

STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN LEARNING SPEAKING AT THE UNIVERSITY LEVEL: AN ANALYSIS OF CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

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Abstract

Mastering speaking as a crucial ability for language learners seems to be challenging. Students had challenges in acquiring this ability. Teachers claimed that the challenges stemmed from students' apprehension or lack of desire. Teachers must identify the underlying issues that hinder learning to effectively address the problems they face. This qualitative research examined the main variables that prevent university students from developing English-speaking abilities. Data were assessed through classroom observation of one class of the first semester of university-level consisting of 42 students, and interviews with 12 chosen participants, focusing on five major characteristics of speaking: pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. Research findings indicate that pronunciation errors, grammatical mistakes, limited vocabulary and expression, fluency and Speech Rhythm Issues, and Comprehension and Responsiveness Challenges were significant factors which contributed to the difficulties faced by students. Findings may inform pedagogical approaches to enhance speaking performance. Furthermore, the result of the data can be used by students and teachers to arrange some plans to overcome the difficulties.

Keywords: *aspects of speaking; speaking skills; students' difficulties*

1. Introduction

People study languages primarily for communication, both written and spoken. Even though people may communicate through other means, language is the most efficient way to express meaning. For foreign language learners, studying a language aims to improve their ability to communicate with others in bigger groups. Students in English must acquire basic language skills to communicate effectively, which include listening, reading, speaking, and writing. From those four basic skills, speaking appears to be the most crucial and obvious of the four fundamental skills (Rao, P. S., 2019).

Speaking skills encompass the entire process of forming meanings, making utterances, and receiving and processing information with confidence (Zarifa, 2020). It requires not just information, such as mastery of vocabulary, grammar, and other linguistic elements, but also the accurate pronunciation of English words by students. They must be able to communicate meaning and receive information from others. On the other hand, they must understand the current discussion. Furthermore, because English is meant to be utilized rather than merely learned, students must be willing and confident in speaking it.

In today's associated and globalized world, speaking competence has become more essential for university students (Lu et al., 2023). Proficient speaking abilities support academic performance by promoting active engagement in conversations, presentations, and collaborative efforts. Along with academics, excellent oral communication skills enhance chances of finding work in the global job market, where graduates fluent in English perform in interviews, collaboration, and leadership positions. Moreover, fluent speaking promotes cross-cultural communication, enabling students to interact comfortably with many cultures, meaning enhancing their global citizenship and intercultural competence.

Despite its significance, teachers often encounter classrooms marked by a muted atmosphere, with several students showing passivity and hesitance to engage in communication (Sanchez & Athanases, 2023). Present ideas explain this reluctance to apprehension fear of errors, or lacking of motivation. However, these theories just address the superficial aspects and do not include the many psychological, linguistic, social, and environmental elements that affect speaking challenges. Superficial understandings can cover up several obstacles such as language anxiety, restricted exposure, cultural expectations, or cognitive obstacles so reducing the efficacy of remedial procedures (Fatemeh & Nasrin, 2017; Lou & Noels, 2020).

This study aims to go beyond current beliefs by revealing the more significant, varied, and actionable factors that contribute to students' difficulties in speaking English. The research aims to identify relevant factors to provide a comprehensive knowledge and equip teachers and learners with specific techniques to overcome these obstacles and improve speaking competency.

2. Literature Review

Speaking is defined as the act or skill of giving a speech at a public event (Bygate, M., 1987). He conceptualizes speaking specifically as the act or skill of delivering a speech at a public event — a formal instance of oral expression. Speaking competency encompasses not just the pronunciation of words but also the ability to convey meaning, participate in effective conversation, and negotiate various language situations (Tompunu et al., 2021). Speaking proficiency is not merely the articulation of words, but the capacity to convey meaning, engage in effective communication, and navigate diverse linguistic contexts (Tompunu et al., 2021). It is a dynamic skill that necessitates the integration of vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and fluency, coupled with the ability to understand and respond appropriately to different communicative situations (Rahman et al., 2022).

