

Identifying Young EFL Learners' Problems in Speaking Skills: A Teacher Perspective

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Abstract

Based on data from a recent international research project, this article focuses on the problems that young learners face in their English speaking skills from a teacher's perspective. To collect the data, this research used a qualitative approach using a case study through observation with 3 English teachers of primary schools as participants and the instruments used were individual interviews and literature review. The purpose of this study is to find out how the challenges and also the strategies of teachers in dealing with the difficulties that their students experience in speaking English, because so far as we know that English has become an international language to communicate. This study found several challenges faced by teachers in teaching speaking to young learners such as lack of vocabulary mastery, mother tongue use, students' confidence issues, and speaking in order of sentence structure. Then, many strategies are applied by the teachers in teaching speaking to young learners such as discussion, describing pictures, and role-playing. The researcher hopes that this study can be a reflection for English teachers that in determining learning strategies must be adjusted to the material, conditions, and also the ability of students so that students are able to follow the learning process well.

Keywords : English young learners, speaking difficulties, teacher's perspectives

Introduction

Speaking ability is one of the four language skills that must be developed in order for EFL/ESL learners to communicate effectively in different contexts. Experts argue that if one is able to communicate orally, it is the same as mastering a given language, hence speaking ability is the key to human communication (Lazaraton et al., 2001). However, speaking has proven to be a demanding skill for young EFL learners. Speaking is very important for EFL students as it is a means of interpersonal communication. For EFL or ESL, speaking ability is a mandatory skill to master. Proficiency in spoken English has two purposes for academics the first is that EFL students can study abroad, secondly, EFL students can present using English in front of their peers in the classroom. Lazaraton also believes that speaking in English falls into the difficult category, therefore in order for language learners to manage oral communication, they need to produce connected utterances, young learners should have interaction skills, speak in different contexts, develop a balance between accuracy and fluency, and speak about unfamiliar issues based on their knowledge (Lazaraton et al., 2001). Some experts in this field argue that young EFL learners' speaking ability may be influenced by many factors. Aleksandrak

(2017) says that the source of this problem of speaking skills in EFL contexts is based on the lack of variety and speaking opportunities in EFL classrooms compared to the many varieties and genres in real-life situations (Aleksandrak, 2017). Speaking skills are under the influence of a number of linguistic and non-linguistic factors such as grammar, vocabulary, pragmatic variables, affective factors, and so on, which combined can exacerbate the problem of speaking skills.

Therefore, EFL learners not only need to equip themselves with sufficient vocabulary and grammar knowledge, but also need to pay attention to fluency and accuracy to manage meaningful communication. Besides factors, students also have their own characteristics in learning, especially elementary school students who are considered as young learners. Young learners are usually very happy to have fun with what they do. Therefore, elementary school teachers must understand their world. In addition, they should also have the ability to teach them communicatively and effectively by using the right learning media. The use of learning media in teaching provides several benefits that can overcome student characteristics (Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2020).

Oktaviani (2020) stated that the use of media in teaching can increase students' motivation

in learning English (Oktaviani, 2020). For young Indonesian learners, speaking English is challenging because their mother tongue is not English. They have learned English since childhood, but they still cannot speak English fluently. Although they understand what people are saying when they use English, they still have problems pronouncing the words correctly. Students' fear of not speaking, inconsistency and low engagement and also speaking in their mother tongue are among the obstacles that students face when speaking English. Difficulty speaking English is caused by cognitive factors and traits of individuality. Besides, ignorance of grammatical patterns is the main cause of their speaking difficulties. Therefore, teachers have a big challenge to make their students to master English well, especially English in the classroom as well as outside the classroom.

Speaking, listening, writing, and also reading are the core abilities needed to master a foreign language (Al Hosni, 2014). Speaking is a way to convey ideas and messages orally, facilitating real communication among students. In speaking, humans can articulate thoughts, emotions, opinions, and exchange information through verbal expression in communication. This includes the use of body language, gestures, physical proximity eye contact, and other nonverbal cues. In speaking activities not only rely on spoken language, but also incorporate various forms of nonverbal communication in expressing messages or thoughts. In the EFL context, language users are also encouraged to speak in different genres and situations, and they should be able to use a variety of conversational strategies and conversational repair (Harmer, 2007a). This requires language users to speak fluently, be able to pronounce phonemes correctly, use appropriate stress and intonation patterns, and speak with connected speech. Chaney (2014) defines speaking as a process of constructing and sharing meaning and information through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols in diverse contexts (Chaney, 2014)

The use of English which is recognized as a second (ESL) or foreign language (EFL) in oral communication, cannot be doubted, as it is one of the most common but also very complex activities that need to be considered when teaching English especially since we - live in a time where the ability to speak English fluently has become a necessity, especially for those who want to advance in certain fields. The focus of speaking instruction, of course, is to improve students' oral production.

Therefore, language teaching activities in the classroom should aim to maximize individual language use (Zhang, 2009). In addition, the goal of teaching speaking is communicative efficiency where learners should be able to make themselves understood and be understood, using their current speaking ability to the maximum. They should try to avoid confusion in the message caused by incorrect pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary, and to observe the social and cultural rules that apply in every communication situation.

