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# Students' difficulties in learning English speaking: A case study in a Muslim high school in the South of Thailand

Bushro Apichat a,1, Nur Fatimah b,2,\*

- a.b Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, Jl. Ringroad Selatan, Kragilan, Tamanan, Kec. Banguntapan, Kabupaten Bantul, Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta 55191
- 1 bushro@tellscore.com; 2 nur.fatimah@pbi.uad.ac.id \*
- \* corresponding author

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The demand on using English as a means of communication is still a challenge for learners of English as a foreign language. The objectives of this study are finding out students' difficulties in learning English speaking and the factors causing students' difficulties in learning English speaking. This study is descriptive qualitative. The data were obtained through interview. The research involved 10 students of the second semester of high school in a muslim school, in the South of Thailand. The results of the research showed that the students had difficulties in learning English speaking. In addition, they also have difficulty in pronunciation. Some sounds are difficult for students to produce. This was caused by internal and external factors. The internal factors include motivation, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, fluency, shyness and also lack of self-confidence. It made students difficult to speak English. The external factors include the environment, teacher, the facility and the students' lack of the opportunity to use English.

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# 1. Introduction

Since English language is a universal language, people are urged to learn the English language. Thailand got the first two English proficiency lowest rank when compared to other countries. There are some factors such as curriculum, students, and quality of teachers, all of which are the key to cause this issue. A curriculum emphasizing on grammar and rules makes the students memorize a lot of lessons even some are not necessary for their daily lives. Also, the students generally have physiological factors that make them afraid to express their thoughts and teachers who are not experts in using English because they were taught to learn by heart as same as the students nowadays. But it is still difficult to solve the problems even though the national education curriculum under the national education of the year 1999 No. 2 already stated of the curriculum that teachers have to teach a foreign language to provide students with the knowledge and ability to use the language. It can be seen that English is a foreign language that has been taught from kindergarten to university level, as a result of the introducing of national foreign language standards and benchmarks in Thailand by the Ministry of Education introduced (Thomas, 2019). And most of those who take a study at the university level are still unable to use English well even though study English for many years (Pongpanic, 2008).



Kongthong and Passornsir (2014) said that everyone sees the importance of the English language. But nowadays, the process of teaching and learning English in Thailand is still low because of English basic of Thai people such as vocabulary, grammar, or speaking is still as problems to solve. Most of English teachers focus on grammar more than speaking and students are shy to speak in English because they do not have confidence in themselves and students are afraid of making mistakes in English. This phenomenon reflects the problem of the school's instructional system in Thailand. The objectives set in the curriculum have not yet been achieved. As well as there is information presented to Thai society and around the world, to show that the failure of English speaking and pronunciation of Thai people is up to 99 percent.

Those are the factors that affect Thai students speak English including various external factors such as English curriculum of instruction. Although Thailand has used English books or curriculum from a native speaker but this still affects teachers because the teachers still do not have the expertise. There are many teachers who are not proficient in speaking, they focus on reading, writing or grammar skills. Therefore, starting with such skills students may be bored and not fun in learning. For this reason, Thai students are delayed in speaking English because students lack the opportunity to practice speaking skills.

The researchers see the importance of investigation students' difficulties in speaking English ability of Thai people to be particular in a muslim school because it is an institution established to give knowledge Islamic religion as well as academic knowledge. There is a teaching and learning of islamic subjects since middle level (mutawassit) until high level (sanawi) and there is a teaching and learning of academic subjects from Mattayom1-6 or grade 7-12. Therefore, the students in this school have to study from both. One of the researchers previously interviewed two out of three English teachers in the school about the factors that affect students' English speaking. Some of English teachers in the school said there were some reasons related the difficulties of students' ability in speaking English such as the facts: the media for teaching are not sufficient to meet the needs of students, a teacher does not use English with the students, the teachers focus on grammar more than speaking because they want the students to be successful in national tests, an environment that is not conducive to speaking English, the students are shy to speak English, and also students are afraid of making mistakes, while the students use the memorization rather than understand the lesson. Actually, they have studied for several years. But they cannot understand or communicate in English well. The students will graduate to serve society and be an important force in the nation's development, government, and parts of future countries. Revealing the students' difficulties in learning English especially speaking and the factors causing students' difficulties in learning English speaking will benefit the development of learning and teaching English in Thailand.

