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EMPIRICAL AND PRACTICAL ANALYSIS ON THE EXPERIENCE OF ENGLISH DEPARTMENT STUDENTS IN LEARNING SPEAKING SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

For many years, the teaching and learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has been predominated by the teacher-centered approach implying behaviouristic's paradigm. In many EFL classes in Indonesian higher education, it is common for EFL learners to be asked instead of asking questions to develop their speaking skills. Consequently, students are not adequately confident to express themselves in English. This article is aimed to investigate how the English Department (ED) students develop their speaking skills. In particular, it is to portray the ways, experiences, and challenges of the ED students regarding the progress of their spoken English. This article employed qualitative research approach while considering constructivists' paradigm. In order to obtain in-depth information regarding the issues being investigated, this research used google form-based interviews. To reinforce the results of the interviews, face-to-face conversations were conducted along with the on-going observations of the researchers. The results of the research showed that the majority of the ED students found it difficult to speak English fluently. It further showed that many of the ED students were not able to speak due to lack of vocabularies, having lack of confidence and poor grammatical knowledge. The implication of the research is to inform lecturers and educational stakeholders in Islamic higher education to provide a well-devised curriculum that introduce the use of technology from which lecturers could develop good lesson plans along with suitable materials and media to enhance English speaking skills of the ED students.

Keywords: Speaking skill, asking question(s), empirical and practical analysis

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INTRODUCTION

For many years, the teaching and learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has been predominated by the teacher-centered approach implying behaviouristic's paradigm (Liu et al, 2006; Serin, 2018). In many EFL classrooms in Indonesian higher education, it is common for learners to be asked instead of asking questions (see Qashoa, 2013; Tuan and Nhu, 2010). For example, a lecturer would start the courses by asking questions to his or her students. Normally, the type of questions addressed are such as: Right, are you ready for the class?; What topic do you think we are going to study today?; Have you finished your assignments?; and many more questions. Farahian and Rezaee (2012) stated that the quality of questions addressed to students play a great role in enhancing students' participation in the process of negotiation of meaning. The study revealed that the level of questions addressed had a close relationship with the level of proficiency of teachers/lecturers and their teaching experiences (Farahian and Rezaee, 2012).

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The study of Osterman (2014) revealed that the Japanese students believed that the eight-year experience of learning EFL had a positive contribution to the learning of English of students. However, the students argued that the grammar-based teaching adopted in Japanese EFL curriculum was not effective to help students develop their spoken English. The study also showed that the Japanese students believed that the early period of exposure to oral English could help students speak English faster. Likewise, the experiences of Asian students who studied in Australia presented in the study of Sawir (2005) showed that majority of the students lacked prior knowledge of English. It was revealed that the students were exposed to teacher-centered EFL activities which led to their poor conversational skills. The main causes of their poor spoken English were the teaching and learning activities that strongly focused on grammar and reading skills.

In the context of the study, spoken English of ED students were considered to be insufficient to engage in public speeches. Therefore, this article is aimed to investigate how the ED students develop their speaking skills. In particular, it is to portray the ways, experiences, and the ways the students dealt with challenges in learning spoken English.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Views of Constructivists on EFL Teaching

The work of Jean Piaget and Vygotsky has strongly influenced the constructivist perspective on learning. Piaget in particular observed child development (Piaget and Cook, 1952) from which two major principles have been claimed to guide intellectual growth and biological development of a child, that is: adaptation and organisation (see Bhattacharya and Han, 2001). Piaget describes that learning is a process of adaptation and organisation. In his view, cognitive stage of a child (more or less of adult in general) develops through four factors: biological maturation, experience with physical environment; experience with social environment; and equilibirium between individual cognitive structure and his or her environment (Bhattacharya and Han, 2001 cited in Ruslin, 2017: 27). In contrast to Piaget, Vygotsky (1979) was concerned with social development of the mind while adopting a more practical and materialistic approach inspired by Marxism. Bredo (1997) noted that Vygotsky (1979) adopted two fundamental ways of developing higher mental functions: engagement in social speech and the use of signs in a talk, while putting an emphasis on the social context of learning (Vygotsky, 1979: 34-35; see also Russ-Eft, 2014). The argument of Vygotsky supports the idea that students need to socially engage in EFL learning with their peers and teachers as well as the learning applications in their smartphones which allow them to engage online. This is how students could develop their speaking skills effectively in the eyes of constructivists. In this context, the role of teachers is not to fully teach their students. Rather, they help, support and facilitate students to learn based on their potential. Thus, teachers of English need to ensure that all students could make use their potential, environment, and opportunities in order for them to learn at the best potential they could do.

