

“Sorry, I Can’t Speak”: English Teachers’ Challenges of Teaching EFL Speaking in an Indonesian Vocational High School Sector¹

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Abstract

Teaching speaking in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes at Indonesian vocational high schools has not been extensively studied from teachers’ perspectives. This paper reports on findings from interview data from four EFL teachers in an Indonesian vocational high school regarding the challenges they encounter on teaching EFL speaking and how they deal with these in the classroom. A case study design which enables researchers to explore a particular issue within a specific context deeply was used. The participating teachers in this study were voluntarily recruited for in-depth interviews. The data were analyzed with thematic analysis to capture emerging themes from the participants’ own words. The results of this study suggested that the participants experienced a number of challenging issues in teaching speaking to their students. They perceived that students’ lack of vocabulary and poor pronunciation were the major problems they encountered while teaching speaking in class. Furthermore, psychological factors such as a lack of confidence and low motivation were also factors hindering communicative speaking activities during class. Based on the findings, policymakers should reframe the current curriculum for speaking classes in the Indonesian vocational high schools.

Resumen

La enseñanza del habla en inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL, por sus siglas en inglés) en las escuelas secundarias vocacionales de Indonesia no ha sido ampliamente estudiada desde la perspectiva de los maestros. Este documento informa sobre los hallazgos de las entrevistas de cuatro profesores de EFL en una escuela secundaria vocacional de Indonesia con respecto a los desafíos que enfrentan al enseñar a hablar EFL y cómo los enfrentan en el aula. Se utilizó un diseño de estudio de caso que permite a los investigadores explorar en profundidad un tema particular dentro de un contexto específico. Los docentes participantes en este estudio fueron reclutados para entrevistas en profundidad. Los datos se analizaron con análisis temático para capturar temas emergentes de las propias palabras de los participantes. Los resultados de este estudio sugieren que los participantes experimentaron una serie de desafíos al enseñar a hablar a sus alumnos. Percibieron que la falta de vocabulario y la mala pronunciación de los estudiantes eran los principales problemas que encontraban al enseñar a hablar en clase. Además, los factores psicológicos como la falta de confianza y la baja motivación también fueron factores que dificultaron las actividades comunicativas del habla durante la clase. Con base en los hallazgos, se recomienda reformular el plan de estudios actual para las clases de expresión oral en las escuelas secundarias vocacionales de Indonesia.

Introduction

This study aimed to examine challenges encountered by Indonesian English teachers in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) speaking in an Indonesian vocational school and investigated how these teachers overcame such challenges in the classroom. As far as we observed, teachers at vocational schools in Indonesia are confronted with various problems in teaching EFL (Rido et al., 2014). Problems reported in Vocational English Learning (VEL) are related to self-made teaching materials and teachers’ teaching competencies (Renandya & Widodo, 2016). For example, scaffolding-related activities in the VEL are frequently neglected (Widodo, 2017) and both teachers and students believe that VEL is exclusively geared on technical terms that they should memorize and translate into students’ first language (L1).

Recent studies have examined the challenges faced by vocational English teachers in Indonesia. For instance, Widodo (2015) reported that vocational English materials were not widely available in vocational schools. He used action research to create more situated materials in the teaching and learning processes. In a similar vein, Rido et al. (2016) studied how English master teachers used classroom management strategies in Indonesian vocational school levels. They indicated that the teachers in their study employed varied techniques and strategies in the classroom and combined them to teach effectively.

Empirical evidence shows that in non-English speaking countries where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL) (Yobouet, 2021), developing speaking skills tends to be challenging for English language

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learners (ELLs). However, despite the challenges, these skills play a central role in EFL countries. In an Indonesian context, for instance, both vocational and secondary school students are expected to have good English speaking proficiency as it is essential for their future careers (Widodo, 2016) and speaking is seen as a representative of one's language ability (Nowicka & Wilczynska, 2011; Richards, 2008). Due to its importance, the current English curriculum in Indonesia, namely Curriculum 2013 (K13), emphasizes the development of students' communicative skills. Therefore, in teaching English speaking skills, many teachers have employed communicative language teaching (CLT) in their teaching and learning process as mandated in the curriculum (Teh, 2021).

