

The Persona Shield: How Debate-Based Role-Play Precedes Fluency in an *Indonesian Madrasah*

Egamberdieva Mohlaroyim*, Dwi Fita Heriyawati

Universitas Islam Malang, Indonesia

Email Corresponding : sultanaliyah678@gmail.com

Abstract

Indonesian students study English for years and still fall silent when asked to speak it. Two cultural pressures explain much of this. *Malu* attaches shame to public error, while *Sok Inggris* marks a fluent speaker as pretentious. Existing research treats anxiety reduction and fluency improvement as parallel gains from role-play, yet no study has examined how the two are related. This qualitative descriptive study investigated debate-based role-play among 25 Grade XI students at MA Almarif Singosari, a *madrasah aliyah* in East Java. Data came from classroom observation, written reflection sheets completed by all participants, and semi-structured interviews with seven purposively selected students and their English teacher. Thematic analysis produced four findings. Assigned debate roles displaced students' self-monitoring and reduced hesitation. The persona shifted ownership of error from the student to the character, a mechanism one student described as wearing a shield. Students valued the strategy for its utility, engagement, and communicative autonomy. Vocabulary limits and residual shame nevertheless persisted, with 60 percent naming lexical gaps as their chief difficulty and 24 percent still reporting embarrassment. These findings indicate that *anxiety mitigation* precedes fluency rather than accompanying it, and that vocabulary is the constraint that survives it. Teachers who address anxiety alone will produce students willing to speak but short of words. Speaking instruction should therefore establish the affective condition first and supply lexical resources before the task, not after it fails.

How to Cite:

Mohlaroyim, E., & Heriyawati, D. F. (2025). The Persona Shield: How Debate-Based Role-Play Precedes Fluency in an *Indonesian Madrasah*. *Educazione: Journal of Education and Learning*, 3(1), 135–148.

Article History

Received : July 2025
Revised : August 2025
Accepted : November 2025

Keywords:

Debate-Based Role-Play, Speaking Anxiety, Speaking Fluency, Persona Shield

INTRODUCTION

English occupies a paradoxical position in Indonesian secondary education. The language is compulsory from primary school through university; it appears on national assessments, and policy documents treat it as a prerequisite for economic participation (Goode, 2020; Sukirman & Linse, 2022). Yet *Indonesian learners* consistently produce spoken English below the level their years of instruction would predict (Fuangkarn & Rimkeeratikul, 2020; Habibi et al., 2024). The problem is not comprehension. Students who can parse a written passage and identify a grammatical error will fall silent when asked to say anything aloud, and that silence deepens rather than eases as they advance through the grades (Darmawangsa et al., 2020; Loureiro et al., 2020). What sustains the pattern is not a deficit of knowledge but a social cost attached to using it. *Indonesian classrooms* carry two culturally specific pressures that operate at once (Imelwaty et al., 2023). *Malu* is a form of shame triggered by public error. *Sok Inggris* is a peer sanction that marks a student who speaks English well as pretentious. A learner who speaks risks the first. A learner who speaks well risks the second. The rational response, and the one most students adopt, is to say nothing.

Research on drama-based and role-play interventions has responded to this problem along three lines, each establishing part of the picture without connecting them. The first line shows that structured speaking practice measurably reduces anxiety. Ölmezer-Öztürk and Öztürk (2021) worked with 52 university freshmen across a fourteen-week oral communication course and found

significant post-test reductions in foreign language speaking anxiety after a process enriched with mini-speeches, presentations, and scaffolded feedback. The second line demonstrates that dramatic framing improves oral performance. Lee and Liu (2022) ran a year-long quasi-experimental study in which college EFL learners dramatized a picture book for a genuine community audience, and drama-based pedagogy outperformed conventional public speaking instruction, though the difference emerged only after sustained exposure. The third line, represented by Lee and Liu (2022), turns to learners' emotions directly, using process drama as participatory action research to interrogate the authenticity of classroom communication in Turkey.

Read together, these three lines share a limitation that is not accidental but structural. Each treats anxiety reduction and oral improvement as parallel benefits that a single intervention happens to deliver, and none asks what relationship holds between the two. That silence follows directly from how the question has been framed. Measuring anxiety before and after an intervention cannot reveal what students then did with the speech that anxiety had suppressed. Measuring oral performance cannot reveal what had to fall away before performance became possible at all. Attending to learners' emotions comes closer, yet stops at the threshold of the mechanism, describing that a fictional role relieves fear without explaining how the relief is produced. The result is a literature that knows role-play works and does not know why. Its verdict is correct and its account is empty, and an empty account cannot be taught, adapted, or applied by a teacher facing a silent classroom on a Tuesday morning. A further absence compounds the first. This body of work has not entered the Indonesian *madrasah*, where "*Malu*" and "*Sok Inggris*" acquire religious and communal force that no secular Western classroom supplies, and where the cost of speaking is therefore not the same cost that this research has been measuring.

This study examines how debate-based role-play shapes speaking fluency and speaking anxiety among Grade XI students at MA Almarif Singosari, a *madrasah aliyah* in East Java. Four questions organize the inquiry. First, how does the strategy affect students' speaking fluency across the stages of a structured debate? Second, through what mechanism does the assignment of a debate persona operate on students' fear of speaking? Third, how do students evaluate the strategy, and against what do they measure its value? Fourth, what difficulties persist once the fear of speaking has receded? The fourth question is the one the existing literature has not thought to ask. A body of research that treats anxiety reduction as a terminal outcome has no reason to inquire into what becomes visible after anxiety recedes. Answering it requires a qualitative design capable of tracing mechanism rather than magnitude, since the object of inquiry is what students experience when they speak under an assigned identity.

