

A Study on the University Students' Speaking Difficulties

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Abstract

Speaking difficulty encountered by the students in every level is one of the major issues in the teaching of EFL. Many researchers reported that the factors are ranged from linguistic domain to psychology. Many experts wrote textbooks and articles to discuss this issue in hoping that the teaching of English speaking in particular can achieve satisfactory result. However, speaking difficulties are found from time to time and this is not because of the material or the teaching strategies. Although the role of the teachers is important, but individual issue of the student also needs to be taken into account. This qualitative research involved 14 university students and they were taken randomly from a university. By using performance test evaluated with a speaking rubric, it has been found that the students' grammar knowledge (linguistic domain) was extremely low. However, data from interview, which has been condensed into some keywords, revealed that the students' performance in speaking activity has been affected by their psychological problem like hesitance and low of self-esteem. Moreover, the finding showed that vocabulary mastery played important role in speaking activity. Psychological reason and vocabulary mastery are two main issues discovered through this research.

Keywords: *speaking, performance, speaking difficulties.*

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1. Background

As time goes by, mastering English today is not merely a choice but somewhat is a need. The development of professional life of human in various aspects has impact on the use of English as the medium of communication. Whether in working or educational environment, the frequency of English uses increases. This increase occurs for two simple reasons, communication and technology. This increase then demands us to be aware the importance of English as an international language. Moreover, the teaching of English is finally becoming a mandatory in almost schools and universities around the world, to prepare good English users in order to create a more communicative environment both in working and education.

Since teaching English became a mandatory, most of the teachers (both in formal and non-formal English schools) put their effort more on what to teach and how to teach them. In other words, the teaching material and the teaching strategy are two fundamental considerations in

many English classrooms. As usual, at the end of the teaching process, the teacher assesses the students' achievement. The assessment process can be taken in various methods or principles. There are many aspects that the teacher can evaluate to judge whether the students have successfully attained the learning purpose or otherwise. In short, evaluation has been so focused on the reason that makes the students pass the English subject. The question is, if the students failed the subject, is there any attempt that the teachers do to find the reason that makes the students fail the English subject? In other words, the student is also the fundamental consideration along the learning material and the teaching strategy.

Timing and classroom duration can be the main reason why a teacher does not pay enough attention on the students' learning background (learning motivation and learning difficulty). In universities, where English subjects are categorized into language skills (speaking, listening, writing, and reading), students may have manifold difficulties that make some of them good in certain language skill but lacking in others.

The facts that studying students' learning difficulties is a challenging work has made the most teachers around us decide to let it untouched. However, it is seen that the ignorance on this case may become an ultimate reason why students' learning achievement never increase.

In the EFL context, speaking skill can be considered as a primary skill that the students must have. Since people who know a language is usually called the speaker of that language, then speaking skill is very important (Ur, 1996:43). However, at least in this research context, students' speaking skill is significantly low. It seems like a study on the students' speaking difficulties in our context is important to be done. Due to this issue, the researchers accomplished a research to identify the students' speaking difficulties. This research is expected to remind us some of the speaking difficulties we might have discovered before and to bring a perhaps-new insight about it.

2. Theoretical Basis

2.1. Speaking as a language skill (viewed from various perspectives)

Speaking is considered as a primary language skill that must be mastered. We commonly refer to a language user as *the speaker*; for example, we term them with *native-speaker* or *speaker of other language*, and so on. Speaking is more than the biological activity of producing voices by using articulatory and respiratory features but also a mental process. The produced language out from the mouth is formerly processed in the brain or mind. This, then, shows us that speaking is actually a thinking process within individual. This, also, shows us that the development of speaking skill is not only based on the maturity of articulating system that individual has but also the maturity of thought in individual's mind.

Speaking is also a social activity where individuals build and share meanings in a given context (Chaney, 1998:13). Through this perspective, speaking skill is not only seen as an expressive function but also a communicative function. This leads us to a thought that speaking skill development is also determined or at least affected by the development of the social interaction.

Since language plays dual role (individual function and social function), speaking activity itself is generated from these two points. Of course it is true that speaking without any other speaker is possible; what we commonly call self-talking. However, for a speaking skill to develop, focusing on the individual part is not enough. Speaking skill development requires its social function to be played.

