

DIFFICULTIES IN SPEAKING SKILL ENCOUNTERED BY ENGLISH STUDENTS AT TADULAKO UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

This study aims to identify the difficulties in speaking English and the factors influencing these difficulties among EFL students. The research design used is a qualitative method with the subjects of the research was fourth-semester students in the English Education Study Program at Tadulako University. The data was collected through questionnaires and interviews. Based on the data analysis results, there are three predominant speaking difficulties faced by most of students. These difficulties include: (1) the difficulties in expressing ideas clearly and effectively, (2) the difficulties in using correct grammar, (3) the difficulties in dealing with anxiety while speaking. The factors influencing these difficulties are categorized into two main groups: linguistic factors and psychological factors. Linguistic factors relate to language elements such as limited vocabulary, improper grammar usage, and nuclear pronunciation. Psychological factors include individual psychological aspects such as low self-confidence, lack of motivation, and high levels of anxiety. The findings of this study are expected to provide insights for educators to develop strategies to help students overcome these challenges and improve their speaking skills.

Keywords: English Education students, linguistic factors, psychological factors, speaking difficulties.

Introduction

Language learning, particularly the development of speaking skills, is a crucial part of an English education program. For students majoring in English education, the ability to communicate effectively in English is essential as it significantly influences their academic performance and future career prospects. Speaking is a vital language skill that allows individuals to express thoughts, ideas, and feelings. It facilitates giving instructions, describing things, and requesting services. According to (Sulastris, 2018), speaking is the use of speech to convey thoughts or explain something. This skill involves interaction between the speaker and the audience and is a common activity in daily life.

EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners often struggle with speaking English because it is not their native language. These struggles include pauses, repetitive habits, limited vocabulary, and unclear speech. (Djamarah, 2011) describes learning difficulties as obstacles preventing students from studying effectively, while (Paramudhita, 2015) notes that speaking difficulties can arise from poor grammar understanding, fear of being mocked, and nervousness.

A broader issue for English learners is the limited exposure to authentic communication outside the classroom. Without daily conversations with native speakers, students may find it challenging to use their language skills in real situations. Access to

multimedia resources like podcasts and videos can improve understanding of different accents and communication styles.

Traditional classrooms often emphasize writing and grammar over speaking, leading to insufficient practice and feedback for students. This issue is evident at Tadulako University, where many English Education students struggle with speaking despite having taken courses since their first semester. Common problems include fear of making mistakes, uncertainty about what to say, difficulty articulating words, limited vocabulary, fear of criticism, and lack of confidence.

The difficulties in speaking English stem from various linguistic and psychological factors. Linguistic factors include limited vocabulary, improper grammar usage, and unclear pronunciation, which hinder students' ability to express ideas clearly. Psychological factors such as low self-confidence, lack of motivation, and high level of anxiety further complicate these challenges, making it difficult for students to participate actively in public speaking activities. This study aims to identify the difficulties faced by fourth-semester students at Tadulako University in speaking English and identify the factors contributing to these challenges. Through an in-depth exploration of these issues, this research aims to offer an understanding of the difficulties faced by students, along with their underlying causes. To achieve this objective, the researcher had formulated two research questions: (1) What are the difficulties in speaking English faced by fourth-semester students? and (2) What are the factors influencing the speaking difficulties faced by fourth-semester students at Tadulako University? The findings of this research are expected to make a significant contribution to develop more effective learning strategies and can serve as a reference for educators, curriculum developers, and educational institutions in designing programs that not only focus on improving technical aspects such as grammar and pronunciation, but also adopt a holistic approach that addresses motivation, self-confidence, and helps manage students anxiety.

Literature Review

Speaking is the process of sharing thoughts and ideas through spoken words and sounds. It involves using language to communicate effectively with others. According to (Kayi, 2006), speaking includes both verbal and non-verbal communication. (Nunan, 2003) emphasizes its importance in understanding and interacting with others, while (Nakhalah, 2016) notes it involves vocalizing sounds using various parts of the body. Speaking is one of the four key language skills, essential for clear communication and building relationships. Students face several key challenges in speaking English. Poor pronunciation can affect intelligibility (how recognizable the speech is), comprehensibility (how well the listener understands), and interpretability (understanding the speaker's intent). Limited vocabulary makes it difficult to express thoughts and form sentences, often leading to confusion about word choice and sentence structure. Additionally, a lack of confidence, often stemming from pronunciation and vocabulary issues, can make students hesitant to speak. These difficulties impact their overall ability to communicate effectively in English. In addition, (Afisah, 2015) pointed out various factors that cause the difficulties in speaking English, can be divided into two types in general: one of linguistic factors, and the other is the psychological factors.