A quantitative study about the problems with the English listening and speaking of students studying at a private vocational school in Bangkok, Thailand was conducted by Khamprated (2012). The results of the study showed that there were 8 out of 20 items rated as a high level of English listening problems. The students reported that it was difficult to understand a speaker with a regional accent, a speaker who spoke too quickly, after only listening once, and it was also difficult for them to understand a speaker with poor pronunciation. The students also realized that it was difficult for them to understand jokes due to cultural differences. The limited grammar and vocabulary skills of the students and made it difficult for them to understand spoken English and they became nervous and worried. In terms of speaking problems, there were 7 out of 20 items related as a high level of difficulty. The students reported that it was difficult to speak English with the correct pronunciation, to speak as fluently as a native speaker, and they experienced frustration when practicing speaking with students whose English ability was low and they did not want to make mistakes when speaking in front of people because they were afraid that other people would laugh at them if they made any mistakes while speaking. Their limited grammar skills made it difficult for them to speak English, so they get nervous and worried when they spoke to foreigners.

In another setting, Hakim (2015) investigated the problems faced by Thai students in learning English speaking at a boarding house. The result of the research showed that the Thai students had problems in relation with inhibition, nothing to say, mother tongue used, low or uneven in participation, and speech act. Furthermore, this study resulted in the solution of the problems. The problem of inhibition was coped by being well prepared. The problem of nothing to say was coped by drilling themselves creatively. The problem of mother tongue use was by having more

confidence to speak English. The problem of low or uneven in participation was coped by memorizing more vocabularies and studied about tenses in order to make their speaking better. Last, to cope with the speech act problems they tried to remember, practiced new vocabularies and drilling their pronunciation and studied more about grammar.

Plailek (2010) discusses the various factors that affect learning and teaching the English language. The most controversial issue in the academic world is when the learners complete an education course, whether primary or secondary degree. They cannot speak English well. This problem can be caused by several reasons. It may be due to teachers, learners, the environment, or other factors that affect to speak English. There are similarities in terms of factors affecting students in elementary schools, secondary and higher education. He has been interested in studying specific novices. The study was conducted in English for novices studying the Buddhist scriptures for many years. He has seen and understood the problems of novices, whose lifestyle was very different from children in society. Research in another setting with another subject, indeed, enriches the findings on the difficulties of Thai students in learning English especially speaking and the factors causing the problems in grade 10-11 in the muslim high school in the South of Thailand. The research leads to research results to improve the development of teaching and learning.

In almost any setting, speaking is the most 14 frequently used language skill (Torky, 2006). It is an interactive process of creating meaning that involves producing and receiving and processing information (Brown, 1994; Burns & Joyce, 1997). Its form and meaning depend on the style and importance of the speech situation (and their own personal linguistic propensities), the learners may also attempt to monitor their output. In conversations and other interactive speech events, the speakers must attend to the feedback from their interlocutors and observe the rules of discourse used in the target culture. Phonological considerations add to the difficulty of the task, especially for adult learners, as speakers strive to achieve "good" pronunciation. The speed of such interaction is also an issue because there may not be adequate time for processing either outgoing speech or incoming messages at the typical rate of native-speaker interaction. All of these factors combine to make speaking in a second or foreign language a formidable task for language learners. Yet for many people, speaking is seen as the central skill. The desire to communicate with others, often face to face and in real time, drives people to attempt to speak fluently and correctly. There is a dynamic tension caused by the competing needs for fluency and accuracy during a natural speech (Richards, 1994).

Further, speaking is one of the four language skills which are interpreted as an expression of idea, opinion, or message with oral language (Harmer, 2007). It often implies conveying information. Speaking in a second or foreign language has been often seen as the most necessary skill in four skills. When attempting to speak, students must think and encode those ideas in the vocabulary and syntactic structures of the target language. Thus, is the way to carry out our feeling through words, conversation with others. Speaking is also used to communicate as by talking and it is the ability to produce the language and share their ideas.

