English-Speaking Skills Problems as Perceived by English Major Students

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Abstract

Understanding the challenges in English-speaking skills among English-major students is crucial for enhancing language learning. Hence, this research aimed to identify the English-speaking skills problems as perceived by the English-major students at a private university in North Sulawesi. This quantitative research used descriptive and comparative research designs. The study consisted of 95 English-major students taking Listening and Speaking classes. An instrument adapted from Irismet cited in Afshar and Asakereh (2016) was used to determine the English-speaking skills problems experienced by the students. The findings indicate the three main English-speaking skill problems of the students as perceived by them were that they lacked self-confidence in speaking in English in the class (M=3.49), had difficulty in finding an opportunity to practice speaking in English outside the class (M=3.32), and were highly anxious to speak English (M=3.25). Lastly, the findings showed no significant differences in the respondents' perceptions of their English-speaking skills problems based on gender and class level.

INTRODUCTION

Acquiring English as a foreign language (EFL) presents difficulties. Al-Jamal and Al-Jamal (2013) stated that EFL learners must actively "construct" their understanding through various means such as reading, listening, writing, and speaking." As students try to learn a new language, numerous factors affect the learning process (Akbari, 2015). For this reason, teachers who are teaching EFL learners at different levels try to facilitate and meet the student's needs to help them learn English at their best. However, as stated earlier, various factors appear to affect the students' learning. Ghania (2012) claimed that the factors that affect English learning might be internal or external. For the past decades, researchers have tried to identify the factors that affect EFL learning; and it seems like the problems faced by students who are learning EFL vary for every student. Thus, students face many different difficulties in their learning.

Different studies have been conducted on various factors associated with language learning to investigate the factors that impede and excel students' learning. Nariswariatmojo (n.d.) proposed that earlier investigations have

classified the elements into two essential groups: internal and external factors. Some of the internal factors that affect language learning include self-confidence, internal motivation, age, cognition, native language, experiences, personality, and negative attitude towards English; furthermore, external factors include teacher, environment, lesson materials, curriculum, and culture and status (Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Macaro, 2010). In addition to that, Gan (2013) argued that the lack of language proficiency, meaningful communication skills and educational speaking conventions, spoken language processes, affective elements, and lack of opportunities to practice English are the problems as perceived by EFL learners. Therefore, all these factors must be further considered so teachers can help students master the language effectively.

Problems faced by students in learning EFL may involve the four micro-skills in English, namely reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills. Some students may be good at reading and writing. However, when it comes to the other two skills, listening and speaking, it looks as if they have more problems with these two latter skills, which cause them to be not very good at listening or speaking skills (Tavil, 2010). Nevertheless, Alaraj (2017) believed that it is more challenging to develop productive skills, namely writing and speaking, than developing receptive skills, namely reading and listening, because EFL learners need to change their language skills when dealing with productive skills and actual performance. According to Afshar and Asakereh (2016) , based on the opinions of several experts, despite its difficulty to master, speaking skill is a skill being demanded for EFL learners. Hence, it is important to identify the problems related to those skills that students may face as they try to master the English language so problems can be solved, and students can maximize their English learning.

Speaking English fluently is a challenging endeavor for various reasons. In Indonesia specifically, Kurniawan (2014) observed that since teachers teaching English emphasized more on written skills than oral skills, students find it challenging to use the language orally. In other words, teachers are more focused on highlighting the grammar aspect than the other language aspects. This then causes the students to have problems with their speaking skills because they lack opportunities to develop their oral skills. Moreover, due to this lack of opportunities to practice or develop oral skills, students themselves do not want to take the risk of making mistakes and thus cannot practice their speaking. Al Hosni (2014) stated that English learners in Oman seemed to encounter numerous difficulties in speaking English. These challenges can then hinder the progress of their English oral proficiency. Zhang (2009) acknowledged that for most English language learners, the most challenging skill to master is speaking, and it seems like they still lack the ability to speak in English. Thus, this speaking skill is an important skill that needs to be further investigated so problems encountered by English language learners can be

understood and solved to help them maximize their competence to communicate orally in English.

