



EFL Learners' Difficulties in Speaking English

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the difficulties faced by EFL learners in speaking English. The identification of the difficulties covers the six aspects of speaking skills as proposed by Brown (2004), namely, pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, and task. The participants of the study were first-semester non-English Department students of Universitas Tidar who took English as a General Course Class. The research data were collected from the students' spoken production and responses to the questionnaire. The results of the study show that there are three major difficulties identified from the students' responses. They are grammar (48%), pronunciation (27%), vocabulary (12%), and other aspects less than 10%.

Keywords: EFL, Learners' Difficulties, Speaking Skill

Introduction

Mastery of English is needed as it is used in international communication by the majority of people. In Indonesia, English is learnt as a foreign language (EFL) since it is not used by Indonesian people in their daily communication. EFL learners are said to be proficient in English when they master four skills of communication: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Among the four skills that should be mastered by the learners, speaking is considered one of the most important language abilities



(Aleksandrak: 2011); and success in language learning is often assessed based on the improvement of EFL learners' spoken language proficiency (Richard: 2008). For this reason, the learners' ability to speak often becomes a priority in EFL learning in Indonesia.

Along with increasing awareness to be able to communicate in English, EFL learners have been exposed to English since they were in elementary school. However, the majority of English learners are incapable of oral communication (Zhang: 2009). This condition leads to a question: "What are the difficulties faced by EFL learners in speaking English?" Therefore, the study aims to identify what kinds of issues EFL learners encounter when it comes to speaking English.

There are some definitions of speaking according to experts. Cameron (2001:46) states that speaking is an active use of language to express meaning. Meanwhile, McDonough and Shaw (2003) define speaking as a skill to produce utterance that is used to express ideas, opinions, wishes or desires to do something, to negotiate and/or solve problems, as well as to establish and maintain relationships. Thus, it can be concluded that speaking involves oral communication to convey feelings and information. Mastering speaking skill means acquiring both micro- and macro-skills of speaking. Speaking skills are divided into macro- and micro-skills by Brown (2004). The smallest language units, such as phonemes, morphemes, words, collocations, and phrasal words, are produced using micro-skills, while the term "macro skills" refers to a speaker's ability to focus on the most important aspects of speech, such as fluency, discourse, function, style, cohesiveness, and speaking strategy. By being proficient in both micro and macro skills, a speaker and listener would successfully build and share meaning.

Brown (2004) states that when someone can demonstrate his ability to speak in a particular language, his language acquisition is considered to be successful. Therefore, teachers need to create a supportive classroom environment that enables learners to develop their speaking skills. In a speaking class, activities are designed to help learners to be able to produce speech sounds and sound patterns; use a phrase and word stress, intonation patterns, and the target language's rhythm; choose appropriate language for the circumstance, issue, and social milieu; construct ideas in a clear and logical order; use language to express opinions; as well as speak clearly and fluently (Nunan: 2003).

Harmer (2005) proposes the most widely used speaking activities in a classroom as follows:

1. Acting from a script

In this activity, learners are asked to act out scenes from plays, their course book, and/or dialogues they write themselves.



2. Communication games

Some games used in a speaking class are information gap, twenty questions, just a minute, call my bluff, and fishbowl.

3. Discussion

Discussion sometimes fails because learners are hesitant to express their opinion in front of the class. One of the strategies used to overcome this problem is by having the "buzz group". This activity gives an opportunity for learners to have a discussion in a small group before performing the discussion in front of the class. By doing so, the stress level of learners decreases since they have time to prepare ideas and the language to use

4. Prepared talks

The prepared talks, in which a learner presents on a subject of his/her own choice, is a common type of activity. Because these speeches are planned, they are not intended for casual and spontaneous dialogues.

5. Questionnaires

Questionnaires can be used to encourage learners to engage in conversation. Teachers can create any relevant topic for a questionnaire.

6. Simulation and roleplay

Simulation and role play are quite beneficial to learners. The learners act out a real-life event as if it were happening in the actual world, such as a business meeting, an environment in an airplane cabin, or an interview.

Meanwhile, when it comes to oral production, Brown (2001) points out that there are six similar types of activities that are easy to create in the classroom. These activities include imitative, intense, responsive, transactional (dialogue), interpersonal (dialogue), and extended (monologue) texts.

