

Students' Difficulties in Speaking English as a Foreign Language: Undergraduate Students' Voices

Dwi Bayu Saputra^{1*}, Eko Saputra², Lia Haryana³,
Adelia Puspa⁴

University of Bengkulu^{1,2,3,4}

Jl. WR Supratman, Kandang Limun, Bengkulu and
38371, Indonesia

dwibayusaputra@unib.ac.id^{1*};

ekosaputra@unib.ac.id²;

lia.haryana@unib.ac.id³;

adeliapuspa@unib.ac.id⁴

* corresponding author

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Abstract

Even though there has been a wide range of research on students' English-speaking issues, there has been little research on concerns associated with perceived difficulties in speaking, particularly in post-pandemic. This study aims to investigate the difficulties experienced by EFL students in speaking. The method used is exploratory sequential mixed methods in which qualitative data support quantitative data. Two data collection techniques were deployed to triangulate the data. Questionnaires were distributed to 105 students to discover their perceptions of difficulties in speaking after the pandemic. Then, eight students were interviewed to dig deeper into the data from the completed questionnaire. This study revealed that students in English study programs still had problems communicating owing to psychological and linguistic reasons. Some of the explanations identified by this research include a lack of English vocabulary, a lack of confidence while speaking English, and nervousness about receiving negative criticism from colleagues or lecturers. The study's findings are intended to add to the body of knowledge concerning students' speaking issues. It is hoped that teaching practitioners will be able to identify the right approach to teaching speaking so that learning may be done more efficiently.

Keywords: Speaking difficulties, English as a Foreign Language, Mixed methods, Anxiety

Introduction

Countless research has been conducted on how to increase EFL students' speaking performance, but empirically there are still students who cannot speak English fluently. Attending and participating in official English classes at school and university for more than ten years do not ensure that students will be able to speak English proficiently (Kassem, 2018; Riadil, 2020; Zrekat & Al-Sohbani, 2022). It could be because English is a foreign language in Indonesia, so students do not have



much exposure to English outside of the classroom, limiting their opportunity to practice the target language (Zrekat et al., 2016). Students are also likely hesitant to speak English in class for fear of making errors (Nunan, 1999; Robby, 2010). Many teachers, particularly at the university level, have complained that students, while in an EFL class, remain inactive when asked to talk or answer in English (Abadi, 2015).

Several factors contribute to students' inability to speak a foreign language fluently. Some of these factors were mentioned by Zarrinabadi et al., (2014) including an unpleasant class atmosphere, unfamiliar topics, too many students, and peers who did not encourage utilizing English inside or outside of the classroom. Other factors might include the influence of the first language (Asif et al., 2018) insufficient vocabulary, and the socioeconomic status of the learner's family (Misbah et al., 2017). Amoah & Yeboah, (2021) added that the inhibiting factors for students' speaking performances consisted of two main factors, linguistic and psychological. The former covers vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar, whereas the latter is associated with anxiety, shyness, or fear of making mistakes, as well as a lack of motivation. This impediment considerably impacts learners' lack of speaking abilities concerning the target language being studied (Lumettu & Runtuwene, 2018).

The situation became even worse when the Covid outbreak started. All schools and universities in Indonesia were forced to convert to remote modes beginning in early March 2020 (Mailizar et al., 2020). Everyone is under pressure to complete online learning in a short period. Thus, the teaching and learning process becomes less effective owing to various variables, one of which is a need for more student engagement (Mailizar et al., 2020). Also, the interaction becomes less when we know that interaction with classmates and rigorous engagement with the teacher is required to develop students' speaking abilities (Barron, 2020).

Many research studies have been conducted to explore students' speaking ability, particularly the influence of online learning on students' speaking ability (Al-Jarf, 2021; Galindo et al., 2020; Hamouda, 2020; Martin, 2020; Saed et al., 2021; Syafiq et al., 2021). Participants in research conducted by Hamouda, (2020) had generally positive opinions regarding taking virtual classes, notably as they considered it beneficial in enhancing their speaking abilities. In a study by Galindo et al., (2020), findings of the study showed that this activity helped the students improve their ability to give oral presentations. Syafiq et al., (2021) discovered that using YouTube videos during online learning might increase students' speaking skills in epidemic situations. Covid-19. Based on the majority of the evidence, online learning improves students' speaking ability.

