Students' perceptions and practices on EFL speaking skill development

Nining Rodianah

SMAS MALNU Pusat Menes, Indonesia

Article info	ABSTRACT
Keywords: EFL Speaking skill development Students' perceptions *Corresponding author:* Nining Rodianah SMAS MALNU Pusat Menes Email: ninghabibah5@gmail.com	Speaking is considered the most challenging skill for Indonesian learners of English. This study examines students' perceptions of speaking skill development and their improvement efforts using an explanatory mixed-methods design. Eighteen English Department students participated through questionnaires and interviews. Findings reveal a gap between students' perceptions and actual proficiency, influenced by linguistic differences, practice opportunities, and psychological barriers. While students use online resources like YouTube, classroom limitations hinder progress. The study emphasizes the need for improved strategies, increased practice, and psychological support. Future research should explore structured interventions to enhance students' confidence and fluency in speaking English.

1.   INTRODUCTION

Speaking seems to be the most difficult skill to be mastered since students often encountered difficulties in the ability to speak and it is "the most complex and difficult skill to master" (Hinkel, 2005, p. 485). The students' difficulty in speaking English may be due to three factors. First, English plays as a foreign language in Indonesia. Richard (2002) says that learning to speak is difficult for foreign language learners because effective oral communication requires the ability to use language appropriately in social interactions.

The second factor is the linguistic aspect differences between English and Indonesian language. English and Indonesian language are different in the sound system, such as: vocabulary system, structure system, and cultural pattern (Syafrizal, 2018). For the sound system, English has a more complex phonemic inventory, including sounds like /θ/ and /ð/, which do not exist in Indonesian, making pronunciation a common hurdle for Indonesian learners of English. For vocabulary, English is being influenced by Germanic and Romance languages which has a rich lexicon with a high degree of synonymy and subtle semantic distinctions. In the terms of grammar, it contrasts sharply between the two languages. English relies heavily on tense and aspect markers to convey time, while Indonesian uses time adverbs and lacks verb conjugations for tense, which can confuse learners accustomed to explicit grammatical markers. For cultural pattern, English often emphasizes individuality and directness in communication, whereas Indonesian tends to prioritize collectivism and indirectness, reflecting the cultural norms of politeness and harmony.

The third factor is students' perceptions on speaking. According to Lizzio et al (2002), positive student perceptions directly influence specific learning outcomes like academic achievement, skill performance and motivation for learning. When students view speaking English as an achievable and rewarding skill, they are more likely to actively engage in practice, participate in discussions, and seek opportunities to improve their speaking abilities independently. On the contrary, when students have negative perceptions toward speaking English, they are seldom to practice it and do not try to develop their speaking by themselves. This mindset discourages them from practicing regularly and limits their willingness to take risks essential for language development.

Based on preliminary observation, it was found that students in one of universities in Rangkasbitung perceived speaking skills as important for their academic and professional development. However, they also view it as the most challenging skill to master. This reflects a positive perception of the importance of speaking but a negative perception regarding their ability to achieve proficiency. Given these perceptions, it is crucial to explore how students attempt to improve their speaking skills. Therefore, this research seeks to delve deeper into students' perceptions of speaking development and their practices in enhancing this skill.

2.   METHOD

This study utilized an explanatory mixed-methods design to integrate qualitative insights that explain and extend quantitative findings, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of the research objectives (Creswell et al., 2003). To obtain the data, questionnaire and in-depth interview were employed. The questionnaire aimed to identify students' perceptions of speaking development and related practices which consisted of 25 items. Furthermore, the in-depth interview provided detailed data on students' perceptions of speaking development and related practices while clarifying their responses to the questionnaire. This method allowed for a deeper exploration of recurring themes and insights.

The participants of this research were 18 English Department students from the fourth and sixth semesters in one of universities in Rangkasbitung. Of these, nine students were from the sixth semester, and nine were from the fourth semester. Five students were selected for interviews because they exhibited positive perceptions of the importance of speaking but negative perceptions regarding their ability to achieve speaking proficiency. This selection criterion ensured diverse and relevant insights into the research focus.

Data from questionnaire were analyzed quantitively to calculate the percentage while data from interview were analyzed qualitatively. The interview data were transcribed and analyzed for recurring themes. This involved re-reading transcripts, identifying explicit and implicit statements, and categorizing recurring issues or topics mentioned by participants. Recurring themes were considered significant as they reflected shared perceptions or challenges faced by students.

3.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data from questionnaire and interview covered five categories. They are perception on their speaking mastery level, their eagerness to develop speaking skill, opportunity and time for speaking practice,

Perception of speaking mastery level

The findings revealed that 38.9% of students perceived their speaking skills are good, while 61.1% consider them unsatisfactory. These results are surprising, as a larger proportion of students viewed their speaking skills negatively despite their unanimous acknowledgment of the importance of mastering English-speaking skills (100%).