English language teaching for primary school students should be well designed according to the characteristics of the students because teaching English as a foreign language is not easy. Some studies have found that learning English at an early age is very effective and very helpful in developing children's English language skills (Borg, 2011). The biggest challenge that will occur experienced by teachers is how to get students to speak in English during the learning process because most students will use their mother tongue as a means of communication and constrained in vocabulary acquisition becomes one of the causes why students do not want to speak in English during English classes. In addition, Kayi states that teachers should provide speaking activities that focus more on meaningful communication rather than directing students to mere memorization (Kayi, 2006). This is in line with Wallace et al. (2004) who state that teachers should provide opportunities for students to practice speaking English. This speaking practice can lead to meaningful communication rather than just memorization (Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2020). It should be noted that EFL learners' speaking skills are influenced by internal factors (mother tongue, age, exposure, innate phonetic ability, identity, language ego, and motivation) and external factors (teaching context and learner autonomy) (Nuraini, 2016).

Based on the previous studies, theories and facts above, the researcher then found that there has not been much research underlining investigating the problems of Indonesian young EFL learners in learning English, especially speaking skills. These problems need to be researched to find the best solution. Therefore, the research problems have been proposed to find out the challenges and teaching strategies that teachers faced in dealing with young EFL learners' difficulties in English.

Methods

To collect data, this study used the instruments of questionnaires, individual interviews and descriptive literature review. Both questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used in this study as research instruments. The questionnaire and interview questions were adopted from Mercado (2008), Lapada et al. (2020), and Pinter (2017) and elaborated with various types of scientific works related to the research problem (Pratama & Awaliyah, 2008). The questions were intended to capture general data regarding teachers' views on teaching English to young learners. Meanwhile, individual interviews as the main data aimed to obtain more detailed and in-depth data information in a comprehensive and meaningful and in-depth manner regarding children's speaking ability problems as well as the challenges faced by teachers and the solutions they undertake to overcome these problems.

Results and Discussion

The data collected on this issue shows that there are three main speaking difficulties encountered by English young learners, namely linguistic difficulties, mother tongue use, and inhibition. Data collected through teacher interviews showed that students struggled to find the right vocabulary when trying to speak in English, reflecting their lack of vocabulary mastery. Data was collected from teacher interviews as all teachers stated this as a very common occurrence, teachers often hear sentences that students say such as "We want to start talking, but we don't know what to say". This shows that students find it difficult to construct sentences when they are trying to express their ideas. Although teachers spend a long time teaching grammar rules, students are still unable to form short sentences when they want to speak English in sentence form due to lack of vocabulary.

The following issue is closely related to the previous issue, which is language acquisition difficulties. During the interview, the teacher said that students tend to speak in their mother tongue when they discuss different rubrics of the assignment, the teacher also said that when students start for discussion they find it easier to use their mother tongue. "They often use their mother tongue when discussing and they often speak their local language when explaining something to their friends, then translate it into English word by word" Therefore, inadequate vocabulary and weak sentence construction skills are the reasons for using the mother tongue.

The teachers stated that during the classroom observations, it was observed that students' participation was very low. This was due to the previously mentioned inhibiting reasons. The students explained that fear and lack of self-confidence of making mistakes in front of their classmates were the reasons for not speaking up in class. The teacher stated that motivating students is the main thing that the teacher continues to develop so that students dare to perform in front of the class.

Several solutions need to be done on improving teaching method speaking skills to young learners, which is beneficial because they are still able to accept new things into their memory (Phillips, 1993). However, teachers find it difficult because students have to master vocabulary, pronunciation, structure, and function to say what they want. Cameron (2001) assumes that a major part of teaching and learning for early learners is oral. Furthermore, Cameron proposes two guiding principles in teaching speaking to young learners the first is that teaching meaning should come first. If children do not understand spoken language, they will not be able to learn it.

The second is that to learn speaking skills, children need to participate in classroom and neighborhood interactions to build knowledge and speaking skills. This means that students should be involved in situations where they will practice speaking with others for real purposes. Some speaking skills that are worth teaching in the classroom, include fluency, phonological clarity, strategy, ability to produce chunks of language, precision (register), understanding of elliptical forms, and use of interconnected devices.

In this case, one of the effective way is by describing pictures. It is one of the ways to teach English speaking. In this activity, students are taught to be able to describe pictures in front of the class. The produces are each student gets one picture and then describes it. The purpose of this teaching is to train students' imagination and retell the story in English speaking. Some participants stated that describing pictures is suitable to improve students' speaking ability in descriptive text because this activity aims to train students' imagination and describe something in speaking English. For this activity, students can form groups and each group is given a different picture. They can discuss the picture with their groups, and then a spokesperson for each group describes the picture to the whole class.

The second method is by doing role-play. It is one of the most frequently used techniques by teachers in the teaching of speaking where students are involved by taking on roles and having discussions with each person to act out a brand role. Many students can benefit greatly from using role-play in classroom activities, as they can act out real situations in the classroom (Harmer, 2007). In role-play activities, the teacher gives information to the learners such as who they are and what they think or feel. 75% of the teachers in the questionnaire stated that using this roleplay model for teaching speaking to young learners will increase students' confidence, vocabulary acquisition and motivation.

Conclusion

This research reveals that the main speaking difficulties faced by young learners are mainly linguistic difficulties which are their lack of English vocabulary acquisition, the use of mother tongue, and their lack of confidence in speaking English. Students cannot speak in English because they lack the necessary vocabulary and grammatical structures. They also lack sentence formation skills, which results in the use of their mother tongue. Students also find making mistakes in speaking in front of their classmates very embarrassing, so they prefer not to speak to avoid such situations. There are three strategies that almost all teachers deliver, including discussion activities, describing pictures, and roleplaying. This study shows that almost all students like roleplaying activities especially when they learn to act out a drama where they will practice how to pronounce English well. Involving students in learning activities can give them more opportunities to use the language, and the classroom will look interesting when students are able to learn English in a real environment.

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