

Research Article

What Factors Contribute to Speech Delay in Early Childhood?: A Case Study of Kindergarten Students in Central Kalimantan

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ABSTRACT

Early childhood is a critical period for language development because it supports communication, social interaction, and later academic achievement. However, some children experience speech delay that limits their participation in learning activities. This study aimed to examine factors associated with speech delay in early childhood and to analyze the challenges faced by teachers and the strategies used in classroom settings. This research employed a qualitative case study design involving five children identified with speech delay in an early childhood education context. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers and parents and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that speech delay is influenced by several factors, including limited verbal stimulation at home, early exposure to digital media, limited social engagement, emotional and behavioral aspects of speech, and speech articulation and production difficulties. Teachers reported challenges such as limited verbal output, reliance on non-verbal communication, selective peer interaction, reduced participation in group learning activities, and limited parental awareness of children's speech difficulties. To address these challenges, teachers implemented individualized verbal stimulation, play-based language activities, structured instructional support, peer-mediated interaction, and parent-teacher collaboration. The study highlights the importance of collaboration among teachers, parents, and relevant professionals in supporting children's speech and language development.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education; Language Development; Speech Delay; Teachers Strategies

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is a fundamental component of human interaction, playing a vital role in communication, social engagement, and early learning processes. During early childhood, speech development becomes particularly important, as it shapes children's ability to express ideas, interact with others, and prepare for formal schooling (Emelyanova et al., 2018; Sainain et al., 2020). Delays in speech development may lead to difficulties that go beyond communication, potentially affecting children's academic preparedness, social involvement, and emotional adjustment.

Speech development in young children occurs through ongoing interaction with their surrounding environments. Regular verbal communication with caregivers, peers, and teachers provides critical opportunities for vocabulary expansion and the development of communicative skills. Previous research emphasizes that responsive interactions, including turn-taking and meaningful conversational exchanges, contribute significantly to positive speech and language outcomes in early childhood (Rowe, 2020; Preza & Hadley, 2022). Likewise, within early childhood education settings, high-quality teacher-child interactions have been shown to support children's speech and language growth (Yang et al., 2021).

Despite these interactions, some children acquire speech skills at a slower pace than expected for their age. This condition, commonly described as speech delay, refers to delays in speech production relative to typical developmental milestones (Abugharsa, 2024; Sunderajan & Kanhere, 2019). Speech delay can limit children's expressive abilities and reduce their participation in social communication. Moreover, it has been linked to subsequent challenges in learning, emotional regulation, and social development (Ulfa et al., 2022).

Research suggests that speech delay is influenced by multiple interacting factors. Environmental factors are particularly influential, especially when children receive limited language input at home, experience infrequent verbal engagement, or are exposed to inappropriate speech models during critical developmental periods. In recent years, increased access to digital devices has raised concerns, as excessive screen exposure may decrease opportunities for direct verbal interaction and has been associated with weaker speech outcomes among young children (Panjeti-Madan &

Ranganathan, 2023; Patel et al., 2025; Wan et al., 2025).

In addition to environmental influences, biological and developmental factors may also contribute to speech delay. These include hearing impairments, nutritional deficiencies, genetic predispositions, and broader neurodevelopmental conditions (Korpilahti et al., 2016; Duncan & Matthews, 2018; Aripirala et al., 2023). Such factors often interact with children's social environments, illustrating the complex nature of speech delay and the need for early identification and targeted intervention.

Within early childhood education contexts, teachers frequently face practical challenges when supporting children with speech delays. These challenges include individual developmental differences, time constraints during instruction, limited access to speech-language professionals, low self-confidence among children, and limited verbal responses. These issues may be more pronounced in under-resourced areas such as Central Kalimantan, where empirical research on speech delay in kindergarten settings remains scarce. Therefore, this study seeks to identify factors contributing to speech delay in early childhood and to examine the challenges faced by teachers, along with the strategies they employ in early childhood education settings.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore speech delay in early childhood and the challenges faced by teachers in early childhood education settings. The research was conducted at TK Wardatul Jannah over a period of approximately one month. The participants consisted of five kindergarten children with speech delay, three classroom teachers, and the children's parents. Participants were selected using purposive sampling. The identification of children with speech delay was supported by behavioral indicators based on teachers' classroom observations and parents' reports, as presented in Table 1. These indicators were used as inclusion criteria and were not intended for clinical diagnosis.