The objectives of this study are twofold: 1) examining challenges encountered by English teachers in teaching EFL speaking in the Indonesian vocational school level and 2) investigating how these teachers face the challenges in the classrooms. These research objectives include evidence-based analyses of the Indonesian vocational school sectors which, in fact, have often been ignored by previous publications. The findings of this study also contribute new perspectives to the policy-makers on how the English curriculum for vocational high schools in Indonesia could be revised.

Literature Review

Challenges in teaching and learning EFL speaking

Linguistic factors

Several factors have been mentioned as potential causes of the difficulties experienced by EFL learners and teachers when learning or teaching speaking. One such factor is the complexity of the competencies. Goh and Burns (2012) proposed several competencies that need to be mastered. The first is linguistic competency covering four kinds of knowledge: grammar, phonology, lexical resources, and discourse. Grammatical knowledge plays an important role in speaking any language. In addition, phonological knowledge means that English speakers should know how to produce words with appropriate intonation, stress, and rhythm, as well as having an awareness of the importance of word stress and the sounds of a language in creating meaning (Burns, 2017). Parallel to Barker and Murphy's (2011) study, they suggest EFL or ESL teachers need to have knowledge of teaching pronunciation, non-Native English speaker pronunciation, and phonology.

Lexical knowledge refers to the size of a language learner's vocabulary (Burns, 2017). Mastering adequate vocabulary plays a significant role in supporting both students' receptive skills and their productive skills (Cahyono & Widiati, 2008). Improving students' vocabulary in various EFL learning environment, such as in Japan, has been influenced by several factors. A study by Tanaka (2017) explored EFL students' vocabulary development in Japan. The results showed that motivation and peers have a positive impact on the development of students' vocabulary. In a learning environment in which students have little motivation to learn the language, their equally demotivated peers have a negative influence on their learning. Tanaka's study revealed that learning autonomy, the ability of learners to control their learning independently (Khotimah et al., 2019) and free of peer influence, is essential to establish the enjoyment of learning that enables students to improve their English skills.

Another study by Kikuchi (2009) indicated that vocabulary memorization is one of the factors which causes students to become demotivated when learning English. EFL learners should have sufficient knowledge of discourse to understand the purpose of a conversation as this affects the lexical resources utilized during the conversation. These four types of linguistic competency, vocabulary knowledge, pronunciation, grammar and discourse, need to be mastered by students to enhance their English speaking skills. However, mastering this linguistic competency is challenging for EFL learners. Such hindrances have been identified as EFL learners' intrinsic issues in learning speaking (Newton et al., 2022).

Psychological Factors

There are also psychological factors that affect an individual's ability to learn to speak English (Burns, 2017), including anxiety, a lack of motivation, and a lack of confidence. Spada and Lightbown (2010) identified several of these factors in language learners, including worry, stress, and nervousness. These feelings cause a significant negative impact on learning a foreign language (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2011). Another study has also found that anxiety has a negative impact on improving English speaking skill (Salam et al., 2021).

A lack of motivation in learning English is one of the major issues affecting teaching and learning of English speaking in EFL countries. Dörnyei (2020) described two types of motivation. In integrative motivation a learner's main goal when learning a new language is to be able to interact with the speakers to learn about

their culture. Meanwhile, instrumental motivation relates to situations where the student learns the language for practical reasons, such as getting a better job, earning a higher salary, or passing an exam, and other practical purposes.

In another study, Shin and Bolkan (2021) found that supportive peers have a positive impact on learners' motivation while demotivated peers have a negative impact on learners' motivation. Other studies have also shown that lack of motivation and lack of confidence are two important challenges experienced for EFL learners (Abrar et al., 2018; Al-Sobhi & Preece, 2018). Self-confidence, the learner's belief in their ability to learn another language, is another psychological factor involved in learning to speaking English. In fact, Ellis (2015) contends it is one of the most important factors.