The researchers were not only interested in the benefits of online learning, but they were also concerned with the drawbacks of these alternative learning modes. There have also been several studies related to students' difficulties in speaking English as a foreign language (Ghafar & Amin, 2022; Meiralda, 2022; Amoah & Yeboah, 2021; Gumartifa et al., 2021). Based on the study conducted by Ghafar & Amin (2022), most learners experience personal, linguistic, social, and environmental speaking challenges. Kurdish students struggled with a lack of confidence, limited vocabulary, hesitation, uneasiness when speaking, fear of making mistakes, a lack of an ideal place to learn English, and a lack of teacher



excitement. From Amoah & Yeboah's study, (2021) study, they found that Chinese EFL learners experience speaking issues that are related to psychological variables such as anxiety, fear of making mistakes, reluctance, and fear of unfavorable assessment rather than linguistic elements. Also, a study by Pratolo et al., (2019) mentioned that there are multiple issues that Indonesian students claim impede their ability to communicate smoothly, including language barriers, psychological aspects, proponent factors like classmates, conversation subjects, and speaking practice.

Previous research has revealed a few gaps that need to be filled in order to expand the body of information about students' difficulties in speaking English, particularly in the EFL setting. Despite the fact that Amoah's research investigated the issues of EFL students in China in depth, it was performed in a context where the learning mode was face-to-face. Scarce attention is being devoted to student views of speaking difficulties in a foreign language, particularly students who have encountered fully online learning. This study aims to fill the existing gap so that the presented findings might add to the body of knowledge concerning students' opinions of difficulties in speaking English. Therefore, this current study sought to answer the main research questions, 'What factors affect the speaking performance of Indonesian EFL learners?'

Method

Research Design

An exploratory sequential mixed methods technique was used in this study, with quantitative data supplemented by qualitative data (Creswell, 2013). The study used a quantitative measure and a semi-structured interview to gain a deeper understanding of the variables that impede students from speaking fluently. Quantitative data is used to investigate students' perceptions which contains items designed to assess EFL learners' speaking issues. Meanwhile, to gain insight into the responses provided in the questionnaire, qualitative data in the form of interviews is employed, resulting in more thorough and comprehensive data presentation. Because the purpose of this study was to investigate students' views of their speaking challenges, both a survey and a semi-structured interview were distributed.

Research Site and Participants

This study was carried out at a public university in Bengkulu province, Indonesia. Participants consisted of approximately 150 undergraduate students from the English language education program. All participants have taken speaking courses for three consecutive semesters. This is a consideration for researchers to ask them to participate as they have gained knowledge related to speaking skills. From 150 questionnaires being deployed, only 105 students filled in the questionnaire. The Google Form was used to generate the questionnaire, which was then sent over to the WhatsApp Group. Each class was asked to complete a questionnaire, and they were informed that the information would be used exclusively for research purposes. All respondents were also informed that their identities would be kept confidential.



Data Collection Techniques

The data was collected with Likert Scale questionnaires and interviews. Indonesian EFL learners' Speaking Difficulty scale was adapted from Amoah & Yeboah, (2021) with some alterations made to fit the teaching and learning setting in Indonesia. As the name implies, it was designed to assess EFL learners' speaking issues. From 23 items in the questionnaire, it covers some of the aspects of learning English such as affective variables like motivation, anxiety, and self-confidence underpinning the notion of Krashen, (2003). Prior researchers consulted various academics to conduct content validity evaluation on this questionnaire. This questionnaire contains questions about psychological issues, such as anxiety, shyness, lack of desire, lack of confidence, timidity, and so on. It also includes linguistic variables such as pronunciation and grammar, as well as other factors such as the effect of the mother tongue. Meanwhile, the interview questions are generally designed to ask about the difficulties encountered when speaking English. The research employed the questionnaire using Google Forms and distributed it to the Whatsapp Group for each class. This questionnaire can be filled out by students at any time, and it should be collected within around two weeks.

Data Analysis Techniques

Microsoft Excel was used to examine the data (newest version). To study the quantitative data acquired from survey replies, descriptive statistics were used to estimate the frequency and mean score for each questionnaire item. Internal consistency was measured using Cronbach's alpha, as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1. Internal Consistency of The Questionnaire

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.894	23

According to Table 1, the consistency coefficient for the 23 items of the questionnaire is 0.894, showing that the close-ended questionnaire of Indonesian EFL learners' Speaking Difficulty scale has high reliability. The interview questions started with what were the challenges in speaking English in general and then a series of follow-up questions linked to the participants' responses in order to dig more deeply into the students' difficulties with speaking. This qualitative data is utilized to complement and go further into the questionnaire's answers provided by the students, allowing researchers to obtain more information and specifics about speaking issues.

Findings and Discussions

Findings

The findings of this study will be presented by first displaying the data gathered from the provided questionnaire, followed by data from the interviews to triangulate the findings. In other words, quantitative data will be presented first, followed by qualitative data, as is required for an exploratory sequential mixed methods study.



