive environments such as English debating, where participants are required to present their arguments in real time under significant pressure. The ability to



deliver structured, coherent arguments demands not only a high level of language proficiency but also the capacity for critical thinking and the agility to respond swiftly to opposing viewpoints.

In English debating practices, the speaking challenges faced by participants are compounded by the need to navigate multiple layers of communication. In addition to maintaining fluency, which allows for the smooth delivery of ideas without unnecessary pauses, debaters must ensure that their arguments are logically structured and accessible to their audience. Effective debaters must also possess a broad lexical resource and employ complex sentence structures to support their claims, which necessitates a high level of grammatical accuracy. These demands make debating a particularly arduous task for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, who may already struggle with foundational language skills.

Fluency and coherence are two of the most crucial components of successful speech production in a debate (Tsunemoto & Trofimovich, 2024). Fluency refers to the smoothness of speech and the ability to convey ideas without hesitation or unnatural pauses. Coherence, however, pertains to the logical flow of ideas, ensuring that each argument is clearly connected to the next and is easy for the audience to follow. These elements are deeply intertwined; fluency impacts the clarity and organization of ideas, while coherence ensures that speech remains structured and logically consistent. Both are essential for delivering arguments effectively and persuasively (González Reséndez, 2024).

In addition to fluency and coherence, the use of an extensive lexical resource is equally important in debating. Lexical resource refers to the variety and appropriateness of the vocabulary used to express ideas. In competitive debates, the ability to select the right words at the right moment is critical for presenting arguments with authority and precision (Watterson, 2023). However, for many EFL learners, the limited range of vocabulary presents a significant obstacle, often resulting in hesitation or difficulties in expressing complex ideas or responding effectively to opponents. The struggle to find the appropriate word can disrupt the flow of the debate, undermining the effectiveness of the argument.



Grammatical accuracy also plays a vital role in speech production during debates. While fluency may allow for rapid speech, grammatical errors can detract from the clarity and impact of the speaker's message. In the fast-paced environment of a debate, where participants are expected to think and respond on the spot, maintaining grammatical accuracy becomes a challenging task (Ceneciro et al., 2023). Even minor errors in syntax or morphology can lead to misunderstandings, weakening the overall persuasiveness of the argument. The complexity of language structures often encountered in debates further exacerbates the difficulty of achieving grammatical accuracy under time constraints.

Pronunciation is another critical aspect that impacts speech production in debates. While emphasis in language education is often placed on grammar and vocabulary, pronunciation remains a fundamental component of effective communication (Chuyên & Nuong, 2023). Mispronounced words can lead to confusion and misunderstanding, which diminishes the credibility of the speaker. For many EFL learners, pronunciation difficulties contribute significantly to anxiety during debates, as they may fear being misunderstood or judged for their accent. These pronunciation challenges can undermine confidence, further hindering the speaker's ability to perform effectively in high-pressure debate settings.

To address these challenges, students in English debating competitions often rely on specific strategies to overcome their speaking difficulties. Some previous studies focused on intensive vocabulary building related to motion words and grammar practice (Wariyati et al., 2023), while others engage in fluency exercises such as impromptu speaking or mock debates (Alisoy & Oglu, 2024). These strategies are typically tailored to the individual needs of the students and their specific areas of weakness. Additionally, some learners actively work on improving their pronunciation through focused practice, utilizing tools like language learning apps or working with speech coaches to refine their speaking skills (Redondo, 2023).

This study aims to explore the speaking difficulties encountered by EFL learners in preparing for English debating competition named National University Debating Championship, focusing specifically on the students' perspectives. Question proposed in this reasearh: how does speaking difficulties encountered by student affecting their debating performance?. By examining how students perceive and navigate challenges related to fluency and coherence,



lexical resource, grammatical accuracy, and pronunciation, this research seeks to provide valuable insights into the specific barriers these learners face. The findings of this study could contribute to the development of more effective pedagogical strategies that address the unique needs of EFL learners in debate settings. A deeper understanding of these difficulties will enable educators to design targeted interventions that equip students with the skills necessary to succeed in English debates and other oral communication contexts.