The study focused on examining factors contributing to speech delay, challenges encountered by teachers in supporting children's speech development, and strategies implemented within early childhood education settings. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with three classroom teachers and five parents. The interviews were conducted at times convenient for the participants and in Indonesian to ensure effective communication. Field notes were taken throughout the data collection process to support data interpretation.

Table 1. Behavioral Indicators for Identifying Speech Delay Based on Teachers' and Parents' Observations

No	Assessment Domain	Descriptive Indicator
1	Expressive Language	The child seldom produces spontaneous speech
2	Expressive Language	The child demonstrates a restricted range of vocabulary
3	Expressive Language	The child is unable to combine words into simple phrases
4	Expressive Language	A single word is frequently used to convey various meanings
5	Receptive Language	The child shows understanding of basic verbal instructions
6	Speech Initiative	The child rarely initiates verbal interaction
7	Speech Initiative	The child communicates verbally only when prompted or required
8	Social Interaction	The child tends to interact with only one familiar individual
9	Social Interaction	The child exhibits limited engagement with peers
10	Social Interaction	The child avoids verbal participation during group activities
11	Psychological Aspect	The child appears anxious or lacks confidence when attempting to speak
12	Psychological Aspect	The child prefers silence rather than making attempts to communicate verbally
13	Articulation	The child's speech is often unclear or difficult to comprehend
14	Oral Motor Skills	The child displays limited or rigid movements of the mouth or tongue
15	Environmental Factor	The child is exposed extensively to digital devices, primarily through passive viewing

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, guided by Miles and Huberman's (1994) interactive model, which involves data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Interview transcripts and field notes were systematically coded to identify meaningful patterns, which were then interpreted to generate themes related to factors influencing speech delay, challenges faced by teachers, and strategies implemented to support children's speech development.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Drawing on data obtained from semi-structured interviews with teachers and parents, this study revealed a range of factors related to speech delay in five children within an early childhood education context. The findings highlight recurring patterns in children's communicative behaviors, engagement in learning activities, and the instructional practices observed across home and classroom environments.

3.1 Factors Influencing Speech Delay

This section outlines the key factors influencing speech delay among the participating children, as identified through semi-structured interviews with teachers and parents. The findings reveal recurring patterns related to children's communication environments, interaction experiences, and individual characteristics that shaped their speech development in both home and classroom contexts.

3.1.1 Limited Verbal Stimulation at Home

The findings indicated that limited interaction in the home environment was present across all participating children, though with varying patterns. Students A and B experienced minimal conversational engagement at home, as communication was largely limited to responding to immediate needs. Student C, who was primarily cared for by a grandparent, had limited opportunities for verbal interaction, with communication focused mainly on instructions. Students D and E also showed restricted home interaction, as family members often anticipated their needs without encouraging verbal responses. Overall, home interactions were characterized by minimal verbal exchange and limited opportunities for children to practice expressive language in daily routines. One parent explained:

P2: *"Because I already understand what my child wants, I rarely ask my child to say the words clearly."*

Another parent similarly noted that when the child was cared for by a grandparent, verbal interaction was minimal.

P3: *"My child was rarely invited to talk and was only spoken to for important things"*

Limited interaction in the home environment further contributed to children's speech delay. Reduced opportunities for daily verbal engagement with caregivers, particularly during early developmental stages, are consistent with recent research indicating that lower caregiver-child conversational turn counts are associated with slower early language development (Gaol et al., 2025; Lovčević, 2025).

