

# Stuttering in the English Language among College Students: A Multiple Case Study

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**Abstract.** This multiple case study investigates the challenges and coping mechanisms of college students who experience stuttering when speaking the English language, addressing a gap in understanding how speech fluency issues affect academic and social participation. Guided by Albert Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory, the study aimed to explore how students' belief in their capabilities influenced their ability to manage stuttering. Three participants from Davao Del Sur State College, each with varying degrees of stuttering severity, were purposefully selected. A qualitative approach was used, employing semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis to examine their experiences. The results revealed that stuttering commonly leads to verbal communication barriers, triggering social anxiety, low self-esteem, speech fatigue, and reduced classroom engagement. Participants employed a range of coping strategies, such as breathing techniques, speech therapy exercises, code-switching, positive reinforcement, and avoidance behavior. However, the effectiveness of these strategies varied depending on individual experiences, levels of self-efficacy, and external pressures, such as academic demands. The study concludes that enhancing students' self-efficacy plays a critical role in helping them manage stuttering and improve participation in English-speaking academic settings.

**Keywords:** College students; English language; Oral constraints; Self-efficacy; Stuttering.

## 1.0 Introduction

Stuttering is a speech disorder that significantly impacts college students' ability to communicate in English, affecting both their academic performance and social interactions. Studies from various contexts, including Kuwait, Korea, and the Philippines, highlight how stuttering, poor pronunciation, and low self-confidence impede oral fluency, particularly during structured speaking tasks like reading aloud (Alshatti et al., 2021; Choi et al., 2020; Pastor & Miller, 2019; Ugalingan et al., 2023; Suryani et al., 2020). In the Philippines, communication challenges are further influenced by social anxiety, linguistic limitations, and classroom dynamics (Separa et al., 2020). Although these difficulties are well-documented, little research has examined how students personally experience and manage stuttering within local academic settings. Addressing this gap, the present study uses a multiple case study approach at Davao del Sur State College to explore coping mechanisms and contribute to the development of learner-centered, inclusive strategies aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 4: Quality Education.

## 2.0 Methodology

The study employed a qualitative multiple-case study design to explore the experiences of four college students from Davao Del Sur State College who stutter or stammer when speaking English. Participants were purposefully selected to represent diverse backgrounds, including a student leader, a journalist, and a former call center agent. Data collection involved an initial screening questionnaire followed by semi-structured onsite interviews, which were recorded and transcribed. Using thematic analysis, the researcher conducted both within-case and cross-case analyses to identify individual experiences and shared themes. Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to, including obtaining informed consent, maintaining confidentiality, and providing emotional support throughout the research process.

## 3.0 Results and Discussion

### 3.1 Profile of Participants

Table 1 presents the demographic information of the three participants, all of whom are enrolled in the Bachelor of Secondary Education major in English program at Davao del Sur State College. While they share the same academic course, they vary in age, family background, and ethnicity. All interviews were conducted in Visayan, and pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality. The diversity in their circumstances enhances the depth of the study's insights.

Table 1. Profile of Participants

| Participant Cases | Age | Course        | Family Status   | Ethnicity |
|-------------------|-----|---------------|-----------------|-----------|
| Noble Girl        | 22  | 4BSED English | Complete Family | Bisaya    |
| Moto Fixer        | 22  | 4BSED English | Single Parent   | Bisaya    |
| Desert Rose       | 23  | 3BSED English | Solo Parenting  | B'laan    |

#### Case 1 (Noble Girl)

In Case 1, the assigned code name is Noble Girl. She is a 22-year-old BSED English student at Davao Del Sur State College. She is coded as a Noble Girl since she was born into a wealthy and well-established family in their barangay. She enjoyed a comfortable life with every opportunity in her academic field. Being the eldest daughter, she benefited from her father's successful mechanic shop. As she grew older, Noble Girl continued to excel in both her academic and personal endeavors. Her parents' support never wavered, allowing her to participate in various extracurricular activities. She served as secretary of the Student Supreme Council (SSC) and was an active journalist among her peers. This sense of responsibility fueled her drive, leading her to excel in her studies and take on leadership roles such as serving as the secretary in SSC and writer in DSSC Chronicles.