B. METHOD

In this study, qualitative analysis (Ezzy, 2013) was used to assess four speaking difficulties related to fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical accuracy, and pronunciation in English debating. The respondents are 4 students from Institut Seni Budaya Indonesia Aceh, passing selection in National University Debating Championship regional selection and preparing for national round of NUDC in two months.

The data collected through observation notes for 9 meetings of practices and semi-structured interview. The main questions addressed: 1) The experience in preparing for the National University Debating Championship, particularly in maintaining fluency and coherence in English; 2) The challenges faced in maintaining fluency and coherence during the debate, including specific moments of difficulty; 3) The limitations in using the right vocabulary (lexical resource) during the debate and strategies for overcoming these challenges; 4) Difficulties with grammatical accuracy and how grammatical errors affected understanding by the opposing team or judges; 5) Preparation for clear pronunciation and the impact of pronunciation issues on fluency and accuracy; 6) Strategies used to ensure fluency and coherence when facing unexpected questions or topics; 7) Struggles with maintaining fluency or using the right words during the debate, and how these barriers were overcome; 8) Techniques for managing anxiety or tension that affected fluency and pronunciation; 9) The impact of debate training on fluency, lexical resource, grammatical accuracy, and pronunciation, including examples of improvements; 10) Advice for other debaters on how to improve fluency, lexical resource, grammatical accuracy, and pronunciation to perform confidently and effectively.

The qualitative data analysis is used to categorize four theme of speaking difficulties: fluency, lexical resource, grammatical accuracy, and pronunciation appeared in observation and responses to open-ended questions in semi-structured interview, identifying patterns of speaking difficulties for the learners. Then, the interview recordings were transcribed verbatim. The transcript of the interview result were analysed qualitatively using thematic analysis, in which key excerpts were coded, grouped into categories, and interpreted to answer the research questions. Selected excerpts are also presented in the findings to illustrate and deepen the explanation of the survey results (JW Creswell & JD Creswell, 2017).

Table 1. Difficulties in English Debating Practices Observation Notes Summary

Meeting	Students	Fluency & Coherence	Lexical resource	Grammatical accuracy	Pronunciation
M1	S1	L	L	L	L
	S2	M	M	M	H
	S3	L	L	L	L
	S4	M	L	M	M
M2	S1	L	M	L	L
	S2	M	H	M	H
	S3	L	L	L	L
	S4	M	L	M	L
M3	S1	L	L	M	L
	S2	M	H	M	H
	S3	L	L	L	L
	S4	M	M	M	M
M4	S1	L	L	M	M
	S2	M	M	H	H
	S3	L	L	L	L
	S4	M	H	M	M
M5	S1	L	M	M	L
	S2	M	M	M	H
	S3	L	L	L	L
	S4	M	H	M	M
M6	S1	L	H	M	M
	S2	H	M	M	H
	S3	L	M	L	L
	S4	M	M	H	M
M7	S1	L	H	M	M
	S2	M	M	M	H
	S3	L	M	M	L
	S4	H	H	M	M
M8	S1	L	L	H	M

	S2	H	H	M	H
	S3	L	M	L	L
	S4	H	M	H	M
M9	S1	L	H	M	M
	S2	H	M	H	H
	S3	L	L	M	M
	S4	H	M	H	M

Occurrences : H = high; M = medium; L=low

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

To answer the research question on how does speaking difficulties encountered by student affecting their debating performance?, this research draws the result into four themes of explanation.

Fluency and Coherence

Fluency is the primary gatekeeper" of debating performance. In the quantitative data, students like Student 3 (S3) who consistently scored Low (L) in fluency faced a compounding deficit of fluency. Qualitative evidence from respondent S2 suggests that fluency is deeply intertwined with topical knowledge. S2 noted,

*"when you know what you want to talk about...
 fluency and coherence will follow."*

This indicates that for EFL learners, a lack of fluency is often a symptom of insufficient information. When a debater lacks the raw material of a case, their speech becomes fragmented. To counter this, debaters like S1 rely on the ARE1 (Assertion, Reasoning, Evidence, Link-back) structure. This framework acts as a mental scaffolding, ensuring that even when the speaker feels pressured, their coherence remains intact for the judges.

