

EXPLORING PRE-SERVICE ENGLISH TEACHERS CHALLENGES IN PARTICIPATING IN CASE BASED CLASSROOM DISCUSSIONS

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore the challenges experienced by pre-service English teachers in participating in case-based classroom discussions in the Creative Arts in ELT course at Universitas Negeri Medan. The study employed a qualitative case study design involving 20 pre-service English teachers selected through purposive sampling. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and reflective journals, and were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings demonstrated that 16 participants experienced speaking anxiety during discussions due to fear of making linguistic errors and negative peer evaluation. Fourteen students reported difficulties in expressing ideas spontaneously because of limited vocabulary and low speaking confidence. In addition, 12 participants experienced challenges in critically analyzing educational cases, while unequal participation frequently occurred as discussions were dominated by more active students. Further, the study also revealed that 15 participants hesitated to present creative ideas because they were concerned about criticism and peer judgment. These challenges reduced students' participation and collaborative interaction during classroom discussions. The results suggest that supportive instructional practices and structured collaborative interaction are essential in fostering active participation and creative engagement in case-based learning environments.

Keywords: Case Method, Challenges, Creative Arts in ELT

1. Introduction

The rapid shift in twenty first century education obliges institutions of higher learning to prioritize student competence over mere knowledge transmission. Future educators are crucially required to develop the "4Cs" critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication enabling them to effectively untangle classroom challenges and apply versatile pedagogical choices in diverse instructional settings.

To accommodate these educational goals, universities increasingly employ student-centered methods like Case-Based Learning (CBL). By analyzing complex, authentic educational dilemmas, pre-service teachers learn to weigh information, frame potential solutions, and integrate abstract theories with active classroom practices (Nielsen, H.N, et.al: 2020; Yoo, M. S., et.al: 2021). Consequently, this framework promotes practical decision-making and solidifies analytical teaching habits (Chen, Y, 2024).

The pedagogical success of CBL depends heavily on the dynamics of active classroom

dialogue. Grounded in sociocultural theory, meaning-making and deep conceptual development happen directly through conversational negotiation, social exchanges, and collaborative argument building (Vygotsky, L. S: 1978; Howe, C., & Abedin, M.: 2021). Thus, systematic engagement in case discussions acts as a fundamental baseline for professional teacher training.

Nevertheless, optimal student involvement during English as a Foreign Language (EFL) case debates remains a challenge. Students commonly deal with significant linguistic obstacles, speaking anxiety, low self-efficacy, and an acute fear of making mistakes, which heavily reduces their willingness to contribute (Dewaele, J. M., & Alfawzan, M.: 2018; Teimouri, Y., et.al: 2019). Moreover, processing high-level educational cases while building complex arguments in English adds an extra cognitive and affective load.

These participation challenges become highly evident in highly specialized environments like the Creative Arts in ELT course, which requires innovative educational planning and intellectual risk-taking. Unfortunately, fear of negative evaluation often leads to unequal classroom engagement, where discussions are controlled by a few vocal students while others remain silent observers (Edmondson, A.: 1999; Wang, X., et.al: 2024). Given that previous studies frequently assess speaking anxiety, critical thinking, or case analysis in isolation, this study comprehensively explores how these linguistic, affective, cognitive, and socio-interactional barriers interact simultaneously among pre-service English teachers at Universitas Negeri Medan.

2. Literature Review

Case-Based Learning (CBL) is a premier student-centered strategy that uses real-world narrative dilemmas to help pre-service teachers link conceptual knowledge with professional practice (Nielsen, H.N, et.al: 2024). Through exploring complex classroom scenarios, future teachers learn to handle instructional adjustments and develop their professional judgment (Safitri, S, et.al: 2023). Empirical studies confirm that CBL builds problem-solving skills and higher-order thinking (Yoo, M. S., et.al: 2021; Chen, Y.: 2024), though its benefits depend entirely on active classroom participation.

Classroom Discussion and Student Participation

Classroom discussions serve as the primary vehicle for CBL, allowing students to co-construct meaning, defend arguments, and explore alternative points of view (Vygotsky, L. S: 1978; Howe, C., & Abedin, M.: 2021). Engaging in purposeful dialogue also expands conceptual knowledge and strengthens professional communication (Mercer, S., & Dörnyei, Z.: 2020). However, because classroom engagement can be uneven, evaluating the root causes of passivity remains essential (Wang, X., et.al: 2024).

Foreign Language Anxiety and Participation in EFL Discussions

Foreign language anxiety involves communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation (Horwitz, E. K., et.al: 1986). Among these elements, fearing peer judgment frequently prevents students from speaking up out of concern over grammatical or pronunciation errors. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that language anxiety limits communicative performance and dampens student motivation, regardless of their actual linguistic competence (Dewaele, J. M., & Alfawzan, M.: 2018; Teimouri, Y., et.al: 2019).

