



AN ANALYSIS OF EFL STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN DEVELOPING CRITICAL REASONING IN ENGLISH ARGUMENTATIVE SPEECHES

Nurlia Irvani¹, Saifur Rohman², & Fathiaty Murtadho³

Universitas Negeri Jakarta

Email: nurlia9906925009@mhs.unj.ac.id¹, saifurrohman@unj.ac.id²,
fathiaty.murtadho@unj.ac.id³

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the difficulties experienced by eleventh-grade students in developing critical reasoning in English argumentative speech at MAN Insan Cendekia Lampung Timur. A qualitative descriptive design was employed involving 96 students. Data were obtained from speech performances, observations, interviews, and supporting documents, and analyzed using an interactive model of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Toulmin's argumentation model was used to examine students' arguments. The findings indicate that students experienced difficulties in developing logical arguments, particularly in providing reasons and evidence to support their opinions. These difficulties were associated with limited vocabulary, grammatical difficulties, pronunciation problems, disrupted fluency, and low self-confidence. The influencing factors included linguistic, psychological, and learning-experience factors. Teachers employed contextual, inquiry, collaborative, and problem-based learning strategies, which students generally perceived positively. However, students still needed systematic support in language use and argument construction. The findings highlight the need for contextual and student-centered argumentative speaking instruction supported by linguistic and argumentative scaffolding to develop students' critical reasoning.

Keywords: *critical reasoning; english argumentative speech; speaking difficulties; toulmin argumentation model; instructional strategies.*

INTRODUCTION

Oral communication skills in English are essential competencies in twenty-first-century learning, particularly in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Speaking is not merely the ability to convey messages verbally but also involves the ability to develop ideas, defend opinions, and construct arguments logically and critically (Yang & Gamble, 2013; Le & Nguyen, 2024). In line with the demands of twenty-first-century education, speaking instruction should therefore focus not only on linguistic proficiency but also on the development of higher-order thinking skills, such as critical thinking, problem solving, and argumentation (Acar & Arslan, 2023). In this

context, argumentative speech represents a form of speaking activity that integrates language proficiency with higher-order thinking skills.

Argumentative speech requires students to express opinions through claims, reasons, evidence, and justification in a logical and systematic manner (Wang & Newell, 2025). Therefore, successful argumentative speech is determined not only by linguistic aspects such as pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and fluency but also by students' ability to develop critical reasoning while speaking (Darmawansah et al., 2024). Critical reasoning in this context refers to the ability to analyze information, evaluate reasons and evidence, establish logical connections among ideas, and defend a position based on relevant evidence (Facione, 2015). Thus, argumentative speech can be viewed as a form of communication that reveals how students' language abilities and reasoning processes operate simultaneously.

Toulmin's (1958) argumentation model provides a relevant framework for understanding this process. The model conceptualizes argumentation through several components, including claim, data/evidence, warrant, backing, qualifier, and rebuttal. In students' argumentative speeches, these components can be used to examine the extent to which students are able to state a position, provide supporting evidence, explain the relationship between evidence and claims, and anticipate or respond to opposing views. Previous studies have indicated that EFL students tend to produce simple claims without sufficient evidence and warrants (Osman & Januin, 2021; Sundari & Febriyanti, 2021). These findings suggest that difficulties in argumentative speech are not limited to speaking proficiency but also involve students' ability to construct arguments and reasoning systematically.

These difficulties become more complex because EFL students must develop ideas and arguments in a language that is not their first language. Previous research has identified several challenges faced by EFL learners, including limited vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, fluency, speaking anxiety, and low self-confidence (Hsu, 2012; Tiyas et al., 2019; Grieve et al., 2021). In argumentative speech, these linguistic and psychological barriers may interact with the cognitive demands of organizing reasons, selecting relevant evidence, and establishing logical connections among ideas. Wang and Newell (2025) emphasize that argumentation represents a concrete form of critical thinking, while other research suggests that limited reasoning abilities may result in students producing shallow, repetitive, and insufficiently evidence-based arguments (Darmawansah et al., 2024). The simultaneous use of a foreign language and the demand to construct arguments may also increase students' cognitive load, making it difficult for them to develop ideas spontaneously (Berry et al., 2025).

A constructivist perspective provides an important theoretical foundation for understanding the development of critical reasoning. From a constructivist perspective, knowledge is actively constructed through experience, social interaction, dialogue, and reflection (Piaget, 1972; Vygotsky, 1978). In EFL learning, a social constructivist approach provides opportunities for students to explore ideas, question information, exchange perspectives, and construct arguments through meaningful interaction. Le and Nguyen (2024) demonstrate that social constructivism can support students' development of reasoning and problem-solving skills, while Darmawansah et al. (2024) show that constructivist-based argumentation activities can improve argument



quality and logical connections among ideas. However, speaking instruction in EFL classrooms may still be characterized by teacher-centered practices and an emphasis on memorization or linguistic performance, limiting students' opportunities to actively develop reasoning and argumentation (Alnofaie, 2013).

