



English-Speaking Challenges of an Autistic Student in an Inclusive EFL Classroom: A Qualitative Case Study

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Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2026-06-01 Revised: 2026-06-06 Accepted: 2026-08-03 Keywords: <i>Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), English-speaking challenges, inclusive classroom, autistic students, speaking development, qualitative case study</i> DOI: 10.24256/ideas.v14i2.11596 Corresponding Author: Pratiwi Hawa pratiwi0304222057@uinsu.ac.id English Education, Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara	<i>This study explored the English-speaking challenges experienced by an autistic student in an inclusive English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom and examined the internal and external factors influencing the student's speaking development. The study offers a qualitative case study perspective by providing an in-depth understanding of the learning experiences of a single autistic student within an inclusive classroom, an area that has received limited attention in previous research. A qualitative case study design was employed involving three participants: one autistic student, one English teacher, and one shadow teacher at an Integrated Islamic Senior High School in North Sumatera. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis because this approach enables researchers to identify and interpret patterns of meaning across multiple qualitative data sources systematically. The findings revealed four major English-speaking challenges: difficulties in vocabulary retention, sentence construction, speaking fluency, and responding to questions. In addition, the student's speaking development was influenced by internal factors, including attention and concentration, delayed information processing, personal interest, and confidence, as well as external factors such as teacher support, shadow teacher assistance, family involvement, and the classroom environment. The findings contribute to English language teaching by highlighting the importance of adaptive instructional strategies and collaborative support systems in inclusive classrooms. Overall, this study emphasizes that individualized educational support and collaboration among teachers, shadow teachers, families, and schools are essential for promoting the English-speaking development of autistic learners in inclusive education.</i>

1. Introduction

Inclusive education has become a fundamental principle of contemporary education systems, aiming to provide equitable learning opportunities for all students regardless of their individual characteristics or disabilities. This educational approach enables students with special educational needs to learn alongside their typically developing peers in regular classrooms while receiving appropriate instructional support to meet their diverse learning needs (UNESCO, 2020). Among students requiring inclusive educational services, those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) represent one of the groups that frequently experience challenges in academic learning and classroom communication due to differences in social interaction, language development, and behavioral characteristics (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2022).

In Indonesia, inclusive education has become an important component of the national education system as part of the government's commitment to ensuring equal educational opportunities for all learners. According to the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (KPPPA RI, 2018), approximately 2.4 million individuals in Indonesia are estimated to have autism. Consequently, increasing numbers of inclusive schools are expected to accommodate autistic students within mainstream classrooms while providing educational support tailored to their individual needs. At the senior high school level, English is a compulsory subject emphasizing communicative competence through discussions, presentations, collaborative learning, and oral interaction. Therefore, autistic students enrolled in inclusive senior high schools are expected to participate actively in English-speaking activities alongside their peers, making effective instructional support particularly important.

The successful implementation of inclusive education requires collaboration among multiple educational environments rather than relying solely on classroom instruction. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) explains that children's development is shaped through continuous interactions within several environmental systems, particularly the family, school, teachers, and peer groups. These interconnected environments collectively influence learners' cognitive, social, and language development. Consequently, autistic students' English-speaking development cannot be understood solely from individual learning characteristics but should also be viewed within the broader educational context that includes teacher support, family involvement, peer interaction, and classroom experiences.

Similarly, Petersson-Bloom and Holmqvist (2022) emphasized that successful inclusive education depends on teacher support, collaborative learning environments, classroom adaptations, and positive peer interactions that enable autistic students to participate meaningfully in classroom learning. From a sociocultural perspective, Vygotsky (1978) further argued that learning develops through social interaction and appropriate scaffolding provided by more knowledgeable individuals. In inclusive English classrooms, scaffolding provided by English teachers and shadow teachers plays an essential role in facilitating autistic students' participation by offering repeated explanations, individualized guidance, and continuous instructional support according to learners' needs.

Among the four language skills, speaking is widely regarded as one of the most complex because it requires learners to integrate vocabulary knowledge, grammatical competence, pronunciation, listening comprehension, cognitive processing, and social interaction simultaneously (Brown, 2007; Harmer, 2001). Unlike reading or writing, speaking requires immediate responses during real-time communication while simultaneously interpreting verbal and non-verbal cues, maintaining conversational turn-taking, and expressing ideas fluently. Consequently, speaking demands not only linguistic

competence but also cognitive flexibility and social communication abilities.

For autistic students, these communicative demands make speaking particularly challenging compared to other language skills. While reading and listening primarily involve receptive language processing, speaking requires learners to generate immediate verbal responses, organize vocabulary into meaningful sentences, regulate pronunciation, and engage in reciprocal social interaction. These processes are often affected by the communication characteristics associated with autism spectrum disorder, including differences in language processing, delayed verbal responses, limited conversational reciprocity, and difficulties interpreting social cues (Hashim et al., 2022; APA, 2022). Consequently, autistic learners frequently experience greater difficulties in speaking than in receptive language skills.

Vocabulary knowledge also plays a crucial role in speaking development. Nation (2013) argues that vocabulary constitutes the foundation of communication because learners cannot effectively express ideas without adequate lexical knowledge. Besides vocabulary mastery, attention is another essential factor influencing successful language learning. Woolfolk (2022) explains that sustained attention enables learners to focus on relevant information, process new knowledge, and retain learning experiences. For autistic learners, limitations in vocabulary retention and attention may substantially reduce opportunities to participate actively in English-speaking activities within inclusive classrooms.

Previous studies have consistently reported that autistic learners experience various challenges during English language learning. Maysuroh et al. (2024) found that vocabulary limitations, pronunciation difficulties, and communication barriers frequently affect autistic students' participation in English learning. Similarly, Hashim et al. (2022) reported that autistic learners often experience challenges in vocabulary learning because differences in communication and cognitive processing reduce opportunities for meaningful language interaction. Dalimunte et al. (2022) further highlighted that verbal, and non-verbal communication characteristics may influence autistic learners' ability to express ideas effectively through spoken language.