The classroom activities identified by the experts show that the goal of speaking instruction is to improve students' conversational skills in the target language. This is in line with Nunan's idea (1991) which addresses that the most crucial part of learning a second or foreign language is developing speaking skills, and its success is determined by one's ability to have a conversation in that language. Furthermore, Nunan (1999) argues that speaking requires linguistic competence in the sense of having a substantial vocabulary, mastering grammar competence, and being able to articulate sounds properly. Functional competence is another requirement for speaking, which entails giving thorough and logical answers to inquiries. Besides, speaking needs strategic competence, which involves the speaker's ability



to apply techniques when he finds difficulty in speaking, as well as sociolinguistic/cultural competence so that the speaker can use language that is suitable for the situation.

Speaking is a productive skill which allows students to actively create texts in spoken forms. Thus, teacher develops a learning atmosphere where the learners can communicate actively in the classroom. However, EFL learners often find speaking is difficult. Brown (2001) identifies the causes of the issue; those are clustering, redundancy, reduced forms, performance variable, colloquial language, rate of delivery, stress, rhythm, intonation, and interaction. In order for the teacher to be able to select an effective teaching process, he/she needs to evaluate the learners' speaking competence. EFL learners' speaking performance is assessed by conducting a speaking ability test. By assessing and discovering to what degree the learners are skilled in speaking, teachers can identify the difficulties the learners faced in speaking.

There are six components of speaking assessment proposed by Brown (2004). They are:

1. Pronunciation

This aspect measures how pronunciation is accepted by educated native speakers.

2. Grammar

This component assesses whether or not or how grammar is equivalent to the grammar of an educated native speaker.

3. Vocabulary

This element evaluates to what extent speech including vocabulary, idioms, colloquialisms, and pertinent cultural references is accepted by educated native speakers.

4. Fluency

This factor judges how fluent the speaker is in the language and how the fluency is accepted by educated native speakers.

5. Comprehension

The aspect shows whether the speaker can understand questions and statements to the degree equivalent to educated native speakers.

6. Task

The element shows whether or not the learner has the same speaking mastery as an educated native speaker.

In detail, the scoring rubric for speaking is outlined in the following table:



Table 1. The scoring rubric of speaking (Brown: 2001)

Aspect	Score	Description
Pronunciation	1	Errors in pronunciation are frequent but can be understood by a native speaker used to dealing with foreigners attempting to speak his language.
	2	The accent is intelligible though often quite faulty.
	3	Errors never interfere with understanding and rarely disturb the native speaker. The accent may be obviously foreign.
	4	Errors in pronunciation are quite rare.
	5	Equivalent to and fully accepted by educated native speakers.
Grammar	1	Errors in grammar are frequent, but the speaker can be understood by a native speaker.
	2	Can usually handle elementary construction quite accurately but does not have thorough or confident control of the grammar.
	3	Control of grammar is good. Able to speak the language with sufficient structural accuracy to participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations on practical, social, and professional topics.
	4	Able to use the language accurately on all levels normally pertinent to professional needs. Errors in grammatical are quite rare.
	5	Equivalent to that of an educated native speaker.
Vocabulary	1	Speaking vocabulary inadequate to express anything but the most elementary needs.
	2	Has speaking vocabulary sufficient to express himself simply with some circumlocutions.
	3	Able to speak the language with sufficient vocabulary to participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations on practical, social, and professional topics. The vocabulary used is broad enough that he rarely has to grope for a word.
	4	Can understand and participate in any conversation within the range of his experience with a high degree of precision in vocabulary.
	5	Speech on all levels is fully accepted by educated native speakers in all its features including breadth of vocabulary and idioms, colloquialisms, and pertinent cultural references.
Fluency	1	(No specific fluency description. Refer to the other four language areas for the implied level of fluency)
	2	Can handle with confidence but not with facility most situations, including introductions and casual conversation about current events, as well as work, family, and autobiographical information.
	3	Can discuss particular interests of competence with reasonable ease. Rarely has to grope for words.
	4	Able to use the language fluently on all levels normally pertinent to professional needs. Can participate in any conversation within the range of the experience with a high degree of fluency.
	5	Has complete fluency in the language such that his speech is fully accepted by educated native speakers.



Comprehension	1	Within the scope of his very limited language experience, can understand simple questions and statements if delivered with slowed speech, repetition, or paraphrase.
	2	Can get the gist of most conversations on non-technical subjects (i.e., topics that require no specialised knowledge)
	3	Comprehension is quite complete at a normal rate of speech.
	4	Can understand any conversation within the range of his experience.
	5	Equivalent to that of an educated native speaker.
Task	1	Can ask and answer questions on topics very familiar to him. Able to satisfy routine travel needs and minimum courtesy requirements (should be able to order-simple directions, make purchases and tell time)
	2	Able to satisfy routine social demands and work requirements; needs help in handling any complications or difficulties.
	3	Can participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations on practical, social, and professional topics.
	4	Would rarely be taken for a native speaker but can respond to appropriately even in unfamiliar situations. Can handle informal interpreting forms and into language.
	5	Speaking proficiency is equivalent to that of an educated native speaker.