Research Method

This research used qualitative research to explore and deeply understand the various difficulties in speaking faced by students in English Education Study Program in academic year 2022/2023 at Tadulako University. This method enables the researcher to gain detailed and holistic insights into students' experiences and perceptions. Data were collected through questionnaires and interviews, which were then systematically analyzed to provide a comprehensive overview of the speaking challenges and the factors influencing students' speaking skills.

Several techniques were used by the researcher to gather data. One of these

techniques involved creating a questionnaire with 20 questions, adapted from Rahmawati's (2021) study, to identify the speaking difficulties experienced by students. Once the data were collected, the researcher analyzed it to uncover patterns in students' speaking difficulties. Subsequently, the researcher conducted interviews with students who exhibited high levels of speaking difficulty, based on the results of the questionnaires. Five students from class D in the fourth-semester were chosen for the interviews, selected based on the questionnaire results. Each student was contacted to arrange a convenient time and place for the interview. Four students participated in face-to-face interviews, while one student was interviewed via Whatsapp due to schedule constraints. These interviews explored various aspects of speaking difficulties, including pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, confidence, and anxiety. Key points were recorded with the permission of the interviewed students. The collected information analyzed to provide deeper insights into the difficulties and factors influencing English speaking difficulties.

Results and Discussion

This chapter displays the results which were collected from the questionnaires and interviews about their speaking difficulties and the factors which influencing to their difficulties.

Difficulties in Speaking Skill

According to the result from the interview there are 3 common difficulties that students faced, such as; difficulties in expressing ideas, difficulties in selecting appropriate grammar, and difficulties in dealing with anxiety.

1. Difficulties in Expressing Ideas

The difficulty in expressing ideas is a major challenge for students speaking English. Many students encounter significant obstacles in organizing words into logical and clear sentences. A primary cause of this difficulty is a limited vocabulary, which directly hinders their ability to express ideas both spontaneously and structurally. Based on the interview results, several students expressed similar concerns. For instance:

Students 3:

"Yes, sometimes I find it difficult to express ideas spontaneously due to vocabulary limitations."

This statement highlights that a student's vocabulary range plays a crucial role in their ability to speak spontaneously. When vocabulary is limited, the process of finding the appropriate words becomes slower, thereby disrupting the flow of speech. Similarly, students 1 mentioned:

"The words are in my head, but when I try to say them, it becomes messy and confusing." Another student said: *"My brain stops for a moment. The more I try to speak, the harder it is to think clearly."*

These statements reveal a gap between the students' clear ideas and their ability to organize words into coherent sentences. This issue can be attributed to underdeveloped syntactic skills, where the students struggle to construct grammatically correct sentences. Consequently, when students exert significant effort to find the correct words in English, their thought processes are disrupted, making it even more challenging to articulate their ideas effectively. This phenomenon aligns with findings by (Alqahtani, 2015) who emphasized that a broad vocabulary has a substantial impact on speaking skills. Students with an extensive vocabulary can express ideas more clearly, confidently, and fluently. Additionally, they adapt better in discussions, as their responses are more accurate and timely. Conversely, students with limited vocabulary frequently pause during conversations,

experience frustration and lose confidence. Furthermore, (Richard, 2008) explains that speaking difficulties often stem from the inability to construct grammatically correct sentences. Students may have well-developed ideas in their native language but their inability to translate the ideas into English results in hesitations and disorganized speech. The mismatch between their thoughts in their native language and their English-speaking skills leads to unclear or even incorrect expressions.