The data from Student 4 (S4) shows a steady climb toward High (H) fluency by the final meetings. This progression highlights that as the physical difficulty of speaking decreases, the student's ability to dominate the floor and manage complex debate structures increases. S3



described being intimidated by the opponent, which leads to stuttering. This shows that fluency in a debate is not just a linguistic skill but an emotional one.

Lexical Resource

Lexical Resource, or the range and precision of vocabulary, dictates the complexity of arguments a student can present. The quantitative data for Student 1 (S1) reveals a common EFL frustration: having a High (H) Lexical Resource but Low (L) Fluency. In the NUDC context, the ability to choose the right word is crucial for defining a motion's parameters. Respondent S3 admitted feeling limited, stating,

"...It hinders me from continuing the sentence."

When a debater hits a lexical wall, it creates a blank space in their speech. This difficulty forces many EFL learners to stick to simple, repetitive language, which can prevent them from expressing the nuances required to win a high-level clash of argument in a debate.

To overcome lexical difficulties, debaters use strategic compensation. S2 mentioned that because debate often uses formal language, it is actually easier to prepare for than modern, informal slang. Meanwhile, S4 uses a synonym and antonym strategy. By memorizing clusters of related words, S4 can still define a concept even if the specific technical term escapes her during the heat of the debate.

Grammatical Accuracy

In the realm of competitive debating, grammatical accuracy is often treated with a pragmatic content over form approach. The quantitative data shows that several students maintained a Medium (M) level of grammar while still participating effectively. This suggests that in the NUDC, perfect grammar is not the primary goal; rather, the goal is intelligibility. As long as the judge can follow the logic, minor errors in tense or articles are often overlooked. S1 reinforced this by stating,

*"no matter how bad your English, it doesn't matter because...
it's a debate competition."*



This highlights a crucial distinction: the competition judges the strength of the argument, not the purity of the language. However, this does not mean grammar is irrelevant. If grammatical errors become too frequent, they lead to meaning breakdown, where the judge can no longer understand the causal link between a debater's premise and their conclusion.

Respondent S2 noted that in fast-paced scenarios, finds it difficult to adjust her grammar, which can lead to the opponent becoming confused. To mitigate this, S2 uses rapid self-correction. This prevents repetition and keeps the speech within the strict time limits of the competition.

Student 4 (S4) shows that as their Grammatical Accuracy improved from Low to High, their overall debating rank result in the meetings also improved. This suggests a correlation between grammatical control and perceived authority. While a debater can get by with Medium grammar, achieving High accuracy allows them to present their points with a level of professional polish that can sway a judge in a close call between two teams.

Pronunciation

Pronunciation is the most underestimated component of debating success. In the quantitative meetings, Student 2 (S2) maintained a High (H) rating in pronunciation throughout all nine sessions. This consistency allowed S2 to remain a dominant participant even when their grammar was only at a Medium level.

Qualitatively, both S2 and S4 emphasized that clear pronunciation is something they actively train. S2 mentioned that checking pronunciations from Google Translate is very important, especially for technical terms in a motion. S3 takes it a step further by performing facial exercises to ensure her mouth and jaw are flexible enough to deliver long English sentences without stuttering. This physical approach treats debating like a performance art.

Pronunciation difficulties are often managed during the 15-minute case building phase. Debaters use this time to whisper their arguments to themselves, testing the sounds of difficult words. By the time they reach the podium, they have minimized the risk of mispronunciation.



This proactive management allows them to focus entirely on the clashes of argument in a debate, knowing that their delivery is clear enough to be persuasive.