Effective communication depends on the enhancement of speaking skills, which is variable upon the complexity of the information conveyed (Alawiyah, T., 2018). It is a complex skill that includes language proficiency, critical thinking, systematic reasoning, and adaptability to various communication circumstances (Pelenkahu et al., 2024). The primary function of speaking transcends the simple production of sounds and words; it is an essential mechanism for human interaction and exchange in many circumstances. In real-world situations, speaking allows students to articulate concepts, convey information, influence others, negotiate interpretations, and cultivate social connections.

To be able to communicate well, students need to understand the aspects or characteristics that contribute to speaking skills. Brown mentions six aspects that should be considered in determining oral proficiency or speaking ability which include Grammar, Vocabulary, Comprehension, Fluency, pronunciation, and Task. It is in line with Weir (2005) who suggests some aspects to analyze in oral competence such as appropriateness,

vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, fluency, and content. Newton & Nation (2020), Thornbury (2015), and Ur, P. (1996) agree that fluency and accuracy (vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation) are the main aspects of speaking skills. Burgess et al. (2005) add comprehension as the third aspect along with fluency and accuracy. To sum up the aspects of speaking skills, table 1 is presented below.

Expert/ Source	Aspect 1	Aspect 2	Aspect 3	Aspect 4	Aspect 5	Aspect 6
Thornbury (2015)	Vocabulary	Grammar	Pronunciation	Fluency		
Ur, P. (1996)	Vocabulary	Grammar	Pronunciation	Fluency	Appropriateness	Content
Newton & Nation (2020)	Vocabulary	Grammar	Pronunciation	Fluency	Comprehension	
Weir (2005)	Vocabulary	Grammar	Pronunciation	Fluency	Comprehension	
Brown (2004)	Vocabulary	Grammar	Pronunciation	Fluency and coherence		
Taken Aspect	Vocabulary	Grammar	Pronunciation	Fluency	Comprehension	

Table 1. The Aspects of Speaking Skills

Those aspects of speaking can be used by teachers to assess the level of students' ability to speak. By focusing on those aspects, teachers can define the ability of the students and finally recognize the difficulties faced by students. Recognizing students' difficulties enables teachers to improve the way of teaching in order to improve the student's ability to speak.

3. Research Method

A qualitative research design was employed in this study. It was used to explore and understand the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human (Creswell, 2009). In this research, the qualitative design was applied to recognize and describe students' difficulties in performing speaking, especially in the classroom context. This study was conducted in a classroom setting of EFL students in an English study program at a private university in Cimahi. It was delivered in a classroom setting in which all of the students study English as a foreign language. Most of the students are Sundanese and speak both Sundanese and Bahasa. The sources of data come from a single class in the first semester of university students consisting of 42 students, 17 boys, and 25 girls.

Twelve students were purposefully chosen from the class based on their various levels of speaking competence and willingness to participate. This selection is aimed at covering a variety of experiences and challenges faced by students. The sample size was considered sufficient to achieve data saturation and provide comprehensive qualitative insights. The methodologies used in the research were observation and interview. The observation aimed to gather data on students' activities and classroom conditions, focusing on five aspects: pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. The observation sheet is shown in Table 1.3 below.

The observations and interviews were transcribed and examined by thematic analysis, a recognized qualitative approach for detecting, analyzing, and reporting patterns in data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coding procedure was directed by the five examined speaking components: pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension.

Through a thorough analysis of the data, repeated patterns and significant remarks on students' speaking issues were found and categorized into themes that represented the main difficulties encountered by the students in their English speaking. This comprehensive methodology, grounded in the framework established by Braun and Clarke, enabled an exhaustive examination of the principal factors affecting students' speaking competence.

Indicator	Observed Aspect	Description/Observation
Pronunciation	Clarity of pronunciation	Is the student's pronunciation clear and understandable to the listener?
Pronunciation	Pronunciation errors in words	Are there pronunciation errors in certain sounds?
Grammar	Use of correct grammatical structures	Does the student use appropriate grammar in their sentences?
Grammar	Common grammar errors	Are there recurring patterns of errors frequently repeated?
Vocabulary	Accuracy of vocabulary usage	Does the student choose words appropriate to the situation or conversational context?
Vocabulary	Vocabulary richness	Does the student use a variety of vocabulary or tend to repeat the same words?
Fluency	Fluency of speech	Does the student speak smoothly without too many pauses or hesitations?
Fluency	Consistency of speech rhythm	Can the student maintain a steady rhythm during conversation or specific tasks?
Comprehension	Understanding of questions or conversation	Is the student able to respond or answer relevantly?
Comprehension	Ability to respond in conversation	Can the student follow the flow of conversation and provide appropriate responses?