3.1.2 Early Exposure to Digital Media

All five children were exposed to digital media at an early age, with most beginning device use between one and two years old. Device use was largely passive and accompanied by minimal verbal interaction, as children focused on screens while caregivers were often engaged with their own devices. Digital media were frequently used to calm children, which limited opportunities for spontaneous speech; teachers reported similar patterns at school, where children showed reduced verbal engagement during language-based activities. Overall, early and frequent digital device exposure was associated with restricted opportunities for children to practice spoken language in both home and classroom contexts. Both parents and teachers reported similar observations regarding children's communication patterns related to digital device use. One parent reported:

P1: *"When my child is watching videos on the phone, we rarely have conversations."*

A parent further explained that

P5: *"I often give my child a phone to help calm them down when they become restless."*

Teachers shared comparable experiences in classroom settings. One teacher noted:

T2: *"The child is more accustomed to watching and listening, and when asked to speak, the responses are often very short or the child remains silent."*

A teacher also indicated that:

T1: *"The child can concentrate well on visual materials, but quickly loses attention when activities require verbal interaction."*

Early exposure to digital media contributed to children's speech delay, as predominantly passive screen use limited opportunities for verbal interaction. Previous studies indicate that prolonged screen time in early childhood reduces caregiver-child communication and may hinder expressive language development (Bal et al., 2024; Panjeti-Madan & Ranganathan, 2023). These findings suggest that early and frequent digital media exposure can negatively affect children's speech development when not supported by active verbal engagement.

3.1.3 Limited Social Engagement

The findings showed that all five children experienced limited social engagement during early childhood, though in different contexts. Students A and B had reduced peer interaction during the COVID-19 pandemic when they were around one to two years old, while Student C experienced minimal social communication while being cared for by a grandparent. Students D and E also had restricted opportunities for peer interaction, as most daily activities occurred at home. Teachers reported that limited participation in group activities reduced children's opportunities to engage in peer communication, which constrained the development of expressive language. One parent explained:

P1: *"During the pandemic, my child stayed at home most of the time and rarely met other children, so there were very few opportunities to interact or talk with peers."*

A parent further explained that:

P4: *"Most of my child's daily activities take place at home, so there are very limited opportunities to meet and interact with other children."*

One of the teachers observed that:

T3: *"The child often prefers solitary play and shows limited participation in group activities."*

Limited social engagement also contributed to children's speech delay by reducing opportunities for meaningful interaction with peers and adults. Previous studies indicate that frequent social interaction provides essential communicative input that supports expressive language development, while restricted social engagement may hinder children's language growth (Zöggeler-Burkhardt et al., 2023; Ji et al., 2025; Setiasih & Suryadi, 2025). These findings suggest that limited opportunities for social participation can constrain children's speech development by reducing exposure to diverse communicative experiences.

3.1.4 Emotional and Behavioral Aspects of Speech

The findings indicated that emotional and behavioral characteristics influenced the children's communication patterns in different ways. Student A demonstrated hesitation and discomfort when interacting with unfamiliar individuals and in group situations, which reduced verbal participation and required repeated exposure before the child felt comfortable speaking. Student D showed similar reluctance in new or crowded settings, often remaining silent during group activities and limiting spontaneous verbal expression. In contrast, Student B and Student C appeared socially confident and did not display fear in social environments; however, both experienced persistent difficulties in verbal expression. Student B frequently relied on nonverbal strategies such as gestures or vocal outbursts to communicate needs, which occasionally led to misunderstandings with peers. Meanwhile, Student C was actively engaged in social interaction but often produced unclear speech, reducing the effectiveness of verbal communication. Student E demonstrated a combination of social confidence and limited speech clarity, participating in interactions but struggling to express ideas verbally.

Emotional and behavioral characteristics play an important role in children's speech development, as emotional regulation and behavioral responses influence how children engage in verbal communication. Previous studies have shown that social-emotional competence is closely associated with expressive language development, where difficulties in emotional regulation or behavioral control may hinder effective speech production even when children appear socially confident (Kalland & Linnavalli, 2022; Bell et al., 2024; Hosokawa et al., 2024). Research also highlights that children's emotional well-being and social environments significantly affect language development, particularly when opportunities for social interaction are limited (Nurwita & Imran, 2021; Setiasih & Suryadi, 2025). Together, these studies suggest that supporting emotional and behavioral regulation alongside language stimulation is essential for improving children's expressive communication abilities. Overall, emotional comfort and social confidence alone were not sufficient to support effective verbal communication, as ongoing challenges in speech clarity and expressive language continued to limit both the frequency and effectiveness of children's spoken interactions in classroom contexts.