The central argument advanced here is that *anxiety mitigation* functions as a precondition for fluency rather than as a co-outcome of it, and that vocabulary is the constraint that survives it. The persona does not teach students English. It lowers the social cost of error to the point where students will use the English they already possess, and the linguistic scaffold then supplies the sentence-level resources that make sustained speech possible once they have begun. Neither condition alone produces fluent output. What follows from this ordering is a finding that a purely quantitative design would have missed. Once students began to speak at length, a constraint became visible that their silence had previously concealed, namely the limits of their own lexicon. This study explores that sequence through the accounts of students who lived it, and through the observations of a teacher who had watched the same cohort stay silent for years. The methodological approach that permits this exploration is set out in the following section.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to examine how debate-based role-play shapes speaking fluency and speaking anxiety among *Indonesian senior* high school students (Indrayadi et al., 2025; Suratin & Sribayak, 2025). The design was chosen because the research questions concern meaning rather than magnitude. They ask what students experience when they

speak under an assigned persona, why that experience differs from ordinary classroom speaking, and what obstacles persist once the fear of speaking has receded, and none of these can be settled by measuring an outcome variable. The research was conducted at MA Almarif Singosari, a *madrasah aliyah* in Singosari, Malang Regency, East Java. A *madrasah* is an Islamic educational institution supervised by the Ministry of Religious Affairs that integrates general academic subjects with Islamic religious education. The site was selected in order to examine English speaking skills within a *madrasah* environment specifically, a setting underrepresented in the Indonesian speaking anxiety literature, and to investigate the sources of the fear, anxiety, and reluctance that senior students report when required to speak English.

Twenty-five Grade XI students participated, together with their English teacher. This age group was selected purposively on the basis of the researchers' prior observations across public, private, and *madrasah* settings, in which senior high school EFL learners consistently demonstrated speaking proficiency below expectations for their level, relying heavily on textbook material rather than developing genuine oral competence, and displaying low fluency and low confidence whenever spontaneous spoken English was required (Rayati et al., 2022). Grade XI students occupy a developmentally consequential position, moving from basic language acquisition toward more abstract and argumentative use, and their familiarity with contested issues encountered through social media makes them capable of sustaining debate on substantive motions. Seven of the twenty-five were subsequently selected for interview on the basis of their observable participation during the role-play. Active participants were identified by their capacity to respond quickly to counter-arguments and to justify their positions, while reserved participants were identified by limited vocabulary, visible shyness, and difficulty constructing counter-arguments. This contrast was deliberate, since sampling for divergence rather than for typicality allows a wider range of experience to surface.

The classroom was arranged to support communication and interaction rather than frontal instruction, a condition necessary for the debate format because the room had to function as a space in which students could act outside the sociocultural constraints imposed by *Malu* and by the peer policing of *Sok Ingggris*. The researchers acted as participant observers, assisted by the class English teacher, who monitored shifts in students' affective behavior and patterns of language use.

Data were collected through three complementary instruments, each addressing a limitations of the others (Gillings & Jaworska, 2025; Koro et al., 2024; Thompson, 2023). Classroom observation, guided by a five-indicator checklist covering fluency, anxiety, vocabulary use, interaction, and confidence, recorded speaking behavior as it occurred, including hesitation patterns, filler use, eye contact, voice projection, body movement, and peer collaboration, and provided behavioral evidence independent of student self-reports. A written reflection sheet, completed by all 25 students immediately after the session, captured self-assessments of enjoyment, confidence, difficulty, and motivation while the experience remained immediate, yielding both quantified response patterns and written commentary in the students' own words. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted with the seven purposively selected students and with the class teacher, who supplied a longitudinal comparison unavailable to the researchers, having taught this cohort long enough to recognize their established patterns of participation and silence. The three instruments are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Data Collection Instruments

Instrument	Participants	Data Obtained	Analytical Function
Classroom observation checklist	25 students	Hesitation and filler patterns; eye contact, voice projection, body movement; peer collaboration	Behavioral evidence independent of self-report
Student reflection sheet	25 students	Enjoyment of assigned role; self-rated confidence (1–10); greatest reported difficulty; motivation for future debate	Immediate self-assessment across the full cohort; distribution of reported difficulties
Semi-structured	7 students; 1	Students' accounts of speaking under	Explanatory mechanism;

Instrument	Participants	Data Obtained	Analytical Function
interview	English teacher	an assigned persona and the teacher's comparison with ordinary lessons	longitudinal and external corroboration

Source: Developed by the researchers (2025)

Data were analyzed thematically through an iterative process of familiarization, coding, theme construction, and verification (Chang & Wang, 2021; Naeem et al., 2025; Udayanga, 2025). The researchers first read the interview transcripts and reflection sheets repeatedly alongside the observation records to establish an overall sense of the material before coding began. Initial codes were generated inductively, staying close to the participants' own language rather than to categories drawn from the literature, so that a student's description of her role as a shield became a code in those terms rather than being subsumed immediately under an existing theoretical construct. Codes were then grouped into candidate themes, which were tested against the full data set and revised where the evidence did not support them (Sun et al., 2025). Themes were retained only when corroborated across at least two of the three data sources, which is the point at which triangulation operated as an analytical procedure rather than as a claim. Where sources diverged, the divergence was preserved and treated as a finding in its own right. Trustworthiness was supported through source triangulation, verbatim reporting of participant quotations, and member checking with the class teacher.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