2. Difficulties in Selecting Appropriate Grammar

The inability to use proper grammar has a significant challenge for students in constructing clear and accurate sentences in English when attempting to speak. Grammar plays a vital role in ensuring coherent and unambiguous communication. Grammatical errors can lead to misunderstanding or even completely incorrect meanings, creating fear and hesitation among students when speaking.

Student 2 expressed his concern by stating, *"I'm worried that what i'm saying isn't grammatically correct. Sometimes i hesitate whether the word of phrase i'm using is correct in the context of the sentence I used. For example, whether the tense I am using is right, or if the word choice accurately conveys my intended meaning. That's what often makes me unsure, it's mainly about grammar."* This highlights that uncertainty in using grammar can lead to self-doubt and hinder the fluency of spontaneous speech.

Another student also admitted their struggle, stating, *"I still don't know much about grammar, I don't fully understand it yet."* This statement reflects a deeper issue, where a lack of understanding of grammatical structures, such as tenses, sentence arrangements, and subject-verb agreement, limits students' ability to communicate effectively. (Gracia, 2008) highlights that limited comprehension of grammar rules obstructs students from constructing sentences that are grammatically accurate, particularly when they are required to think and communicate in a second language. Furthermore, (Sayuri., 2016) notes that students often face difficulties organizing sentences correctly while speaking because their efforts to maintain fluency frequently conflict with their limited grammatical proficiency. This difficulty creates a cycle of self-doubt and diminished confidence, ultimately restricting their ability to engage in meaningful conversations in English. Addressing these difficulties requires not only a theoretical understanding of grammar rules but also consistent practice in applying these rules within real communicative context. Without such practice, students are likely to remain stuck in a cycle of fear and suboptimal performance, which impedes their progress in developing effective speaking skills.

3. Difficulties in Dealing with Anxiety

Anxiety about public speaking is one of the most common difficulties faced by students, especially when they are required to speak spontaneously. This often causes them to lose focus or even go blank, which hinders their ability to speak fluently and in an organized manner. This situation not only affects their academic performance but also limits their opportunities to develop essential speaking skills for the professional world.

Student 5, stating:

"I can't speak in front of a lot of people due to stage fright," while another mentioned trembling, sweating, and feeling weak when asked to speak suddenly." This statement reflects a deep fear of public situations, often accompanied by physical reactions such as trembling, sweating, and feeling weak. Often students have expressed similar feelings, highlighting the emotional and mental strain they experience when required to speak

suddenly. Such reactions are usually caused by a combination of psychological factors and unpleasant past experiences.

Public speaking anxiety is often influenced by three main factors: fear of negative judgement, previous negative experiences, and low self-confidence. Fear of negative judgement triggers significant stress as students worry about being criticized or ridiculed if they make mistakes while speaking. Negative experiences, such as being harshly corrected or making mistakes in the past, can leave psychological scars that intensify their fears. Low self-confidence further exacerbates the situation by causing students to doubt their abilities, leading them to avoid public speaking opportunities altogether. Yoioiga and Rustam (2023) emphasize that this type of anxiety can significantly hinder students' progress in improving their speaking skills. The persistent fear of making mistakes often discourages students from participating in class discussions or engaging in social speaking situations. As a result, they miss important opportunities to build confidence and refine their communication skills. the impact of this anxiety is not limited to emotional aspects but also includes serious physical and mental symptoms. Physically, common symptoms include an increased heart rate, excessive sweating, trembling, and fatigue. Mentally, anxiety can cause confusion, difficulty concentrating, and challenges in organizing thoughts effectively. This condition often creates a vicious cycle, where anxious students are too afraid to try, ultimately stalling the development of their speaking skills.

Factors Influencing the Difficulties in Speaking

Based on the analysis of questionnaire data, students' speaking difficulties are influenced by two main categories: linguistic factors and psychological factors. These factors significantly hinder the development of students' speaking abilities in English. Linguistic factors include limited vocabulary, improper grammar usage, and unclear pronunciation. On the other hand, psychological factors involve low motivation, lack self-confidence, and high levels of anxiety when speaking in public.