*"The role of a secretary in the Supreme Student Council at DSSC is challenging, especially since you have to accommodate different students daily."*

Despite her many accomplishments, Noble Girl faced a significant challenge with stuttering. This speech impediment often hindered her ability to express her thoughts clearly. Specifically, she struggles in academic settings and fears that her stuttering might disrupt the flow of classroom discussions, making her hesitant to participate in class discussions. Additionally, she struggled with a limited vocabulary, which further hindered her confidence in articulating her ideas. These struggles fueled her low self-esteem, and social anxiety often overwhelmed her, leaving her feeling isolated and inadequate in both academic and social settings.

*"I struggled the most with oral recitations because my stutter gets in the way of expressing my thoughts."*

*"When I try to speak, I often get stuck on certain words. When I do not know the right words, I struggle to express my thoughts clearly. This lack of fluency can exacerbate my stuttering because I become anxious about finding the correct words, which then affects my speech flow."*

Reflecting on her struggles, her feelings of inadequacy extended beyond the classroom; she noticed that her stutter affected her ability to connect with others, making her reluctant to engage in social gatherings, including even casual conversations. As a result, she felt increasingly disconnected from her peers, who often seemed confident and articulate.

*"Stuttering has significantly impacted my confidence. I often avoid speaking in class because I do not want to embarrass myself, and because of this, I often look down on myself among my colleagues."*

Despite these challenges, Noble Girl remained determined to overcome her stuttering. She recognized it as just one aspect of her identity, not the entirety of who she was. Seeking support from her family, friends, and teachers, she began practicing techniques to manage her speech, including breathing exercises and positive affirmations. With each small victory, she slowly regained her confidence, learning that her voice mattered, regardless of how it sounded.

*"One of my coping mechanisms is practicing breathing exercises, and I apply a positive, affirmative mindset. This helps me calm down and reduces my anxiety when I speak. Every time I managed to continue talking, like finishing a sentence without stuttering, I felt more confident."*

*"I am capable. I am intelligent. My voice matters."*

### **Case 2 (Moto Fixer)**

Case 2 was a fourth-year college student pursuing a Bachelor of Secondary Education degree, majoring in English. He was coded as a Moto fixer because of his passion for fixing motor engines as his part-time job. Growing up in a rural area on his family's land, life was never easy for him as the youngest of seven siblings. He experienced a significant loss early in life when his father, a dedicated farmer who worked from dawn until dusk, passed away. His father's sudden death placed a heavy burden on his mother, who had taken on the responsibility of raising the family alone. As the youngest sibling, he often felt overlooked and relied on his older siblings for guidance and support. Thus, he navigated the complexities of rural life mostly on his own.

*"That is probably the hardest thing I have ever gone through. I was just a young boy when it happened. My father was a farmer, working long hours to provide for us. He was the backbone of the family, and when we lost him, it felt like our world collapsed."*

Likewise, Moto Fixer was also suffering from stuttering. As the youngest, Moto felt a deep sense of isolation and neglect. He often found himself hesitant to engage with his peers, particularly during group discussions. The fear of making mistakes when speaking English, especially in front of others, made him reluctant to participate in conversations. His stutter compounded these feelings, leading to social anxiety and a fear of judgment from classmates. Moto struggled to express himself during in-class sessions and social interactions, making him feel increasingly marginalized in both his academic and social life. In addition, he also experienced speech fatigue, which caused him to be exhausted and lose concentration due to stuttering.