External Factors

Other difficulties involved in teaching and learning speaking are caused by external factors. These factors relate to the classroom environment and negative feedback from teachers and peers (Abrar et al., 2018). These external factors result in difficulty for learners to actively engage in speaking. In addition, a healthy environment where learners are exposed to the targeted language has a considerable influence on learning to speak, and a lack of such an environment can have detrimental consequences since it affects their language acquisition (Lee & Hsieh, 2019; Salam, et al., 2021). Other external factors include lack of supportive facilities and large classes. A study conducted by Al-Sobhi and Preece (2018) revealed that lack of audio facilities, teachers' books, posters, etc. is one of the problems faced when teaching English speaking to Arab students. In a Pakistani context, large classes have a strong correlation with teachers' emotional stress, physical exhaustion, and professional frustration. Likewise, class size is one of the important factors affecting their professional experience (Shamin & Coleman, 2018).

Situating previous studies in the teaching of EFL speaking

A large number of previous studies investigating the teaching of speaking skills has been extensively conducted (e.g., Barker, 2018; Blake, 2017; Farrell & Yang, 2019; Ozdemir & Papi, 2022; Pawlak & Waniek-Klimczak 2015; Richards, 2008). The findings of these studies suggest that the interest of scholars in studying this issue is not new and at the tertiary level has been inconsistent. Empirically, research in China (Chen & Goh, 2011) has critically looked at problems encountered by EFL teachers in teaching English speaking in a higher education context and have shown that the participating teachers faced multiple complexities in their classroom teaching. In an academic speaking context, Pitura (2022) revealed how university students encountered problems related to academic presentations, conversations, and debates in their English-medium university. In the Indonesia setting, Abrar et al. (2018) explored university students' and teachers' experiences with speaking and their study revealed similar results to the previous investigations, showing that the main problems were large class sizes, a lack of supportive teaching facilities, psychological factors (e.g., lack of motivation, low self-efficacy of either teachers or students regarding their oral competency), and lack of supportive environments in which to practice spoken English. However, these studies do differ in their findings regarding language barriers, vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and fluency (Abrar et al., 2018).

Similar results to those mentioned above have been found in research examining the secondary school context. Al-Sobhi and Preece (2018) in Kuala Lumpur revealed that students' confidence and motivation, low English proficiency, and lack of learning support facilities were the main issues in teaching English speaking. In addition, Farrel and Yang (2019) revealed how teacher belief and practice are aligned in L2 speaking classroom. Their research suggests pedagogy-informed findings to conceptualize teacher beliefs and practice in the L2 classroom. Unlike research conducted in tertiary education and secondary schools, studies investigating English speaking in an Indonesian context have focused on the strategies used in teaching speaking and the impact of those strategies on learners' achievement (Gani et al., 2015; Mistar & Umamah, 2014; Wahyuni, 2013). However, research investigating EFL teachers' perceptions of teaching English speaking in Indonesian vocational high schools is sparse. Therefore, to fill the gap, this study explored Indonesian vocational high school teachers' perceptions of the challenges they encountered in teaching EFL speaking. To guide the study, two research questions were formulated:

1. To what extent do vocational high school teachers perceive challenges in teaching speaking in their vocational English classes?
2. From their perspectives, how do the teachers address their teaching complexities in the classes?

Methodology

Participants

The participants in this study were four English teachers at a public vocational high school in Dompu Regency, Indonesia. First it was explained that the study was voluntarily and we sent an informed consent form prior to the data collection process. At the time of the study, these four teachers were teaching English at levels 11, 12 and 13 in different programs in the school. Their teaching experiences were ranging from 3-17 years. Unlike quantitative research that uses large samples, qualitative research tends to use small samples (Braun & Clark, 2013). These four English teachers were recruited as they were senior English teachers at the school, and one of the teachers was the chair of the Association of English Teachers in the vocational high schools in Dompu Regency. Considering the range of teaching experiences of these teachers, it was expected that recruiting them for the study would provide detailed descriptions of their shared voices during teaching EFL speaking in the classrooms.