Debate Roles Displaced Students' Self-Monitoring and Reduced Hesitation

Classroom observation prior to the intervention captured a pattern familiar to teachers of Indonesian EFL classrooms. Students produced language slowly and defensively, weighing grammatical form before releasing an utterance, so that speech arrived in fragments punctuated by extended silence and by fillers such as "um" and "uh." What changed during the debate sessions was not the students' grammatical knowledge, which the intervention did not target, but the order of their priorities. Once the debate was underway, the communicative goal of persuading an opposing group displaced the goal of producing a well-formed sentence. Observation across the four debate stages recorded a steady reduction in long pauses and hesitation markers, and a corresponding rise in the use of discourse markers that carried speech forward rather than arresting it. *Lexical retrieval*, previously slow and cautious, accelerated as students actively searched for the words their roles demanded. Fluency here is best understood not as an increase in speed but as a decrease in breakdown. Students stopped less often, and recovered faster when they did stop.

Students themselves located the source of this shift in the cognitive absorption that came with playing an active character. One participant, assigned the role of Expert, wrote:

"Honestly, at first I thought I would freeze every two seconds because my English is not perfect. But when I got the role of the 'Expert' and used the vocabulary cards, I was too busy building arguments for my team. I forgot that my friends were watching me. I just wanted to win the argument." (Student 4, Reflection Sheet)

A second participant pointed to the scaffolding rather than the role itself:

"The template and the 'Useful Expressions' sheet were like a map. Usually I say 'ummm... uh...' a lot because I don't know how to start. But today I could just say 'In my opinion...' and the words came out. I didn't have to open my textbook." (Student 5, Reflection Sheet)

The class teacher, observing the same session, framed the change in terms of participation rates:

"In a normal lesson, maybe only 20–30% of the students are active. But during the debate, almost the entire class was engaged. They were speaking with much more fluency than usual because they had a specific mission for their team." (Teacher, Interview)

Taken together, these three accounts point to two distinct mechanisms operating at once. Student 4 describes an attentional displacement. The effort of constructing an argument consumed the cognitive resources that would otherwise have been spent monitoring her own performance and gauging the audience's reaction; consequently, fluency improved not because she tried harder to be fluent, but because she stopped trying to be careful. Student 5 describes a different, more mundane phenomenon. Her account attributes the change to a concrete linguistic resource, an expression sheet that supplied sentence openings, allowing her to bypass the retrieval bottleneck at precisely the point where her speech had previously stalled. The teacher's testimony supplies a third angle, shifting the unit of analysis from the individual to the class. The debate's team structure distributed the obligation to speak across all participants rather than allowing it to concentrate, as it usually does, among a confident minority. Fluency in this classroom therefore appears to be the product of a psychological condition and a material scaffold working in combination, not of either one alone.

The distinction matters for what follows. Student 4's account and Student 5's account are not two versions of the same finding but two separable conditions, and the reflection data allow them to be separated. Every student in the class reported using the Useful Expressions, which means the material scaffold was available to all twenty-five participants regardless of how they experienced their role. Yet the psychological effect Student 4 describes, being absorbed by the character to the point of forgetting the audience, is not reported uniformly, and the residual difficulties examined in 4.1.4 indicate that some learners remained conscious of being watched throughout. Scaffolding, in other words, appears to have been a necessary condition for fluent output but not a sufficient one. Where students also entered the persona fully, the two mechanisms compounded and hesitation fell away. Where they did not, the expression sheet still supplied sentence openings, but the older habit of self-monitoring persisted beneath them. This finding sets up the question that the next theme addresses directly, namely how the assigned role operated on students' fear of speaking.

Assigned Personas Shifted Ownership of Error from Student to Character

The clearest account of what the assigned role accomplished came from a student who had entered the session expecting to remain silent, as she typically did:

"Usually I choose to be silent because I am afraid of making mistakes and feeling 'Malu' (embarrassed) in front of my classmates. But today, I was not myself, I was the 'Pro-group speaker'. If my English was wrong, it was the character who was wrong, not me. It was like wearing a shield." (Student 6, Student Interview)

The formulation is the student's own, and it is precise. She does not claim that her English improved, nor that her fear disappeared. She claims that the fear was redirected onto a figure who could absorb it. The role did not make error less likely; it made error survivable, by relocating responsibility away from the self who would face her classmates afterward. Observation registered this redirection in students' bodies before it appeared in their speech. The behaviors recorded before the intervention, such as stuttering, restless movement, a lowered voice, and an unwillingness to meet anyone's eyes, were the postures of someone bracing for judgment. During the debate, students held eye contact, projected their voices, and consulted teammates mid-argument rather than retreating into isolation.

The teacher, who had taught this cohort long enough to recognize their habitual silences, arrived independently at the same metaphor:

"There was a significant decrease in shyness. Usually, they were afraid of my judgment or their peers' laughter. But when they wore the 'shield' of the role, their focus shifted to the argument, not to their own mistakes." (Teacher, Interview)

The fact that a student and her teacher independently invoked the same 'shield' metaphor

is a significant finding, indicating that the protective function of the role was experienced consciously rather than imposed by the researcher. The teacher's phrasing also distinguishes two sources of threat, her own judgment and the peers' laughter, corresponding to the vertical and horizontal pressures that operate in this classroom. The role addressed both at once, because within the fiction of the debate, elaborate English was a requirement of the character rather than a personal affectation. An Expert who spoke like an Expert was performing competently, not showing off. What the persona suspended, therefore, was not the students' capacity to feel *malu* but the social conditions under which shame is normally assigned. The behavioral shift observed across the sessions is set out in Figure 1.

