



THE STUDENTS' CHALLENGES IN SPOKEN ENGLISH PROFICIENCY: A CASE
STUDY IN AN INDONESIAN UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

This study investigates challenges faced by 5th-semester English major students at an Indonesian university in developing proficient English-speaking skills. Utilizing a qualitative descriptive method, the research aims to identify and analyze impediments hindering students' spoken English proficiency. Subjects were 5th-semester English major students, and data collection involved observation, interviews, and documentation.

The findings reveal diverse challenges, including low vocabulary mastery, grammar deficiencies, pronunciation difficulties, fear of judgment, lack of confidence, limited practice opportunities, minimal exposure to English, environmental factors, mother tongue dominance, low motivation, and ineffective teaching strategies. Pronunciation emerged as the predominant issue, with students expressing apprehension due to fear of mispronunciation.

This research provides valuable insights for educators, curriculum developers, and language learning practitioners, offering a nuanced understanding of specific areas requiring attention. Addressing these challenges can inform targeted interventions and strategies, fostering an improved learning environment for enhancing English-speaking skills.

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1. Introduction

Ernest R. Hilgard's seminal work defines learning as a deliberate process that induces changes distinct from those caused by external factors (Hilgard, 1984). This transformative nature of learning is characterized by its relatively permanent impact, setting it apart from changes resulting from transient conditions such as fatigue, illness, or intoxication. Learning, being a fundamental element in education, plays a crucial role in determining the success or failure of educational goals (Abdullah, Maqfirah, Arifin, and Haddar, 2023). Its significance extends beyond the confines of classrooms to encompass students' experiences in their homes and family environments

(Fisher, Frey & Thausand, 2003). Hence, educators, particularly lecturers, must possess a comprehensive understanding of learning, encompassing its diverse aspects, forms, and manifestations (Boekaerts, 1997).

While some perceive learning as a mere accumulation or memorization of facts, it is the cornerstone of any educational endeavor. As a dynamic process, learning occupies a prominent position in various disciplines related to education, notably educational psychology. Given its paramount importance, a substantial portion of research and experimentation in educational psychology focuses on gaining a deeper understanding of the intricate process of human change (Dunlosky, Rawson, Marsh, Nathan, and Willingham, 2013).

Learning English presents formidable challenges, particularly for those not inherently interested but compelled to incorporate English into their education. Numerous studies delve into the difficulties of learning English, with a particular emphasis on speaking skills (Aziz and Kashinathan, 2021). However, the exploration of students' strategies in addressing these challenges remains relatively underexplored. Understanding these strategies becomes crucial as it offers valuable insights derived from the experiences of fellow students, aiding in the development of effective interventions.

This study focuses on the English language education scenario in one of Indonesian universities. Notably, despite their academic background, many students encounter difficulties in speaking English, attributed to a lack of interest and insufficient practice. Intriguingly, some proficient speakers exhibit reluctance or embarrassment, prompting a deeper inquiry into the strategies employed by students to navigate these challenges.

The research addresses two primary questions: What difficulties do students encounter in speaking English? and What strategies do students use to overcome these challenges? The study aims to contribute to academic knowledge by offering theoretical insights into addressing language difficulties and providing practical guidance for educators and students alike.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to enhance academic understanding and offer valuable information for students and education practitioners regarding strategies for overcoming difficulties in speaking English. However, it is important to note that this study is limited to fifth-semester students majoring in English education who specifically struggle with speaking English.

2. Materials and Methods

The research methodology employed in this study adopts a qualitative approach to provide a comprehensive understanding of the intricate interaction between student strategies and the challenges associated with learning to speak English. This methodology seeks to delve into the strategies employed by students in addressing difficulties in speaking English during their learning activities, offering an in-depth exploration of their views and experiences.

Research Design

Qualitative research methods are selected with a purpose: to facilitate research and to comprehend the phenomena under investigation (Mohr, 1999). These methods are particularly valuable in overcoming obstacles and challenges faced by researchers during the research process. Qualitative research provides an overview of the phenomenon studied, aiding in variable determination and theory generation (Sofaer, 1999,).

In this study, the focus is on utilizing the case study method, aiming to present empirical evidence in-depth, typically used to test specific theories. The case study approach is guided by a theoretical foundation at the inception and throughout the data analysis phase (Merriam, 1988). It involves an in-depth examination of a particular case within its context, without any external intervention.

The participants in this study consist of five 5th-semester students majoring in English in an Indonesian University. The selection criteria involve choosing students who are still unable to speak English effectively, emphasizing the need for a targeted exploration of strategies employed by students facing speaking difficulties.

Data Collection and Analysis

The research methodology employed in this study encompasses three key components: observation, interviews, and documentation, each serving distinct purposes in unraveling the complexities of practicing English, particularly focusing on speaking skills.

Observation serves as a fundamental method to gain insights into the practical application of English in the face of challenges related to speaking skills (Smit and Onwuegbuzie, 2018). The chosen approach for this study is non-participant observation, emphasizing the role of the researcher as an independent observer not directly involved in the activities under scrutiny. Field notes play a pivotal role in this process, capturing and detailing events within the field to facilitate the identification and understanding of difficulties encountered in speaking skills during various learning activities.

Complementing the observational aspect, interviews are conducted as a means of engaging research participants in question-and-answer sessions, fostering the exchange of information and ideas (Qu and Dumay, 2011). In this context, interviews serve a crucial role in providing additional data to confirm the utilization of strategies by the participants to overcome challenges in their English-speaking endeavors.