Vygotsky (1979: 35) theorized that in a child which is more or less in adults, the learning process takes places at three different levels: gesture without response; gesture with response for completing child's task; and whole pattern of interaction through internalization (see also Bredo, 1997). As Russ-Eft (2014: 123), the main concern of Vygotsky in this perspective is the gradual process of learning which in learning how to speak English for non-English speaking students, such process also takes place. In other words, teachers need to identify the level of understanding of students, their interests, and their motivations in order for them to provide well-presented learning materials, suitable media, assess their students on the basis of their learning process. Besides, the importance of social interaction or the social context of

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learning is strongly emphasised in Vygotsky's view. In the context of EFL learning, the study of Wang (2014) showed that wikis (one of many digital-based media) increase the students' motivation to learn English, enhance their writing confidence and promote their initiatives for social constructivist learning. He further elaborated that most of the students enjoyed performing group tasks in the wiki-meditated environment because they found it to be engaging, challenging and interesting. In addition, Wang (2014) explained that collaboration on a wiki in an EFL setting contributed to both language development and social interaction which is very much taken into account in constructivism.

The Teaching of Speaking Skills in Contemporary EFL Classrooms

The teaching of speaking skills in contemporary EFL classrooms has remarkably changed. The advancement of information and communication technology has transformed the ways students learn English (Mindog, 2016; Rao, 2018, 2019; and Sad et al, 2020; Ta'amneh, 2021). The use of technology in EFL classrooms has changed the ways students learn, experience, and deal with challenges in their learning activities. Mindog (2016) in particular observed that Japanese students learn English faster due to the use of smartphones. This was because the Japanese students learned integrated English and made use of their fellow students frequently as they accessed the connection through Social Network Services (SNS). In the context of Turkish freshmen students entering university studied by Sad et al (2020), it was found that the use of smartphones helped students learn English better. However, the study revealed that majority of the students engaged more in watching videos (YouTube) and listening to music than reading and writing. This suggests that having more time in watching videos and listening to music, the students would learn how to speak English faster than other skills.

The study of Kabooha (2016) in the context of Preparatory Year Program (PYP) in English Language Institute (ELI) at King Abdul Aziz University indicate that both students as well as teachers had positive attitudes towards the use of movies in their EFL classes to improve students' language skills. The study offers pedagogical implications for EFL instructors with respect to the integration of films in their classrooms to improve students' language learning (Kabooha, 2016: 248). She made mention that well-selected movie materials could enhance students' language learning process and increase their motivation to learn the target language (p.248). Based on the empirical evidences, it could be concluded that the introduction of technological devices in the EFL curriculum enables the English learning to be more effective. It means that there is a great chance for students to learn English faster and effectively. In line with Kabooha (2016), Talley and Hui-Ling (2014) explained that the students in an EFL learning classrooms faced two dimensional aspects of learning the target language. First, they have to adapt themselves with practical and authentic settings of the target language. Second, they have to actively participate in activities where English is used as the target language. Likewise, Savaşçı (2014) explained that students in many cases were reluctant to speak English although they may be active in other skills such as reading. The study of Savaşçı (2014) indicated that several factors such as anxiety, fear of being despised, teacher strategy, and culture were found to influence the reluctance problem among speakers (p.2682).