3.1.5 Speech Articulation and Production Difficulties

The findings showed that all five children experienced ongoing difficulties related to speech clarity and articulation. Student A produced speech that was audible but unclear, making it difficult for communication partners to understand the intended message. Student B showed challenges in producing speech sounds and frequently relied on shouting rather than clear verbal articulation to express needs. Student C, who was observed to have oral-motor characteristics that affected articulation, appeared socially confident but continued to experience reduced speech intelligibility. Students D and E also demonstrated unclear pronunciation during daily interactions, which limited the effectiveness of their verbal communication. Across cases, articulation and oral-motor exercises were not routinely practiced in the home environment, contributing to persistent difficulties in speech production. Teachers reported frequent misunderstandings during

classroom interactions, as children often relied on gestures, body movements, or single-word utterances to convey meaning. As a result, children had limited opportunities to practice clear and extended verbal expression during daily learning activities. These communication patterns reduced the effectiveness of verbal interaction and limited children's participation in classroom discourse.

Difficulties in speech articulation and production are closely related to children's oral-motor control and speech sound development, as limitations in motor coordination can reduce speech clarity and intelligibility. Several studies indicate that children with speech sound disorders often experience challenges in coordinating articulatory movements, which directly affect expressive language development and everyday communication (Wren et al., 2016; Maasen & Terband, 2024). Other research highlights that persistent articulation difficulties may continue even when children demonstrate adequate social engagement, suggesting that speech production requires targeted support beyond general interaction opportunities (Bowen, 2023). Additional studies have reported that oral-motor and articulation difficulties are significant internal factors contributing to speech delay, particularly when structured articulation practice is limited in both home and educational settings (Istiqbal, 2021; Wibowo & Praktino, 2025). Together, these findings emphasize the importance of early identification and consistent support for oral-motor and articulatory development to improve children's speech clarity and overall communication skills.

3.2 Teachers' Challenges

Teachers reported several challenges in addressing speech delay within classroom settings, such as limited verbal output, reliance on non-verbal communication, selective peer interaction, reduced participation in group learning activities, and limited parental awareness of children's speech difficulties. Some children produced only single words or unclear vocalizations to express various needs, while others avoided verbal interaction altogether, particularly in group situations. As a result, teachers frequently experienced difficulty understanding children's intended messages and facilitating verbal participation during learning activities. Teachers also observed that some children preferred solitary play and showed resistance to joining group activities that required verbal communication. One teacher explained that although the child attempted to communicate, unclear articulation often hindered understanding. She stated that:

T1: *"The child wants to talk and often tries to ask questions, but the words are not clear, so sometimes I do not understand what the child is saying."*

Another teacher noted that during group activities, children often withdrew and chose to play alone, especially when verbal interaction was expected:

T2: *"During group activities, the child often withdraws and prefers to play alone, especially when verbal interaction is required."*

In addition, reliance on non-verbal communication posed further challenges. Teachers reported that some children primarily used gestures, body movements, or physical contact rather than spoken language to convey their needs, which limited opportunities for verbal practice in classroom interactions. These patterns made it difficult for teachers to engage children in verbal exchanges and to support speech development within group learning contexts.

T3: *"The child rarely uses words and mostly communicates through gestures, touching, or body movements to express what they want."*

In one case, a teacher experienced challenges in collaborating with parents, particularly when parental awareness of children's speech difficulties was limited, which reduced the consistency of support beyond the classroom. The teacher reported that:

T1: *"I have worked well with most parents, but one parent does not see the speech delay as a problem, so the support at home is very limited."*

Challenges faced by kindergarten teachers in addressing children's reliance on non-verbal communication highlight the complexity of supporting speech development in early childhood classrooms. Research in kindergarten settings shows that children with speech and language difficulties often withdraw from group activities and depend on gestures or minimal verbal output, which limits opportunities for language-rich interaction (Klieve & Stark, 2025). Studies also indicate that limited verbal participation during early classroom routines can hinder teachers' efforts to facilitate expressive language development and peer communication in kindergarten contexts (Tilbe & Gai, 2025; Weadman et al., 2025). Similarly, Norbury et al. (2016) emphasize that without targeted support, young children who rely heavily on non-verbal communication may continue to experience barriers in developing effective spoken language during the early years of schooling. In addition, limited parental awareness and engagement can hinder the effectiveness of classroom-based speech interventions, as inconsistent stimulation at home reduces the continuity of language development support (Rahmawati, 2022).