Table 2. Observation Sheet

The interview was done with 12 students picked based on the difficulties they faced that were caught during the observation. The interview list of questions was also arranged based on those five aspects of speaking as seen in table 3 below.

No.	Indicator	Question
1	Pronunciation	Do you feel difficulty pronouncing words in English? If yes, why?
2	Pronunciation	How do you improve your pronunciation if there are words that are difficult to pronounce?
3	Grammar	Do you find it difficult to use correct grammar when speaking?
4	Grammar	Which part of grammar is the most confusing when you speak English?
5	Vocabulary	Do you often have difficulty finding the right vocabulary when speaking? Why?
6	Vocabulary	How do you expand your vocabulary to help you speak more fluently?
7	Fluency	Do you find it difficult to speak fluently without frequent pauses? If yes, what is the reason?
8	Fluency	How do you try to speak more fluently in English?
9	Comprehension	Do you often have difficulty understanding questions or conversations in English?
10	Comprehension	What do you do if you do not understand what your conversation partner is saying?

This research fulfilled with ethical norms for research involving human subjects. Before data collection, informed permission was gained from all participants, who were thoroughly informed on the study's aims and methods. Participants were guaranteed the confidentiality and anonymity of their responds, with data securely maintained and available only to the researcher. Participation was voluntary, allowing individuals to withdraw at any time without consequences.

4. Result and Discussion

As aforementioned, speaking in college has reached the level of real communication where they have to implement their skill in real life and get used to using them in any situation (Argawati & Syahrizal, 2016). However, what we find in the classroom is a silent condition of students. This section is to describe specific speaking difficulties encountered by learners, followed by a review of the underlying factors identified through comprehensive observations and interviews. By carefully identifying these obstacles, the research clarifies the complex nature of speaking skill development. Based on the observation and interview done by the research, here are the explanations of the difficulties faced by the students in performing speaking skills.

4.1 Result of Observation

The observation sheet contains 5 aspects of speaking covering pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. There are two points for each aspect as presented in table 1.3 above. The result of each point is described below:

a. **Pronunciation**

Clear and understandable pronunciation

During the teaching and learning process, students interact between teacher-students and student-student. When they try to speak, sometimes they mispronounce the words so that the listener shows misunderstanding through facial expressions or gestures.

Specific pronunciation errors

Most of the students made mistakes in pronouncing the sound /f/ to /p/; like when they pronounced /free/ it became /pree/. This is due to the influence of their native language. However, this mistake is understandable by their friends since it is common and tolerable.

Besides the common mistakes that are understandable, some errors made listeners misunderstand the meaning. For example, it is on the word 'three'. Instead of using /θ/, they used /t/. So the sound changed into /tree/ which means different from the meaning they intend to deliver.

b. **Grammar**

Use appropriate grammatical structures in their sentences

Some students frequently used incorrect verb tenses, e.g., "She have lunch in the cafeteria" instead of "She has lunch in the cafeteria." Errors were consistent throughout the activity.

Recurring patterns of grammatical mistakes

Most students had difficulty with subject-verb agreement and past tense forms. Students tend to say 'Everyone **know** the answer' instead of 'everyone knows the answer'. As we understand that "Everyone" is a singular indefinite pronoun, the verb must be singular (knows, not know).

c. Vocabulary

Choose words that are appropriate for the situation or context

Students used appropriate words but repeated simple vocabulary such as "good" and "bad."

Use a variety of vocabulary, or tend to repeat the same words

Most of the students demonstrated a limited range of vocabulary, often using the same phrases like "I think" repeatedly. It seems like to have more exposure to synonyms to enrich their vocabulary.

d. Fluency

Speak smoothly without frequent pauses or long thinking gaps

Some students spoke fluently with minimal pauses, while most of the students paused frequently and appeared hesitant.