### 1.1. Teaching English in Thailand

Ulla (2018) stated that English is not widely spoken or used in Thailand. In schools and universities, English is not used as a medium of instruction. Some Thai students have difficulty speaking and understanding the language. Even if the English language has been introduced to them since they were in their primary years at school it has been unsuccessful and ineffective. This is manifested in their low language proficiency scores in TOEFL (Educational Testing Service, 2010) compared to people from other nations in the region. In a test data and score summary released by the Educational Testing Service (2010) for TOEFL Internet and paper-based tests, Thailand consistently trailed behind other Southeast Asian countries with an average score of 75 out of 120 for Internet-based tests and 486 out of 660 for paper-based tests. This low to zero English proficiency level of Thai students is generally associated with the kind of English language teaching and learning they received in their classrooms.

Some studies mentioned a number of factors why English language learning in Thai classrooms is unproductive. Firstly, while teachers in Thailand are delivering the lessons in their local language, they tend to focus more on grammar (Simpson, 2011). Secondly, there is a lack of confidence and a lack of speaking opportunities for the students to practise their English language communication

skills (Noom-ura, 2013). Thirdly, there is a lack of qualified teachers to teach English, as most of these teachers do not have a degree in English (Dhanasobhon, 2007). Lastly, English lessons are conducted in a teacher-centred classroom, making the students passive learners (Wiriyachitra, 2002). With these factors contributing to the English language education problem in the country, the Thai government and its education institutions are working to address these issues. Bringing in some foreign English teachers to help the local teachers teach English and other subjects is seen as one of the best ways to improve English language education in Thailand.

In Thailand, the struggling to improve the learning process will still go on with the emphasis on learner-centeredness through educational management and facilities. Developing English language teachers both in English proficiency and teaching methodology, especially with the correct concept of learner centeredness, has to be conducted at the same time.

Another area which will be more emphasized in the English language teaching circle in Thailand is research in English language teaching as it is required both at school and at the university. English language teachers are required to develop research skills in addition to teaching skills. Although there are some obstacles to the development of English language teaching to reach the same standard for all schools and universities throughout the country, the researcher believe that the situation as a whole would move in a positive direction, as we are all well-aware that English is the global lingua franca. Although young people have started to learn a third language such as Chinese or Japanese, English is still the second language Thai students need to acquire, and the main aim of teachers of English is to find the most effective way to teach student.

## 1.2. Learning English for Non-native Speaker

According to Abdullah and Hussein (2013), English as a second or foreign language (ESFL) refers to the use of English by speakers who are different from the native languages. In recent years, teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) have been paying increasing attention to identifying the needs of their students, to students" attitudes towards English and their reasons for learning it.

Madisha (2018) described the differences between learning the first language and second language. The first language is a language that babies acquire from birth until about 7 or 8 years old. They can keep learning the language even after those years to master all the idiomatic expressions, sentence structures, and many more areas. Kids learn the language naturally and effortlessly by listening to their parents communicating with it to them or even listen to other kids conversing with it. The second language is a language learned at a later stage after a mother tongue. The first language, on the other hand, is a language acquired by babies naturally from their parents. They can have double first languages as a result of parents emanating from varying linguistic backgrounds. A second language, on the other hand, is often learned in the classrooms, online tutorials, listening to others speak in a different linguistic environment or foreign country. There are many techniques through which a second language can be learned.

# 1.3. Techniques of Learning Speaking

Wood (2010) explains the key areas to focus on to improve English skills to speak quickly and automatically. They can be in the form of learning new words every day, understanding the meaning, learning English grammar implicitly, pronunciation (talking like a native speaker), finding the opportunities to practice English. Wood has recommended the development of spoken English each day start by learning new words every day, finding out the meaning each word, learning grammar, listening to accent from native speakers to make more proficient in the language and the last is practicing every day.

There are many techniques for teaching speaking such as role playing and game. Role-playing creating a dramatic situation in a classroom, or in a part, simply acting out dialogues, but also in part re-labeling objects and people in the room to prepare for imaginative role-playing. A game is one of the activities which can help to create dynamic, motivating classes. The reason is that real learning takes place when the students, in a relaxed atmosphere, participate in activities that require them to use what they have been drilled on.