> *"Quite enough, because you know that right now in higher semester our lectures always giving us motivation, giving tips in order to be brave in speaking, and always ask the students to try to speak, and those make me motivated to improve my speaking skill." (Students B)*

> *"Still low, it may be caused of rarely practice. I usually speak English with my classmate in the classroom only." (Student C)*

These findings suggest a gap between students' perceptions of their abilities and their recognition of speaking proficiency as essential. In addition, the findings imply that the study program should give priority on improving students' speaking skill.

Students' Eagerness to Develop Speaking Skill

The data showed that students employed various techniques to enhance their speaking skills. The table indicates that only 16.7% of students attended English courses, while 66.7% focused on improving their vocabulary through daily activities, and 88.9% watched videos as a learning resource. Additionally, 11.1% participated in debate competitions, 5.6% joined speech contests, and 33.3% actively spoke in the classroom. However, students rarely engaged in extracurricular activities to develop their speaking abilities. Their chosen strategies tended to be enjoyable and engaging, with 100% using the internet or YouTube and 61.1% focusing on improving their pronunciation.

Students exhibited different levels of enthusiasm for improving their speaking skills, with most relying on the internet as a primary resource. Watching English videos helped them mimic correct pronunciation and expand their vocabulary, making the internet an essential tool for their language development.

> *"It's important to develop our speaking skill, because nowadays in fieldwork, English became the priority. That's why I always watch the videos from Youtube to see the tutorial like how to pronounce and adding my vocabulary." (Student D)*
>
> *"Why I took English department for my focus study it because I like English. But sometime I feel worried to make mistakes in my speaking, not confident. But I try to communicate with my native friend and download the phone cell application to develop my skill in speaking," (Student B)*

Students exhibited different levels of enthusiasm for improving their speaking skills, with most relying on the internet as a primary resource. Watching English videos helped them mimic correct pronunciation and expand their vocabulary, making the internet an essential tool for their language development.

Opportunity and Time for Practicing Speaking

Students often practice speaking English with their classmates. Kayi (2006) emphasizes that many linguists and ESL teachers agree that students learn to speak a second language effectively through interaction. Activities involving peers, especially speaking English, are commonly preferred by students to develop their speaking skills.

The data reveals that 88.9% of students believe they have adequate opportunities to practice speaking during class with classmates and lecturers. However, only 27.8% practice speaking English with friends outside the classroom. A significant number of students (77.8%) reported that the allocated time for speaking practice in class is insufficient, and 88.9% suggested extending this time. Additionally, 55.6% participate in study groups or English clubs to improve their speaking skills.

The findings highlight students' perceptions of opportunities and time for practicing their speaking skills. Speaking class serves as a primary platform for students to develop their speaking abilities. Many students rely on the structured environment of speaking classes, where lecturers provide guidance and facilitate practice. According to Tarigan (2000), speaking involves the ability to articulate sounds and words to convey ideas, thoughts, and emotions. Mastery of speaking skills requires active production, meaning students must frequently use spoken English to become more familiar and comfortable with the language. Regular practice enhances fluency and familiarity, enabling students to express themselves more effectively in English.

Speaking Materials, Activities and Facilities

The data indicate that 94.4% of students found the classroom materials engaging and effective for developing their speaking skills, while only 38.9% agreed that the classroom facilities were adequate for this purpose. Additionally, 77.8% of students stated that the activities in speaking class contributed positively to their skill development.

> *"There were some materials in the classroom that suitable for develop our speaking skill, and for facilities it's still lack of for example there was no audio and projector." (Student A)*

> *"Material in the class is helpful for me to develop my speaking skill and my knowledge.*
> *Classroom facility is still lack of from modern facilities, but the lecturers always try to find*
> *the idea to empower students' speaking skill." (Students E)*

These findings revealed insights into students' perceptions of the speaking materials, activities, and facilities provided in class. Students generally appreciated the materials prepared by their lecturers, as these were highly supportive of their speaking skill development. Harmer (2007) explains that the purpose of teaching speaking is to provide students with rehearsal opportunities, allowing them to practice real-life communication in a safe classroom environment. Activities such as role-plays, presentations, and similar tasks designed by lecturers enhance students' speaking abilities by creating meaningful practice opportunities.

Speaking classes serve as a platform for students to develop and practice their skills. However, the facilities available in the classroom play a critical role in supporting this process. Facilities such as projectors, laptops, and audio equipment are essential tools for enhancing students' learning experiences. While many students acknowledged the use of these tools, some expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of the facilities, which they felt limited their ability to develop speaking skills effectively. Improved classroom facilities could provide additional support, enabling students to gain greater benefits in their speaking skill development.