Several previous studies have demonstrated the importance of integrating speaking, argumentation, and critical thinking in EFL learning. Yang and Gamble (2013) found that integrating critical-thinking activities can support the quality of students' oral communication. Vergara Montes (2022) showed that argumentative speaking can serve as a means of developing students' critical thinking and communication skills, while Ghoneam (2023) found that the application of the Toulmin model in speaking instruction can help students develop more structured arguments. Studies by Le and Nguyen (2024) and Darmawansah et al. (2024) further highlight the importance of a constructivist perspective in developing students' reasoning and argumentation. More recent studies have also indicated that debates, oral presentations, argumentative speaking, and scenario-based activities can support the development of critical thinking among EFL learners (Budiastuti, 2025; Ilyas & Istaryatiningtias, 2025; Narueprempree & Tachom, 2024).

Nevertheless, a gap remains in the existing literature. Most previous studies have focused on general speaking ability, argumentative writing, the analysis of argument structures, or the effectiveness of instructional models in improving students' critical thinking. Relatively limited attention has been given to the specific difficulties experienced by senior high school students in developing critical reasoning while delivering English argumentative speeches. Furthermore, previous studies have predominantly employed quantitative approaches that emphasize the measurement of speaking performance or critical-thinking scores. Such approaches may not fully capture how reasoning difficulties emerge in actual oral communication. Students' speech performance can instead provide authentic data for identifying how they construct claims, reasons, evidence, and logical connections during real communicative situations.

Based on this research gap, the present study integrates three dimensions: speaking difficulties, argumentative speech, and critical reasoning within a qualitative investigation. Students' video speech performances are used as the primary source of data to identify and describe the difficulties students experience when constructing arguments. Toulmin's argumentation model is employed as an analytical framework to examine key argument components, particularly claims, evidence, warrants, and rebuttals. Meanwhile, a constructivist perspective is adopted to understand how students' reasoning development is related to active engagement, interaction, and meaning construction in the learning process.

Accordingly, this study aims to identify and describe the difficulties experienced by students in developing critical reasoning in English argumentative speech, as well as to describe how these difficulties emerge in students' experiences and practices of argumentative speaking. The study also aims to analyze the factors influencing these difficulties and to explore the instructional strategies employed by teachers to support students' argumentative speaking abilities. Based on these findings,

the study further seeks to identify instructional needs that may support the development of students' critical reasoning in English argumentative speech.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore students' difficulties in developing critical reasoning during English argumentative speeches. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables an in-depth understanding of students' reasoning processes and the challenges they encounter while constructing arguments in authentic speaking performances. The research was conducted at MAN Insan Cendekia Lampung Timur and involved 96 eleventh-grade students who participated in English speaking activities focusing on argumentative speech. Participants were selected purposively because they were directly engaged in the learning activities investigated in this study.

The primary data consisted of students' argumentative speech performances in video form, classroom observations, and semi-structured interview results. Supporting documents, including lesson plans, assessment rubrics, and students' learning materials, were used as secondary data to strengthen the interpretation of the findings. Collecting data from multiple sources enabled triangulation and improved the credibility of the study.

Data was collected through four techniques. First, classroom observations were conducted to examine students' participation and speaking behavior during argumentative speech activities. Second, students' speech performances were recorded and transcribed to analyze the structure of their arguments and the manifestation of critical reasoning. Third, semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected students to identify factors influencing their difficulties in constructing arguments. Finally, document analysis was employed to examine instructional documents and assessment instruments used during the learning process.

The main research instrument was the researcher, supported by observation sheets, interview guidelines, document analysis sheets, and an argumentative speech assessment rubric. Students' reasoning was analyzed using Toulmin's Argumentation Model, which includes claim, evidence, warrant, backing, qualifier, and rebuttal. This analytical framework enabled the identification of weaknesses in students' argument construction and their critical reasoning during speech performances.

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. Speech transcripts, observation notes, and interview data were coded to identify recurring themes related to reasoning difficulties, linguistic limitations, and psychological barriers. Emerging categories were compared across different data sources to enhance analytical consistency.

To ensure trustworthiness, this study applied source triangulation, technique triangulation, prolonged engagement, and member checking. Ethical considerations were also maintained by obtaining participants' consent, ensuring confidentiality, and using the collected data exclusively for academic purposes.