METHOD

The study uses social constructivist approach while particularly highlighting Vygotsky's Zone Proximal Development. This approach is based on the premise that EFL learning process in higher education classroom has been strongly influenced by social interactions of students therein and the values of learning amongst students are very much attached to their social backgrounds and traditions. The subjects of the research consist of 9 ED Students of UIN Datokarama Palu. These students were derived from different   batches to provide a better understanding about the ways of students constructing

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questions, selecting topics, selecting language learning applications, and dealing with challenges to develop their English speaking skills. Moreover, these students accepted the consent to take part in this research. The main data gathering technique is the interviews using Google form. Meanwhile, face-to-face conversations were conducted along with the ongoing observations during the class sessions.

The ED students were purposively selected to provide information in regards to their encounters with learning speaking activities both offline and online. Moreover, the students selected were deemed to have discrepancies in terms of abilities, interests, motivation, understanding, and the ways they dealt with challenges in English. Regarding the data collection, the research employed two different types of data collection techniques: Google form-based semi-structured interviews, face-to-face interviews for probing and confirming the results of the online interviews, and ongoing observations. These techniques were used to provide rigorous findings of the research. Semi- structured interviews would provide in-depth information in regards to subject matters being investigated while maintaining the track of the research (Ruslin, 2017; 2022).

This research used Miles and Huberman's model to provide a good analysis for the qualitative data. Qualitative data analyses were carried out interactively and continuously to provide a systematic process of searching and compiling data obtained from interviews and the ongoing observations. Moreover, to obtain robust finding, triangulation is needed (see Creswell, 2005; Bryman, 2008; and Denzin and Lincoln, 2009). All these processes were carefully taken into account in order to better recognize what information were important to answer the research questions and which were not. These procedures would lead to a well-presented conclusion.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This research is aimed to investigate how the ED students develop their speaking skills. In particular, it is aimed to portray the ways, experiences, and the ways the students dealt with challenges in learning spoken English. Based on the results of the interviews, it was found that all the selected students of the English Department at UIN Datokarama Palu were aware of the importance of speaking skills. This was shown in the following Table 1 and Table 2 in which the ED students recognized the purpose and the essence of spoken English in EFL classrooms. The interviews further indicated that majority of the ED students were aware that learning spoken English was rather difficult especially they were lacked of vocabularies, poor grammatical understanding, and poor general knowledge of selected topics for discussions. These all led to the poor confidence of the ED students in using English during class sessions.

In terms of preferable techniques of the ED students in enhancing their speaking skills, the results of the interviews suggest that there were great varieties of techniques used by the ED students in EFL classrooms. This was acknowledged by the ED students where many of them preferred to watch movies and listening to songs. Others were found to have preferred continuous practices, memorizing vocabularies they came across to encounter, and reading books. In addition, be aware of English pronunciation was one suggested way to improve spoken English. This is in line with the experiences of the researchers in teaching at the English Department. The researchers agreed that the use of technology had almost replaced the existence of lecturers in EFL classroom. This is especially true as the ED students preferred to deal with their smartphones even at the time of face-to-face learning in the classrooms. This suggests that the use of technological devices such as smartphones and online applications equipped in were the most ways needed to improve speaking skills of the ED students. It is to inform educational stakeholders in higher education to include technology and all its required devices in EFL curriculum as suggested by Klimova (2018) and Ta'amneh (2021) and many more researchers in the current ELT.

The interviews showed that there were many challenges faced by the ED students in their EFL learning. These challenges covered poor vocabulary mastery, pronunciations, knowledge of grammar, lack of exercises, mental weaknesses, confidence and many more. To deal with challenges in EFL learning, the interviews revealed that the ED students need more practices and exercises. Moreover, the ED students suggested the lecturers to provide more opportunities where they were able to exercise their knowledge and skills in English. Regarding the provision of the opportunities for students to exercise their English, Ismaili and Bajrami (2016) made mention that as many studies observed, the exposures of students to the target language (English) has a very strong influence on the spoken language of students.

CONCLUSION

The results of the research showed that the majority of the ED students found it difficult to speak English fluently. It further showed that many of the ED students were not able to speak due to lack of vocabularies, having lack of confidence and poor grammatical knowledge. The implication of the research is to inform lecturers and educational stakeholders in Islamic higher education to provide a well-devised curriculum that introduce the use of technology from which lecturers could develop good lesson plans along with suitable materials and media to enhance English speaking skills of the ED students.

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