

AN ANALYSIS OF DIFFICULTIES FACING INDONESIAN LEARNERS IN ACQUIRING ENGLISH SPOKEN COMPETENCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to discuss obstacles and constraints encountering EFL learners in Indonesia in their endeavour gaining English spoken competence. It reveals that acquiring oral communication skill in English which serve as a foreign language is a long and complex undertaking. Majority of Indonesian learners still experience troubles due to psychological and social factors. The former refers to the issues related to the learners themselves who need a lot of struggle to develop both their motivation and self confidence. The former is concerned with the surrounding atmosphere and people that often hamper learners to achieve competence in spoken English. Both psychological and social problems should receive much attention from the stake holders who get involved in the enhancement quality program of English instruction. Suggestions and solutions are therefore have been put forward and need considerable efforts and persistence to put them in to practice.

The Acquisition Process Of Spoken English Skill In Efl Setting

It stands to reason that among the four skills: writing, reading, listening and speaking, speaking is so much a part of daily life that we take it for granted. Everyday, we always see people spent much time and are engrossed in conversation. The average person produces tens of thousands of words a day, although some people - like auctioneers or politicians - may produce even more than that (Huda, 1999). So natural and integral is speaking that we often forget that it needs long and complex undertakings to achieve this ability- until, that is, we have to learn how to do it all over again in a foreign language.

Acquiring spoken English in EFL setting requires more than just knowing its grammatical and semantic rule. Students are to understand how native speakers exploit the language in the context of structured interpersonal exchange. In other words, "effective oral communication requires the ability to use the language appropriately in social interactions" (Shumin, 2002). Furthermore, Canale and Swain (1996) have grouped four aspects of competence: grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence. How these four aspects of competence represent speaking proficiency is graphically illustrated by Shumin (2002) as follows:

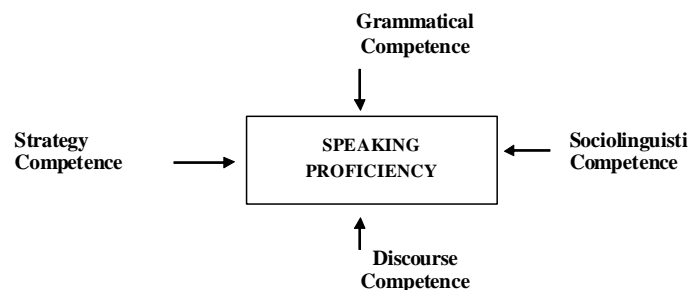
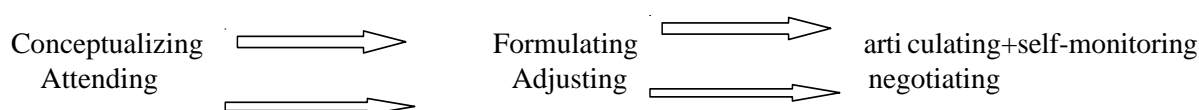


Figure 1. Speaking proficiency and the aspects of communicative competence (Shumin, 2002)

This figure demonstrates that four aspects of competence contribute to attain speaking proficiency. Grammatical competence serves to allow speakers use and understand English language structures accurately, which in turn play significant role to their fluency. Sociolinguistic competence refers to the awareness of the social context in which language is used: the roles of participant, the information they share, and the function of interaction (Savignon, 1997:37). Meanwhile, discourse competence is concerned with the connection of a series of sentences or utterances or intersential relationships to form a meaningful whole. Finally, strategic competence refers to the ability to keep the conversation running smoothly. With reference to the speaking activities. It deals with the ability of a speaker to make use of gestures or mentioning the features of something when he/she forget or does not know how to say a word or phrases in the target language.