Table 2. Distribution of Mean and Standard deviation of Indonesian EFL learner's Speaking Difficulty

Statement	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Overall		2.57	
It's hard for me to speak English immediately without thinking about L1.	105	2.79	0.567
It is difficult for me to speak English naturally without reverting to my first language.	105	2.74	0.555
It is hard for me to speak English without hesitation.	105	2.65	0.650
It is hard for me to speak English without making grammar mistakes.	105	3.00	0.665
Producing English tenses correctly in speaking is a challenging task for me.	105	2.73	0.593
I do not consider myself better than other students in speaking English.	105	2.67	0.716
When speaking English, I usually find it difficult to convey anything straight without first articulating it in Bahasa Indonesia and then translating it into English.	105	2.71	0.631
I find it difficult to improve my English-speaking proficiency due to fear.	105	2.61	0.727
Fluent English pronunciation is difficult for me.	105	2.42	0.718
It is challenging for me when my teacher explains English classes in Bahasa Indonesia.	105	2.05	0.699
It is challenging for me when my teacher utilizes English to explain English classes.	105	2.23	0.639
During English lessons, I find it challenging to speak a lot of English.	105	2.57	0.691
Outside of the English classroom, I find it difficult to speak much English.	105	2.53	0.694
I do not find it difficult to speak a lot of English outside the English classroom	105	2.51	0.695
It is tough for me to talk without preparation during English classes.	105	2.82	0.632
I find it difficult to answer questions in English.	105	2.44	0.706
I find it challenging to speak English to my teacher during English courses	105	2.57	0.648
I find it difficult for taking English oral exams	105	2.62	0.699
I find it challenging to even recall the words or phrases I acquired during the session.	105	2.44	0.664
Every word the teacher says in English is hard for me to grasp.	105	2.21	0.661
It is tough for me to answer questions willingly during English courses.	105	2.51	0.709



It is tough for me to relate or describe events in English in an organized manner.	105	2.61	0.643
When debating with my friends, it usually takes me longer to defend myself effortlessly in English.	105	2.78	0.635

In an attempt to find an answer to the study question, 'What factors influence the speaking performance of Indonesian EFL learners?' A Speaking Difficulty Scale for Indonesian EFL Learners was developed. Looking at Table 2, which distributes the 23 items, it can be seen that students generally have difficulty speaking English. With 5 as the highest level of difficulty and 1 as the lowest, all items have an average of 2.57, indicating that it is rated as average in this respect.

From table 2, the data revealed that Grammar-related items get the highest average score of 3.00. The participants considered that they have difficulties speaking without making grammatical errors. There were 65 respondents, or 61.9 percent, who agreed with this statement, while 21 other individuals strongly agreed. Meanwhile, just 19 participants disagreed, indicating that students who had trouble speaking due to grammatical issues outweighed students who did not have difficulties speaking owing to grammar issues. This data is corroborated by evidence collected from the interview session. The following are some extracts from interviews on students' difficulties communicating due to grammatical issues: *"I'm afraid what I'm saying isn't following proper grammar. When I have to speak English, grammar makes me uneasy. Because I am an English education student, I consider I should be able to communicate with grammatical structures."* (Excerpt 1).

"I'm afraid that if I speak with the wrong grammar, then my interlocutor will not understand what I mean. And also, I'm afraid if my interlocutor corrects my grammar and my pronunciation." (Excerpt 2)

Meanwhile, students who claimed that grammar did not hinder their ability to communicate did so because they did not focus on accuracy when speaking, instead emphasizing fluency, as shown in the following excerpt:

"When I communicate without thinking about grammar, I feel more at ease and free. I'm not worried about how this grammar will come across when I talk" (excerpt 3).

"In my opinion, when speaking, grammar is not too important." (Excerpt 4)

"When it comes to everyday conversation, I don't put much emphasis on grammar, but when it comes to academic subjects, grammar is crucial." (Excerpt 5)

The second highest item is connected to speaking preparation. Students struggle when asked to talk spontaneously or extemporaneously, as evidenced by an average of 2.82. On this issue, 66 participants (62.9%) said they agreed, and 11 said they strongly agreed, indicating that they would struggle if required to speak English without preparation. Only 28 individuals out of 105 disagree with this statement.

"I'm hesitant to speak out since I still have a limited vocabulary and am not competent in pronouncing English words. I am ashamed of people who speak more English than me like my lecturer." (Excerpt 6)



Also, EFL students in this study considered that speaking English without thinking about the words they wished to convey in their native language, particularly Indonesian, would be challenging. The excerpts below strengthen the data from the questionnaire

"I typically consider the Indonesian language first because I have to think the grammar to use and also, I sometimes don't know the English word, so I think the Indonesian language first." (Excerpt 7)

"The lack of vocabulary requires me to think of sentences in Indonesian first sometimes in my head and then I translate them into English." (Excerpt 8)

Interestingly, one of the respondents said that thinking about what to say in Indonesian would help him speak English.