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

The thematic analysis showed that students' argumentative speaking abilities were related to their learning conditions and the instructional strategies implemented by teachers. The analysis generated five interconnected themes: (1) types of students' speaking difficulties, (2) factors influencing these difficulties, (3) instructional strategies implemented by teachers, (4) students' perceptions of the instructional strategies, and (5) needs for instructional model development.

1. Types of Students' Speaking Difficulties

The findings indicate that students experienced difficulties in both linguistic aspects and argument development. Linguistic difficulties included limited vocabulary, grammatical difficulties, and disrupted speaking fluency, while argumentative difficulties were related to providing reasons and supporting evidence for their opinions.

Limited vocabulary was one of the most frequently reported difficulties. One student stated, "*Pemahaman saya terhadap bahasanya masih kurang*" (Student, Ref.293). This finding was supported by Teacher 1, who explained that students often understood the ideas they wanted to express but had difficulty transferring their opinions from Indonesian into English: "*Kesulitan utama mereka adalah mengubah opini dari bahasa Indonesia ke struktur bahasa Inggris*" (Teacher 1, Ref.26).

Students also experienced difficulties in constructing grammatically appropriate sentences. Teacher 2 stated, "*Siswa masih kesulitan menyusun kalimat yang benar.*" These difficulties affected speaking fluency because students often paused while searching for appropriate words or sentence structures. As Teacher 1 explained, "*Siswa sering berhenti karena mencari kata yang tepat.*"

In addition to linguistic difficulties, students experienced difficulties in developing arguments. Teacher 2 stated, "*Siswa sulit mengembangkan alasan yang logis.*" This finding indicates that argumentative speaking requires not only English language competence but also the ability to develop logical reasons and supporting evidence.

2. Factors Influencing Students' Difficulties

Three main factors were identified as influencing students' speaking difficulties: linguistic, psychological, and learning-experience factors. Linguistic factors included limited vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. Psychological factors were mainly related to students' lack of confidence, while learning-experience factors concerned students' limited experience in expressing opinions argumentatively.

Teacher 2 directly identified lack of confidence as one of the students' difficulties: "*Kurang percaya diri*" (Ref.6). In addition, students were not accustomed to expressing and defending opinions because previous learning activities had focused more on answering questions than on developing reasons and supporting arguments.

3. Instructional Strategies Implemented by Teachers

The third theme represents the central focus of the findings. The analysis showed that teachers had implemented several strategies to support students' argumentative speaking, including contextual learning, inquiry learning, collaborative learning, and problem-based learning.

In contextual learning, teachers connected learning materials with issues that were familiar and relevant to students' lives. Teacher 1 stated, "*Menggunakan isu yang sedang viral*" (Ref.22), while a student confirmed that "*Guru mengaitkan materi dengan situasi yang dialami siswa*" (Student, Ref.289).

Teachers also implemented inquiry learning by asking students to search for information and supporting facts before presenting their arguments. Teacher 1 explained that students were required to "*Mencari minimal dua fakta pendukung*" (Ref.35), while Teacher 2 stated that students were encouraged to "*Mencari informasi dari berbagai sumber*" (Ref.11). This practice was also reflected in a student's statement: "*Saya mencari lewat media sosial*" (Student, Ref.297).

Collaborative learning was implemented through group discussions, exchange of ideas, feedback, and presentations. Teachers also used real-life problems as prompts for discussion through problem-based learning. These strategies provided students with opportunities to obtain ideas, seek information, exchange perspectives, and express their opinions.

4. Students' Perceptions of the Instructional Strategies

Overall, students expressed positive perceptions of the instructional strategies implemented by teachers. Contextual topics and discussion activities were considered more engaging and helped students generate ideas for developing arguments.

However, these strategies did not fully address students' linguistic difficulties. Students still required support in vocabulary, grammar, speaking fluency, and argument construction. Thus, although the existing strategies supported student engagement, they needed to be complemented by more systematic linguistic and argumentative support.

5. Needs for Instructional Model Development

The findings indicate that the primary need is not to replace the strategies already used by teachers but to refine them. The proposed instructional model should retain contextual, inquiry-based, collaborative, and problem-based characteristics while incorporating systematic linguistic and argumentative scaffolding.

Such scaffolding is needed to help students develop vocabulary, construct sentences, maintain speaking fluency, and develop reasons and evidence to support their opinions. Therefore, the model is conceptualized as a refinement of existing instructional practices rather than a replacement for them.