In relation to problem-solving, materials which focus on problem-solving offer further opportunities for the students to work in pairs or small groups, to share information and opinions on topics, which are meaningful to them. Moreover, the discussion enable the class to experience. If

such a group work is used regularly and introduced with a careful explanation of its proposal, the class will soon accept it as a natural activity. For speaking, using song in English foreign language classroom, can be both enjoyable and educational. A song usually provides a peaceful and happy mood for the listeners. Songs can also be used as a useful aid in the learning of vocabulary, pronunciation, structures, and sentence patterns (Rusdiningsih, 2012)

# 1.4. Difficulties in Learning English as a Non-native Speaker

According to Robledo Cortés (2015) students seem to have difficulties when they try to communicate and share their opinions in different contexts because although they are aware of the grammatical structure of the sentences, most of the time, they do not know how to write or say some words in English because their vocabulary seems to be limited. These particular situations appear to make some students feel angry, frustrated or even de-motivated. For some students, the first exposure to the English language may be de-motivating for them because of their lack of words or expressions to communicate. It is known that the process of learning a new language takes time and commitment from both teachers and learners. When teachers identify their learners' strengths and weaknesses, they can help them to learn a language in the most suitable way according to their learning styles, intelligence, as well as their particular context. Most of Thai students do not prefer to learn English because they find the subject matter boring and the four skills are quite hard for them. The subject matter is not familiar, and it is presented in a strange language which they have to try very hard to understand or express ideas effectively (Nabihah, 2013).

Further, Iswara, Azib and Dewi (2011) explain that fluency comes as two new problems to be overcome. Fluency in speaking is known as the natural ability to speak spontaneously, quickly and comprehensibly with few numbers of errors that may distract the listener from the speaker's message; when accuracy focuses on the elements of phonology, grammar, and discourse in spoken output. Generally, the problem faced dealing with fluency was when the learners speak to the others; the students tried to make the hearers understand about what they want to say. They found that the students tended to hesitate and fragmentary while speaking because they have problems in retrieving the lexical items, encoding the grammatical form of their message and correcting their own output. This condition made the students speak hesitantly and fragmented, as mean that the frequency of pause filler such as "well", "mm", "ee" and also the production of disfluency such as repetition, repair, restarts, and also prolongation will fluently fulfill their talks.

### 1.5. Factors Causing Students' Difficulties in Learning English as a Non-native Speaker

There are some factors causing learning problems to students. According to Syah (2005), causal factors of students' learning problem are divided into two categories; there are internal and external factors. The Internal factors include cognitive, affective and psychomotor. Meanwhile the External factors include family, society, and school environment (e.g. school building condition, the teacher and learning facility). Besides, Harmer (2007) stated that factor which seems to have a strong effect on a students' success or failure in language learning is motivation. Then he separates it into two main categories: Extrinsic motivation which is concerned with factors outside the classroom (e.g. integrative motivation and instrumental motivation) and Intrinsic motivation which is concerned with what takes place inside the classroom (e.g. physical condition, method, the teacher and success). In addition, Ahmadi and Supriyono (2004) classified causal factors of students' learning problem into two categories: internal categories, which include physiology factor and psychology factor, and external ones, which include social, family and school.

Family is the smallest unit of society. Family is the first place of a child's learns. A child learns many things at home, like language, norms, ways to behave with other people, etc. Therefore, family has an essential role to build some good habits of the children including learning. Children need support learn from the family. The students who have support and attention for their study, especially from the family, will try to do their best in learning. While, a family who are ignoring about the child's education will be the factor of their child's learning problem.

School also becomes the main role of the students' learning process. The important aspects of school that influence success or fail of students' learning are the teacher and learning family. Teacher is a person who changes the parents' role when a child is in the school. Students learn many lessons from the teacher. When the students accept and comprehend the information and material well from the teacher, it can be said that the learning process is success. In the other hand, when

most of the students are not able to understand the materials which are given by the teacher, it can be said that the learning process is fail. The teacher also can be a factor in students' learning problem. In line with the teacher, learning facility able has role to the success of students' learning. Learning facility can enable the leaning process to be more effective. The lack of learning facility can be a barrier of the learning process.

Speaking in English as a foreign language is considered a difficult skill to acquire by most learners. That is why many students are not really interested in the speaking activity. Therefore, many of the students cannot speak in English. Most of the learners only got a little exposure to get the language. They find it difficult either to know the real example of English or to practice this language in daily life. All of those conditions make the teaching and learning process ineffective, especially in the speaking class.

This study on the problems of the students' difficulties in learning English speaking in a muslim high school can reveal the students' difficulties and the factors causing students' difficulties in learning English speaking. Hence, its results may lead to contribution to improve the English teaching and learning process in Thailand and other related countries.