Discussion

Fluency plays a central role in debating performance, influencing not only the delivery but also the strategic engagement of the debater. In competitive debating, fluency is essential for maintaining the flow of speech and effectively responding to rebuttals (Wang & Patterson, 2024). When fluency is lacking, cognitive resources are consumed by the struggle to produce continuous speech, leaving little mental capacity for organizing arguments or adjusting strategies in real-time. This aligns with the cognitive load theory (Clark et al., 2006), which suggests that when a debater's cognitive resources are overwhelmed by fluency concerns, their ability to perform effectively is compromised. In such instances, the debater may focus more on survival, merely completing their speech, rather than strategically engaging with the opposition. Therefore, fluency is not just a linguistic skill but a foundational component that enables the debater to organize and present their arguments coherently.

The relationship between lexical resource and fluency is another crucial factor in debate performance. A mismatch between a debater's lexical knowledge and their fluency can create a significant processing gap, where the debater may possess sophisticated vocabulary but struggles to retrieve and deploy it efficiently during the debate (Brown & Bown, 2014). This gap can result in fragmented performances, where the use of advanced vocabulary fails to impact the argument effectively due to hesitation or lack of fluency. Lexical resource is not only about possessing a large vocabulary but also the speed and flexibility with which words can be retrieved and used in real-time during the debate (Zheng, 2025). This flexibility is what allows a debater to maintain momentum. Ultimately, lexical resource is about more than just knowing words; it is about the speed of retrieval (Alshehri & Zhang, 2022). As seen in the performance of more fluent students, the goal is to move from passive vocabulary—words they understand—to active vocabulary—words they can use instantly.

Debaters who can rapidly access and deploy vocabulary, especially under time pressure, are able to maintain momentum and deliver more persuasive and coherent arguments. This highlights the importance of moving from passive to active vocabulary to enhance a debater's



ability to navigate complex arguments (Scoones, 2024). When a debater's lexical resource reaches a Medium (M) or High (H) level of active use, they can begin to use power words that persuade the judge and intimidate the opposition. This ability to quickly recall and use effective vocabulary significantly contributes to a debater's overall performance, allowing them to remain competitive even when facing challenging topics or time constraints (Będkowski, 2024).

Grammatical accuracy, although important, is not the primary factor in a debater's performance. As the findings suggest, the goal of competitive debating is intelligibility rather than grammatical perfection. In the context of the National University Debating Championship (NUDC), minor grammatical errors did not hinder students as long as the logic and structure of their arguments remained clear. This supports the pragmatic approach to language use, where content takes precedence over form (Zalabardo, 2023). However, excessive errors in grammar can hinder the debater's ability to communicate effectively, leading to confusion and breakdowns in meaning. The ability to self-correct in real-time is a valuable skill, enabling debaters to maintain the flow of their arguments despite occasional grammatical slip-ups (Arnesen et al., 2024). This skill allows debaters to recover quickly from mistakes, ensuring that their message is not disrupted and that their arguments remain coherent and intelligible throughout the debate.

Pronunciation, often underestimated in its significance, emerged as a crucial component of effective debating. The findings reveal that students with high pronunciation scores maintained a dominant presence in the debate, even when their grammatical accuracy was not perfect. Clear pronunciation enhances a debater's authority and ensures that their arguments are easily understood by the judges. This suggests that clear pronunciation acts as a persuasion driver, giving the speaker an air of authority and making their arguments easier to digest for the audience (Crick, 2022). It functions as a bridge between the debater's ideas and the judge's understanding. Without clear articulation, even the most well-structured arguments can be lost.

If the pronunciation is unclear, the logic of the argument, regardless of its quality, will not be understood by the judge. Pronunciation is the bridge between the speaker's mind and the judge's ballot; if this bridge is broken by poor articulation or incorrect word stress, the logic—



no matter how brilliant never reaches its destination (Adinda & Ahmad, 2024). This highlights the critical role that pronunciation plays in the overall effectiveness of a debater's performance. The ability to pronounce words clearly and correctly ensures that the logic of the argument is transmitted efficiently and persuasively to the judge. In competitive debating, where time is limited and arguments need to be delivered succinctly, pronunciation can significantly impact how well a debater's ideas are received (Apriliani et al., 2021).