Although previous studies provide valuable insights into English language learning among autistic students, they differ in their primary research focus. Lasintia et al. (2021) emphasized instructional strategies such as individualized instruction, repetition, and visual supports for teaching English to autistic learners. In contrast, Apriliyanti (2023) examined teachers' challenges in adapting English instruction for students with special educational needs in inclusive classrooms. Petersson-Bloom and Holmqvist (2022), however, focused on broader educational support systems, highlighting collaboration among teachers, peers, and schools as fundamental components of inclusive education. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that both instructional practices and educational support contribute to autistic students' learning. Nevertheless, most investigations examine these aspects separately rather than exploring how individual learner characteristics interact with environmental support to influence English-speaking development.

Despite the growing body of literature, several important gaps remain. First, previous studies have predominantly focused on communication difficulties, instructional strategies, or teacher perspectives without specifically examining English-speaking challenges in depth. Second, limited research has simultaneously investigated both the internal factors (such as attention, processing delay, confidence, and personal interest) and external factors (including teacher support, shadow teacher assistance, family involvement, and classroom environment) influencing autistic students' English-speaking development. Third, relatively few qualitative case studies have explored these issues within inclusive senior high school EFL classrooms using multiple qualitative data sources.

Unlike previous studies, the present study adopts a qualitative case study approach to provide an in-depth understanding of the English-speaking experiences of one autistic student in an inclusive senior high school EFL classroom. The novelty of this study lies not only in its focus on a single autistic learner but also in its simultaneous examination of English-speaking challenges alongside both internal and external factors influencing speaking development. Furthermore, the study strengthens the credibility of its findings through methodological triangulation by integrating classroom observations, interviews with the English teacher, and interviews with the shadow teacher. This comprehensive approach provides a richer understanding of autistic students' English-speaking development within authentic inclusive educational settings.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the English-speaking challenges experienced by an autistic student in an inclusive classroom setting and to identify the internal and external factors influencing the student's English-speaking development. The findings are expected to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on English language teaching for students with autism spectrum disorder while providing practical insights for English teachers, shadow teachers, families, and schools in developing more effective and inclusive English language learning practices.

2. Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative single-case study design to explore the English-speaking challenges experienced by an autistic student in an inclusive English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to gain an in-depth understanding of the participant's experiences, perceptions, and speaking difficulties within a real educational context. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative case studies enable researchers to investigate a bounded phenomenon intensively by integrating multiple sources of evidence to understand the complexity of a particular case.

A single-case study was deliberately selected because the objective of this research was not to generalize findings to a broader population but to obtain a rich and contextualized understanding of one autistic student's English-speaking development in an inclusive classroom. Focusing on a single participant allowed the researcher to examine the interaction between English-speaking challenges, internal factors, and external factors in greater depth than would be possible through large-scale quantitative research. This design also enabled the researcher to explore the student's authentic classroom experiences from multiple perspectives, including those of the English teacher and the shadow teacher.

Research Setting and Participants

This study was conducted at an Integrated Islamic Senior High School in North Sumatera, Indonesia, which implements inclusive education by providing learning opportunities for students with special educational needs alongside their typically developing peers. To protect participant confidentiality, the name of the school is not disclosed in this article.

The study involved three participants selected through purposive sampling because they possessed direct experience relevant to the research objectives. The primary participant was one autistic student enrolled in Grade X (approximately 15 years old). Two additional participants served as supporting informants: one English teacher and one shadow teacher who regularly accompanied the student during classroom learning. The autistic student met the following criteria:

1. was officially enrolled as an active student at the school;
2. had a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) according to school records;
3. regularly participated in English language learning activities; and
4. voluntarily participated with permission from both the school and parents.

The English teacher was selected because of direct teaching experience with the participant and familiarity with the student's English-speaking development. The shadow teacher was included because of continuous involvement in assisting the student during classroom learning and extensive knowledge of the student's communication abilities and learning progress.

Data Collection

Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. The use of multiple data collection methods enabled the researcher to obtain comprehensive information regarding the student's English-speaking challenges and strengthened the credibility of the findings through data triangulation.

Classroom observations were conducted during four regular English lessons over a period of one month. Each observation lasted approximately 35-70 minutes, following the school's regular lesson schedule. The observations aimed to examine the student's participation in English-speaking activities, communication behaviors, responses to teacher instructions, and interactions with the English teacher, shadow teacher, and classmates.

An observation checklist was prepared prior to data collection to ensure consistency across observation sessions. The observations focused on four aspects of English-speaking performance, namely vocabulary retention, sentence construction, speaking fluency, and responding to questions. In addition, the researcher recorded field notes regarding the student's attention, classroom behavior, learning engagement, and communication patterns throughout the lessons.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the autistic student, the English teacher, and the shadow teacher. This interview format enabled participants to describe their experiences and perceptions while allowing the researcher to explore issues related to English-speaking challenges and the factors influencing the student's speaking development in greater depth.

The interview questions were developed based on the research objectives and previous literature concerning English-speaking challenges experienced by autistic learners in inclusive classrooms. The interviews explored speaking difficulties, learning experiences, instructional support, and internal and external factors influencing the student's English-speaking development.

Documentation was used as a complementary source of data to support the observation and interview findings. The documentation consisted of photographs taken during the research process, including classroom learning activities, speaking practices, teacher-student interactions, and the assistance provided by the shadow teacher during English lessons.

These photographs were examined to verify classroom situations, participant interactions, and instructional practices observed during data collection. The documentation also strengthened the triangulation process by providing visual evidence that supported the observation notes and interview findings.