Anxiety Indicators: Before and During the Debate Sessions
(Classroom Observation, n=25)

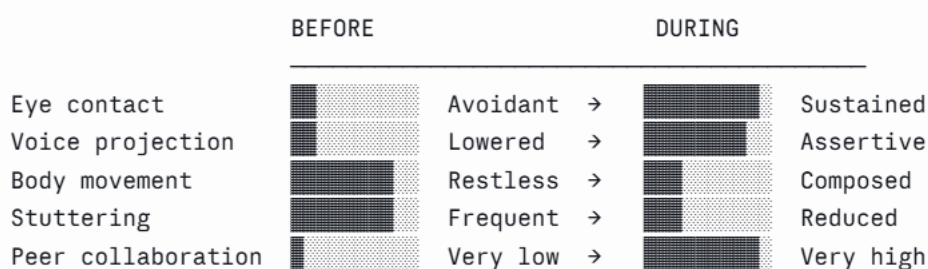


Figure 1. Observed Shift in Anxiety and Engagement Indicators During Debate-Based Role-Play

Source: Processed from classroom observation data (2025)

Figure 1 indicates that the reduction in anxiety was not confined to what students reported but was visible in how they held themselves. The four indicators associated with apprehension, avoidant gaze, lowered voice, restless movement, and stuttering, all moved in the same direction, while peer collaboration moved in the opposite direction, rising from near-absence to a sustained feature of the sessions. The simultaneity matters. A student who is no longer bracing for ridicule has cognitive and physical resources available for something else, and in this classroom that surplus was spent on turning toward teammates rather than away from them. The persona did not merely reduce fear; it converted the energy previously devoted to self-protection into collaborative work on the argument. This reading is consistent with Student 6's own explanation, in which the shield is described not as something that calms her but as something that frees her attention for the task. The reflection data qualify how far this protection extended, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Students' Self-Reported Affective Response to Debate-Based Role-Play (n = 25)

Indicator	Results	Representative Quotation
Enjoyment of assigned role	92% (23 students) reported enjoying their roles	"I loved being an Expert; it made me feel like I had a real job."
Self-rated confidence during the debate	Mean = 8.7 (range 7–10); no rating below 7	"I give myself a 9 because I wasn't afraid of the audience."
Embarrassment ("Malu") as the greatest difficulty	24% (6 students)	"Usually, I am embarrassed (malu) in front of friends, but today I forgot it."
Motivation for future debate activities	96% (24 students)	"This is better than just reading books. I want to speak more English now."

Source: Processed from student reflection sheets (2025)

Table 2 shows that the persona effect was broad but not total. Enjoyment and motivation reached almost the entire cohort, and confidence clustered high enough that no student rated the experience below seven, which is difficult to reconcile with the passive, anxiety-dominated

behavior recorded before the intervention. Yet six students still identified embarrassment as their single greatest obstacle even while the role was in force, and the phrasing of the representative quotation locates the relief firmly inside the session rather than beyond it. The student says she "usually" feels embarrassed, and that "today" she forgot it. The temporal markers are the finding. On this evidence, the persona operates as a temporary architecture rather than a cure, suspending the conditions that produce speaking anxiety for as long as the fiction is sustained, which proves sufficient for a student to speak, while leaving the underlying disposition unaltered once the role is set aside.

Students Valued the Strategy for Its Utility, Engagement, and Autonomy

Students' appraisal of debate-based role-play was not a singular sentiment but a cluster of judgments regarding the benefits of the activity over ordinary instruction. Analysis of interview and reflection data revealed three consistent dimensions through which students evaluated the strategy. The first dimension concerned cognitive utility: whether the activity provided practical, applicable knowledge. The second concerned affective engagement: whether the activity sustained their attention and fostered a desire to participate. The third concerned communicative autonomy: whether the activity allowed them to direct their own speech rather than waiting to be prompted. Although these dimensions are analytically distinct, students frequently cited one without referencing the others. These dimensions share a common point of reference: students consistently defined the value of the debate against the grammar-focused, textbook-centered lessons that characterize their typical English instruction.

The clearest statement of cognitive utility came from a student who framed the strategy as filling a gap she had felt for years:

"This is what we really need in high school. Usually, English class is just about written questions and grammar rules, which is boring. But this debate forced us to think fast, work together, and speak immediately. I hope the teacher uses this strategy every week so our English gets fluent faster." (Student 1, Student Interview)

The role of moderator provided a distinct, more specific account where the source of confidence was professional identity rather than enjoyment:

"Being the Moderator felt like a big responsibility. I had to make sure the debate ran smoothly, so I had to speak. It wasn't about my English being good or bad; it was about doing my job. That gave me the confidence to speak up." (Student 5, Student Interview)

The teacher, reflecting on the strategy's longer-term value, attributed it to the automatization of speech rather than in any single session:

"If we do this consistently, they will build their muscle memory for speaking. It teaches them not just vocabulary, but how to think and respond quickly in English, which is what they lack the most." (Teacher, Interview)

The three attitudinal dimensions, together with the evidence supporting each, are set out in Table 3.