*"Every time I am with others, I usually feel like I am just on the sidelines, not just in school but also in my social life, I see my classmates and friends talking, and I get left out, not because they do not want me there, but because I really cannot keep up with the conversation."*

*"I cannot concentrate well during discussions, especially in class. It feels like my mind is wandering, and because of my stutter, I feel exhausted. The worst part is that it makes me want to sleep in class."*

Despite the challenges Moto Fixer faced, he often found himself avoiding speaking in social situations, preferring instead to lean into his passion for fixing motorcycles. This tendency to retreat into his mechanical world provided him with a sense of solace and control. As he shielded away from conversations, he dedicated more time to repairing motors, immersing himself in the intricate details of each bike. The satisfaction of transforming a broken machine into a fully functioning one became a refuge from his anxiety. While he excelled at mechanical repairs, he realized that healing from his emotional wounds was a much more complex journey.

*"Honestly, when I am in the garage, I can transform and fix a broken motorcycle. It feels good to me. I wish I could feel that same feeling in social situations. However, when I am around people, I become anxious. I would rather focus on the details of the motorcycle engine than engage in conversations, which I struggle to follow because of my stuttering."*

Furthermore, though he still faced moments of social anxiety, Moto learned to embrace his passion for fixing motorcycles as a coping mechanism. It became a way for him to navigate his challenges, channeling his emotions into something tangible and productive. Additionally, through the process of breathing techniques, he discovered that while he may struggle with speaking, he possessed a valuable skill that defined his identity and connected

him to others, enabling him to build relationships based on mutual interests rather than just words.

*"I have been avoiding speaking, especially in front of many people. In this way, I felt like I would not get stressed anymore."*

*"Taking deep breaths before speaking in front of many people, then inhaling and exhaling, has also helped me, especially with my stuttering."*

### **Case 3 (Desert Rose)**

Case 3 is coded as Desert Rose. She is a proud member of the B'laan cultural community and the eldest daughter in her family. She embodies the values of hard work and resilience. Currently, she is pursuing a Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSED) majoring in English. Desert Rose faced the challenges of limited educational access and discrimination due to her cultural background. She was determined to break these barriers because her goal was to be the first in her family to earn a degree, showcasing the transformative power of education. She views her academic success not just as a personal achievement but as a beacon of hope and a catalyst for change. Through this, she inspires others in her community to pursue their academic and professional aspirations. The goal is to become the first member of her family to earn a degree.

*"When I was young, people often looked down on us, especially since we were B'laan."*

*"It is my dream to finish my studies because if this happens, I will be the first member of our tribe to hold a degree."*

Desert Rose grappled with stuttering. This exacerbated her social anxiety and limited her vocabulary in English. This challenge often makes her hesitant to engage in conversations, especially in academic settings where oral communication is required. She admits that the fear of committing mistakes and being judged by her peers contributes to her anxiety, making it difficult for her to express her thoughts. Desert Rose's anxiety is heightened by the competitive nature of her educational environment, where her peers seem to express themselves effortlessly.

*"I am afraid of stuttering because, for me, it feels like failure, especially since I have experienced being judged by my classmates in the past."*

*"Yes, but it is tough, especially since I still lack knowledge, particularly in choosing the correct words for my speaking skills."*

Despite these challenges, Desert Rose remains determined to overcome her stuttering and improve her communication skills. She discovered that through breathing techniques, her stuttering gradually lessened. However, she still tends to avoid school activities that involve public speaking. Nonetheless, Desert Rose continues to work on her confidence, knowing that her journey is about progress, not perfection.

*"My first strategy is to inhale and exhale before speaking, and also include giving myself affirmations that I can do it."*

*"I really cannot avoid usually staying away from school activities that involve speaking engagements because I tend to stutter."*

## **3.2 Cross-Case Analysis on the Experience Challenges of College Students who Stutter in English**

Research Question 1 aimed to gain insight into the experience of challenges in stuttering in the English language, as shown in Table 2 below. This study presents unique challenges that can be grouped into several categories: Oral Constraints, Fear of Mistakes, Social Anxiety, Low Self-esteem, Poor Vocabulary, and Speech Fatigue.