Speaking in foreign language is of course totally different from speaking in first language. In terms of the stages of mental processing involved, there is probably not much different at all. Below is the chart of the normal processes when people get involved in face to face communication:



As we can see from the above flow chart, like L1 speakers, L2 speakers also produce speech through a sequence of conceptualizing, then formulating, and finally articulating, during which time they are also self-monitoring. At the same time, they will be attending to their interlocutors, adjusting their message accordingly, and negotiating the management of conversational turns. The skills of speaking, therefore are essentially the same and should, in theory be transferable from the speakers' first language into the second. The underlying difference here is the language itself. L2 speakers' knowledge of the L2, including its vocabulary and grammar is rarely extensive or as established as their knowledge of their L1. On the other hand, the problems may be due to a lack of knowledge rather than the unavailability of that knowledge. It has not seemed sufficiently integrated into their existing language knowledge, or it has been so seldom accessed, which is not yet easily retrievable. The process of arranging and manipulating grammar or retrieving the word is not yet automatic. The aforementioned is the typical process when people strive to pass messages in an interaction (Miller, 2000).

Efl Speaking In Indonesia

In EFL setting, including in Indonesia, an unfortunate but commonly found dilemma is this : where English language competence is the most wanted and is potentially most valuable to individuals and their families, it is also difficult to attain. It is evident that little exposure to the target language in EFL contexts have denied learners comprehensible input, while opportunities to explore and practice the language in real communication, especially in spoken communication, are relatively rare. (Lamb, 2002; Thornbury, 2005). Given the status of English as a foreign language in Indonesia, there are only few percentages of people use it in their everyday communication. Nevertheless, in certain societies in this country, English has been introduced and used for various reasons. For instance, in formal occasions, some of the scholars are quite familiar with English and occasionally exploit it as a medium in communication (Musyahda, 2002). Those who are engaged with the high management level affairs such as bankers and government officials get used to apply code-mixing and code-switching in Indonesian and English. The frequency of English usage among teenagers can also be observed like in seminars exclusively provided for youth or among middle-level workers; business meetings either with counterparts or colleagues in the work places; and the exposure of English's chunks, utterances and terms by radiobroadcasters or hosts in TV (Azis, 2003). Furthermore, the good prospect and development of tourism sector lead to the

vacancy and emergence of professionals such as tour guides and hotel receptionists where possessing adequate competence in spoken English is the main prerequisite.

In spite of the fact that some Indonesians have used English in everyday life, many (Nur, 2004; Renandya, 2004) argue that English speaking instruction is a failure due to some reasons. Improvements of communication ability are therefore painstakingly made. At present, as the world is borderless and is changing very steadily towards a global village, human resource development become a central issue and an ability to communicate internationally is of an essential quality of the manpower. Global market currently often require the ability to use English.

In this paper, discussions of obstacles and constraints English learners have faced in Indonesia when trying to achieve competence in spoken English is widely explored. Following are some constraints and weakness which have hindered English learners in possessing spoken skill in Indonesia viewed from both psychological and sociological factors:

Psychological Resistances

Native Speakers' like Accent is still the Main Target

English has recently been placed as an international language which implies that acquiring native speakers' accent may not be the primary target among EFL learners because it does not exclusively belong to English native speakers anymore. Yet, there are still many learners mentally tend to accept and appreciate someone who owns native speakers' like accent. What forms the background of this sort of preference is their prior learning experiences at secondary level. Both formal and informal institution here in Indonesia have for a long time made use of English lesson materials, no matter audio or printed media, which provide the standard English produced by native speakers: American, British, Australian, Canadian, etc. Consequently, when practicing spoken language, majority of learners psychologically seems frustrated and appeared to be ashamed of talking in English with the influence of their local dialect's accent (Karana, 2005). This inhibiting factors has of course hampered the learners' goal of having good competence in English spoken as few if any Indonesian learners can achieve native speakers' accent. There are lot of findings and evidences on the ground where Indonesian learners unhappily welcome audio and videos materials which provides CD or VCD conversations use non-native speakers' voice. This phenomena has been seen in the course of English lesson where majority of English teachers in Indonesia implicitly encourage their learners to develop and gain any perceived degree of fluency particularly in the phonological aspects where the produced sounds should be intelligible and are to follow the English native speakers' accent (Dukut, 2004).