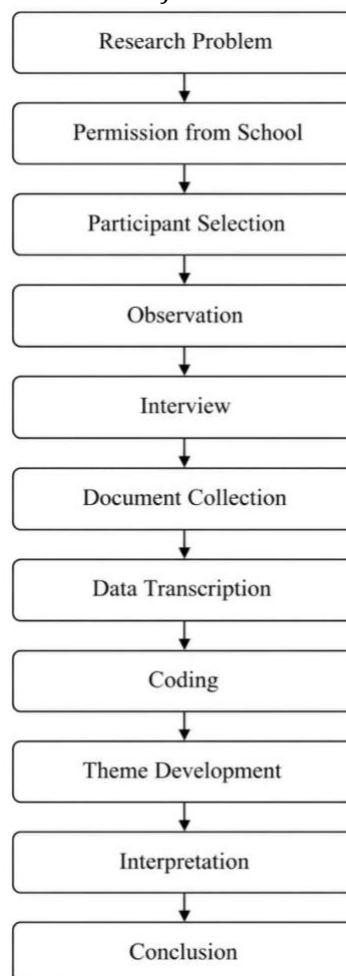
Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis because this approach provides a systematic framework for identifying, organizing, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data.

The analysis consisted of six phases. First, the researcher familiarized herself with the data by repeatedly reviewing interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentation. Second, meaningful segments of data related to English-speaking challenges and influencing factors were assigned initial codes. Third, similar codes were grouped into potential themes representing broader patterns across the data. Fourth, the themes were reviewed and refined to ensure consistency with the research questions. Fifth, each theme was clearly defined and named according to its conceptual meaning. Finally, the themes were interpreted and presented narratively by integrating evidence obtained from observations, interviews, and documentation.

The overall research procedure began with identifying the research problem, obtaining permission from the school, selecting participants, conducting classroom observations, carrying out semi-structured interviews, collecting documentation, transcribing the data, coding the data, developing themes, interpreting the findings, and drawing conclusions. The research procedure is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Flowchart of the Research Procedure



Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were observed throughout the research process. Prior to data collection, permission to conduct the study was obtained from the school principal. The parents of the autistic student provided informed consent for the student's participation, while the English teacher and the shadow teacher voluntarily agreed to participate in the interviews after receiving an explanation of the study's objectives and procedures.

To ensure confidentiality, the identities of all participants and the name of the school were anonymized throughout the study. Pseudonyms were used during data analysis and reporting, and all information collected was used solely for academic research purposes.

3. Result

The findings of this study were generated through thematic analysis of classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with the English teacher and the shadow teacher, and document analysis. Three major themes emerged from the data. The first theme describes the English-speaking challenges experienced by the autistic student during English learning activities. The second theme identifies the internal factors influencing the student's English-speaking development, while the third theme explains the external factors that either facilitated or hindered the student's speaking performance. Table 1 presents an overview of the major findings, including the supporting data sources and representative evidence.

Table 1. Summary of Findings

Theme	Data Sources	Representative Evidence
Vocabulary Retention	ET, ST, OBS, DOC	<i>"He often forgot newly learned vocabulary."</i>
Sentence Construction	ET, ST, OBS	<i>"He usually produced one- or two-word responses."</i>
Speaking Fluency	ET, OBS	<i>"He paused for a long time before speaking."</i>
Responding to Questions	ET, ST, OBS	<i>"He needed repeated questions before responding."</i>
Internal Factors	ET, ST, OBS	<i>Attention, processing delay, confidence, personal interest</i>

Note. ET = English Teacher Interview; ST = Shadow Teacher Interview; OBS = Classroom Observation; DOC = Document Analysis.

1. English-Speaking Challenges Experienced by the Autistic Student

The findings revealed that the autistic student experienced several challenges in developing English-speaking skills in the inclusive classroom. Based on the interviews with the English teacher and the shadow teacher, supported by classroom observations, four major challenges were identified: vocabulary retention, sentence construction, speaking fluency, and responding to questions. The triangulation of these three data sources strengthened the credibility of the findings.

Difficulty in Vocabulary Retention

Vocabulary retention emerged as the most prominent English-speaking challenge experienced by the autistic student. According to the English teacher, the student frequently forgot newly introduced vocabulary, making it difficult to express ideas during English-speaking activities. The teacher explained that vocabulary had to be repeated several times before the student could remember and use it appropriately.

"He often forgets the vocabulary that has been taught. Therefore, we need to repeat the words several times before he can remember them." (ET)

Similarly, the shadow teacher explained that the student's limited concentration contributed to difficulties in remembering vocabulary. Although the student showed enthusiasm toward English, especially through songs, newly introduced vocabulary was often forgotten after classroom instruction.

"He enjoys English songs, but remembering new vocabulary is still difficult because he easily loses focus." (ST)

These interview findings were confirmed through classroom observations. During vocabulary practice activities, the student frequently paused before answering the teacher's questions and required verbal prompts from both the English teacher and the shadow teacher before recalling target vocabulary. Nevertheless, after repeated modeling and guidance, the student was able to produce several appropriate English words.

Document analysis further strengthened these findings. The student's English worksheets showed incomplete vocabulary recall and occasional spelling inaccuracies, while the lesson plans indicated that vocabulary repetition and reinforcement were consistently incorporated into English instruction to accommodate the student's learning needs.

Overall, evidence obtained from interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis consistently demonstrated that vocabulary retention remained one of the student's primary English-speaking challenges.

Difficulty in Sentence Construction

Another challenge identified in this study was sentence construction. The English teacher explained that although the student could recognize and pronounce several English vocabulary items correctly, he experienced difficulty organizing them into complete sentences during spontaneous classroom interaction.

"He knows many English words, but when he is asked to communicate directly in English, he cannot arrange them into complete sentences." (ET)

The shadow teacher also reported that the student usually responded using single words or short expressions and rarely produced complete sentences independently. The student generally waited for others to initiate communication before attempting to respond.

"Usually, he answers using one or two words. He still needs someone to start the conversation first." (ST)

These findings were supported by classroom observations. During pair-work and classroom discussions, the student mostly produced isolated words rather than complete utterances. The English teacher and the shadow teacher frequently modeled complete sentences before encouraging the student to repeat them.

Document analysis also supported this finding. The student's classroom assignments showed that he could identify vocabulary correctly but often produced incomplete written or spoken sentence structures, indicating difficulties in organizing language into meaningful expressions.

Overall, the findings indicate that sentence construction remained a significant challenge despite the student's ability to recognize individual English vocabulary items.