Nowadays, the different factors related to students' inability to master speaking skills as students learn English are still ongoing issues that need to be resolved. In Indonesia, for example, many students are still having difficulties speaking in English. Altasya, Handayani, and Irawati (2023) claimed that Indonesian students find speaking English difficult since it is not their native language. Hence, addressing the problems or difficulties faced by the students regarding their English-speaking skills is only possible after identifying the speaking skills problems that they experience. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate the English-speaking skills problems hindering students' development of speaking skills, especially among EFL students so that the issues can be addressed as soon as possible, and teachers together with students can further maximize students' English-speaking skills. Since there are still limited studies on English speaking skills problems encountered by Indonesian students, especially in North Sulawesi, this study intended to provide information on the issues that the students might experience as they learn to speak English.

Specifically, this study is expected to provide insights to English teachers into the problems students may be experiencing as they try to maximize their English-speaking skills. Hence, teachers can attempt to discover solutions to the issues and help them maximize their English-speaking skills. This study sought to pinpoint the issues in English-speaking skills experienced by English-major students at a private university in North Sulawesi. Moreover, this study also sought to examine if there exists a notable distinction in the perceived English-speaking skills problems based on gender and English class level.

Studies have been conducted to investigate the speaking skills problems encountered by EFL learners. A study conducted by Dil cited in Al Hosni (2014) found that the two major English-speaking challenges faced by EFL Turkish learners are anxiety and unwillingness during the process of English speaking. It was further explained that the cause of this is the fear of being negatively evaluated, more specifically in front of their friends. Furthermore, Alyan (2013) claimed that the cause of the hesitation of students to speak in English is because of their thought that their English is wrong. In other words, the thought that their English is wrong causes the students to keep silent and thus prevents them from interacting in speaking activities. Another reason why students are not able to speak English fluently could be because of their shyness and lack of confidence to speak in front of the class. The attitudes as well as the evaluations from teachers and classmates may be the cause of students' lack of ability to communicate successfully in a foreign class Senel (2012).

There are also other English-speaking problems faced by students in learning English. Al-Jamal and Al-Jamal (2013) reported that excessive use of first language (L1), overcrowded classes, and lack of sufficient time to practice speaking are the prominent problems encountered by Jordanian EFL students.

Similarly, Hamad (2013) found that the excessive use of L1, lack of time to speak in speaking classes, instructors' techniques of teaching that are inefficient, insufficient exercises to develop speaking ability, fear of speaking English, and not using L1 when it is essential to clarify some issues were found to be the English speaking skills problems of female EFL students studying at the Saudi colleges for girls.

Moreover, psychological factors are one of the factors that affect students' willingness to speak. Juhana (2012) proposed that among the psychological factors, fear of making mistakes, anxiety, shyness, lack of confidence, and lack of motivation are some of the main psychological factors that affect the students' performance as it comes from the individuals themselves. Therefore, psychological factor is one personal key factors that needs to be taken account by teachers to understand why some students do not want to speak.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research designs that the researchers used in this study were descriptive and comparative. The researchers used the descriptive survey method because it helped identify the most common reported speaking skill problems faced by English-major students. Furthermore, the researcher used the comparative method to see the significant differences in English-major students' perceptions of their English-speaking skills problems based on gender and English class levels. The population of this study was the English-major students enrolled in different Listening and Speaking classes, with a sample size of 95 students selected through convenience sampling. This method involved choosing respondents based on their availability during data collection. A 37-item questionnaire assessing speaking skills problems, adapted from Irismet in Afshar and Asakereh (2016), was utilized in this study. Respondents rated statements on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Prior to administration, the questionnaire underwent a pilot test with 36 English-major students taking the same classes from the preceding semester.

Validity testing revealed that 12 items were not valid, specifically items 1, 3, 7, 11, 22, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, and 35, resulting in a total of 25 valid items. Additionally, the questionnaire demonstrated acceptable internal consistency, as evidenced by Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of $\alpha = 0.87$. Descriptive statistics, particularly mean scores, were employed to address the first research question, identifying principal English-speaking skills problems perceived by respondents. Furthermore, to investigate research questions two and three, the independent samples t-test and one-way ANOVA were utilized, respectively.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Research Question Number 1: What are the most common English-speaking skills problems experienced by English-major students?