The proactive strategies employed by debaters to manage their pronunciation further emphasize its importance in competitive debates. Techniques such as practicing difficult words or using tools like online pronunciation guides are essential for preparing debaters to speak clearly under pressure. These strategies allow debaters to mitigate the risks of mispronunciation and maintain confidence in their delivery (Deliana & Ganie, 2025). Additionally, debaters may use the case-building phase of the debate to rehearse their pronunciation, ensuring that by the time they are on stage, their delivery is clear and fluent. This level of preparation demonstrates the importance of treating pronunciation as an integral part of the debating process, akin to a performance art that requires physical and mental readiness.

Fluency, lexical resource, grammatical accuracy, and pronunciation are all interconnected components that shape the overall effectiveness of a debater's performance (He & Reynolds, 2024). The findings highlight the need for debaters to not only focus on improving each of these skills individually but also to integrate them effectively in real-time debates. Success in competitive debating requires debaters to manage these elements simultaneously, ensuring that their arguments are not only logically sound but also clearly delivered and persuasive. While grammatical perfection is not essential, maintaining fluency, a rich lexical resource, and clear pronunciation is critical to a strong performance .

The integration of these elements is particularly important in high-pressure situations, where the debater must juggle multiple cognitive tasks. Developing fluency allows the debater to focus on argumentation rather than struggling with speech production, while lexical resource enables the effective deployment of complex ideas (Apriliani et al., 2021). Pronunciation, in turn, ensures that these ideas are communicated clearly to the audience. The ability to manage these skills under time constraints is what distinguishes successful debaters from those who



struggle. Training programs for debaters should focus not only on individual skills but also on how these skills interact in the context of live debates, helping debaters perform at their highest potential.

Future research could explore how these components of fluency, lexical resource, grammatical accuracy, and pronunciation interact during live debates and how they contribute to the overall outcome of the debate. Additionally, research could examine the role of psychological factors, such as nervousness and stress, in fluency and pronunciation, as these factors often affect performance in competitive settings. By understanding how these various elements work together, educators can better design training programs that address the full spectrum of skills required for successful debating.

Finally, fluency, lexical resource, grammatical accuracy, and pronunciation are all vital components of debating success. Each element plays a specific role in the performance of the debater, with fluency and pronunciation serving as the foundation for effective communication and argumentation. Lexical resource allows the debater to express complex ideas, while grammatical accuracy ensures clarity and coherence. These components must be developed in tandem, as they interact to create a persuasive and well-structured debate performance. By addressing all of these aspects, debaters can maximize their potential and improve their chances of success in competitive environments.

D. CONCLUSION

The study suggests several implications to enhance EFL learners' debating performance. Firstly, to improve fluency and coherence, English programs should prioritize activities that encourage real-time speaking practice, such as debates and timed discussions, allowing students to organize and present their ideas clearly under pressure. In addressing lexical resource gaps, vocabulary-building exercises focusing on both breadth and depth should be integrated into the curriculum, helping students develop quicker recall abilities essential for debates. While grammatical accuracy is often treated flexibly in informal settings, it remains crucial for clear communication, and thus, learners should focus on grammar, particularly sentence structure and syntax, to maintain logical clarity in their arguments.



More critically, the results confirm that while grammatical accuracy is often treated pragmatically in a debate setting, it remains the essential vehicle for logical clarity. Any significant breakdown in grammar leads to an intelligibility ceiling that prevents the judge from following the debater reasoning. Similarly, the study confirms that pronunciation acts as a crucial persuasion driver, where clear articulation allows debaters to project authority and mask other linguistic weaknesses.

Further research could explore the effectiveness of specific vocabulary-building techniques, pronunciation training methods, and cognitive strategies in improving debating performance across different cultural and linguistic contexts. Additionally, future studies could investigate the long-term impact of integrated debate preparation on students' overall communication skills and critical thinking abilities, extending beyond the competitive debate environment.

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