"Before I speak in English, I usually prepare the words in my mind in Indonesian, then I spontaneously say them in English." (Excerpt 9)

Also, from data from the interview session, the student mentioned that one of the things that made him feel uncomfortable speaking English was that the other person criticized his grammar and pronunciation when he talked. The manner the interlocutor corrects him is also unpleasant. An extract from the interview is provided below.

"I'm scared that what I'm saying will be lost due to poor language, especially if my interlocutor corrects me in a way that irritates me." (Excerpt 10)

Discussion

This study aims to address research questions about the factors that inhibit Indonesian EFL students from speaking. It was discovered that both psychological and linguistic issues were the most strongly experienced by undergraduate students, preventing them from speaking confidently.

The participants believed that making grammatical mistakes when speaking was harmful, thus they chose to remain silent rather than push themselves to learn how to speak. The students also might feel afraid of being laughed at to get wrong in speaking in front of their friends. It is in line with Hamouda, (2012) the majority of participants in his study are reluctant to talk because they are afraid of making errors, being laughed at, and being criticized by the teacher. Furthermore, they are terrified of their peers' judgments of their performance. Yahya (2013) discovered that students would not be afraid to speak the language if they knew they would not be evaluated or interrupted for making mistakes. He & Chen, (2010) state that students' self-evaluation of their speaking skills as imperfect leads to insecurity about communicating with others. Teachers have to give more attention to how to give appropriate feedback so that students might not feel intimidated either by their teacher or their classmate.

From the finding, it can be interpreted that linguistics issues held by students contribute to students' speaking anxiety. In other words, the psychological factor is strengthened by the linguistic factor creating students' lack of confidence in speaking. It corroborated with the study conducted by Diaab, (2016) which found that Libyan students struggle with oral communication owing to linguistics and psychological constraints. His study also revealed that due to less exposure to English, students found speaking to become more intimidating and challenging.



It can be worse if the students are still not confident with their pronunciation. Here this study shows that pronunciation is perceived as a factor that hinders students' ability to speak. Some interviewees stated that their difficulties speaking were caused by a variety of issues, one of which was an inability or lack of confidence in pronouncing English words. They are concerned that the word they are speaking will be mispronounced and that the other person will not comprehend it. This is consistent with the results of researchers Leong & Ahmadi (2017), who discovered that variances in pronunciation might cause a lot of issues for non-native English speakers, causing them to become confused while forming English words.

Linguistics and psychology are the two aspects that influence students' proficiency in speaking English, and they are also the two reasons that make foreign students fearful of speaking the language they are studying. This is in line with research by Mahripah (2014). Based on his finding (2014), psychological factors like motivation and personality, as well as some linguistic aspects of language including phonology, syntax, vocabulary, and semantics, have an impact on EFL learners' speaking abilities. These results, however, contrast significantly from those of Amoah & Yeboah, (2021), who discovered that Chinese students' speaking difficulties are more a result of psychological than linguistic factors. It may be that none of their students are English majors.

These findings have relevant implications that can be considered when embarking on speaking courses to students at the tertiary level. Teachers must provide an atmosphere encouraging students to participate actively in and outside the classroom. Giving students adequate and pertinent comments will help them feel cared for, which will lower their fear and increase engagement, and ultimately enhance their speaking abilities.

Conclusion

This research aims to investigate how students—particularly those enrolled in English study programs—perceive speaking issues after the pandemic. This study found that even though students had taken three speaking classes consecutively, English study program students still had difficulty speaking due to psychological and linguistic factors. Some of the causes that can be noticed from this research include a lack of vocabulary in English, a lack of confidence while speaking words in English, and a fear of receiving negative feedback from colleagues or lecturers who teach. This finding adds to a body of research showing that psychological and linguistic issues contribute to students' speaking difficulties. With the help of these findings, it is hoped that educators will pay closer attention to these two elements of the teaching and learning process. In particular, when providing feedback, teachers are expected to be able to convey that making mistakes when speaking a foreign language is common and to ask other students not to make fun of friends who speak ungrammatical correct or mispronounced words in English. The study had some limitations that should be acknowledged. This study only used a relatively small sample and interviewed eight out of 105. Future studies are anticipated to employ a more significant, diverse sample of many colleges. The outcomes could be more broadly applicable. Also, future research can focus on qualitative data where the participants taken have low speaking ability. Researchers can use in-



depth interviews with several students to explore more deeply the difficulties experienced by these students.

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