Maintain a steady rhythm of speech during a conversation or specific task

Some students were consistent in maintaining speech flow, while others hesitated after every sentence.

e. Comprehension

Answer or respond appropriately and relevantly

Most of the students struggled to understand questions involving complex vocabulary.

Follow the flow of the conversation and provide suitable responses

Most students responded well but needed more time to process questions before answering.

4.2 Result of Interview

There were ten questions on the interview list which were based on the five aspects of speaking. Here is the conclusion gained from the interview with the twelve students mentioned above.

a. Pronunciation

Do you find it difficult to pronounce words in English? If yes, why?

Yes, I find it difficult to pronounce some words, especially those with 'th' sounds like 'think' or 'thank'. I think this happens because there are no similar sounds in my native language.

How do you improve your pronunciation when you find a word difficult to say?

I usually listen to how native speakers pronounce the word, for example, through online videos or dictionaries. Then, I try to repeat the word several times until it sounds correct.

b. Grammar

Do you have trouble using correct grammar when speaking English?

Yes, I often struggle with grammar, especially when forming sentences in the past tense. Sometimes, I forget to use the correct verb form.

Which part of grammar do you find most challenging when speaking English?

I find a subject-verb agreement the most challenging. For example, I sometimes forget to add 's' for third-person singular subjects in the present tense.

c. Vocabulary

Do you often struggle to find the right words when speaking English? If yes, why?

Yes, I often struggle to find the right words. I think it's because I don't practice enough and my vocabulary is still limited.

How do you expand your vocabulary to help you speak more fluently?

I try to read English books and watch movies with subtitles. I also write down new words and practice using them in sentences.

d. Fluency

Do you find it difficult to speak fluently without frequent pauses? If yes, what causes this difficulty?

Yes, sometimes I pause a lot because I need time to think about the right words or grammar. I also feel nervous, which makes it harder to speak fluently.

What do you do to improve your fluency in English speaking?

I try to practice speaking with my friends or record myself speaking. It helps me get used to speaking continuously without pausing too much.

e. Comprehension

Do you often have difficulty understanding questions or conversations in English?

Yes, especially when the speaker talks too fast or uses advanced vocabulary that I'm not familiar with.

What do you usually do when you do not understand what the other person is saying?

I usually ask them to repeat or slow down. Sometimes, I try to guess the meaning based on the context of the conversation.

4.3 Interpretation on the Research Findings

Based on the results of the observation and interview above, the discussion now turns into the interpretation of the finding which was linked with the aspects of speaking.

a. Pronunciation

This research identifies pronunciation as a significant speaking challenge that affects clear and comprehensible oral communication. The results indicate that students often misarticulate certain phonemes, such as replacing /f/ with /p/ (e.g., pronouncing "free" as "pree"), mostly due to the impact of their mother language. Although many errors are accepted and understood among colleagues, more significant mistakes—such as replacing the /θ/ sound in "three" with /t/, producing "tree"—result in miscommunication.

These data correspond with Bygate's (1987) assertion that pronunciation is a crucial component of speaking competency, influencing listener understanding. The kids'

difficulties emphasize that phonological interference from their home language continues as an obstacle. The result is that in the absence of targeted pronunciation teaching, learners may persist in making mistakes that limit effective interaction, highlighting the need for targeted phonetic training in language education.

b. Grammar

Grammatical challenges, especially with verb tenses and subject-verb agreement, provide a significant challenge for the learners. Frequent mistakes included "She have lunch" instead of "She has lunch," and the use of plural verbs with single indefinite pronouns, such as "everyone know" instead of "everyone knows." These patterns suggest a lack of total knowledge of essential grammatical principles despite their active application.

These results support Ur's (1996) claim that grammatical correctness is vital for clarity and precision in spoken language. Grammatical mistakes may induce confusion and reduce the clear fluency of speakers. The consequences indicate that language training must emphasize the regular practice of grammatical structures within context, allowing students to internalize and confidently apply rules in spontaneous speech.

c. Vocabulary

The research revealed that although students often use contextually suitable language, their lexical range is limited, with a notable amount of constant usage of basic phrases such as "good," "bad," and expressions like "I think." This repetition indicates a limited language range, which restricts expressive depth and may result in communicative tiredness.