Monitoring and Controlling grammar

It is undeniable that having competence in grammar is one of the key factors to attain spoken competence. In addition, the ability in exploiting the complex syntactical patterns of the target language indeed gives a valuable asset and an indication that a language learners have reached the excellent level of English. However, it should be noted here that keep monitoring and controlling grammar when speaking may result in an unnatural way of expressions. In short, the intelligibility and automaticity in speaking process will be more difficult to gain. It is common for us to see people who tend to control their grammar when speaking may sometime frustrate their interlocutor since they carefully keep paying attention to the accuracy of the speech production rather than the interaction itself. The advocates of the importance of fluency have long argued that too much emphasis on formal accuracy is another major source of stress and anxiety in the EFL learners. (Richards, 1998; Little Wood, 1984; Yi, 2001) They therefore put forward the notion of language fluency prior to language accuracy. They believe that a learner can never learn a language without making mistakes in the interaction process. On the contrary, Even though a lot of efforts

have been made in order to improve language teaching in Indonesia, for example the promotion of communicative approach which is in favour of fluency, the influence of grammar translation method have still dominated and overshadowed most English teachers in Indonesia. As a consequent, when practicing English spoken, majority of learners unconsciously keep monitoring the accuracy of the grammar which of course will make it difficult for them to be fluent speaker. Although the fluency-oriented approach seems so different from the accuracy-oriented approach, introducing some elements of accuracy in it is feasible. In fact, this view is shared by many EFL teachers. Hammer(2007) has found that the majority of teachers surveyed favor the judicious use of grammar for accuracy within a meaning-centered communicative approach. Moreover, many EFL teachers have already been practicing this. Let's take a look at this example. "I went a movie." is a plausible answer by an EFL student to the question, "What did you do during the weekend?" From the fluency-oriented view, the teacher is expected to ask about the movie rather than to correct the sentence. However, the teacher is most likely to say, "Oh, you went to see a movie," instead of jumping to the question, "What movie did you see?" This type of natural reaction, known as consciousness raising, (Richard, *ibid*) works as feedback from the instructor, reminding speaker of the errors in a positive way. Furthermore, another strategic issue that need to be addressed which have also contributed to the slow progress of Indonesian learners in getting spoken competence is that most English teachers in Indonesia have usually made fatal mistake when correcting learners' errors in grammar. A lot of complaints and uncomfortable feelings shared by English learners about the way teachers react to their grammar errors when doing oral English practice where majority teachers usually interrupt suddenly their learners when making mistakes in grammar at the moment they are producing English expressions. Such bad reaction of course make most of learners feel annoyed and inhibited even the worse of it is the learners feel discouraged, and have no self confidence to develop their speaking skill.

Dependent Personality

Dependent personality of majority learners in Indonesia is also one of the typical weaknesses which have hampered them attaining competence in speaking. It may be related to the culture of most Indonesians who are accustomed to living in a family atmosphere. They appear to be happy when getting assistance and moral support from someone else whenever doing something. In addition, most learners in Indonesia have a misconception when interpreting the term "practice". There have been a stigma attached to their mind that practicing a foreign language should be carried out with the existence of a partner or someone to whom they can talk to. Conversely, a good language learners are required to be autonomous and seek any opportunity to practice the target language individually by making use of facilities either electronic or non electronic media. Instead of practicing with someone else, developing speaking competence is actually also possible with the assistance of English conversation books, internet, CD, VCD and a great deal of authentic materials. The advancement of current technology, for example internet, has enabled English learners to improve their spoken competence through telephoning, chatting and message sending via online media: facebook, email, twitter, spike etc with people across the world. In short, the availability of such facilities has paved the way to the learners to be an autonomous learners rather than a dependent learners. Until now, only few learners exploit this facilities whereas most of them are understandably lazy to access them. Another factor of the learners' unwillingness to improve their spoken skill alone without the help of someone else is that psychologically, some of them just rely on schools to practice English. They therefore rarely try to improve their English outside of the classroom. On the contrary, Classroom or formal language learning is not the only place to improve learners speaking skill as so much is at stake that formal course in a foreign languages are often inadequate training grounds, in and of themselves, for the successful learning of second language. Learners have to bear in mind that learning spoken English is not enough and effective solely within the confines of the classroom (Brown, 2001).