6. Development of Codes into Themes

To demonstrate the development of thematic analysis, the data were examined through open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The coding process is summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1. Development of Codes into Themes**

Analysis Stage	Results
Open Coding	Limited vocabulary, grammar difficulties, pronunciation, lack of confidence, difficulty developing arguments, contextual issues, group discussions, inquiry, presentations, feedback, speaking practice, and media use.
Axial Coding	Codes were grouped into categories of speaking difficulties, influencing factors, contextual learning, inquiry learning, collaborative learning, problem-based learning, students' perceptions, and instructional needs.
Selective Coding	The analysis was redirected toward teachers' instructional strategies as the core theme, while students' difficulties were positioned as the context underlying the implementation of these strategies.
Final Themes	(1) Types of speaking difficulties; (2) factors influencing difficulties; (3) teachers' instructional strategies; (4) students' perceptions of the strategies; and (5) needs for instructional model development.

7. Quotation Traceability

To maintain transparency and credibility, the main themes were supported by quotations that could be traced to the original data sources. Selected quotations are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Quotation Traceability

Theme	Subtheme	Informant	Ref.	Key Quotation
Speaking difficulties	Limited vocabulary	Student	293	"Pemahaman saya terhadap bahasanya masih kurang."
Speaking difficulties	Translating ideas into English	Teacher 1	26	"Kesulitan utama mereka adalah mengubah opini dari bahasa Indonesia ke struktur bahasa Inggris."
Influencing factors	Lack of confidence	Teacher 2	6	"Kurang percaya diri."
Instructional strategies	Contextual issues	Teacher 1	22	"Menggunakan isu yang sedang viral."
Instructional strategies	Inquiry learning	Teacher 1	35	"Mencari minimal dua fakta pendukung."
Instructional strategies	Inquiry learning	Teacher 2	11	"Mencari informasi dari berbagai sumber."
Students' perceptions	Contextual learning	Student	289	"Guru mengaitkan materi dengan situasi yang dialami siswa."
Students' perceptions	Information seeking	Student	297	"Saya mencari lewat media sosial."

The traceability table demonstrates the direct connection between the interpretations and the empirical data obtained from teachers and students. The use of reference codes also provides an audit trail that supports the transparency of the thematic analysis.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that students' difficulties in argumentative speaking involve both language competence and reasoning ability. Students may have ideas

about a topic, but limited vocabulary and grammatical knowledge make it difficult for them to express those ideas spontaneously. At the same time, students have difficulty developing logical reasons and supporting evidence. This suggests that argumentative speaking instruction needs to integrate linguistic support with the development of reasoning skills.

The identification of linguistic, psychological, and learning-experience factors further indicates that students' difficulties are interconnected. Limited language proficiency may increase students' hesitation when speaking, while low confidence may reduce their willingness to express opinions. Limited experience in constructing arguments may further restrict opportunities to develop these abilities. Therefore, students need repeated and structured opportunities to practice argumentative speaking in a supportive learning environment.

An important finding concerns the instructional strategies implemented by teachers. The use of real-life contexts, inquiry learning, collaborative learning, and problem-based learning indicates that existing classroom practices already provide opportunities for students to actively seek information, exchange ideas, and express opinions. These strategies provide meaningful contexts in which students can develop arguments.

However, students' positive perceptions of these strategies do not indicate that all difficulties have been resolved. Students continued to experience problems with vocabulary, grammar, and speaking fluency. This finding suggests a gap between students' engagement in learning activities and their ability to linguistically express arguments. Therefore, contextual, collaborative, and problem-based activities need to be accompanied by explicit and systematic linguistic support.

The relationship among the five themes points to the need for an integrative instructional model. Students' difficulties provide the basis for identifying instructional needs, while the strategies already implemented by teachers provide an empirical foundation for model development. Accordingly, the proposed model should not replace teachers' existing practices but refine them through the integration of linguistic and argumentative scaffolding.

Overall, the findings suggest three important components for developing argumentative speaking instruction: meaningful contexts, activities that promote the construction and exchange of ideas, and structured linguistic and argumentative scaffolding. These components provide a conceptual basis for designing an instructional model that is more responsive to the actual needs of both students and teachers.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated students' difficulties in developing critical reasoning in English argumentative speech at MAN Insan Cendekia Lampung Timur. The findings indicate that students experienced difficulties not only in linguistic aspects, including vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and fluency, but also in developing logical reasons and supporting evidence for their opinions. These difficulties were influenced by linguistic, psychological, and learning-experience factors.



The study also found that teachers had implemented contextual learning, inquiry learning, collaborative learning, and problem-based learning to support students' argumentative speaking. Students generally perceived these strategies positively because they helped them engage in learning and generate ideas. However, the strategies did not fully address students' linguistic and argumentative difficulties. Therefore, the findings suggest the need to refine existing instructional practices by integrating systematic linguistic and argumentative scaffolding. Such an approach can provide students with structured support to develop language proficiency and critical reasoning in English argumentative speech.

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