Classroom Climate and Students' Psychological Barriers

This section examines students' perceptions of their classroom environment and psychological barriers when speaking English. Classroom climate, as perceived by students, often centers on their interactions with lecturers. Regarding psychological barriers, the data revealed several challenges faced by students. According to Iskandarwassid and Suhendar (2011), speaking skills rely on confidence to communicate accurately, honestly, and responsibly by overcoming psychological challenges such as shyness, low self-esteem, stress, or hesitation.

The data shows that only 11.1% of students frequently used English with classmates, and 27.8% used English with lecturers. Despite interactions with classmates being more frequent than with lecturers, students reported limited communication in English with peers. This suggests the need for lecturers to design activities that encourage students to use English as a medium of communication among themselves. Psychological barriers also emerged as a significant issue. Approximately 61.1% of students felt shy speaking English due to fear of being laughed at by peers, and 27.8% expressed fear of speaking due to lecturers, despite all lecturers (100%) never reprimanding students for speaking mistakes. Fear of making grammatical or vocabulary errors appeared to be the main concern, with 83.3% of students struggling in this area. Consequently, 66.7% of students preferred preparing notes before speaking.

> *"I feel unconfident speaking English because my grammar is poor, and my vocabulary is limited.*
> *I'm afraid of making mistakes, even though my lecturer never scolds me." (Student D)*

> *"I always prepare notes before speaking to avoid forgetting what to say. My lecturer corrects me*
> *positively after I finish speaking." (Student A)*

> *"I rarely speak English because I fear making mistakes and lack confidence." (Student B)*

> *"Grammar is harder for me than pronunciation. I feel unconfident about my grammar." (Student C)*

> *"Lecturers encourage us even when we make mistakes. They correct us constructively and*
> *motivate us to improve." (Student E)*

Most students experienced psychological barriers when speaking English, primarily due to a lack of confidence. Widdowson (1994) highlights that speaking is an active production skill requiring regular practice rather than theoretical learning. Students reported feeling shy and hesitant to speak English due to fear of

mistakes in pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. To cope with these barriers, many students prepared notes before speaking. This preparation involved selecting appropriate vocabulary, practicing pronunciation, and arranging sentences according to grammar rules. However, some students lost focus or confidence when peers laughed at their mistakes, while others-maintained composure due to higher self-assurance. In conclusion, the primary psychological challenges for students include difficulties with grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, compounded by low confidence and fear of peer judgment. These findings highlight the need for supportive classroom activities and strategies to build students' confidence and proficiency in speaking English.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, it reveals that students consider speaking skills to be crucial for effective communication in English. Most respondents expressed a desire to speak fluently and proficiently, emphasizing the importance of mastering speaking skills. While students felt that the opportunities provided in speaking classes were sufficient, they noted that the time allocated for speaking practice was limited and that classroom facilities needed improvement. Additionally, more than half of the respondents reported feeling self-conscious about speaking English due to the fear of being ridiculed by their peers. These results suggest that students would benefit from increased motivation, psychological support, and encouragement to overcome their shyness, highlighting the need for a supportive and conducive classroom environment. In addition, it is recommended that students develop a deeper understanding of their perceptions regarding speaking skill development and adopt strategies to enhance their proficiency. This awareness will enable them to choose appropriate methods for improving their speaking abilities. Future research should focus on exploring students' perceptions of speaking skills and the strategies they employ, with the aim of providing valuable insights for English learners. The outcomes of such studies can serve as a useful resource for both English students and others in their efforts to improve speaking skills.

REFERENCES

Creswell, J. (1998). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design Choosing Among Five Traditions.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Harmer, J. 2007. *The Practice of English Language Teaching.* Pierson: Longman

Hinkel, E. (Ed.). 2005. Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Iskandarwassid dan Suhendar. 2011. Strategi Pembelajaran Bahasa. Bandung: Remaja Rosdakarya.

Kayi, H. 2006. Teaching Speaking: Activities to Promote Speaking in a Second Language. The Internet TESL Journal, Vol. XII, No. 11 http://iteslj.org/

Widdowson, H. (1994) 'The ownership of English', *TESOL Quarterly*, 28, 377–89.

Lizzio, A., Wilson, K.L., and Simons, R. 2002. University Students' Perceptions of the Learning Environment and Academic Outcomes: Implications for Theory and Practice. Studies In Higher Education. Vol 27. No 1. 27-52. DOI:10.1080/03075070120099359

Richard, Jack C &. A. (2002). *Methodology in Language Teaching.* United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.

Syafrizal. (2018). *Teaching English as a Foreign Language.* Serang: Untirta Press