Table 3. Dimensions of Students' Perceptions of Debate-Based Role-Play

Dimension	Definition	Supporting Evidence	Data Source
Cognitive utility	Perceived effectiveness of the activity as a means of practicing genuine oral communication, contrasted with grammar-oriented instruction.	Explicit rejection of written questions and grammar rules; demand for weekly repetition of the strategy; teacher's account of muscle memory for speaking	Student Interview; Teacher Interview
Affective engagement	Intrinsic motivation generated by the competitive, team-based structure of the assigned roles.	92% (23 students) reported enjoying their roles; 96% (24 students) expressed motivation for future debates	Reflection Sheet

Dimension	Definition	Supporting Evidence	Data Source
Communicative autonomy	The capacity to manage one's speech within a character persona, without continuous teacher direction.	The moderator's account of "doing my job" rather than being evaluated on English; the teacher's observation that each student carried a specific mission.	Student Interview; Teacher Interview; Observation

Source: Data processed from interviews, reflection sheets, and observations (2025).

Table 3 clarifies that the three dimensions rest on different evidentiary bases and are not simply three descriptions of enjoyment. Affective engagement is the dimension the reflection data measure most directly, and the figures are close to unanimous. Cognitive utility, by contrast, emerges from interview data and carries an evaluative edge that the percentages cannot capture, since Student 1 does not merely say she enjoyed the debate but says it supplied something her prior instruction had withheld. Communicative autonomy is the most analytically consequential of the three. Student 5's account inverts the usual logic of a speaking class, in which a student speaks in order to be assessed on her English. As Moderator, she spoke in order to discharge a function, and the quality of her English became instrumental to that function rather than the object of scrutiny. The teacher's testimony corroborates this from outside, describing every student as carrying a specific mission. Motivation, in this classroom, followed from being given something to do rather than something to be graded on.

Vocabulary Limitations and Residual Shame Constrained a Majority of Learners.

The gains documented above did not eliminate difficulty, and the reflection data identify the principal obstacle with unusual precision. When asked to name the single hardest aspect of speaking English during the debate, students converged overwhelmingly on *lexical retrieval* rather than on grammar or on fear. The distribution matters because it reorders the assumptions that commonly govern speaking instruction in this setting, where anxiety is typically treated as the primary barrier and vocabulary as a secondary technical matter. The reflection data invert that ordering. They also reveal a second, less visible constraint that the percentages alone would conceal, specifically, a group of students whose vocabulary was adequate but who nonetheless lost access to it under pressure. The distribution of reported difficulties is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Students' Self-Reported Primary Difficulty During the Debate (n = 25)

Reported Difficulty	Proportion	Number of Students	Representative Quotation
Not finding words (vocabulary)	60%	15	"The card helped me start my sentence without thinking too long."
Embarrassment ("Malu")	24%	6	"Usually, I am embarrassed (Malu) in front of friends, but today I forgot it."
Fear of grammar	16%	4	-

Source: Processed from student reflection sheets (2025)

Table 4 establishes that the dominant constraint in this classroom was lexical rather than affective, with three out of every five students naming vocabulary as their chief difficulty even after the persona had reduced their fear of speaking. The finding qualifies the persona effect documented in the preceding theme rather than contradicting it. Removing the fear of judgment does not supply the words a student never possessed, and a learner freed to speak will discover, at the moment of speaking, exactly which resources she lacks. The 24% who still named embarrassment as their greatest obstacle are equally significant, since they indicate that the shield did not close over the entire cohort uniformly. Grammar, notably, was the least reported difficulty at 16%, which is striking given that grammar dominates the instruction these students ordinarily receive. The activity appears to have exposed a mismatch between what the curriculum emphasizes and what students actually need when required to speak.

Interview and observation data specify the mechanism behind the lexical constraint. One student described the retrieval failure directly:

"I understood my character's mission, but my vocabulary was too limited. I wanted to say a complex idea, but I could only say simple sentences. I had to pause a lot to translate in my head." (Student 7, Reflection Sheet)

The teacher's account confirms the pattern observed externally and identifies the compensatory strategy students adopted.

"They adapted well to the roles, but their limited vocabulary prevented them from conveying strong ideas quickly. They often mixed in Indonesian words when they were stuck." (Teacher, Interview)

Read against Table 4, these two accounts describe a bottleneck that sits downstream of anxiety rather than alongside it. Student 7 is explicit that the obstacle was neither fear nor confusion about her task, as she understood her character's mission perfectly well. The obstacle was the gap between the complexity of the idea she held and the lexical means available to express it, which forced her back into mental translation; this mental translation produced precisely the pauses the intervention had otherwise reduced. The teacher's observation of code-switching describes the same bottleneck from a different vantage, as a student who inserts an *Indonesian word* has not stopped communicating but has run out of English at that specific point. Alongside this lexical constraint, observation also recorded a psychological dualism in a smaller group of students whose vocabulary control was demonstrably adequate but who froze momentarily under the pressure of the exchange, losing access to words they had used successfully in earlier stages of the same session. For these students, the difficulty was not the absence of the word but the momentary unavailability of a word they possessed.

The four themes examined above therefore describe a single process rather than four separate outcomes. The assigned persona lowered the social risk of speaking, which released students into speech; the scaffolding supplied the sentence-level resources that made that speech sustainable; students recognized and valued both, and asked for the strategy to be repeated. What the strategy did not do was expand the lexicon the students brought with them, and it is at that boundary that the residual difficulties cluster. The intervention removed the barrier that had prevented students from using what they knew, and in doing so it revealed, with some precision, the limits of what they knew.

