

# How Tertiary EFL Learners Dealt with Problems in Oral Communication in the Target Language

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## How Tertiary EFL Learners Dealt with Problems in Oral Communication in the Target Language

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### Abstract

Speaking is an important skill because through speaking people convey direct ideas or messages orally to others in life. In speaking skills some components, namely pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and intelligibility determine communication success and fluency. In the context of EFL learning, many students find it difficult to speak in English. Difficulty in speaking English is also experienced by learners at higher education. Nevertheless, the difficulties in speaking English can be overcome with particular strategy use. This research was conducted to examine the problems facing the tertiary EFL learners in speaking English as the target language and identify the strategies used in their oral communication. The study involved seventy-eight students at the fourth semester in the Department of English Language Teaching at Universitas Muhammadiyah Purwokerto that were randomly chosen as samples. Data on learning strategies were identified and classified according to Oxford (1990)'s Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) which classifies strategies into two: direct strategies consisting of memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies and indirect strategies comprising affective, metacognitive and social strategies. Findings indicated that many students had more than one speaking difficulties. The difficulties covered: (1) linguistic factors, which included lack of vocabulary (55.93%), grammar (51.9%), pronunciation (25.6%), (2) psychological factors, which included lack of motivation (55.8%), fear of making mistakes (52.6%), anxiety (49.35%), lack of confidence (43.6%), and shyness (34.6%). In order to overcome those problems, students applied some strategies. Findings indicated that the strategies used the most were affective strategies (67.53%), then memory strategies (67.25%), compensation strategies (64.93%), cognitive strategies (61.53%), social strategies (59.8%), metacognitive strategies (56.4%).

**Keywords:** strategies, tertiary EFL learners, oral communication, speaking skill, problems, target language

### 1. Introduction

The nature of language is speech. Thus, speaking skill plays a very important role in language learning. Speaking is the productive skill which consists of producing systematic verbal utterances to convey meaning [1]. Speech activity usually involves two people, namely the speaker and listener. The components that support success in speaking skill are (1) pronunciation, which includes segmental phonemes (vowels and consonants) and suprasegmental phonemes (such as stress, intonation, rhythm, etc.), (2) grammar, (3) vocabulary, (4) fluency, (5) intelligibility. In speaking skills components that determine success in fluency, among others, are intonation, grammar, vocabulary and intelligibility. However, many students find it difficult to speak in English.

Success in learning English as Foreign Language (EFL) in Indonesia is generally hard to achieve [2]. The fact is that most Indonesians who learn English have poor mastery of English. One important factor that needs to be reviewed is the inadequate presence of exposure.

Difficulty in speaking English is experienced by some people including tertiary students. This happens because English is a foreign language and they are not used to speak it as a language of communication in daily activities. In addition, vocabulary, grammar and how to pronounce English words that are very different from mother tongue also make it difficult for students to speak in English. However, the difficulties in speaking English can be overcome with several strategies.

Each student has a different learning strategy in dealing with difficulties in speaking English. Learning strategy is defined as specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques that are used by students to improve their learning, such as looking for partners in conversation or giving encouragement to overcome a difficult language task [3].

Speaking is an activity of using language to communicate with others by expressing the ideas, feeling, thought and sharing information. This is in line with a statement that says speaking is an activity done to communicate with others [4]. When someone speaks, he or she interacts and uses the language to express his or her ideas, feelings and thought. He or she also shares information with others through communication. The reason why people need to speak is because people need to talk to one another, share ideas, expression and thoughts. They also need to understand one another. Speaking is regarded the most difficult skill among the four language skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing because it needs great courage and preparation to produce the language. Speaking is not just making sound of words, but it is how to communicate, express and share the thoughts, feeling, idea, opinion and information that is sent by the speaker, so the listener can catch the meaning of what the speaker says.

Just as learning any other skills, learning a foreign language requires adequate practice. Since English is a foreign language in Indonesia and, consequently, the learners do not speak English in daily activities, they often find difficulties in using the language. There are 3 linguistic factors resulting in this condition i.e.: (a) pronunciation, (b) lack of vocabulary, and (c) grammar [5] and 5 psychological factors, including: (a) anxiety, (b) fear of mistake, (c) shyness, (d) lack of confidence, and (e) lack of motivation [6]. In line with this, it was reported that learners who had low self-esteem, higher anxiety, and poor motivation also had serious difficulties in oral communication even though they had adequate linguistic skills [7].

Some research found that the difficulties often faced by students in speaking English were lack of English vocabulary, not being confident to speak, not being used to talk in English class, and difficulty expressing words or sentences [8]. A study aimed at examining the speaking problems encountered by Turkish high school learners of English found that the students were afraid of making mistakes, lack of vocabulary and grammar [9].