Linguistic Challenges and Difficulties in Expressing Ideas

Active participation requires deep communicative competence, forcing students to pull from grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic assets in real time (Howe, C., & Abedin, M.: 2021). Limited vocabulary and low fluency frequently disrupt this spontaneous idea formulation (Canale, M., & Swain, M.: 1980). For pre-service teachers, these verbal limits slow down spontaneous communication and add to their cognitive burden during fast-paced academic exchanges.

Critical Thinking and Cognitive Challenges in Case Analysis

Analyzing educational cases requires sophisticated cognitive skills such as interpretation, evaluation, and inference (Facione, P. A.: 1990). Pre-service teachers often struggle to apply educational theories to practical situations (Harahap, A., & Fithriani, R.: 2024). Furthermore, this analysis challenge is compounded when students must explain their pedagogical reasoning in a foreign language (Chen, Y.: 2024).

Psychological Safety and Social Participation

Psychological safety describes an instructional atmosphere where students feel secure taking interpersonal risks without fear of ridicule (Edmondson, A.: 1999). Safe spaces encourage collaborative problem-solving, open sharing, and deep learning engagement (McIlroy, T.: 2020; Wang, X., et.al 2024). Without psychological safety, students tend to withdraw from discussions to avoid social judgment.

Creativity and Creative Risk-Taking in ELT

Fostering creativity requires generating unique but contextually appropriate educational solutions (Beghetto, R. A.: 2019). However, offering unconventional ideas requires a safe environment that tolerates experimental mistakes (Henriksen, D., et.al: 2021). When classroom spaces feel judgmental, students suppress their creative ideas, which limits their development during teacher preparation.

3. Research Method

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the challenges experienced by pre-service English teachers in participating in case-based classroom discussions (Patton, M. Q.: 2015). A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to understand participants' experiences, perceptions, and challenges within a specific educational context rather than to measure relationships among variables quantitatively (Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N.: 2018). The case study design enabled the researchers to investigate the phenomenon in depth within its real-life setting, namely the Creative Arts in ELT course at Universitas Negeri Medan (Yin, R. K.: 2018).

4. Result and Discussion

Data Sources and Results

Table 1. Frequency of Emerging Learning Challenges Across Multiple Data Sources

Theme	Interview	Observation	Journal	Total Evidence
Speaking Anxiety	16	14	15	45
Difficulty Expressing Ideas	14	13	14	41
Case Analysis Challenges	12	11	12	35
Unequal Participation	13	15	10	38

Creative Idea Hesitation	15	12	14	41
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Analytical data revealed 5 salient issues that emerged consistently during the interviews, classroom observations and reflective journals. This convergence of tripartite data sources strengthens the outcomes via methodological triangulation, clarifying that these barriers are a manifestation of deeply embedded structural issues (not isolated incidents) and hence should be viewed as such. Empirically, speaking anxiety was identified as the most frequent barrier at 45 occurrences overall (N = 54), followed closely by inability to articulate thoughts (N = 41) and hesitation in creative conception (N = 41). An equally important (38 instances) and a second most frequent barrier (35 instances) were disproportionately participation and difficulties with case analytic critically, suggesting that learners were wrestling at the same time with a confluence of affective, linguistic, cognitive and collaborative barriers. Ultimately, these data emphasize the complexity of the challenges students face in developing oral proficiency and higher-order cognitive skills in classroom contexts.

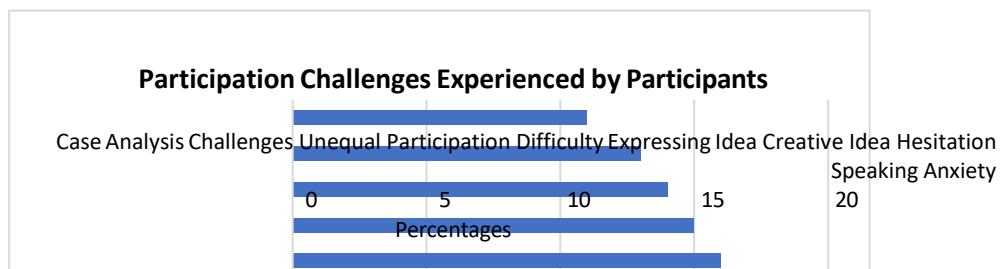


Figure 1. Challenges Experienced by Participants

The data shows the prominent rank of participation challenges faced by the participants. The results are strikingly apparent, with speaking anxiety (16%) and hesitation to share a creative idea (15%) as some of the major deterrents in both emotional and expressive hindrances. This trend is also sustained by 14% of respondents having difficulties expressing an idea explicitly which indicates a more underlying friction point for learners exists in communicative output as opposed to group dynamics or task complexity. In fact, both interpersonal and methodological issues—specifically uneven engagement and difficulties in the analysis of cases came last with rates of 13% and 11%, respectively. In the end, it was all visual proof makes clear that there is a long way to go to close up the gaps in student engagement by tackling psychological communication barriers.