Discussion

The persona effect documented in this study operates on a mechanism that Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis predicts but does not fully specify (L. Wang, 2020). Krashen holds that anxiety raises a psychological barrier preventing known language from becoming spoken output, yet the hypothesis says little about what lowers that barrier under real classroom conditions. The present findings supply one answer. Assigning students concrete debate roles allowed them to detach personal identity from speaking performance, producing what this study terms the Persona Shield. Zang (2023) reported a comparable pattern among Indonesian secondary students, finding that structured communicative identities reduced anxiety and strengthened self-assurance, and Cahya and Churnia (2026) identified emotionally safe, low-stakes classroom environments as among the most effective conditions for lowering the affective filter. What the present data add is the students' own account of the mechanism. Student 6 did not describe feeling calmer; she described the mistake belonging to someone else. That relocation of ownership, rather than any general reduction in tension, is what permitted her to speak. The finding also extends Uztosun (2021), who showed that role assignment disrupts peer-driven social pressure by reframing speaking identity from personal to professional. In this classroom, because every student was performing a role, elaborate English registered as a requirement of the character rather than as personal pretension, which neutralized the "*Sok Inggris*" stigma that ordinarily polices participation.

The fluency gains observed here fit an interactionist account of language development. Rather than waiting to be called on, students listened, decoded, detected contradictions, and formulated arguments in real time, which is precisely the negotiation of meaning that the Interaction Hypothesis (Gillings & Jaworska, 2025) identifies as the engine of acquisition. Canals (2021) found that interactive, task-based strategies improve speaking quality when social anxiety and confidence barriers are addressed explicitly through role assignment, and the present data corroborate this while locating students' verbal output within the zone of proximal development described by Vygotsky, where strategic devices such as delay fillers, circumlocution, and gesture allowed learners to sustain communication under time pressure. The reduction in pauses and hesitations aligns with Suzuki and Kormos (2023), whose experimental participants displayed significantly fewer hesitation patterns than students receiving direct instruction, and with Naeem et al. (2025), who confirmed that structured role play enhances participation in debate. Students in this study also reported that verbalization became more direct over the course of the sessions, with less reliance on mental translation from Indonesian, a shift consistent with Welesilassie and Nikolov (2024), who argue that reducing anxiety in Indonesian EFL classrooms requires restructuring classroom dynamics rather than remediating individual learners.

The residual difficulties reported here qualify a common assumption in the role play literature, namely that spontaneity itself drives fluency. It does not. Every student in this class used the Useful Expressions sheet, and Student 5 attributed her improvement directly to it rather than to her role, describing the template as a map that told her how to begin. Without that scaffold, students experienced moments of cognitive freeze in which they lost access to words they demonstrably possessed. Suzuki and Kormos (2023) argue that real-time fluency depends on accessible linguistic resources and processing speed rather than on spontaneity alone, and the present findings support this position while sharpening it. The reflection data indicate that scaffolding was a necessary condition for fluent output but not a sufficient one, since the resource reached all twenty-five students whereas the psychological absorption Student 4 described did not. Vocabulary cards and expression sheets removed the sentence initiation bottleneck. They did not remove the fear of being watched. Both conditions had to hold for hesitation to fall away, which suggests that persona-based activities and linguistic scaffolding are complements rather than alternatives.

Read against the broader literature on speaking anxiety, these findings support a shift in where the problem is located. Al Hanake (2024) and M. Wang et al. (2022) all document the effectiveness of role play in reducing foreign language classroom anxiety among *Indonesian learners*, while M. Wang et al. (2022) show that clearly defined role responsibilities strengthen both cognitive and emotional engagement. The present study aligns with this body of work but departs from approaches that treat anxiety as an individual pathology requiring counseling or personal remediation. The teacher's testimony is instructive on this point. She attributed the drop in shyness not to any change in the students themselves but to the shield of the role, which redirected their attention. Bajri and Elmahdi (2024) and Habibi et al. (2024) reach a similar conclusion, suggesting that restructuring task design through role assignment and peer collaboration offers a more immediate, classroom embedded remedy than individual intervention, particularly where "Malu" culture and "Sok Inggris" stigma compound the anxiety that (Russell, 2020) originally described. Anxiety in this classroom was a property of the social situation, and changing the situation changed the anxiety.

Taken together, the four findings describe a single sequential process rather than four independent outcomes, and this sequence is set out in Figure 2.