Limited Speaking Fluency

The findings also revealed that spontaneous speaking fluency remained limited. According to the English teacher, the student's pronunciation was relatively good because he frequently listened to English songs. However, fluent communication during classroom interaction remained challenging because the student often hesitated before producing verbal responses.

"His pronunciation is actually good because he often listens to English songs, but he still hesitates when speaking spontaneously." (ET)

The shadow teacher shared a similar perspective and explained that the student's interest in English songs contributed positively to pronunciation development.

"He likes English songs very much, so his pronunciation is quite good." (ST)

These findings were confirmed during classroom observations. Although the student pronounced familiar English words accurately, he frequently paused before responding, required additional processing time, and demonstrated limited fluency during spontaneous communication. However, the student participated more actively when English songs were incorporated into classroom activities.

Document analysis further indicated that classroom learning materials occasionally integrated songs and pronunciation exercises, reflecting the teacher's effort to utilize the student's personal interests to facilitate speaking development.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the student's pronunciation was stronger than his spontaneous speaking fluency, suggesting that fluency remained an area requiring continued instructional support.

Difficulty in Responding to Questions

The final speaking challenge identified in this study involved responding to classroom questions. Both participants explained that the student generally understood the teacher's instructions but required additional time before providing verbal responses. The English teacher stated:

"Sometimes explaining once is not enough. I have to repeat the question several times before he responds." (ET)

The shadow teacher similarly explained:

"He usually understands the question, but his response is slower than other students. Sometimes the question needs to be repeated." (ST)

These interview findings were confirmed during classroom observations. The student frequently paused after receiving questions, looked toward the shadow teacher for additional support, and responded only after repeated explanations or verbal prompts were provided.

Document analysis also supported this finding. Classroom assessment records indicated that the student demonstrated better performance during guided speaking activities than during spontaneous oral questioning, suggesting that structured support positively influenced response accuracy.

Overall, the findings consistently demonstrated that delayed responses represented one of the student's most noticeable English-speaking challenges during classroom interaction.

2. Internal Factors Influencing the Student's English-Speaking Development

The findings revealed that the student's English-speaking development was influenced by four internal factors: attention and concentration, processing delay, personal interest, and confidence. These factors consistently emerged from interviews with the English teacher and the shadow teacher and were further confirmed through classroom observations and document analysis.

Attention and Concentration

Attention and concentration emerged as one of the most influential internal factors affecting the student's English-speaking performance. Both participants explained that the student frequently experienced difficulty maintaining attention during English lessons, particularly when classroom activities became lengthy or when environmental distractions were present. The English teacher stated:

"Students with autism are very difficult to keep focused. Once they are distracted by something they like, their attention shifts completely. This becomes one of our biggest challenges during English lessons." (ET)

Similarly, the shadow teacher explained that maintaining the student's attention required continuous verbal reminders and individualized assistance.

"Sometimes he becomes more interested in his own activities. I have to remind him repeatedly to pay attention to the teacher and return to the lesson." (ST)

These interview findings were confirmed during classroom observations. During several classroom activities, the student occasionally diverted his attention by drawing or quietly singing before returning to the learning activity after receiving prompts from the shadow teacher. The student demonstrated greater engagement when activities matched his interests or when direct guidance was provided.

Document analysis also supported these findings. English lesson plans showed that the teacher frequently incorporated repetition, short instructional segments, and interactive activities to maintain the student's attention throughout the lesson.

Overall, the findings indicate that limited attention and concentration substantially influenced the student's participation in English-speaking activities.

Processing Delay

Another internal factor identified in this study was delayed information processing. Both participants explained that the student generally understood classroom instructions but required additional time before producing verbal responses. The English teacher explained:

"Sometimes explaining only once is not enough. I usually repeat the question and provide additional explanation before he responds." (ET)

The shadow teacher similarly reported:

"He understands the questions, but his responses are rather slow. Sometimes the teacher has to repeat the question twice."

These findings were confirmed through classroom observations. The student frequently paused before responding to the teacher's questions and occasionally looked toward the shadow teacher before answering. Additional verbal prompts and repeated instructions appeared to facilitate more accurate responses.

Document analysis also supported this finding. Classroom assessment records indicated that the student achieved better performance during guided speaking activities than during spontaneous oral questioning, suggesting that additional processing time positively influenced speaking performance.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that delayed information processing consistently affected the student's classroom communication.

Personal Interest

The findings further revealed that the student's personal interests positively influenced English-speaking development. Both participants explained that the student showed a strong interest in English songs, which appeared to increase motivation and improve pronunciation. The English teacher stated:

"He likes listening to English songs. That's why his pronunciation is already very fluent." (ET)

The shadow teacher also explained:

"Music is what he enjoys the most. When English is taught through songs, he becomes more enthusiastic and willing to participate." (ST)

These interview findings were confirmed during classroom observations. The student participated more actively whenever English songs were incorporated into classroom activities. Compared with ordinary speaking exercises, music-based activities increased the student's enthusiasm, attention, and willingness to communicate.

Document analysis also indicated that English learning materials occasionally incorporated songs and pronunciation practice as instructional media, reflecting the teacher's efforts to utilize the student's interests during English instruction.

Overall, the findings indicate that personal interest functioned as a positive factor supporting the student's English-speaking development.

Confidence

Confidence was identified as another internal factor influencing the student's participation during English-speaking activities. Although the student occasionally hesitated before responding, both participants reported that he generally demonstrated willingness to participate when provided with encouragement and appropriate support. The English teacher stated:

"I rarely see him refusing to participate because of fear. Usually, he just needs encouragement and repeated guidance before trying." (ET)

Similarly, the shadow teacher explained:

"Actually, he is quite confident, especially when talking about things he likes or when singing English songs." (ST)

These findings were supported by classroom observations. The student willingly participated in classroom speaking activities after receiving encouragement from the English teacher and shadow teacher. Although responses were sometimes delayed, the student rarely demonstrated signs of anxiety or avoidance during English lessons.

Document analysis further indicated that the student showed consistent participation in classroom speaking tasks, particularly when activities were familiar and appropriately scaffolded.