**Table 2.** Cross-Case Analysis of the Experience Challenges among College Students who Stutter in English

| Cases       | Oral Constraints | Fear of Mistakes | Social Anxiety | Low Self-esteem | Poor Vocabulary | Speech fatigue |
|-------------|------------------|------------------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|----------------|
| Noble Girl  | ✓                |                  | ✓              | ✓               | ✓               |                |
| Moto Fixer  |                  | ✓                |                | ✓               |                 | ✓              |
| Desert Rose | ✓                | ✓                | ✓              | ✓               | ✓               | ✓              |

Note: Table 2 summarizes the challenges experienced by each case across six categories. A check mark (✓) indicates that the participant reported experiencing the specific challenge.

### **Oral Constraints**

The first theme in the challenges faced by participants who stutter in English is oral constraints. In this case study,

some college students, particularly those in Cases 1 and 3, struggle with stuttering when communicating in English, their second language. This supports the study, which claimed that oral expression is often the most challenging part for learners of English, linked to issues such as stuttering (Amiruddin et al., 2022). Likewise, English-only policies can exacerbate this issue, increasing anxiety and reducing fluency, particularly for non-native speakers (Vacalares, 2023).

### ***Fear of Mistakes***

This fear is often heightened in college students who stutter, particularly when studying the English language. In this study, the theme is presented in Cases 2 and 3, where the pressure to meet the expectations of fluent communication, coupled with the fear of being judged or misunderstood, affected their overall language learning process. Accordingly, one of the main reasons students tend to avoid speaking in English is that they are afraid their teachers will make mistakes, which can lead to difficulties in speaking (Dashti, 2021).

### ***Social Anxiety***

In the challenge of stuttering in the English language, college students have to avoid social gatherings. In this study, the theme of social anxiety was presented both from Case 1 and Case 3. Both cases reveal the profound impact that social anxiety, driven by the fear of stuttering, has on college students' lives. This supports the claim that fear of being evaluated and anxiety in communicating can directly mirror emotional struggles leading to stuttering. This is also because students tend to avoid embarrassment in social settings (Daymiel et al., 2022).

### ***Low Self-esteem***

In exploring the theme of low self-esteem, this case study examines several individuals whose academic and social experiences have been significantly impacted by their self-perception. Based on the interview results, Cases 1, 2, and 3 were found to have low self-esteem due to stuttering in the English language. These cases highlight the diverse factors that contribute to low self-esteem, particularly among students who face unique challenges, such as stuttering. Low self-esteem is a prevalent psychological issue faced by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, impacting their speaking abilities and overall language learning experience (Ilyas et al., 2021).

### ***Poor Vocabulary***

The interplay between stuttering and vocabulary acquisition is a crucial area of study, shedding light on how speech disorders can impact language proficiency and communication competence. Meanwhile, in this study, Cases 1 and 3 both presented their results and shared insights on experiencing stuttering in the English language due to having poor vocabulary. Thus, research by Gul et al. (2022) identifies inadequate grammar knowledge as a key factor, as a solid understanding of grammar is essential for constructing coherent sentences. Additionally, limited speaking opportunities hinder individuals from practicing their verbal skills, which can lead to a decrease in confidence in their ability to express themselves effectively.

### ***Speech Fatigue***

In this study, speech fatigue is a significant yet often overlooked phenomenon that individuals who stutter experience. This condition arises from the mental and physical exertion required to produce fluent speech, leading to exhaustion after speaking activities. Cases 2 and 3 experienced such problems due to stuttering in the English language. As they navigate the complexities of speech disfluencies, individuals may find themselves not only battling their stuttering but also contending with the fatigue that accompanies their communication efforts. It shows that people who stutter (PWS) often experience more than just speech-related challenges; they also report a higher prevalence of physical discomforts such as musculoskeletal pain, headaches, and jaw pain (Almudhi & Zafar, 2023). The physical strain caused by the effort to communicate may exacerbate these symptoms, highlighting the broader physical impact stuttering can have on individuals.