Sociological Resistances

Beside the psychological resistances aforementioned, the influence of everyday life also hinder Indonesian learners in their endeavour to attain oral communication skill in English. Some of constraints of the social factors will be discussed comprehensively in this section:

Prejudices Against English Users

Given the status of English as a foreign language in Indonesia where society here consciously or unconsciously seems reluctant and experience discomfort feeling with those who speaks this language in informal setting or at public properties: shopping centres, bus and train stations, market, etc. Furthermore, majority of English users in this country come from the 'have' or upper-class people. Such prejudices are getting worse following the role of English which represent the recent modern civilization marked by the status of English as international language and the language of technology, business, and entertainment fields. Consequently, most community, particularly lower middle-class often tend to think that people who like exploiting and using this language in everyday life just want to show off their capability and prestige or implicitly claim themselves as high-class people. Even they are thought as non nationalists who like promoting foreign language and playing down the important role of their national language. This phenomenon is reasonable due to the foreign language status attached to English;. However, such unfriendly atmosphere has ofcourse weakened and discouraged those who like using English in everyday oral communication. For these type of people, communicating in English is an amazing experience since language itself has the elements of art and culture. Nevertheless, They should be ready to accept the reality that they will come across resistances and sceptics from surrounding society.

Interlocutors are neither attentive nor cooperative

As aforementioned, typically, Indonesians prefer to practice oral communication in English with a partner. It may be caused by the characteristic of most Indonesians who like to spend much time devoting themselves in conversation either in group or in pair. However; when it comes to speaking in English, majority of interlocutors seem find it difficult to be a good communicator. There are a lot of complaints made by English learners who are keen to practice English but hampered by inattentive and unfriendly interlocutors. Mutual respect and mutual understanding are very crucial in developing effective interaction since it may give a sort of stimulant and motivate people to keep talking in a good and relaxed climate. The inability of having interpersonal communication on the part of interlocutors has appeared to distract and frustrate most of the learners. Below are some examples of disturbances and obstacles made by interlocutors in speaking English::

Intolerance with errors and mistakes produced by someone when talking. This means that speaking partners or interlocutors often show negative responses, unpleasant even disparagement towards their speaking partners through out interaction process. It is clearly seen in some occasions either in formal or in informal settings, those whose good skill competence in English show dislikes, annoyance, even anger in their face when listening to the errors in terms of pronunciation and grammar made by their friends. These attitudes certainly will result in low self-esteem and frustration on the part of English learners who initially possess desire and determination to improve their speaking skill and may lead to the unwillingness to practice English. On the other hand, the intolerance interlocutors are usually classified as excellent English speakers. In short, Most of English learners who have gained good skill in speaking never try to elicit or persuade their friends that errors and mistakes are still negotiable and it is as a matter of time to improve them. Instead of giving good feedback and reinforcements, they even underestimate and avoid helping their friends whose low competence in speaking.

Ineffective interpersonal communication. Majority of English learners in Indonesia just keep silent, without doing anything to help their friends when getting trouble in expressing phrases and words at the

time interaction process is undergoing. There are a lot of comments of English learners who says: "Every time I talk in English, my interlocutor is neither helpful nor cooperative, He did nothing when I got stuck with vocabulary and phrases. What he did was just quite and we ended up "saying good bye" to each other. Such situation always occur and disappoint English learners who still struggle to reach a good competence in speaking

Lack of knowledge skill in correcting and reacting to error. In many occasions, the less contribution and annoying responses of an interlocutor to his/her speaking partner may lead to a misunderstanding and misconception that mastering English spoken is the most difficult to accomplish and it therefore needs time and talent. One of the negative responses of an interlocutor that irritate and disrupt someone when talking in English is interrupting him/her continuously everytime he/she makes both pronunciation and grammar mistakes. using utterances, i.e., "That's wrong"; "No"; "you are wrong, please repeat again" or retelling the mispronounced words spontaneously in a loud voice and sullen face. In Indonesia, it is quite often somebody who has good competence in speaking interrupts his/her friend when doing conversation..Once a university students of Education Faculty majoring in English said that he happened to see his two friends were talking to each other. The funny was they corrected each other which consequently the conversation was not running well. Following are some dialogues he had listened and observed:

Student A : "Andy, why did you Absent Yesterday?"