Overall, the findings suggest that confidence was not the student's primary obstacle. Instead, attention difficulties and delayed processing appeared to influence speaking performance more substantially.

3. External Factors Influencing the Student's English-Speaking Development

The findings revealed that the student's English-speaking development was influenced not only by individual characteristics but also by several external factors. Four external factors consistently emerged from the data: teacher support, shadow teacher assistance, family support, and the classroom environment. These findings were identified through interviews with the English teacher and the shadow teacher and were further confirmed through classroom observations and document analysis.

Teacher Support

Teacher support emerged as one of the most influential external factors facilitating the student's English-speaking development. The English teacher explained that teaching an autistic student required instructional adaptations that differed from those used with other students. Repetition, vocabulary reinforcement, modeling, positive feedback, and individualized guidance were frequently provided to help the student participate during English-speaking activities. The English teacher stated:

"Teaching him requires patience because repetition is very important. I usually repeat vocabulary, provide examples, and encourage him to answer step by step." (ET)

The shadow teacher shared a similar perspective and explained that the English teacher consistently adjusted classroom instruction according to the student's learning needs.

"The teacher often repeats explanations and gives additional examples so that he can understand the lesson more easily." (ST)

These interview findings were confirmed during classroom observations. The English teacher frequently simplified classroom instructions, modeled correct English expressions, repeated target vocabulary, and provided immediate praise whenever the student successfully responded to classroom questions.

Document analysis further supported these findings. English lesson plans demonstrated the use of vocabulary repetition, guided speaking practice, and interactive classroom activities designed to facilitate the student's participation during English lessons.

Overall, the findings indicate that adaptive instructional support provided by the English teacher played an important role in encouraging the student's English-speaking participation.

Shadow Teacher Assistance

The findings also highlighted the important contribution of the shadow teacher in supporting the student's English-speaking development. Unlike the English teacher, who managed the entire classroom, the shadow teacher provided continuous individualized assistance throughout classroom learning. The English teacher explained:

"The presence of the shadow teacher is very helpful because she can immediately assist the student whenever additional explanation is needed." (ET)

Similarly, the shadow teacher stated:

"My role is to help him stay focused, repeat the teacher's instructions, and encourage him to communicate independently whenever possible." (ST)

These interview findings were confirmed during classroom observations. Throughout English lessons, the shadow teacher frequently redirected the student's attention, repeated classroom instructions, provided verbal prompts, and encouraged the student to answer questions independently before offering further assistance.

Document analysis also indicated that individualized assistance formed part of the student's educational support during English learning, reflecting the collaborative instructional practices implemented in the inclusive classroom.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that continuous assistance from the shadow teacher substantially supported the student's classroom participation and English-speaking performance.

Family Support

Family support emerged as another important external factor influencing the student's English-speaking development. According to the English teacher, the student's family regularly introduced English through songs and everyday exposure, contributing positively to pronunciation and vocabulary development. The English teacher stated:

"His parents often expose him to English songs at home. That is one reason why his pronunciation is relatively good." (ET)

The shadow teacher also explained:

"His family provides positive support by allowing him to practice English through activities that he enjoys." (ST)

These findings were confirmed through classroom observations. The student demonstrated greater confidence and more accurate pronunciation when singing English songs or using familiar expressions that appeared to have been practiced previously.

Document analysis also supported these findings. Learning notes and classroom assignments indicated that the student responded more successfully to vocabulary and pronunciation activities involving familiar songs and repeated language exposure.

Overall, the findings suggest that continuous language exposure at home contributed positively to the student's English-speaking development.

Classroom Environment

The classroom environment was also identified as an important external factor influencing the student's English-speaking participation. Both participants explained that a supportive classroom atmosphere encouraged the student to communicate more actively during English lessons. The English teacher stated:

"His classmates usually accept him well and often encourage him when he participates in classroom activities." (ET)

Similarly, the shadow teacher reported:

"The classroom atmosphere is generally supportive. His friends are patient and often help him during learning activities." (ST)

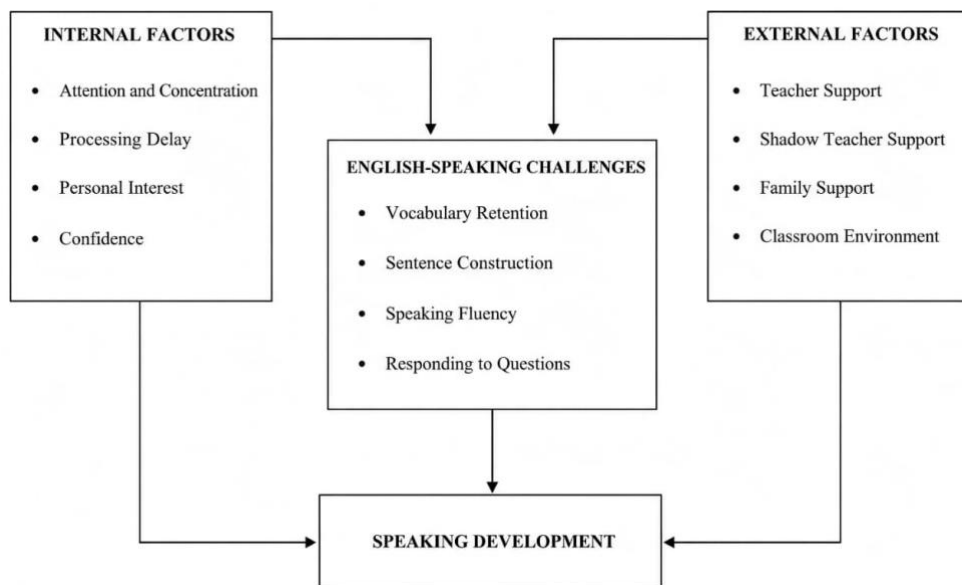
These interview findings were confirmed during classroom observations. The student interacted positively with classmates during pair and group activities and showed greater willingness to communicate when receiving encouragement from peers and teachers. Although the student rarely initiated conversations independently, classmates frequently invited him to participate in classroom discussions and collaborative learning tasks.