Observation Checklist

To evaluate the observed behaviors systematically, data were recorded using a structured observation checklist. Each item on the checklist was assessed using a 5-point Likert scale (Likert, R: 1932) to measure frequency, where the scores are defined as follows: 1 = Never, 2= Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, and 5 = Always. This scoring system allows for a quantified analysis of the frequency patterns observed during the study.

Table 2. Behavior Indicators

Observation Indicators	Mean Score
Hesitates before speaking	4.3

Shows nervous behavior	4.2
Difficulty elaborating ideas	4.0
Connects theory with practice	3.0
Shares creative ideas voluntarily	2.9
Participates actively	3.2

The table presented itemizes the mean scores for various observation indicators evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale. A granular analysis of the data reveals that negative or restrictive behavioral traits registered the highest frequencies. Specifically, *hesitates before speaking* and *shows nervous behavior* emerged as the most prominent indicators, yielding substantial mean scores of 4.3 and 4.2, respectively. This trend is further compounded by a high mean score of 4.0 for *Difficulty elaborating ideas*, signifying a prevalent struggle with linguistic output. Conversely, positive participatory behaviors clustered around the mid-point of the scale; *Participates actively* achieved a mean of 3.2, while the integration of conceptual knowledge *Connects theory with practice* stood exactly at 3.0. Notably, the lowest recorded frequency was observed in *Shares creative ideas voluntarily* (2.9), falling slightly below the moderate threshold.

Table 3. Reflective Journal Frequencies

Reflection Theme	Frequency
Fear of making mistakes	16
Limited vocabulary	14
Lack of confidence	14
Difficulty analyzing cases	12
Fear of criticism	15
Passive participation	11

The journal indicates that psychological vulnerabilities heavily dominate student self-reflections. The high frequencies associated with the fear of making errors (16) and fear of external judgment or criticism (15) suggest that the classroom climate may induce significant evaluation anxiety among learners. This internal friction is further aggravated by self-perceived cognitive and linguistic deficits, as evidenced by the identical frequency counts (14) for vocabulary limitations and an overall lack of confidence. Interestingly, the data demonstrate that these internal emotional strains overshadow structural and task-based difficulties, given that case analysis issues (12) and actual passive behavior (11) were the least cited themes. Ultimately, these self-reported insights imply that students' overt disengagement is primarily a defense mechanism rooted in anxiety rather than a simple lack of interest or analytical capability.

Table 4. Thematic Relationship Model

Theme	Linguistic	Affective	Cognitive	Social
Speaking Anxiety	✓	✓		✓
Expressing Ideas	✓	✓		
Case Analysis			✓	
Unequal Participation		✓		✓
Creative Hesitation		✓		✓

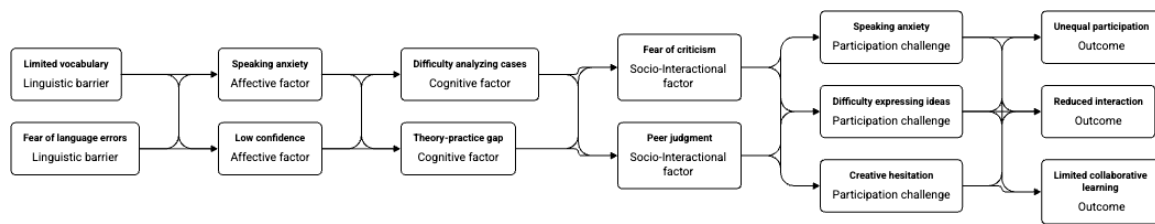


Figure 2. Cross-Theme Matrix

Table 4 and Figure 2 demonstrate that participation challenges are deeply interconnected. Speaking anxiety stems from a mix of linguistic limits, affective stress, and social pressures. Similarly, creative hesitation is tied to social and affective dynamics rather than missing cognitive skills. This shows that language practice alone will not resolve classroom passivity if social fears and environmental anxieties are left unaddressed.

The thematic model reveals that participation challenges developed through a sequential and interconnected process.

At the first level, students experienced linguistic limitations, including restricted vocabulary and concerns about language accuracy. These challenges contributed to affective responses such as anxiety and low confidence.

Subsequently, anxiety reduced students' willingness to engage in complex cognitive tasks, including analyzing educational cases and defending arguments. At the same time, concerns regarding peer judgment created additional social pressure that discouraged students from taking intellectual risks.

The combined influence of linguistic, affective, cognitive, and social factors ultimately resulted in reduced participation, unequal contribution patterns, and limited collaborative interaction.