**Table 3.1 The Most Common English-Speaking Skills Problems
Experienced by English-Major Students**

No.	Item	Mean	SD
1.	A1	2.97	1.15273
2.	A2	3.49	1.03012
3.	A3	3.25	1.10095
4.	S4	3.32	1.20516
5.	S5	1.68	70353
6.	S6	2.25	1.03110
7.	G7	1.27	57320
8.	G8	1.63	79964
9.	G9	1.45	63192
10.	G10	1.44	67973
11.	G11	1.41	69182
12.	G11	1.65	80910
13.	G13	1.87	74722
14.	G14	1.95	81695
15.	G15	1.92	69440
16.	G16	1.73	72114
17.	G17	1.57	66289
18.	G18	1.69	75897
19.	G19	1.71	72748
20.	L20	2.34	97425
21.	L21	2.49	96617
22.	L22	3.02	89892
23.	L23	3.12	89755
24.	L24	3.17	96373
25.	L25	3.05	1.05557

Table 3.1 displays the results of the English-speaking skills problems most commonly encountered by the respondents. The results showed that the reported items that have the highest means as perceived by the respondents were items number 2 (Item A2) "*Saya tidak bisa berbicara bahasa Inggris dengan baik di kelas karena saya kurang percaya diri*" with a mean score of 3.49, followed by item number 4 (Item S4) which states "*Saya memiliki kesulitan mencari kesempatan-kesempatan untuk melatih kemampuan berbicara saya di luar kelas,*" with a mean score of 3.32. Then, the next item was found to be item number 3 (Item A3) which states "*Kegelisahan saya terlalu tinggi. Ini mencegah saya berbicara bahasa Inggris dengan baik*" with a mean score of 3.25. In other words, the prominent English-speaking skills problems encountered by the respondents stemmed

from their lack of self-confidence, struggles in seeking chances to practice English outside of class, and their apprehension when communicating in English.

As reported by the respondents, the issue of greatest concern, indicated by the highest mean score, was their lack of self-confidence. This finding is similar to the result found by Turki (2015). He found that students who suffered reduced self-confidence were demotivated to speak. Juhana (2012) argued that the reasons behind their lack of self-confidence are that students are afraid to make mistakes, they are shy they will be laughed at, and they have a fear of getting a bad score. These underlying reasons thus cause them to have less self-confidence in speaking English in class, leading them to have minimal practice in the use of the language. In other words, self-confidence is an important aspect that can encourage students to speak. Thus, when they are not confident in themselves, it would somehow negatively affect their motivation to speak in English.

Another major issue reported was the challenge of finding opportunities to practice English outside the class. This result is similar to the result obtained by Afshar and Asakereh (2016) wherein it was reported that students had difficulty practicing English outside the classroom and thus, it became a problem to them in improving their English-speaking skills. Moreover, they added that students encountered difficulty in finding a partner or native speaker to communicate with. Senel (2012) similarly found that Turkish EFL students also experienced that lack of the use of English outside the class hindered their English-speaking skills development. To solve this problem, students need to be then more exposed to English so they will have more opportunities to use the language. As Khamprated (2012) mentioned, having the opportunity to practice and use both within and beyond the classroom is an effective way to encourage them to practice their English. Thus, teachers should actively support the students and help them to be able to use English outside of regular class time, facilitating the development of their speaking skills.

A high level of anxiety was another major problem reported by the respondents. The results of this study align with the findings of Liu (2006) in which it was found that Chinese at all levels of proficiency were anxious when they spoke English. This could be because students are probably uncomfortable speaking the language. For instance, when they do so, there are different challenges that they need to face such as the fear of being negatively evaluated. Timina (2015) believed that speaking in English in the classroom can somehow make students feel uncomfortable, making them face numerous challenges. Rao in Timina suggested that the reason why students do not often voluntarily answer questions in class can be traced back to the culture of many Asian countries. In other words, the culture of many Asian countries has somehow shaped these behaviors of the students. Another cause of this anxiety might also come from parents and teachers. Tseng (2012) stated that pressure from parents and teachers to have a good score in English, being punished, fear of English

speakers from other countries, and the students' belief that English is not easy to learn are some of the reasons why language learners are anxious. Thus, these might be the reasons why the respondents of this study were anxious to speak English. Research Question Number 2: Do English-major students' perceptions of their English-speaking skills problems differ significantly based on gender?