Document analysis further indicated that English lesson plans incorporated collaborative learning activities and pair-work, providing opportunities for the student to interact with classmates in structured learning situations.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that a positive and supportive classroom environment facilitated the student's participation in English-speaking activities.

The interaction between the identified internal and external factors and their influence on the student's English-speaking development is illustrated in figure 2.

Figure 2. Relationship Between Internal and External Factors Influencing the English-speaking Development of an Autistic Student



The findings of this study identified four major English-speaking challenges experienced by the autistic student, namely difficulties in vocabulary retention, sentence construction, speaking fluency, and responding to questions during classroom interaction. These challenges were influenced by four internal factors, including attention and concentration, processing delay, personal interest, and confidence, as well as four external factors consisting of teacher support, shadow teacher assistance, family support, and the classroom environment.

Evidence obtained from classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis consistently demonstrated that the student's English-speaking development was shaped by the interaction between individual learner characteristics and the educational support provided within the inclusive classroom. Classroom observations confirmed the interview findings by showing how the student's speaking performance changed when appropriate instructional support was provided, while document analysis strengthened the evidence by demonstrating that English learning materials, lesson plans, and classroom assessments reflected the instructional adaptations described by the participants.

Overall, the findings suggest that English-speaking development among autistic learners in inclusive classrooms cannot be understood solely through individual learner characteristics. Instead, speaking development results from the interaction between internal learning characteristics and external educational support systems. The following section discusses these findings in relation to previous studies and relevant theoretical perspectives.

4. Discussion

Vocabulary Retention as the Primary English-Speaking Challenge

The findings of this study revealed that vocabulary retention was the most prominent English-speaking challenge experienced by the autistic student. Evidence from interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis consistently demonstrated that the student frequently forgot newly introduced vocabulary and required repeated exposure before being able to use new words appropriately during speaking activities. Although the student showed relatively good pronunciation when using familiar vocabulary, recalling newly learned words remained difficult without continuous instructional support.

This finding supports Nation (2013), who argues that vocabulary knowledge is the foundation of speaking because learners cannot express ideas effectively without adequate

lexical resources. Vocabulary serves as the building block of oral communication; therefore, limited vocabulary retention directly affects learners' ability to construct meaningful spoken expressions. For autistic learners, vocabulary acquisition may become more challenging because language processing differences often reduce opportunities to consolidate newly learned words into long-term memory.

The present findings are also consistent with Hashim et al. (2022), who reported that autistic learners frequently experience difficulties in English vocabulary learning due to differences in communication and cognitive processing. Similarly, Maysuroh et al. (2024) found that vocabulary limitations were among the most common barriers affecting autistic students' participation in English language learning. While these previous studies mainly described vocabulary difficulties, the present study extends existing knowledge by demonstrating how vocabulary retention difficulties were consistently confirmed through interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis within an inclusive senior high school EFL classroom.

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings can also be interpreted through the principles of Differentiated Instruction. Tomlinson (2017) emphasizes that instruction should be adapted according to learners' readiness, interests, and learning profiles rather than relying on uniform teaching approaches. In the present study, repeated vocabulary practice, modeling, visual supports, and individualized guidance represented differentiated instructional strategies that accommodated the student's learning characteristics.

The findings are further supported by the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework, which recommends providing multiple means of representation and engagement to accommodate learner diversity (CAST, 2024). Vocabulary repetition, visual prompts, and contextualized examples observed during English lessons reflect UDL principles because they provided flexible learning opportunities suited to the student's communication needs.

These findings suggest that English teachers should provide repeated vocabulary exposure, visual supports, contextual learning activities, and individualized feedback when teaching autistic learners. Rather than expecting immediate vocabulary mastery, teachers should recognize that repeated practice and meaningful language exposure are essential components of successful vocabulary development.

Sentence Construction Difficulties

The findings further demonstrated that sentence construction represented another major English-speaking challenge experienced by the autistic student. Although the student recognized many English vocabulary items, organizing those words into meaningful sentences remained difficult during spontaneous classroom interaction. Classroom observations showed that the student generally produced isolated words or short expressions rather than complete sentences unless guided by the teacher or shadow teacher.

This finding is consistent with Brown (2007), who explains that speaking competence involves integrating vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and discourse organization simultaneously. Similarly, Harmer (2001) argues that effective speaking requires learners to organize language accurately while responding appropriately to communicative situations. For autistic learners, coordinating these linguistic processes during spontaneous interaction may require additional cognitive effort, resulting in simplified verbal responses.

The present findings also support those of Lasintia et al. (2021), who reported that autistic learners often require individualized instruction, sentence modeling, and repeated

language practice to develop English communication skills. Likewise, Dalimunte et al. (2022) found that verbal communication differences frequently influence autistic learners' ability to organize ideas into spoken language. Compared with previous studies, the present research provides additional evidence by illustrating how sentence construction difficulties became visible not only through teacher perceptions but also through direct classroom observations and analysis of students' learning documents.

The findings may also be explained using Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory. According to Vygotsky, learning occurs most effectively when learners receive appropriate scaffolding from more knowledgeable individuals. In this study, the English teacher and the shadow teacher continuously modeled complete English sentences, repeated classroom instructions, and guided the student step by step before encouraging independent verbal responses. Such instructional support enabled the student to produce longer utterances than when communicating independently.

These instructional practices also align with Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2024) because teachers provided multiple forms of support, including verbal modeling, guided practice, and repeated explanations, allowing the student to access learning through flexible instructional pathways. Similarly, the differentiated instructional strategies observed in this study reflected Tomlinson's (2017) recommendation that teaching should accommodate individual learning differences rather than expecting identical learning outcomes from all students.

The findings therefore indicate that sentence construction among autistic learners should not be viewed merely as a linguistic problem but also as a learning process that requires structured instructional support. English teachers should provide sentence frames, guided speaking activities, visual prompts, and repeated modeling to facilitate meaningful language production within inclusive classrooms.