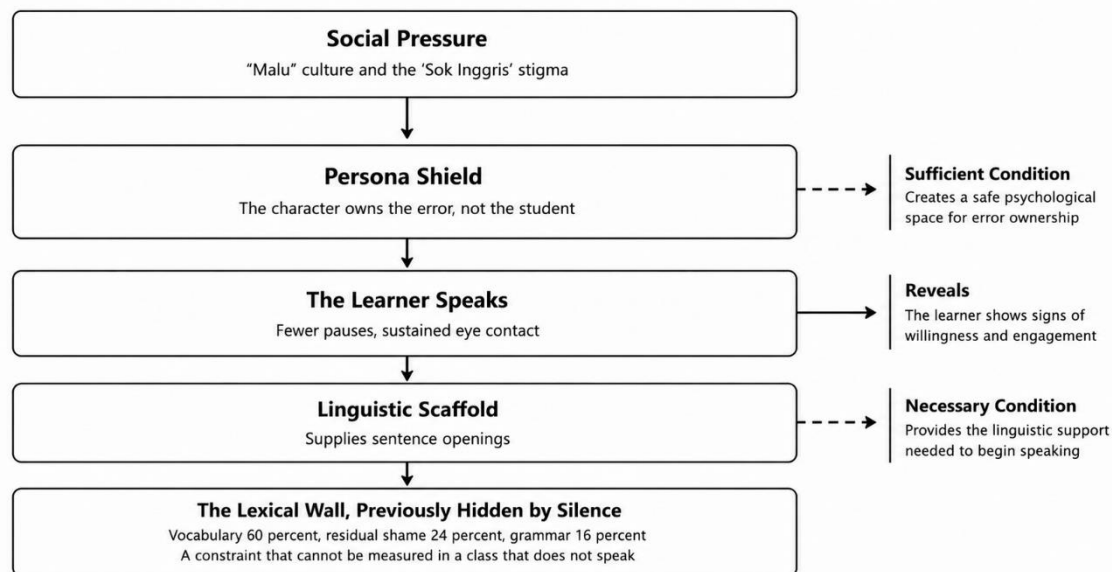


Figure 2. The Persona Shield Model of Debate-Based Speaking Development

Source: Developed by the researchers based on the findings of this study (2025)

Figure 2 makes visible a causal ordering that the existing literature has not articulated. The model holds that the persona operates first, lowering the social cost of error and releasing students into speech, and that scaffolding operates second, supplying the sentence level resources that make sustained speech possible once the student has begun. Neither condition alone produces fluency, which is why the model represents them as complementary rather than sequential inputs to the same outcome. The third stage is the one that matters most for theory. Once anxiety receded and students began to speak at length, a constraint became visible that had previously been hidden beneath their silence, namely the limits of their own lexicon. Sixty percent of the cohort named vocabulary as their greatest difficulty, a proportion that could not have been measured in a classroom where students did not speak. The intervention did not merely reduce a barrier; it exposed what the barrier had been concealing.

This ordering constitutes the study's principal contribution. The role-play literature has consistently treated anxiety reduction and fluency improvement as parallel benefits, two outcomes that the same intervention happens to deliver. Sukirman and Linse (2022) measure fluency, Loureiro et al. (2020) measure anxiety, and neither examines what the relationship between them might be. The present findings indicate that the relationship is not parallel but sequential. *Anxiety mitigation* is a precondition for fluency rather than a co-outcome of it, and vocabulary is the constraint that survives it. This has a direct consequence for how speaking instruction in *Indonesian classrooms* is designed. A teacher who addresses anxiety alone will produce students who are willing to speak but who run out of words at the moment they attempt something complex, which is precisely what Student 7 reported. A teacher who drills vocabulary alone will produce students who possess the words but who will not use them in front of their peers. The two must be sequenced, with the affective condition established first and the lexical resource supplied in advance of the task rather than in response to its failure. A further implication concerns proficiency thresholds. That intermediate level Grade XI students sustained complex argumentative debate through emotional and linguistic scaffolding challenges the assumption, still widespread in Indonesian secondary education, that learners must first reach advanced proficiency before attempting demanding communicative tasks. What this study adds is an account of why that willingness emerges and where it stops.

CONCLUSION

This study found that debate-based role-play improved the speaking fluency of Grade XI students by lowering the social cost of error rather than by teaching new language, and that the persona through which students spoke and the linguistic scaffold they relied on functioned as complementary conditions rather than interchangeable ones. Several limitations qualify these conclusions. The research examined a single intervention in one classroom of 25 students at one school; thus, the patterns reported here describe this setting rather than Indonesian secondary classrooms generally. No follow-up was conducted, which means the study can show that anxiety receded during the debate but cannot show whether it stayed low afterward, and one student's own phrasing, that today she forgot her embarrassment, suggests caution on this point. Evidence of fluency rests on classroom observation and student self-report rather than on measured speech rate or pause frequency. The researchers also designed and observed the intervention themselves. Future work should follow learners across repeated debate cycles, incorporate objective fluency measures, and test whether embedding explicit vocabulary instruction before the task addresses the lexical constraint this study exposed.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors thank the principal, the English teacher, and the Grade XI students of MA (*Madrasah Aliyah*) Almarif Singosari, whose willingness to speak made this study possible.

REFERENCES

- Al Hanake, N. (2024). Examining Foreign Language Learners' Speaking Anxiety: The Case of English L2 Learners. *World Journal of English Language*, 14(6), 244–252. <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v14n6p244>
- Bajri, I. A., & Elmahdi, O. E. H. (2024). Addressing Language Anxiety in the EFL Classroom: EFL Teachers' Perspective. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 14(7), 2222–2232. <https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1407.30>
- Canals, L. (2021). Multimodality and Translanguaging in Negotiation of Meaning. *Foreign Language Annals*, 54(3), 647–670. <https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12547>
- Chang, C. C., & Wang, Y. H. (2021). Using Phenomenological Methodology With Thematic Analysis to Examine and Reflect on Commonalities of Instructors' Experiences in MOOCs. *Education Sciences*, 11(5), 203. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11050203>
- Darmawangsa, D., Sukmayadi, V., & Yahya, A. H. (2020). First-Year Students' Communication Apprehension in Learning French as Foreign Language. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 10(2), 340–348. <https://doi.org/10.17509/ijal.v10i2.28599>
- Fuangkarn, K., & Rimkeeratikul, S. (2020). An Observational Study on the Effects of Native English-Speaking Teachers and Non-Native English-Speaking Teachers on Students' English Proficiency and Perceptions. *Arab World English Journal*, 11(3), 241–259. <https://doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol11no3.15>
- Gillings, M., & Jaworska, S. (2025). How Humans and Machines Identify Discourse Topics: A Methodological Triangulation. *Applied Corpus Linguistics*, 5(1), 100121. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acorp.2025.100121>
- Goode, C. (2020). English Language in Brunei: Use, Policy, and Status in Education – A Review. *Indonesian JELT: Indonesian Journal of English Language Teaching*, 15(1), 21–46. <https://doi.org/10.25170/ijelt.v15i1.1411>
- Habibi, A., Mailizar, M., Yaqin, L. N., Alqahtani, T. M., Abrar, M., Hamuddin, B., & Failasofah, F. (2024). Unlocking English Proficiency: YouTube's Impact on Speaking Skills Among