These results reflect the observations of Newton & Nation (2020) about the significance of language breadth for diverse and successful communication. A restricted vocabulary not only constrains expression but also impairs fluency and diminishes confidence. The message is evident: learners need more exposure to varied vocabulary via reading, listening, and active practice to broaden their lexical repertoire and participate more effectively in dialogue.

d. Fluency

Fluency difficulties were noticeable via frequent pauses and hesitations in speaking, with several students finding it challenging to sustain a consistent and seamless production. Although several individuals demonstrated considerable fluency with little pauses, the majority had disturbed speech patterns, often preventing to find appropriate phrases or correct grammatical errors.

This confirms Thornbury's (2015) viewpoint that fluency signifies seamless, fluid communication lack of unnecessary hesitancy. Interruptions caused by cognitive overload or anxiety hinder authentic communication, reducing the quality of communication. Therefore, a pedagogical emphasis on fluency-enhancing activities, including conversational practice and speaking drills, is crucial for fostering students' confidence and automaticity in spoken English.

e. Comprehension

Comprehension challenges arose largely when students faced intricate terminology or rapid speech. Although many could react appropriately, they often required more

processing time, sometimes requesting repeat or prompting their interlocutors to slow down.

These issues align with Weir's (2005) assertion that understanding is essential for meaningful interactions, influencing the capacity to react effectively in dialogues. The conclusion is that the development of listening comprehension abilities should coincide with speaking teaching, allowing students to absorb and respond to material efficiently, therefore fostering more engaging and coherent discussion.

The conclusion of the contributing factors of students' difficulties in speaking is presented in Table 4 below.

No.	Contributing Factors	Description
1	Pronunciation Errors	Includes mispronunciations such as /f/ pronounced as /p/, substitutions confusing meaning, and other phonetic challenges.
2	Grammatical Mistakes	Frequent errors in subject-verb agreement and incorrect verb tense usage affecting sentence structure.
3	Limited Vocabulary and Expression	Repetitive use of simple words and phrases, and lack of variety through synonyms restrict expressive ability.
4	Fluency and Speech Rhythm Issues	Frequent hesitations, pauses, and inconsistent speech rhythm disrupt smooth and natural speech flow.
5	Comprehension and Responsiveness Challenges	Difficulty understanding complex vocabulary and delayed responses that impact conversational flow.

Table 4. The Contributing Factors of Students' Difficulties in Speaking

The collected results from observations and interviews indicate that the development of speaking skills is complex, including the interaction of pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and understanding difficulties. Utilizing integrated teaching methods customized to student requirements will improve overall communication skills. Targeted phonetic practice, grammar reinforcement, vocabulary enhancement, fluency exercises, and listening comprehension training are essential for the development of effective speaking abilities.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has identified and analyzed the specific difficulties that learners encounter in five key components of speaking: pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. The findings directly address the research question by revealing that the significant factors contributing to students' challenges in learning to speak are intricately linked, arising from native language interference, insufficient grammatical acquisition, restricted lexical knowledge, and cognitive demands during real-time speaking, and inadequate listening comprehension skills.

This study not only identifies these issues but also enhances the area of EFL teaching and learning by underscoring the need for integrated and balanced instructional methodologies. Effective educational strategies must include phonetic training, grammar practice in communicative situations, vocabulary expansion, fluency improvement, and simultaneous listening development. This comprehensive viewpoint, based on empirical data and theoretical models, guides educators and curriculum designers in implementing specific strategies to enhance students' speaking proficiency, thereby enhancing their capacity to communicate confidently and effectively in global settings.

Students' reflections on their speaking difficulties, whether through interviews or discussions, enhance their self-awareness of difficulties in pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, or fluency. Identifying and addressing these difficulties systematically by their teachers enhances their confidence and motivation. This assistance enables students to express themselves more effectively and enhances their enjoyment in language acquisition, helping them to overcome speaking difficulties through customized approaches.

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