The good news is that some students have strategies to deal with their speaking difficulties. Different individual student may have different strategies to acquire speaking skill. Learning strategy is defined as specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques, such as looking for partners in conversation or giving encouragement to overcome a difficult language task that are used by students to improve their learning [10]. Further, language learning strategies are used with the explicit goal of helping learners improve their knowledge and understanding of a target language [11]. Some research confirmed the benefit of oral communication strategy use. Oral communication strategies had significant effect on learners' self-efficacy beliefs [12]. Strategies could be trained to develop oral communication proficiency in target language [13]. Certain educational approaches, such as cooperative learning could be implemented to improve speaking skill in target language [14].

As aforementioned, learning strategies are specific actions or techniques which are necessary to build motivation or raise confidence and help students or language learners improve their learning or understanding of target language, in such a way that they will be more enthusiastic to learn. In the literature, some experts have developed and proposed taxonomies of learning strategies. Relevant studies may refer to any one particular classification scheme. A recently published work following Celce-Murcia's taxonomy showed that university students employed the following strategies most frequently: achievement or compensatory strategies, stalling or time-gaining strategies, self-monitoring strategies, and interactional strategies, respectively [15]. The present study employed Oxford (1990)'s taxonomy [16], where learning strategies are classified into two main categories as follows:

a. Direct Strategies, which consist of:

1) Memory strategies

Memory strategies are used to remember more effectively, to retrieve and transfer information which is needed for using language. Besides, memory strategies enable students to save important memory information gathered from their learning. These strategies are related with how students remember language, in this context remembering difficult grammar by reviewing it many times and remember by using some new words in sentences.

2) Cognitive strategies

Cognitive strategies can help students understand and produce new language by many different means such as practice pronunciation by saying English words over and over, learning to speak by watching TV programs or movies, joining a foreign language club and making a friend with a native or advanced learner.

3) Compensation strategies

Compensation strategies guide students to make up for limited knowledge, such as using mother language when not knowing a word in English, using mime, gesture or physical movement, using synonym.

b. Indirect Strategies, which comprise:

1) Metacognitive strategies

Metacognitive strategies facilitate the students to plan language learning in efficient way by managing and evaluating their own learning, for example organizing schedule to practice speaking, setting a goal to be able speak fluently, using checklist, learning diaries, or journal to describe speaking learning process, evaluating the progress and correcting the mistakes.

2) Affective strategies

Affective strategies relate to students' strategies to develop self-confidence, such as taking a deep breath before starting to speak in front of people to reduce anxiety, saying a positive statement which encourages to speak English, encouraging or giving reward to improve speaking skill.

3) Social strategies

Social strategies support the students in involving learning by getting interaction with others including practice speaking in pair or group with friends, asking a native speaker or a more advanced learner when not knowing how to express ideas, asking a native speaker or a more advanced learner to correct speaking errors.

## 2. Methodology

This study belongs to descriptive research, or more specifically survey research, which aims to determine and describe the way things are [17]. This study was aimed at (1) investigating the difficulties encountered by university EFL students when practicing oral

communication in the target language and (2) identifying the strategies used to overcome the problems.

This research involved seventy-eight students sitting at the fourth semester in the Department of English Language Teaching at Universitas Muhammadiyah Purwokerto, Central Java Province, Indonesia. They were randomly chosen as samples.

Questionnaires were administered to examine students' difficulties when attempting to speak English as the target language and identify strategies they used to deal with the problems. The questionnaires used were of close-ended type [18]. The questionnaires consisted of two sections. The first section was the instrument to gather data on student difficulty encountered when practicing oral communication in English. It contained 13 items. The other section was the instrument to collect data on student strategy use to deal with the problems. This questionnaire contained Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) that was adapted from Oxford 1990 with 17 items, covering 6 categories of learning strategies, i.e. memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. Both sections used a 5 point Likert scale: Very often – Often – Sometimes – Seldom – Never for student difficulty section and Strongly Agree – Agree – Undecided – Disagree – Strongly Disagree for strategy use section.

The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics in the forms average score, percentage, and distribution frequency and was visualized in graphic organizers. The 5 point Likert scale was numericalized in following table (Table 1).

**Table 1. Likert Scale Rating**

Response		Score
Very Often	Strongly Agree	5
Often	Agree	4
Sometimes	Undecided	3
Seldom	Disagree	2
Never	Strongly Disagree	1

Percentage score of each item across participants was sought to classify student speaking problems and strategy use. Average percentage score of each aspect was also sought to classify student speaking problems and strategy use.