- Indonesian University Students. *Journal of Technology and Science Education*, 14(1), 142–157. <https://doi.org/10.3926/jotse.2485>
- Imelwaty, S., Suharni, Kemal, E., Sukmarani, M., & Tien, C. Y. (2023). A Content Analysis of the Cultural Products in High School English Language Learning Materials in Indonesia. *Jurnal Gramatika*, 9(2), 258–270. <https://doi.org/10.22202/jg.2023.v9i2.7375>
- Indrayadi, T., Suhaimi, S., & Usman, U. (2025). Indonesian EFL Learners' Views of Fondi Application Toward Speaking Performance: A Qualitative Approach. *The Qualitative Report*, 30(11), 4636–4650. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2025.7362>
- Koro, M., Wolgemuth, J., & Trinh, E. (2024). Reducing Methodological Footprints in Qualitative Research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 30(6), 484–492. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10778004231183944>
- Lee, Y. J. J., & Liu, Y. T. (2022). Promoting Oral Presentation Skills Through Drama-Based Tasks With an Authentic Audience: A Longitudinal Study. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, 31(3), 253–267. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40299-021-00557-x>
- Loureiro, M., Loureiro, N., & Silva, R. (2020). Differences of Gender in Oral and Written Communication Apprehension of University Students. *Education Sciences*, 10(12), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci10120379>
- Naeem, M., Smith, T., & Thomas, L. (2025). Thematic Analysis and Artificial Intelligence: A Step-by-Step Process for Using ChatGPT in Thematic Analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069251333886>
- Ölmezer-Öztürk, E., & Öztürk, G. (2021). Reducing Speaking Anxiety in EFL Classrooms: An Explanatory Mixed-Methods Study. *Porta Linguarum*, 2021(36), 249–261. <https://doi.org/10.30827/PORTALIN.V0I36.18018>
- Rayati, M., Abedi, H., & Aghazadeh, S. (2022). EFL Learners' Speaking Strategies: A Study of Low and High Proficiency Learners. *Mextesol Journal*, 46(4), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.61871/mj.v46n4-5>
- Russell, V. (2020). Language Anxiety and the Online Learner. *Foreign Language Annals*, 53(2), 338–352. <https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12461>
- Sukirman, S., & Linse, C. (2022). Analysing English Language Teaching Cognitive Learning Outcomes Within the Current National Guideline of Indonesian Islamic Higher Education Curriculum. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4155169>
- Sun, Y., Hsieh, J., & Gao, X. (2025). Integrating Qualitative Comparative Analysis With Reflexive Thematic Analysis in Theme Development. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069251318749>
- Suratin, N., & Sribayak, V. (2025). Factors Contributing to Speaking Anxiety and Anxiety Reduction Techniques in Thai Adult EFL Learners. *LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network*, 18(1), 294–319. <https://doi.org/10.70730/MYTS3987>
- Suzuki, S., & Kormos, J. (2023). The Multidimensionality of Second Language Oral Fluency: Interfacing Cognitive Fluency and Utterance Fluency. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 45(1), 38–64. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0272263121000899>
- Thompson, M. (2023). Epistemic Risk in Methodological Triangulation: The Case of Implicit Attitudes. *Synthese*, 201(1). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-022-03943-0>
- Udayanga, S. (2025). Reflexive and Iterative Thematic Analysis (RITA): A Design-Framework for Qualitative Research. *Qualitative Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941251377282>
- Uztosun, M. S. (2021). Foreign Language Speaking Competence and Self-Regulated Speaking Motivation. *Foreign Language Annals*, 54(2), 410–428. <https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12559>
- Wang, L. (2020). Application of Affective Filter Hypothesis in Junior English Vocabulary Teaching. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 11(6), 983–987. <https://doi.org/10.17507/jltr.1106.16>

- Wang, M., Wang, H., & Shi, Y. (2022). The Role of English as a Foreign Language Learners' Grit and Foreign Language Anxiety in Their Willingness to Communicate: Theoretical Perspectives. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1002562>
- Welesilassie, M. W., & Nikolov, M. (2024). L2 Anxiety, Proficiency, and Communication Across the Classroom, Non-Classroom, and Digital Settings: Insights From Ethiopian Preparatory Schools. *Language Teaching Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13621688241288792>
- Zang, Q. (2023). Effect of Building Identity in Foreign Language Teachers' Cooperative Team on Anxiety. *CNS Spectrums*, 28(S2), S80–S81. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1092852923004534>