#### 2. Research Method

The study is descriptive qualitative. Qualitative research investigates the day and/or exceptional lives of individuals, communities, societies, and organizations through intense and/or sustained contact with participants in a naturalistic setting (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). Ten students in the muslim high school, in the South of Thailand (high school at suburb, in a province of the South of Thailand) were interviewed. Sugiyono (2013) said that interviewing allows the researcher to acquire a better knowledge of how the participant interprets an event or phenomena than observation alone. They were the students in Mattayom 4-5 (students in senior high school grade 10-11) learning English as a compulsory subject at all grade levels, taking science and mathematics program, the only program study at high school level. There were five male and five female from different levels and different basic English language proficiency as recommended by the teacher in that school. The interview was conducted in Thai language. It was to reveal the students' difficulties and the factors causing students' difficulties in learning English speaking. The interview was recorded, transcribed and translated into English. The researchers defined the scope of interview questions as personal identity, students background in learning English speaking, students' difficulties in learning English speaking and the factors causing students' difficulties in learning English speaking.

In analyzing the data, the researchers classified the data into description of the difficulties faced by students in learning English speaking and description of the factors causing students' difficulties in learning English speaking. To ensure trustworthiness, the researchers used triangulation, mechanically recorded data, verbatim accounts, and in the students' language (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997). To enhance it, the researchers did member checking as suggested by Babbie and Mouton (2004). The researcher also asked questions to English teacher in that school via Facebook. The researchers asked the participants to confirm that what the researcher wrote was what they intended to express.

# 3. Findings and Discussion

# 3.1. The Difficulties Faced by Students in Learning English Speaking

Eight students out of ten were worried in English grammar because they scared that if speaking out would be wrong. Table 1 presented the students' difficulties in speaking English, especially in relation to grammar.

Table 1. Students' Difficulties in Grammar

Types of	Students' Difficulties	References

Grammar		
Tenses	When the students would like to say "I will go to school" but they are often confused about what was to say between "I want to go to school now" or "I went to school now". An other example is like the sentence is "I was a student in Muslim Suksa school last year" they always say "I am a student in Muslim Suksa school last year" because they do not understand how to use the simple, past, or other tenses clearly.	Interview with the tenth student and Interview with the seventh student
Part of speech (pronoun)	Some of students would like to say "I love <u>him</u> " but they say "I love <u>he</u> " some of students are still confused how to use pronoun correctly.	Interview with the second student
Article	Some of students would like to say "This is <u>a</u> book" they are confused what to say "This is <u>an</u> book", "This is <u>a</u> book" or "This is <u>the</u> book". When they were confused about it they usually fear to speaking out because of the fear to make it wrong, fear that other people did not understand.	Interview with the first student,

The result also shows that all the interviewed students said that vocabulary is very difficult for them. Usually, they were confused because many words could be interpreted in different meanings, some words were written in different spellings but they referred to the same meaning or some words were with different spellings but they were pronounced the same pronunciation. Some of them are homonym which is used to denote word-forms belonging to distinct lexemes that are written and pronounced in the same way, or, homophone which has the same pronunciation but different spellings and meanings (Katamba, 1994; 2015). The researchers received from the interview that some students said, the words "key, main or principal" all words have the same meaning. They were confused why different words were used and they did not know how to use them. It is still difficult for them to understand. Four of ten students had problems in listening skills. Due, they could not understand what the other said and could not answer back. The second student said "I do not understand the content or what the teacher talking about".

Another result is that there are two of ten students worried about accents or pronunciation. They feared that when they spoke out to others, no one understand what they talked about. It is revealed that five students said fluency was very difficult for them, even some teachers of English had no fluency in speaking skills. While the teachers took classes, they used local language, like Thai language. From the students' point of view, it was found that Thai English teachers always used Thai language to explain the lesson in the English classes. It made students unfamiliar with English.

# 3.2. The Factors Causing Students' Difficulties in Learning English Speaking

The following discussion describes the two factors resulting in the students' difficulties when speaking English. They are external and internal factors. The external factors can be in the form of lack of proper support from teachers, learners'insensitive personality and individual attention (Rajitha & Alamelu, 2020; Day & Gu, 2013; Siyli & Kafes, 2015). In relation to these factors, all of the participants said that the environmental factor did not support to communicate in English. Whether it was the home environment or even at school environment did not encourage students to use English because everyone around them used Thai language to communicate. Even in the English classes most of Thai teachers often used Thai language to describe and communicate with the students, it made students far away and unfamiliar with English language.