From these perspectives, the problem or difficulties in the speaking activity or difficulties in speaking learning may come not from individual disability but also from social barrier.

2.2. Important Knowledge for a Speaking Activity

As a language skill, a speaking activity involves particular areas of knowledge which are mentioned by Burns (1998) as follows:

- ⇒ Mechanics (pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary): including the use of right words in the right order with correct pronunciation;
- ⇒ Function (transaction and interaction): knowing when clarity of message is essential (transaction or information exchange) and when precise to understanding is not required (interaction or relationship building);
- ⇒ Social and cultural rules and norms (turn-talking, rate of speech, length of pauses between speakers, relative roles of participants): to understanding how to take into account who is speaking to whom, in what circumstances, about what and for what the reason.

By looking at the points Burns mentions above, it is clear that for a speaking activity to take place as intended, it requires a range of linguistic knowledge, cognitive knowledge, and socio-cultural knowledge.

Speaking skill also requires other linguistic competences to be involved such as listening and pronunciation. Even, speaking skill cannot be separated from listening skill (Rivers, 1981). A speaking activity does not only entail the existence of the speaker but also a listener. In speaking situation, the speaker-listener role exchanges within the exchange of messages and feedbacks. Therefore, it is reasonable to have thought that speaking skill is not a stand-alone skill. Its development stands on the development of listening skill and pronunciation skill. This makes us understand that the success of a speaking activity is determined by a successful listening action.

2.3. *Speaking Difficulties*

By speaking difficulties we mean the factors that cause the students lack of speaking skill. Some previous researchers found that students face difficulties in speaking in various areas of knowledge we have mentioned above.

Al-Lawati (1995), for example, found that the linguistic domain (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and discourse) constitutes the most serious area of difficulty. Al-Abri (2008) also mentions that the lack of oral activity in the learning textbook, which sometimes becomes the reason why the students lack of speaking skill, is wrong. The students can actually learn speaking skill from many sources like songs, TV programs, or other media. What he is saying is that the students (and teachers) expected too much from the textbook. They didn't utilize the sources available for the oral materials.

Ur (1996) said that one of the most important factors causing speaking difficulties is their psychology. They are afraid of making mistakes (low self-confidence). They sometimes don't have anything to say (low of ideas) and this makes the students take no participation in the speaking learning process. This, eventually, leads the students to the difficulty of speaking in the real context.

Based on some noticeable description above, it can be summed that the students' speaking difficulties can be divided into three main categories: linguistic category, psychological category, and social category.

Linguistically, the students' lack of knowledge about the language system can make one faces with difficulties in speaking. This entails not only speaking but also listening and pronunciation skill. For the skills to develop, teachers and students must utilize the learning and material sources available and not only relying on the textbook. Psychologically, the students' speaking difficulties can be emerged from the lack of ideas and self-confidence. These two first categories lead to the third category which is the students' could not communicate optimally in the real social context.

3. Method

This research is a sample of the application of qualitative method. Since this research attempts to inquire understanding human or social phenomena, it fulfills the basic requirement of a qualitative method research (Cresswell, 1997). Also, this research builds its structure and is reported descriptively by using words although a numerical rubric of speaking is used to acquire the components of their speaking difficulties.

Random sampling has been accomplished within a small population (English Department students of STKIP Kie Raha Ternate for the academic year 2017/2018). 14 students were randomly taken from this population.

Data of the research is taken from interview and speaking rubric. The interview is done to obtain individual perspective on the speaking activity and is analyzed by using condensed meaning technique. The rubric is used to measure their speaking difficulty components and is analyzed by using simple average calculation (the lower the score, the more difficult it is).

4. Finding and Discussion

The rubric used to measure the students' speaking skill consists of four components of measurement namely: Pronunciation (P), Grammar (G), Vocabulary (V), and Fluency (F). This rubric is used while each student does their oral presentation in a short performance test. The components are scored from 1 (poor), 2 (enough), 3 (good), and 4 (excellent).