Methodology

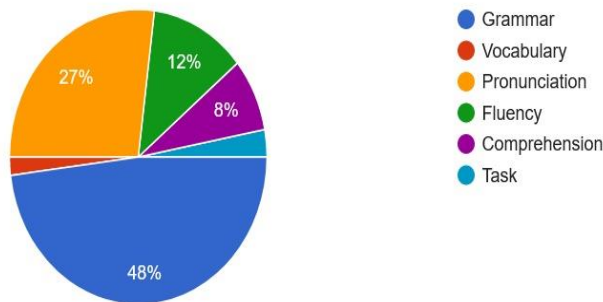
This study is descriptive research since it aims to describe EFL learners' difficulties in speaking. The participants of the study were first-semester students of the non-English Department of Universitas Tidar who took English as a General Course Class. The objective of the course is to develop the students' oral communication, especially conversation including introduction, greeting, leave-taking, asking for and telling time, describing routine, asking about and describing things, asking for direction and location, talking about traveling, talking about pastime and activities, talking about future jobs, and asking for and giving opinions.

To answer the research question "What are the difficulties faced by EFL learners' in speaking English", the researcher collected the data taken from the students' spoken production and questionnaire. First, the students were asked to fill in a questionnaire to identify which aspect of speaking is the most difficult according to them. Next, to confirm their perception, the students' speaking score is analysed. The scores were obtained from the students' performance in doing conversation expressing introduction, greeting, leave-taking, asking for and telling time, describing routine, and describing things. The conversation was then assessed by using the scoring rubric of speaking by Brown (2001) and analysed to determine which aspect gets the lowest score.



Findings and Discussion

This section presents the finding and discussion based on the analysis of the research data. The data from the questionnaire is shown in the chart below.



The participants' responses to the questionnaire show that 48% of the students regard grammar as the most difficult aspect in speaking, while 27% of the students state that they have problems in pronunciation, and 12% of the students consider that vocabulary is the most difficult. To justify the students' perception, the data of the scores obtained from the students' speaking performance were then analysed. The scores taken are based on the aspects that support speaking competence suggested by Brown (2004) i.e., grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, comprehension, and task. Each aspect of speaking was examined to identify in what area the students get the lowest score. The same as the questionnaire result, the analysis of the students' performance also shows that most students have the lowest score in grammar, then followed by pronunciation and vocabulary.

Both data taken from the questionnaire and the students' performance show that the major challenges faced by EFL learners in speaking are as follows:

1. Grammar

To be able to communicate effectively, students should master grammar (Phuong et al., 2019). For this reason, grammar is perceived as a key element in speaking. However, the students have poor grammar mastery. In conversations with others, grammatical errors are frequently found. The students converse using incorrect structure; hence, they mostly do not realise that they make mistakes and errors in structure. This issue eventually leads to



ineffective communication as the meaning is not conveyed properly. Even though the students are given the topic and prepare the dialog before the performance, due to gaps in the grammar of the first and foreign language, they still produce inaccurate grammar in speaking. Besides, they also believe that they do not have competent management of their grammar.

2. Pronunciation

Pronunciation is important in speaking as it is a way in which a language or specific word or sound is spoken (Hornby: 2008). In fact, the students often struggle with pronunciation, and this affects their speaking performance: the students show some errors when pronouncing words. The students' problem with pronunciation is also caused by inhibition, and it leads to the inaccuracy of their speaking in delivering information.

3. Vocabulary

Vocabulary learning is central to language acquisition, whether it is in the first, second, or foreign language (Celce and Murcia: 2001). The reason why vocabulary is important in learning a language is because when we speak of the vocabulary of the language, we primarily but not exclusively discuss the words of that language (McCarthy: 1990). Students' problems in speaking from the aspect of vocabulary mastery can be derived from the lack of word meaning mastery. For EFL students, mastering the meaning of words from a new language can be very challenging. A low mastery of the meaning of the vocabulary can cause problems that affect fluency in speaking.

Conclusion

The results of the study reveal that there are three main difficulties faced by the students in developing their English-speaking skills. The first difficulty deals with the aspect of grammar, which is caused by the differences between the students' first language and English, the language being learnt. The second issue is difficulty with pronunciation in English due to the inhibition of the English pronunciation system. In this regard, there are some significant differences between the pronunciation system of their first language and English. The last



problem is related to vocabulary mastery as a result of the difficulty in mastering the meaning of new words in English.

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