1. Linguistic factors

Based on data collected from the questionnaires, limited vocabulary emerged as the most dominant issues. A total of 89.2%, or 33 students, reported experiencing difficulties in using adequate vocabulary when speaking. This issue hinders their ability to convey ideas or opinion clearly in English conversations. Limited vocabulary prevents students from selecting appropriate words to express their thoughts. This is exacerbated by the lack of habitual practices to enrich vocabulary through activities like reading, listening, or speaking in English. (Fauzi, 2021) explains that limited vocabulary not only disrupts students' comprehension of learning materials but also diminishes their ability to respond effectively in conversational situations. This leads students to hesitate when speaking or even avoid speaking altogether.

(Rahmawati, S & Putri, D, 2023) emphasize that vocabulary development is a fundamental foundation for improving speaking abilities. However, challenges arise when students do not receive adequate learning support to expand their vocabulary mastery. This deficiency impacts their ability to choose relevant words, construct sentences with correct structure, and express ideas effectively. Furthermore, a lack of vocabulary mastery often causes frustration among students, ultimately affecting their confidence when speaking English.

Unclear pronunciation also falls under linguistic factors that influence students' speaking abilities. Pronunciation errors often lead to miscommunication or misunderstanding by the listener, which subsequently undermines students' confidence. This is commonly caused by a lack of speaking practice or the absence of constructive feedback from teachers or peers. These findings highlight the

importance of learning programs that not only focus on vocabulary acquisition but also incorporate interactive speaking activities, such as role-playing, group discussions, and presentations, to help students improve their pronunciation. Furthermore, improper grammar usage also represents a major barrier to speaking proficiency. When students lack an understanding of correct grammatical structures, they tend to produce disorganized sentences, making their intended meaning difficult for listeners to comprehend. Improper grammar their ideas due to a fear of making mistakes.

2. Psychological Factors

Psychological factors significantly affect fourth-semester students' English-speaking skills. The results of the questionnaire in this study indicate that a lack of self-confidence is the primary obstacle in the speaking skills of fourth-semester students. A total of 81.1% or 30 students reported experiencing difficulties in speaking due to low levels of self-confidence. This condition makes them reluctant to speak, avoid participation in discussions, and feel afraid of making mistakes when speaking in English. In addition to low self-confidence, speaking anxiety is also a significant psychological factors that hinders students' speaking skills. The questionnaire results show that 78.4% of students experience anxiety when speaking in English. This anxiety can be caused by various factors, including social pressure, fear of negative evaluation, and lack of preparation before speaking.

According to Deyan (2018), speaking anxiety in a foreign language is often associated with fear of making mistakes and the inability to convey messages effectively. This condition affects students' cognitive aspects, making it difficult for them to respond to questions or express ideas fluently. (Sayuri, 2016) and (Horwitz, 1986)) also emphasize that anxiety can hinder effective communication, causing students to prefer remaining silent rather than attempting to speak in English.

Apart from its psychological impact, speaking anxiety also affects students' physiological aspects. Symptoms such as increased heart rate, sweating, trembling hands, and difficulty controlling their voice often arise when speaking in public. These conditions further deteriorate students' speaking abilities and reduce their motivation to practice speaking in English. (Damayanti, I & Listyani, L, 2020) states that making mistakes in speaking can lead to feelings of embarrassment and a tendency to withdraw from verbal interactions. This finding is reinforced by (Asysyfa, 2019), who found that students with low levels of self-confidence tend to avoid speaking due to fear of criticism of feeling incompetent. Furthermore, (Suparlan, 2021) found that low self-confidence is often related to negative past experiences, such as communication failures or a lack of support from their environment.

Low self-confidence also affects the structure and fluency of speaking. Students with low confidence tend to speak with unstable intonation, experience frequent pauses, and struggle to find the right words. They focus more in the possibility of making mistakes rather than delivering their message clearly and effectively. As a result, their communication becomes less fluent and poorly structured.

Conclusion

Based on the explanation, it can be concluded that the Fourth-semester English education students face three main speaking difficulties, they are difficulties in expressing ideas, difficulties in selecting correct grammar, and difficulties in dealing with anxiety. These difficulties influenced by two main factors such as linguistic factors and psychological factors. Linguistic factors included limited vocabulary, improper grammar use, and unclear pronunciation. Meanwhile, psychological factors included low self-

confidence, lack of motivation, and anxiety.

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