3.2 Teachers' Strategies

In response to the challenges, teachers described various instructional strategies aimed at supporting children's speech development. One commonly used approach was individualized verbal stimulation through one-on-one interactions, where teachers provided frequent verbal modeling, repeated simple words, and encouraged children to attempt speech without pressure. One teacher stated:

T3: *"I usually talk to the child one-on-one, repeat simple words, and encourage the child to try speaking without forcing"*

Play-based learning activities were widely implemented to promote verbal expression in a relaxed classroom setting. Teachers reported using songs, storytelling, and interactive games to encourage children to speak more naturally and feel comfortable engaging verbally during learning activities. These approaches were perceived as effective in fostering a positive emotional atmosphere that supported children's communication development, as one teacher explained:

T2: *"We use songs, storytelling, and simple games so the child feels relaxed and more comfortable speaking during activities"*

To improve children's focus and readiness to speak, teachers employed structured strategies such as short learning tasks, clear and repeated instructions, and frequent redirection of attention before prompting verbal responses. Teachers also adopted peer-mediated strategies by pairing children with familiar classmates to gradually increase comfort with social interaction and verbal communication, as the teacher noted:

T1: *"I help the child focus by giving short tasks, repeating instructions, and reminding the child to pay attention before asking them to speak"*

Furthermore, teachers highlighted efforts to collaborate with parents by encouraging consistent communication practices at home and advising parents to reduce children's use of digital devices. While active parent-teacher collaboration was reported in some cases, limited parental involvement in other cases reduced the continuity of speech stimulation beyond the classroom, presenting an ongoing challenge to sustained speech development. The teacher described:

T2: *"I always ask parents to talk more with their child at home and reduce gadget use so the child can practice speaking more often."*

Teachers' instructional strategies reflect evidence-based approaches to supporting speech development in kindergarten classrooms, particularly for children with limited verbal output. Research shows that individualized verbal interaction and frequent modeling during one-on-one engagement can effectively increase children's expressive language by reducing anxiety and providing targeted linguistic input (Smith-Lock et al., 2013; Wardani, 2025). Play-based activities such as singing, storytelling, and interactive games have also been shown to create emotionally supportive environments that promote spontaneous verbal expression in early childhood settings (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015; Peaslee, 2022; Ulfah et al., 2025). In addition, structured tasks, attention scaffolding, and peer-mediated interaction support children's readiness to communicate and participation in group learning, while consistent parent-teacher collaboration is critical for maintaining continuity of speech stimulation beyond the classroom (Sultana & Purdy, 2024; Aisyah & Alkautsar, 2025).

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined factors associated with speech delay in early childhood and explored the challenges faced by teachers and the instructional strategies used in classroom settings. The findings indicate that speech delay is influenced by multiple interrelated factors, including limited verbal stimulation at home, early exposure to digital media, limited social engagement, emotional and behavioral aspects of speech, and difficulties in speech articulation and production. Teachers encountered challenges such as limited verbal output, reliance on non-verbal communication, selective peer interaction, reduced participation in group learning activities, and limited parental awareness of children's speech difficulties. To address these challenges, teachers implemented individualized verbal stimulation, play-based language activities, structured instructional support, peer-mediated interaction, and collaboration with parents. Overall, the findings highlight that supporting children with speech delay requires a comprehensive approach that integrates classroom-based strategies and consistent support across home and school environments.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, it is recommended that early childhood educators consistently apply individualized and play-based language stimulation strategies to create supportive learning environments that encourage verbal expression. Structured instructional support and peer-mediated interaction should be integrated into daily classroom activities to enhance

children's readiness to communicate. Parents are encouraged to actively engage in verbal interaction with their children at home, limit excessive digital media use, and collaborate closely with teachers to ensure continuity of speech stimulation. In addition, early identification of speech delay and collaboration with relevant professionals are recommended to provide more comprehensive support. Future research may involve larger samples and incorporate professional assessments to further explore effective interventions for speech delay in early childhood education.

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AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors discussed the results and contributed to from the start to final manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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