Documentation, as a method, involves the meticulous collection and presentation of accurate evidence from specific sources of information (Merriam, 1988). In the present study, documentation is leveraged to obtain comprehensive information, knowledge, and evidence related to the application of specific strategies employed by individuals in overcoming difficulties in speaking English. This multi-faceted approach, combining observation, interviews, and documentation, ensures a comprehensive and nuanced exploration of the challenges and strategies associated with practicing English, particularly within the realm of speaking skills.

Data Analysis Method

Upon the completion of data collection, this qualitative research employs a meticulous three-step process of data analysis.

The initial step, Data Reduction, involves the systematic curation of collected data from questionnaires, interviews, and supporting documents, tailored to the research objectives. Through careful selection, relevant data are organized into groups, facilitating the extraction of meaningful insights and the formulation of conclusions (Graue, 2015). This phase ensures a focused and purposeful analysis, aligning precisely with the specific needs of the research.

Subsequently, in Data Presentation, the grouped data and drawn conclusions are articulated in a narrative format, a conventional practice in qualitative research. This narrative presentation serves to enhance clarity and comprehension for the reader, offering illumination on how students employ strategies to navigate challenges encountered during online English learning. The qualitative nature of this presentation adds depth and context to the understanding of the students' experiences (Thorne, 2000).

The final stage, Conclusion and Verification, involves deriving conclusive findings from the analysis. However, a crucial step is to subject these conclusions to tentative testing against supporting theories and related concepts (Kothari, 2004). This verification process acknowledges the limitations of generalization, recognizing that the conclusions are context-specific to the 5-6 students involved. By adopting this approach, the interpretation of findings remains cautious and contextually grounded, ensuring a nuanced understanding of the observed phenomena within the specified academic setting. This meticulous process underscores the commitment to rigor and validity in drawing meaningful insights from qualitative data analysis.

3. Results and Discussions

In this chapter, the researcher delves into the findings on "students' difficulty in speaking English." The data collection involved in-depth observation and interviews, providing a comprehensive understanding of the challenges students encounter in spoken English.

The preceding chapter explored various factors contributing to these difficulties, revealing that a significant number of students struggle with effective communication. The identified problems encompass a range, including low vocabulary mastery, grammar hurdles, pronunciation difficulties, shyness, nervousness, fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, limited practice, dominance of the mother tongue, and ineffective English teaching strategies.

In the context of this study, students' English problems denote their difficulties in understanding and effectively utilizing spoken English. As emphasized by Harmer (2008), every student is prone to making mistakes in spoken or written English. The observation and interviews conducted over a month in an Indonesian University affirm that most, if not all, students make mistakes during English speaking exercises.

The variability among students lies in the frequency and type of errors committed, closely tied to the challenges encountered in the process of learning to speak English, as detailed in the previous section. The research findings identify several problems in students' English speaking proficiency, particularly related to the four components of English highlighted by Douglas and Frazier (2001).

Pronunciation, the first component, involves attention to specific sounds, intonation, phrasing, stress, timing, rhythm, sound quality, and non-verbal elements closely linked to spoken language (O'Connor, 1980). Grammar, the second component, is crucial for clear and meaningful communication (Thomson & Martinet, 2015). Vocabulary, the third component, encompasses knowledge of words and their meanings. Finally, fluency, the fourth component, pertains to the speed and ease with which language learners perform speaking, listening, reading, and writing tasks.

The findings underscore the significance of addressing these four components comprehensively to enhance students' English-speaking skills. Strategies and interventions should not only focus on vocabulary and grammar but also on pronunciation and fluency aspects. Effective teaching methodologies should be employed to build students' confidence, encourage practice, and minimize the impact of the mother tongue on English speaking.

In conclusion, the identified difficulties and problems in speaking English highlight the multifaceted nature of language learning. Recognizing these challenges enables educators to tailor interventions and strategies that address specific components, fostering a more holistic development of English-speaking proficiency.

4. Conclusion

The English proficiency of the students remains a significant concern, demanding immediate attention and improvement. Most students struggle to articulate themselves in English, facing challenges in producing coherent words, phrases, and sentences. While a handful exhibit commendable English skills, particularly in spoken communication, this represents only a minority. The class is predominantly composed of students with low English-speaking abilities.

The research findings shed light on the myriad difficulties experienced by students in speaking English. These challenges encompass low vocabulary mastery, grammatical stumbling blocks, pronunciation difficulties, shyness, nervousness, fear of mistakes, lack of confidence, limited practice opportunities, minimal exposure to English, environmental factors, dominance of the mother tongue, low motivation, and ineffective teaching strategies.

Among these issues, pronunciation emerges as the dominant difficulty, with students expressing fear of speaking due to the inability to pronounce words correctly.

The reluctance to speak is often attributed to a lack of confidence, shyness, and nervousness, coupled with the perception that English writing and speaking differ significantly, confusing. Despite these challenges, there is a clear need for interventions to elevate the overall English proficiency of students.

Suggestions for improvement in English language learning encompass recommendations for lecturers, students, and future researchers. Lecturers are advised to focus on motivation and engagement, tailoring diverse and interesting teaching methods to class conditions and materials. This tailored approach ensures that students remain enthusiastic and avoid boredom during lessons, thereby promoting effective learning.

For students, a proactive role in language development is emphasized. Hard work and consistent practice in speaking English are identified as key factors for successful communication. Overcoming fear and hesitation is crucial, encouraging students to express their ideas without the fear of making mistakes. Embracing a proactive approach to language acquisition is highlighted as a significant contributor to overall improvement.

Future researchers are encouraged to bring creativity into the teaching and learning process, striving for innovation and positive impact. Approaching the study of students and lecturers with a fresh perspective can yield valuable insights, contributing to the continuous improvement of language education. A commitment to ongoing exploration and experimentation in teaching methodologies is suggested to pave the way for a more effective and engaging language learning experience.

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