The use of rubric in the students' performance test has led the researchers to have the following tabulated scores (name of the students are coded):

Students' Scores based on the Speaking Rubric

No.	Ss	P	G	V	F	Score	AVG1
1.	DLN	3	2	3	3	11	2,75
2.	RJ	2	2	3	3	10	2,50
3.	LUMS	3	2	2	2	9	2,25
4.	PFA	3	2	3	3	11	2,75
5.	RWH	3	2	2	3	10	2,50
6.	HMS	3	2	2	3	10	2,50
7.	EW	3	2	2	2	9	2,25
8.	WR	3	2	3	3	11	2,75
9.	EM	3	2	2	3	10	2,50
10.	NF	2	1	1	2	6	1,50
11.	FM	3	2	2	3	10	2,50
12.	IM	2	2	2	2	8	2,00
13.	AM	2	1	2	2	7	1,75
14.	MM	2	1	2	2	7	1,75
Total		37	25	31	36		
Avg2		2,64	1,79	2,21	2,57		

As is seen through the table we display two scores of average. The first average (AVG1) is the individual average score. This AVG1 shows us the students rank (from 1 to 4, poor to excellent). The second Average (Avg2) is the collective average score. This Avg2 shows us the speaking component rank (from 1 to 4, poor to excellent).

It is quite surprising that from 14 participants there is none of them who gained even the *good* score (3). Their speaking skill is extremely low. If we consider to round the numbers (e.g. >2 is rounded to 3, and >1 is rounded to 2), then we have 43% of them gained *enough* and 57% of them gained *good*. However, rounding the scores will not improve their real speaking skill. Therefore, it is reasonable to state that 43% of them have *poor* speaking skill and 57% of them have *enough* speaking skill.

Their inability to achieve *good* and *excellent* score based on the rubric shows us that the speaking difficulties exist. Moreover, the speaking testing in the field was single performance test or a monologue; which means listening skill is not tested and is considered as having no effect on their speaking activity.

What makes their speaking score low is their lack of vocabulary component. Since the AVG1 scores are accumulated from the component scores, then the Avg2 scores make us see the rank of the speaking difficulties they deal with.

From the table, it can be seen that lacking of *grammar* is the primary difficulty that they encounter in the performance test, followed by *vocabulary*. Simply, the scores tell us that they find speaking is difficult because, although they know what to say, they do not know how to say it and by using what word. Since a sentence structure is built up from vocabulary, their grammatical difficulty can be emerged from their lack of vocabulary too.

However, the vocabulary score (which is higher than grammar score) shows us that they might have the word but they do not know how to put it into a syntactically correct sentence. Perhaps, this data is telling us that linguistic competence that the students have needs to be taken into serious consideration. Grammar knowledge and vocabulary are two of all fundamental linguistic knowledge which is needed in the speaking activity even just in a monologue. This information supports us to see that the teaching of speaking is not only about “what to say” but also about “how to say it”. Of course, this statement is applied in the other productive language skill like writing activity as well.

An open and non-structured interview has been administered and from the data gathered the researchers found that the responses given by the respondents could be condensed into five keywords: grammar, listening skill, psychological reason, vocabulary, and speaking practice.

These keywords represent the issues that the students have and become the factors of their speaking difficulties. In percentage, these keywords can be displayed as follows:

No	Issues of Speaking Difficulties	%
1	Grammar	17
2	Listening Skill	6
3	Psychological Reason	33
4	Vocabulary	39
5	Practice	6

The table above shows that the issue of psychological reason and vocabulary mastery need serious attention. Although the previous table shows that grammar was the issue, but from the students' responses we could see that it is their lacking of vocabulary and their hesitance or other psychological reasons that make their speaking activity lacks of grammaticality.

The condensed information from the interview data confirm the statements produced by Al-Lawati (1995) and Ur (1996). When the performance test was given, the researchers paid attention to their speaking activity and grammar seemed to be the issue. However, after gathering the data from interview, it is understandable that their lack of grammar came from other issues. Al-Lawati and Penny Ur were right that linguistic domain and psychology play important role in speaking activities. The students might know what they want to say, but they do not know the right words to be used. Moreover, although a good speaker can be attacked by self-confidence issue like hesitance or being nervous.

5. Conclusion

Based on the data discussed above, it can be concluded that the students' speaking difficulties caused by their grammar issue. However, this problem is caused by other issues namely psychological reason including hesitance, nervousness, and low-self-esteem and their lacking of vocabulary. This finding tells us to consider the issue concerning the learning of words and the practice of speaking in the public. Grammar issue is not a self-standing problem that the students encounter. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to the background factors like their psychology and their vocabulary.



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