The model suggests that participation in case-based classroom discussions is not determined by a single factor. Rather, it represents the outcome of multiple interacting dimensions that collectively shape students' engagement in learning activities.

Discussion

Speaking Anxiety as the Primary Challenge in Case-Based Classroom Discussions

The results demonstrate that speaking anxiety serves as the most prominent obstacle for pre-service teachers within case discussions. Most participants reported deep anxiety driven by an explicit fear of making language errors and receiving negative evaluations from peers, directly mirroring the foundational tenets of Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety theory (Horwitz, E. K., et.al: 1986). This matches prior EFL findings where anxiety regularly limits communicative confidence and lowers verbal output (Dewaele, J. M., & Alfawzan, M.: 2018; Teimouri, Y., et.al: 2019).

However, this study extends past research by demonstrating that within a case-based environment, anxiety is both linguistic and intellectual. Students are not just worried about basic communication, but are also anxious about the quality of their pedagogical arguments. Triangulated data from observations and journals confirms that this anxiety triggers visible avoidance behaviors, providing clearer empirical evidence than single-method survey.

Difficulties in Expressing Ideas: A Challenge Beyond Language Proficiency

The common struggle with real-time idea expression highlights the difficulties EFL

learners face when trying to transform thoughts into spoken words under spontaneous communication demands (Canale, M., & Swain, M.: 1980; Mercer, S., & Dörnyei, Z.: 2020). This issue aligns with classic speech production models where quick, real-time message formulation is required (Levelt, W. J. M.: 1989).

However, within case-based learning, this difficulty is compounded by the cognitive load of simultaneous problem-solving and language processing. Pre-service teachers often grasp the case material well but struggle to articulate their analysis quickly in English. Therefore, difficulties expressing ideas should be understood as a consequence of high cognitive load during real-time discussions, rather than a simple lack of language proficiency.

Cognitive Challenges in Educational Case Analysis

The cognitive difficulties students face when identifying problems and applying theory to cases match established definitions of critical thinking, which emphasize the complex nature of analysis and evaluation (Facione, P. A.: 1990). This problem supports previous teacher education research showing that future teachers often struggle to connect theoretical concepts with practical classroom choices (Nielsen, H.N, et.al: 2024; Chen, Y.: 2024).

Crucially, this study highlights a clear connection between language limits and critical thinking. While past research often separates these issues, our findings demonstrate that analytical performance is closely tied to language competence. Quiet students are frequently limited by their ability to verbalize complex reasoning in English, confirming that critical thinking and communication are deeply intertwined in EFL teacher training (M.H. Isnaini, et.al: 2022).

Unequal Participation as a Consequence of Multiple Challenges

The presence of unequal classroom participation, where discussions are dominated by a few vocal students, aligns with existing research on collaborative learning environments (Mercer, S., & Dörnyei, Z.: 2020; Wang, X., et.al: 2024). However, this study views unequal participation as a cumulative symptom rather than an isolated classroom management problem.

Quiet behavior often serves as a coping mechanism against a combination of language anxiety, real-time articulation struggles, and fear of negative peer evaluation. This indicates that balancing classroom engagement requires resolving the underlying emotional and social pressures rather than simply changing interaction rules.

Psychological Safety and Creative Risk Taking

The hesitation to share innovative pedagogical strategies highlights the critical role of psychological safety in fostering interpersonal risk-taking (Edmondson, A.: 1999). This confirms that creative engagement relies heavily on a supportive, open classroom climate (McIlroy, T.: 2020; Henriksen, D., et.al: 2021).

A key insight from this study is the presence of creative idea suppression within the Creative Arts in ELT course. While students possessed innovative ideas, they frequently chose not to share them due to fear of peer criticism. This demonstrates that creative curriculum tasks can be rendered ineffective if the learning environment does not feel socially safe, proving that psychological safety is an absolute prerequisite for creative teacher preparation.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that pre-service English teachers face a combination of linguistic, affective, cognitive, and socio-interactional challenges during case-based discussions. Speaking anxiety emerged as the most prominent barrier, accompanied by creative hesitation, difficulties expressing ideas spontaneously, unequal participation, and case analysis hurdles. These elements are deeply interconnected; linguistic limitations increase emotional anxiety, which then limits critical thinking and leads to silent withdrawal to avoid social judgment.

This study shows that participation hurdles involve both linguistic and intellectual risks, where a lack of psychological safety causes students to suppress creative ideas. Pedagogically, implementing Case-Based Learning successfully requires more than just assigning authentic cases. Teacher educators must offer language scaffolding, guide the analysis process, build a supportive classroom climate, and organize discussions to ensure balanced participation.

Future research should focus on evaluating specific classroom strategies to reduce speaking anxiety, build psychological safety, and create more inclusive discussion formats across diverse teacher education programs.

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