Speaking Fluency

The findings revealed that the autistic student demonstrated relatively good pronunciation but experienced limited speaking fluency during spontaneous classroom communication. Although the student was able to pronounce familiar English words accurately, he frequently hesitated, paused before responding, and required additional time to formulate verbal responses. Classroom observations also showed that the student participated more actively when English songs were incorporated into learning activities, indicating that familiar and enjoyable learning contexts positively influenced speaking performance.

This finding supports Brown (2007), who states that speaking fluency is not merely the ability to pronounce words correctly but also the ability to produce language naturally, smoothly, and meaningfully during communication. Likewise, Harmer (2001) emphasizes that fluency develops through repeated opportunities to communicate in supportive learning environments where learners feel comfortable expressing themselves.

The findings are consistent with Hashim et al. (2022), who reported that autistic learners often demonstrate uneven language development, with pronunciation sometimes developing more rapidly than spontaneous communication skills. Similarly, Nascimento et al. (2025) found that autistic students frequently experience hesitation and delayed verbal responses despite possessing adequate receptive language abilities. The present study extends these findings by demonstrating that speaking fluency was influenced not only by individual communication characteristics but also by the learning activities implemented in the classroom.

An interesting finding of this study concerns the role of music in supporting English-speaking development. Both the English teacher and the shadow teacher explained that the

student showed a strong interest in English songs, and classroom observations confirmed that music-based activities increased the student's participation, pronunciation accuracy, and willingness to communicate. These findings suggest that music served as a motivating learning medium that reduced communication barriers and encouraged greater verbal engagement.

Previous studies have similarly highlighted the positive contribution of music to language learning among autistic learners. Hashim et al. (2022) noted that meaningful and enjoyable language exposure increases learners' motivation to acquire English vocabulary and pronunciation. Music provides repetitive language input, authentic pronunciation models, and a low-anxiety learning environment, all of which are beneficial for autistic learners who often prefer predictable and repetitive learning experiences.

The findings also suggest opportunities for integrating digital technologies into English-speaking instruction. Recent studies by Harahap and Dalimunthe (2024) demonstrated that the Speechace application effectively improves learners' pronunciation through immediate automated feedback, while Napitupulu and Dalimunthe (2025) found that Character AI and similar conversational technologies provide opportunities for learners to practice English speaking independently in supportive and low-pressure environments. Such AI-assisted speaking tools may offer additional opportunities for autistic students to practice pronunciation and speaking fluency outside the classroom while reducing communication anxiety.

These findings imply that English teachers should incorporate music-based activities, repetitive pronunciation practice, and interactive digital technologies into speaking instruction. Providing enjoyable, meaningful, and technology-supported learning experiences may increase autistic students' motivation and confidence while gradually improving speaking fluency.

Responding to Questions

The findings further revealed that responding to questions represented another significant challenge experienced by the autistic student. Although the student generally understood the teacher's questions, both interviews and classroom observations showed that additional processing time was frequently required before verbal responses could be produced. The student often paused, waited for prompts from the shadow teacher, or responded after the teacher repeated the question.

This finding is consistent with Woolfolk (2022), who explains that differences in information processing influence how learners receive, interpret, and respond to classroom instruction. Students requiring longer processing time may understand the learning material but need additional opportunities to organize their thoughts before responding verbally. Therefore, delayed responses should not necessarily be interpreted as a lack of understanding.

The present findings are also supported by Dalimunte et al. (2022), who found that autistic learners frequently experience verbal communication differences that influence the speed of expressive language production. Likewise, Nascimento et al. (2025) reported that communication delays among autistic students often become more apparent during spontaneous classroom interaction than during structured learning activities. Compared with these previous studies, the present research provides additional contextual evidence by illustrating how delayed responses were consistently observed in an inclusive senior high school English classroom.

From a sociocultural perspective, Vygotsky (1978) emphasizes that learning develops through social interaction and appropriate scaffolding. In the present study, scaffolding was

consistently provided by both the English teacher and the shadow teacher through repeated questioning, simplified instructions, verbal prompts, and positive encouragement. These instructional supports enabled the student to respond more successfully during classroom communication than when expected to answer independently.

These findings also reflect the principles of Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2024), which encourages teachers to provide multiple means of engagement and expression for diverse learners. Allowing additional response time, simplifying questions, and providing verbal cues represent flexible instructional strategies that accommodate individual differences in language processing without reducing learning expectations.

The findings therefore suggest that English teachers should avoid interpreting delayed responses as an indication of limited ability. Instead, providing sufficient wait time, clear instructions, and supportive scaffolding allows autistic learners to demonstrate their actual language competence. Such practices contribute to a more inclusive classroom environment in which learners are encouraged to participate according to their individual learning characteristics.

Internal Factors Influencing English-Speaking Development

The findings of this study indicate that the autistic student's English-speaking development was shaped by several internal factors, namely attention and concentration, processing delay, personal interest, and confidence. These factors interacted with one another and influenced the student's ability to participate in English-speaking activities within the inclusive classroom.

Attention and concentration emerged as one of the most influential factors affecting the student's speaking performance. Classroom observations showed that the student occasionally lost focus during English lessons, particularly when learning activities became lengthy or when environmental distractions were present.

However, the student's attention improved when lessons incorporated topics or activities that matched personal interests, such as English songs.

This finding is consistent with Woolfolk (2022), who explains that attention is an essential cognitive process because learners must first attend to instructional information before meaningful learning and language production can occur. When attention is disrupted, language processing and verbal responses become less effective, particularly for learners with diverse learning characteristics.

Another important internal factor was processing delay. The student frequently required additional time to understand classroom questions before producing verbal responses. Rather than indicating limited comprehension, the delayed responses reflected differences in information processing that influenced expressive communication. Similar findings were reported by Nascimento et al. (2025), who found that autistic learners often require additional processing time during second-language communication despite demonstrating adequate understanding of classroom instruction.

Personal interest also played an important role in supporting English-speaking development. The student's enthusiasm for English songs increased classroom participation, improved pronunciation, and encouraged greater willingness to communicate. This finding highlights that learning motivation among autistic learners may increase significantly when instructional activities are connected to individual interests.