Teachers	Teaching experience	Gender	Educational Background
T1	4 years	Female	Bachelor degree (English Education)
T2	20 years	Female	Bachelor degree (English Education)
T3	15 years	Female	Bachelor degree (English Education)
T4	16 years	Female	Bachelor Degree (English Education)

Table 1. Participants' background information

Data Collection and Analysis

To answer the two research questions, this study utilized interviews as the primary data collection tool. We employed in-depth interviews to investigate the teachers' opinions and insights in a particular case (Yin, 2014). Follow-up questions were also raised during our conversations with the teachers as this method could capture detailed perspectives of their teaching experiences. The interview sessions were done using participants' national language and English interchangeably. The interviews were also recorded in order to secure the oral data.

The data from the interviewees were then analyzed using a thematic analysis. This thematic analysis was employed to identify and analyze the data based on specific patterns of meaning, called themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis involved the process of creating categories, grouping them, and finding the relationships between them (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Therefore, after transcribing the interview results, we labelled the themes based on the participants' shared voices, and grouped the categories. Finally, the relationships of each category were examined in order to understand the overall meaning of the data.

Findings and Discussion

Linguistics factors

The interview analysis showcases that there were two types of linguistic factors that expressed challenges found in teaching EFL speaking: students' lack of vocabulary and poor pronunciation. All participants agreed that students' lack of vocabulary had become the main issue and that this had led to several problems in teaching practices, such as the students' inability to respond to the teachers' questions and lack of confidence when speaking English. They also contended that this factor tended to hinder the teachers' ability to speak English in teaching and learning processes. The participants' reasons for choosing vocabulary as the main issue in teaching speaking reflected in their interview responses:

Excerpt 1:

Because of students do not have enough vocabulary [sic]. This would hinder my ability while teaching speaking. (T1)

Excerpt 2:

My students have very limited vocabulary. This condition really affects their willingness in speaking. For example, when they want to speak they want to say 'okey teacher, in my opinion, mmmmmm how to say ...mmmm.. The word is Sorry I can't speak' If they can't express their speaking, they would say in Bahasa and said Maaf. Gak jadi, bu. Gak tau cara ngomongnya [Sorry. I can't express my opinion because I don't know what to say in English]. If they have many English vocabularies they will not hesitate to speak. (T2)

Excerpt 3:

Students in my class actually quite confidence [sic] in speaking, but they always find it difficult to express their thought [sic] in English because limited vocabulary has been the main problem. (T3)

These findings suggest that lack of students' vocabulary results in demotivation in the learning environment for both EFL teachers and learners since it hinders the teachers ability to use English-only instruction in the class because the students cannot respond to their teachers' questions. This has been highlighted previously by Tanaka (2017) who investigated EFL teaching and learning in Japan.

Another linguistic competency that has become a challenge for teachers in teaching EFL speaking is the students' pronunciation. The teachers perceived that difficulty in pronouncing English words is due to the inconsistencies between the written forms of English and English pronunciation. One of the participating English teachers, T4, shared in the interview:

Excerpt 4:

My students tend to complain about the differences between the written form of English and its pronunciation. They sometimes would ask me about why some words are written in the same forms but sometimes they have to pronounce differently [sic]. (T4)

In addition, when the participants were asked about another obstacle in teaching EFL speaking, they believed that students' mother tongue also affects students' pronunciation of English words. This condition is shared by one of the participants, "I think you might also notice that students' mother tongue accent is strong enough. It is really difficult to ask them to pronounce like native speakers." (T2).

The teachers tended to refer to native-like pronunciation as they believed that such a model could help students obtain improved English speaking proficiency. Although previous research has problematized such a native speaker fallacy (Daoud & Kasztalska, 2022; Gani et al., 2015; Holliday, 2015; Leonard, 2018, 2019; Tsuchiya, 2020), similar concerns seem to be neglected in EFL setting (Almusharraf, 2021). Due to these factors, this issue has been one of the challenges in teaching EFL speaking. However, the teachers' beliefs about students' mother tongue may have a negative impact on students' English pronunciation. Teachers' perceptions of poor pronunciation may be caused by their lack of awareness of the variety of English accents from non-native English speakers (Kang et al., 2018; Lee, 2019). Previously, Barker and Murphy (2011) suggested that in an EFL or ESL context, it is vital to enhance the awareness of learners regarding the variety of accents in learning pronunciation. Additionally, apart from a lack of awareness of this issue, the teachers in this study should improve their teaching knowledge of pronunciation.