In addition, students in this muslim high school lacked the opportunity to use English due to the unfavorable environment because everyone around only speak Thai language. Further, the facility is not enough for students and do not help students to use English language. And there are fewer activities that make them feel interested more in learning English.

In the school, students learned English with Thai teachers and a foreign teacher. The students compared between learning English with Thai teachers and the foreign teacher. They said when they studied with Thai teachers, the teacher always focused on the content, grammar, memorizing vocabulary and would be focused on intensive tutoring for the exam. It was rarely focused on listening and speaking skills. It caused their becoming bored. In contrast, while studying with a foreign teacher, the focus was on listening, vocabulary and speaking skills. There was integration in teaching and learning such as teacher give the examples or create games to build skills to open the opportunity for students to practice speaking more English. However, there was only native English teacher in the school. Most of students enjoyed learning and were excited when studying with a foreign teacher, a native speaker of English. Students' preference to be taught by native speakers reached 75% and 70% stated that they felt more comfortable and that it was easier learning pronunciation with native speakers of English (Suksiripakonchai, 2013). The internal factors include the followings. Some of students lacked motivation to learn English language because they thought that English was not their own language or not the language used in everyday life. Some students study English just to take the exam or certificate, it is not for communication.

Eight out of the ten students reported that they have low self-confidence to the study. Their lack of self-confidence and shy in using the language is linked to their poor proficiency in various language skills causing them to become afraid or embarrassed of making mistakes. Some students always left their own questions. They feared to ask when they did not understand because feared that others would catch their mistakes or laughed them. "When I did not understand the lesson, I always quiet because I am shy and fear to ask the teacher". And because most of Thai people had a habit like to insult like mocking when others said wrong or the accent was not clear. Often being mocked by friends or laughed. It caused such students lose confidence and fear to speak with others in English.

The results of this research shows similarities with and differences from relevant studies. Khamprated (2012) studied about the problems with the English listening and speaking of students studying at a private vocational school in Bangkok, Thailand and the result of the research show that the students reported that it was difficult to speak English with the correct pronunciation, to speak as fluently as a native speaker, and they experienced frustration when practicing speaking with students whose English ability was low and they did not want to make mistakes when speaking in front of people because they were afraid that other people would laugh at them if they made any mistakes while speaking. Their limited grammar skills made it difficult for them to speak English, so they get nervous and worried when they spoke to foreigners. From Hakim (2015), the problems faced by Thai students in learning English speaking at a boarding house. The findings of the research show that the Thai students had problems in relation with inhibition, nothing to say, mother tongue used, low or uneven in participation, and speech act.

Also, Plailek (2010) studied about factors affecting English speaking abilities of second year English major students in the faculty of Education, Rajabhat Universities in Bangkok and the results of the research show that the various factors that affect learning and teaching the English language. The most controversial issue in the academic world is when the learners complete an education course, whether primary or secondary even degree. They cannot speak English well. This problem can be caused by several reasons. It may be due to teachers, learners, the environment, or other factors that affect to speak English.

All the results that the researchers described earlier, it was consistent with those studies. The main factors that made students' difficulties in learning English were the environment this results same with the result of Plailek (2010) study. The problem of Thai students in speaking English it was found that the students have difficulties in pronunciation, fluency, grammar and shyness to speaking out because they were afraid that other people would laugh at them if they made any mistakes while speaking. These problems are interconnected with the research result of Khamprated (2012) and Hakim (2015). It shows that Thai students still have difficulties to speak English.

#### 4. Conclusion

The study conducted indicated that students have difficulties to speak English, although they have been learning English formally for ten years. They face English speaking difficulties including lack of confidence, pronunciations, grammar, vocabulary, etc. This study investigates factors that become student's obstacle to speak English. In addition, this study is also focused on finding out causes of the obstacles. Overall, it can be concluded that, most of students believed that the environment was the main factor causing an obstacle for them to speak English. Not only that, the teacher could be the great factor which affects the success of English classroom teaching. The non-native teacher is still applying the teacher-center approach and go for teaching grammar more than speaking performance. All teachers should be role models to get the better teaching and learning English. Both teachers and students should more aware of how they cope with an oral communication in order to get the high level of speaking English proficiency.

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