Confidence represented another internal factor influencing classroom participation. Although the student occasionally hesitated before speaking, classroom observations indicated that confidence increased after receiving encouragement from the English teacher and shadow teacher. These findings suggest that confidence among autistic learners is not a fixed characteristic but can develop through continuous positive learning experiences and

supportive instructional practices.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that English-speaking development cannot be explained solely by linguistic ability. Instead, individual cognitive and motivational characteristics interact to influence how autistic learners participate in English-speaking activities.

External Factors Influencing English-Speaking Development

In addition to internal characteristics, this study found that teacher support, shadow teacher assistance, family support, and the classroom environment substantially influenced the student's English-speaking development. These findings demonstrate that speaking development is shaped not only by individual learner characteristics but also by the educational and social environments surrounding the learner.

The findings can be understood through Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), which proposes that children's development is influenced by interactions within their immediate environments, particularly family, school, teachers, and peers. In the present study, the collaboration between the English teacher, shadow teacher, classmates, and family created a supportive learning environment that encouraged the student's participation during English-speaking activities. This finding reinforces the importance of considering speaking development as a product of interconnected environmental influences rather than solely an individual responsibility.

Teacher support emerged as one of the strongest facilitating factors. The English teacher consistently implemented instructional adaptations, including repetition, simplified explanations, vocabulary reinforcement, sentence modeling, and positive feedback. These findings align with Tomlinson's (2017) Differentiated Instruction, which emphasizes adapting teaching strategies according to learners' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Rather than applying identical instructional methods to all students, differentiated instruction allows teachers to accommodate diverse learning needs within inclusive classrooms.

The findings are also consistent with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2024), which recommend providing multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression to ensure equitable learning opportunities for all students. The use of repeated explanations, visual supports, guided speaking practice, and flexible instructional strategies observed in this study reflects the practical implementation of UDL principles within English language teaching.

The shadow teacher also played an essential role by maintaining the student's attention, repeating instructions, providing individualized prompts, and encouraging independent communication. This continuous support enabled the student to participate more actively without becoming overly dependent on adult assistance.

Family support further strengthened English-speaking development. The student's exposure to English songs and positive encouragement at home complemented classroom instruction and contributed to pronunciation development and learning motivation. These findings support Bronfenbrenner's view that learning experiences occurring within the family environment significantly influence children's educational development.

Finally, the classroom environment provided meaningful opportunities for social interaction. Positive peer acceptance and collaborative learning activities encouraged the student to participate more confidently in classroom communication. These findings support Petersson-Bloom and Holmqvist (2022), who emphasize that inclusive education requires supportive classroom relationships in addition to instructional adaptations.

Overall, the findings indicate that English-speaking development results from

continuous interaction between learner characteristics and supportive educational environments. Consequently, successful English instruction for autistic learners requires collaboration among teachers, shadow teachers, families, and peers.

Educational Implications

The findings of this study provide several practical implications for English language teaching in inclusive classrooms. First, English teachers should recognize that autistic learners may require individualized instructional support rather than identical learning experiences. Repetition, sentence modeling, visual supports, simplified instructions, and sufficient response time should become regular components of English-speaking instruction.

Second, teachers should incorporate students' personal interests into classroom activities whenever possible. In this study, English songs significantly increased the student's participation and speaking confidence, suggesting that interest-based learning can serve as an effective strategy for improving communication.

Third, collaboration among English teachers, shadow teachers, families, and schools should be strengthened to provide consistent support across learning environments. Continuous communication among these stakeholders enables instructional strategies used at school to be reinforced at home, thereby supporting more sustainable language development.

Finally, English teachers are encouraged to integrate digital technologies into speaking instruction. AI-assisted applications such as Speechace and Yoodli provide learners with opportunities to practice pronunciation, fluency, and conversational skills independently while receiving immediate feedback. For autistic learners, these technologies may create supportive, low-anxiety learning environments that complement face-to-face classroom instruction.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the study focused on a single autistic student within one inclusive senior high school; therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to all autistic learners because communication characteristics and learning needs vary considerably among individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Instead, the findings should be understood as an in-depth description of one particular case.

Second, data collection was limited to classroom observations, interviews, and documentation conducted within a relatively short period. Longer observation periods might provide a more comprehensive understanding of changes in English-speaking development over time.

Future research is therefore recommended to involve multiple autistic students from different educational settings in order to obtain broader perspectives regarding English-speaking development in inclusive classrooms. Comparative studies involving students with different disability categories may also contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of inclusive English language teaching. In addition, longitudinal research examining speaking development over extended periods would provide valuable insights into how instructional support influences language development over time.

Finally, future studies should further investigate the effectiveness of AI-assisted speaking applications, including Speechace, Yoodli, Character AI, and other emerging educational technologies, in supporting English-speaking development among autistic learners in inclusive educational settings.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the English-speaking challenges experienced by an autistic student in an inclusive classroom setting and identified the internal and external factors influencing the student's speaking development. The findings revealed that the student faced several challenges in English speaking, particularly in vocabulary retention, sentence construction, speaking fluency, and responding to questions. Although the student demonstrated relatively good pronunciation, especially when singing English songs or using familiar expressions, spontaneous communication remained difficult. These challenges limited the student's ability to participate actively in English-speaking activities.

The study also found that both internal and external factors influenced the student's English-speaking development. Internal factors included difficulties in attention and concentration, delayed processing of information, and individual learning characteristics. However, confidence was not identified as a major barrier, as the student generally showed willingness to participate in classroom activities. External factors consisted of teacher support, shadow teacher assistance, family support, and a positive classroom environment. The findings suggest that effective English instruction for autistic students should involve individualized support, adaptive teaching strategies, collaboration among teachers and shadow teachers, and learning activities that incorporate students' interests. Such approaches may help create more inclusive and meaningful English learning experiences for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in inclusive classrooms.

This study contributes to the growing body of research on English language learning among autistic students in inclusive education settings. However, since the study focused on a single case, future research is recommended to involve a larger number of participants and different educational contexts to provide a broader understanding of autistic students' English-speaking development and learning needs.

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