The findings of this study support previous research by Abrar et al. (2018) who found that vocabulary and pronunciation are two of the four linguistic factors that have become problems with speaking English. One aspect the teachers did not mention as a problem was grammar. While "grammar knowledge is a fundamental requirement for speaking any language" (Burns, 2017, p. 243), the English teachers in this study do not perceive it to be a serious issue in their teaching of English speaking. One English teacher in the study argued that the main point of speaking is for the listeners to understand what is being said and to be able to respond regardless of any grammar mistakes (personal conversation with T1). However, considerate this might be, the authors consider that it is essential to correct students' grammar in their speaking so that they would develop an awareness about the way in which grammar and vocabulary are intertwined in communication. This idea is aligned with Widodo's (2015,) argument that "vocabulary is integral to grammar" (p. 138) especially in terms of checking the coherence of the text.

Psychological factors

Another challenge faced by the participating teachers in this study relates to psychological factors. Two main psychological factors emerged from the thematic analysis: the students' lack of confidence and lack of motivation. In the interview sessions, we documented two main factors causing students' lack of confidence in speaking English: the lack of vocabulary and negative feedback from their peers. As has been discussed in the linguistic factors, the lack of vocabulary leads to decreased confidence while speaking (Chou, 2018). Consequently, the students are not willing to communicate in English (Salam et al., 2021). In terms of negative feedback from their peers, this occurs when a student makes a mistake while speaking English and their friends laugh at or with them. T1 shared this condition in the interview with us:

Excerpt 5:

The problem of [sic] my students is they tend to laugh with their friends when speaking English, especially when their friends are making mistakes. For example, when I make a correction on [sic] students' pronunciation during their friends' performance, some naughty students would suddenly laugh and said "Hahaha. Your speaking is wrong. Hahaha" [laughing]. This really affect [sic] my students' confidence when speaking English in the class. (T1)

This type of negative feedback could be categorized as demotivating their peers which were highlighted in the studies conducted by Chang (2010) and Chien et al. (2020). Empirically, demotivated peers have a negative influence on the learners' psychology in learning EFL or ESL learning contexts. Consequently, this reduces the students' confidence when speaking English. To motivate students in learning English, the teachers in this study employed a motivation technique which is based on theories of motivation for second language acquisition. For example, T3 and T4 motivated their students by telling them that English would help them to have better jobs and higher income. This is seen in the interviews with T2 and T4.

Excerpt 6:

I always motivate my students to learn English by telling them that if they are able to speak English and having good English, it would help them to have better jobs, such as working in hotels or as tour guides. This would absolutely improve their income and they can also support their family as well. (T2)

Excerpt 7:

By sharing to my students about the benefit of learning English, like having good job, it would have positive impact on their willingness to study English. (T4)

Based on the interviews, both of the teachers employed instrumental motivation in teaching English for practical reasons, such as acquiring the potential for earning a high salary and securing a better job (Dörnyei, 2001). Purwati (2020) argues that motivation in learning EFL should be enacted by EFL learners since it would enhance their willingness to learn. Our study's finding highlight that the motivation used by the teachers tends to emphasize the external motivation, particularly for having a better salary and job. Motivating the students in this way may be effective in the given context because West Nusa Tenggara Province, particularly Dompu has many potential tourism sectors (Wahyuningtyas et al., 2020). However, the findings of this study do not support previous research by Spada and Lightbown (2010) and Salam et al. (2021) who found that students' anxiety feeling is raised during speaking English. Thus, pedagogically, the teachers in this study do not deal with any anxiety-related activities in the English classrooms.