Student B : (frowned and stared his speaking partner) "Why were you absent? Not why did you absent?"

Student A : "O.K. Why were absent yesterday?"

Student B : "O..... my motor cycle broken and I bring to the workshop."

Student A : (interrupt with a sullen face and hard voice) "Past Tense! Past Tense! That's wrong! You should say My motor cycle was broken and I brought it to the garage, not workshop. O.K.?"

Student B : (Feel Inhibited.) "O.K. Hmmm, My motor cycle was broken and I brought it to the garage."

Conversation above is only one of many examples how it is hard and is complicated to develop good climate and friendly environment to improve oral English communication in Indonesia. Meanwhile, Harmer (2001) argues that gaining competence in spoken language is actually not as difficult as most English learners in EFL setting assume since it just needs a conducive and good environment which socially and psychologically enable them to keep speaking. Hammer (ibid) further illustrates the tour guides in some EFL nations, with severely limited knowledge of English and low education level enable to speak English without monitoring and controlling both their grammar and pronunciation. They seem to have self-confident and just get to know how to speak fluently from experience on the ground and the time prove that practice makes perfect. Furthermore, supportive work climate and environment also help them a lot in building their courage to speak.

Low Competence of English Teachers

A lot of concerns have been expressed over the low competence of majority of English teachers in Indonesia. It is one of the factors why English learners' competence has been still far from ideal. Even though English currently has been taught from primary level and become compulsory subject at the secondary level, the paramount role of English teachers in motivating and stimulating their learners to possess competence in spoken English is still arising questions. Widiati & Cahyono (2006) say that in most cases, there are still a lot of issues need to be addressed in connection with the English speaking Instruction in Indonesia, Among others are: many English teachers are not able to set up relaxed and conducive atmosphere; class activities are not suitable with the learners' interests; lack of knowledge and innovations in building students' motivation; low competence; majority of teachers just want to get things done when teaching English class where exercises and drills in spoken class are text books oriented without taking into consideration the

learners' English proficiency level and so on. On the other hand, a lot of efforts in the form of curriculum reforms and introduction and promotion of a variety of English teaching methods as well as strategies to help teachers improve their competence skill has not yet given good impacts on the learners. One of the causes of the slow progress are the teachers themselves have so far seem reluctant and have no commitment to develop their competence. In this respect, we are referring to the moral responsibility on the part of most English teachers. Only few teachers in Indonesia who really like developing their English competence whereas majority of them have been devoted in their routines works and are not willing to get to know the latest information and development in English teaching. Percentages or numbers of the low competence and irresponsibility of teachers in developing their English competence are not essential to be exposed here. Yet, on the ground, information and voices from students and community appears to have been enough data that most English teachers need to have better teaching performance. The minister of Education from the central to provincial level, has actually provided a great deal of quality enhancement programs: workshop, training, seminar and the scholarship programs for those who would like to pursue their higher academic degrees. Besides, Recently, the incentives and benefits have been given by both central and local government as an attempt to boost and encourage teachers to give significant contribution in education. All of the efforts and programs to assist teachers to improve their teaching quality means nothing if most teachers in Indonesia seldom to follow up and to practice knowledge and experience they have got from the programs related to English.

Conclusion

Difficulties and obstacles still lie ahead in developing and improving English spoken competence of Indonesian learners. As one of the key elements of communication, speaking does need receive much attention particularly in EFL setting like the one in Indonesia. Helping and motivating learners speak English fluently and appropriately needs of course seriously well organized instruction (e.g., selecting learning tasks, activities and materials) and a lot of practice (i.e. either facilitated by the teachers in the classroom or independently performed by the learners outside of the classroom) because of limited exposure to the target language and contact with native speakers.

We have attempted to explain the both psychological and sociological factors facing Indonesian learners in acquiring English. In terms the former aspect, Indonesian learners are required to raise an awareness that they may not depend on someone else to gain competence in spoken English as recently there has been many media and learning sources are available. In the latter aspect, socially, having interpersonal communication strategies and creating good climate in performing oral communication in English are urgently need to be learned. The form of English society in certain both formal and informal institution is very crucial as an effort to help particularly those whose the same targets and purposes to develop their English competence.

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