## **3.3 Cross-Case Analysis on the Coping Mechanisms of College Students who Stutter in English**

Research question 2 aimed to gain insight into the coping mechanisms of college students who stutter in the English language, as shown in Table 3 below. These three students shared their experiences, which provided their strategies for this study. These are the coping mechanisms and strategies being formulated in this study: Breathing Techniques, Positive reinforcement, and Avoidance Behavior.

**Table 3.** *Cross-Case Analysis of Coping Mechanisms among College Students who Stutter in English*

| Cases       | Breathing Techniques | Positive Reinforcement | Avoidance Behavior |
|-------------|----------------------|------------------------|--------------------|
| Noble Girl  | ✓                    | ✓                      |                    |
| Moto Fixer  |                      | ✓                      | ✓                  |
| Desert Rose | ✓                    | ✓                      | ✓                  |

*Note:* Table 3 summarizes the coping mechanisms employed by each case across three categories. A check mark (✓) indicates that the participant reported experiencing the specific coping mechanism.

### **Breathing Techniques**

In Cases 1 and 3, both participants found that using breathing techniques significantly helped manage their stuttering when speaking English. By focusing on controlled breathing, they were able to reduce tension and regain some fluency in their speech. This strategy helped calm their nerves, which often exacerbate stuttering episodes, especially during moments of academic pressure or social anxiety. According to Brown (2020), diaphragmatic breathing, which involves deep breathing from the diaphragm, has been shown to promote a more relaxed and controlled speech pattern, enhancing fluency and reducing speech-related anxiety. This technique regulates airflow, easing the tension commonly felt during stuttering episodes, and is particularly beneficial for individuals with both developmental and acquired stuttering.

### **Positive Reinforcement**

All four cases (Cases 1, 2, and 3) relied on positive reinforcement to cope with the emotional and social challenges associated with stuttering in English. Positive reinforcement, such as receiving encouragement from peers, family members, or instructors, helped to build their confidence. Positive teachers' attitudes were also found to play a crucial role in addressing second-language speaking anxiety, as these attitudes were seen as a preferred coping mechanism. When teachers showed understanding and provided encouragement, students felt more supported and comfortable in their learning environments, which in turn fostered a more positive atmosphere for language acquisition. This kind of support enabled students to engage in their studies without fear of judgment, suggesting that emotional and psychological support are crucial in overcoming language barriers. This supports the study, which reports the benefits of supportive environments that contribute to various aspects of learners and the acquisition of effective coping strategies (Li, 2022).

### **Avoidance Behavior**

Cases 2 and 3 identified avoidance behavior as a key coping mechanism in dealing with their stuttering. Instead of confronting or attempting to overcome their stutter entirely, they chose to avoid specific speaking situations, which helped alleviate their anxiety. By recognizing the role of avoidance in their communication strategies, these students focused on minimizing the emotional and social impact of stuttering. However, they also acknowledged the need for improvement and personal growth, realizing that avoidance could not be their sole strategy for success. This pattern of avoidance behavior is often observed among individuals who stutter (PWS), as noted by Sønsterud et al. (2020), who found that PWS frequently engage in avoidance behaviors. This avoidance is commonly linked to anxiety related to language, as individuals fear judgment or become frustrated by their inability to communicate fluently. This emotional burden can lead to further withdrawal from social interactions, perpetuating a cycle of anxiety and avoidance. Addressing this anxiety can reduce avoidance behaviors and promote more confident communication, highlighting the importance of addressing both the emotional and communicative aspects of stuttering.

## **4.0 Conclusion**

This study examines the challenges faced by college students who stutter when speaking English, including oral constraints, fear of errors, social anxiety, low self-esteem, limited vocabulary, and speech fatigue. Despite these issues, students employ various coping strategies, including breathing techniques, positive reinforcement, and avoidance behaviors. The research emphasizes the importance of inclusive classroom practices, flexible language policies, and teacher awareness. It also recommends policy reforms and further research into digital interventions, as well as long-term support for individuals with stuttering, aligning with goals for inclusive and high-quality education.

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Author 1: conceptualization, data gathering, data analysis  
 Author 2: conceptualization, data analysis

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in the conduct and publication of this research.

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