External factors

External factors were highlighted by the participating teachers as causing problems when teaching EFL speaking. The first was a lack of learning support facilities such as an English laboratory, a sufficient number of projectors, tape recorders, and other learning aids that complicated teaching EFL speaking in the school. These findings echo previous research by Anwar, Ubaidillah, and Sulistiyo (2020). In the interview, one of the participants shared that:

Excerpt 8:

In terms of the condition of the classroom, we only have basic facility [sic] such as tables, chairs, white board (only one). Although the school provides LCD [liquid crystal displays], but the number of LCD [sic] is very limited while the number of class and teachers are outnumbered than LCD [sic]. When I want to use it in my teaching speaking, the LCD is sometimes being used by other teachers. And you know, we even don't have any other facility like a recorder, an English laboratory. So, if teachers want to use LCD, laptop, and etc. teachers must bring by themselves [sic]. This condition makes us difficult in teaching speaking [sic]. (T3)

Such teaching facilities are essential in supporting students' English language acquisition. This finding reflects those of Al-Sobhi and Preece (2018) who investigated the speaking problems of Arab students in Kuala Lumpur. Their study revealed a lack of learning support facilities as an issue for teaching speaking.

Another external factor faced by the vocational English teachers is large class size. This has been a common issue for EFL teachers in this study because large classes make class management difficult (Ramdani & Rahmat, 2018). T1 expressed her views that large classes were a problem for her for two reasons: difficulty in managing the students and in evaluating their speaking skill. Based on the findings of their study on learning English speaking in a Pakistani context, Shamin and Coleman (2018) argued that large classes correlated with the teachers' emotional stress, physical exhaustion, and professional frustration. Moreover, they contended that class size was one of the important factors impacting teachers' professional experience. Therefore teachers' professionalism and emotions are related to the large classes and influence their teaching performance (Korucu Kis & Kartal, 2019).

Teachers' shared voices for improvements

Several recommendations were proposed by the participants to improve their current situation which may also be adopted by other educational institutions. Firstly, schools should provide teaching aids in order to

support the the teaching of EFL speaking. For example, schools should be equipped with an English laboratory to support students' EFL speaking. In addition, they suggest that facilities, such as a sufficient number of projectors and speakers, should be provided by the school. This type of support would be helpful to facilitate and to maximize both the teachers' and the students' performance. Another recommendation made by the English teachers in this study related to the professional development program. Murray (2010, p. 198) argued that being "a professional in any field, requires a commitment to professional competence". To achieve their professionalism, ELT practitioners must be involved in professional development. Therefore, both institutions and governments should conduct a certain number of professional development programs for improving professional competence. In line with these ideas for increasing professional development activities, the vocational English teachers in this study put forward suggestions that the local and national governments to conduct regular training programs focusing on teaching communicative skills such as speaking. According to the teachers, this type of program has a significant role to play in their professional work.

With regard to the large class sizes, one of the English teachers argued that the number of students in each class should be reduced to make it easier for teachers to manage the students. However, other teachers contended that reducing the number of students in a class could be difficult because the school has a lot of students.

To address the challenges of linguistic factors, lack of vocabulary, and poor pronunciation, the English teachers need to employ a variety of teaching strategies, for example, the use of group and peer work, utilizing translation during the teaching process, and asking students to memorize and use new vocabulary when speaking.

Conclusion

This study has investigated challenges faced by English teachers in teaching EFL speaking in an Indonesian vocational high school sector and analyzed how these teachers overcome such complicatedness. The EFL teachers in this study believe that teaching EFL speaking is challenging due to three salient factors: linguistic, psychological, and external factors. Students' lack of vocabulary and poor pronunciation are included in the elements of linguistic competence. However, contrary to the findings of other studies, the teachers in this study did not believe that grammar competence and discourse knowledge were issues in their teaching practice. Other issues highlighted by the thematic analysis were psychological factors, including students' lack of confidence and lack of motivation. The participants believe that the two main causes for students' lack of confidence is their limited vocabulary and the negative attitudes of their classmates. External factors such technological support for learning were also mentioned by the participants in the interview sessions. The study indicated that although the students had low motivation for speaking English, the teachers employed instrumental motivation to improve students' learning motivation. Hopefully the findings from this study will be able to contribute to further discussion on the complexities of teaching EFL speaking worldwide.

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