Table 3.2 Difference in the English-Speaking Skills Problems Based on Gender

		T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Mean	Equal variances assumed	.705	93	.483	-.06378	.09048
	Equal variances not assumed	.794	71.766	.430	-.06378	.08036

As indicated in Table 3.2, no significant difference was found in the English major students' perceptions of their English-speaking skills problems based on gender since the p = .483. Thus, the hypothesis that states "There is no significant difference in the English major students' perceptions of their English-speaking problems based on gender" is retained. This result suggests that both male and female students experience the same issues related to their English speaking. Similar to the finding of this study, Al-Saadi et al. (2013)also found no significant difference in the perception of speaking difficulty faced by the students.

The reason why the result shows no significant difference statistically could be because both the problems of the male and female students stem from similar factors. Factors that include limited opportunities for English practice, affective factors, and linguistic factors were found to be the source of speaking skills problems in the EFL context (Aleksandrzak, 2011; Hojati & Afghari, 2013; Wang, 2014). For instance, the affective factor contributing to their English-speaking skills problems, such as anxiety of both male and female students might be the same. In fact, in her study, Katemba (2013) found that both male and female Indonesian students were found to be highly anxious in learning English and there was no significant difference in their anxiety. Therefore, since their English-speaking skills problems might stem from the same factors, this might explain why the English-speaking skills problems of both the male and female students did not differ significantly. Research Question Number 3: Do English-major students' perceptions of their English-speaking skills problems differ significantly based on English class level?

Table 3.3 The Difference in the English-Speaking Skills Problems Based on English Class Level

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.741	2	.371	2.322	.104
Within Groups	14.679	92	.160		
Total	15.420	94			

Table 3.3 shows the difference in the English-major students' perceptions of their English-speaking problems based on English class level. The result showed no significant difference in the English-major students' perceptions of their English-speaking skills problems based on class level with p = .104. Thus, the null hypothesis stating "There is no significant difference in the English major students' perceptions of their English-speaking problems based on English class level" is retained.

The finding suggests that regardless of the Listening and Speaking class levels, the issues the students face with English speaking skills do not differ significantly. This implies that individuals across all levels of English Listening and Speaking classes encountered similar English-speaking skills problems. Zhang (2009) argued that speaking remains the most challenging aspect of language acquisition for the majority of English learners. The reason for this could be because students might not be comfortable with the language. Timina (2015) claimed that English is one of the foreign languages included in all levels of educational institutions in East Asian countries. However, for the Asian students themselves, English is not a comfortable language because the system is not the same as their native languages. Therefore, this could elucidate why students across various class levels encounter similar challenges in English speaking.

Moreover, Leong and Ahmadi (2017) mentioned that English speaking is a difficult task for all English learners as they need to know numerous vital elements such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, and comprehension. Students at all levels probably have not fully mastered all these elements and they still experience problems speaking in English. In addition to that, Juhana (2012) believed that the factors hindering speaking in English class include fear of making mistakes, shyness, anxiety, lack of confidence, and low motivation. Thus, generally, the students at all class levels are still struggling with all these factors which might result in them encountering comparable English-speaking problems.

CONCLUSION

It is concluded that the students experienced self-confidence problems when speaking English, limited opportunities to practice English outside the

class, and anxiety in speaking English. Consequently, teachers should assist students in enhancing their self-confidence, provide ample opportunities for English practice, and explore methods to alleviate the students' anxiety. These highlight the importance of a comprehensive approach to language education that addresses not only linguistic skills but also factors such as confidence-building, anxiety management, and providing enough opportunities for English-speaking practice. Moreover, both male and female students faced identical issues with their English-speaking skills. Lastly, the students at different levels of Listening and Speaking classes reported the same English-speaking skills problems. This suggests that despite differences in English class levels, students encountered similar challenges in English speaking skills.

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