### 3. Results and Discussion

The data on student speaking difficulty in target language and speaking strategy use to solve the problem was obtained from the questionnaire result that was administered to the participants. All data across seventy-eight students who were sitting at the fourth semester in the academic year 2018/2019 in the Department of English Language Teaching at Universitas Muhammadiyah Purwokerto was analyzed. Based on the tabulation of data from the questionnaire, the percentage score of each aspect with regard to linguistic factors and psychological factors were displayed in figures below.

#### 3.1. Students' Speaking Difficulties

The questionnaire of student speaking difficulty, which was written in the Indonesian language, consisted of 13 items. As mentioned earlier, this instrument itself covered two main causal factors of oral communication problems in target language, namely linguistic factors and psychological factors. After the data obtained from the questionnaires was analyzed, the results were presented below.



### 3.1.1. Linguistic factors

Based on the results of data analysis, there were three major oral communication problems due to linguistic factors encountered by the EFL students when attempting to orally communicate in English. The linguistic factors included lack of vocabulary, poor grammar, and below standard pronunciation. Figure 1 clearly displays the result.

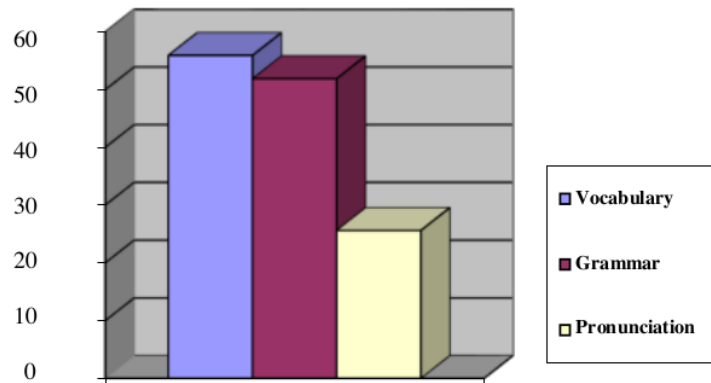


Figure 1. Speaking Difficulties Due to Linguistic Factors

As can be seen in Figure 1, the total average percentage of difficulties faced by the students due to linguistics factors was: (1) 55.93% of the students lacked vocabulary, (2) 51.9% of the students experienced difficulties in grammar, and (2) 25.6% of students had difficulties in pronunciation. Thus, lack of vocabulary and poor grammar, respectively, turned out to be the most problematic linguistic barriers in this study. Over half of the participants found these barriers in speaking English. The next barrier to success in speaking the target language was pronunciation problem.

### 3.1.2. Psychological factors

Data analysis revealed that there were five main oral communication problems due to psychological factors faced by the EFL students when trying to speak in English. The linguistic factors included lack of confidence, lack of motivation, shyness, anxiety, and fear of making mistakes. Figure 2 clearly illustrates the result.

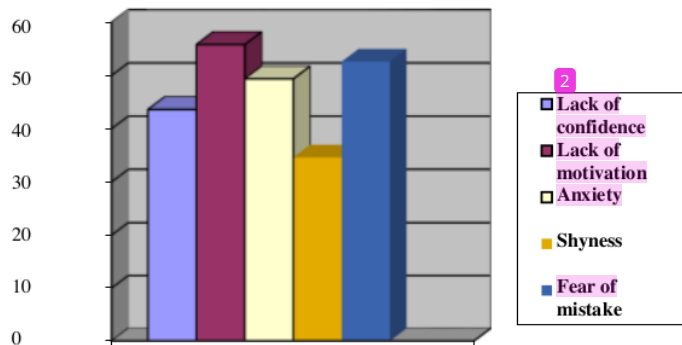


Figure 2. Speaking Difficulties Due to Psychological Factors

As can be seen in Figure 2, the total average percentage of difficulties faced by the students due to psychological factors was: (1) 55.8% of students lacked motivation, (2) 52.6% of students feared to make mistakes, (3) 49.35% of students felt anxious, (4) 43.6% of students lacked confidence, and (5) 34.6% of students felt shy. So, lack of motivation and fear of making mistakes, respectively, turned out to be the most problematic psychological hindrances in this research. Over half of the participants found these hindrances in speaking English. The next obstacles to success in speaking the target language were higher anxiety, less confidence, and shyness.

### 3.2. Students' Strategies in Speaking

The questionnaire of strategies in speaking, which was written in the Indonesian language, consisted of 17 items. As mentioned earlier, this instrument contained Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) that was adapted from Oxford 1990 with 17 items, covering 6 categories of learning strategies, i.e. memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. After the data obtained from the questionnaires was analyzed, the results were presented below.

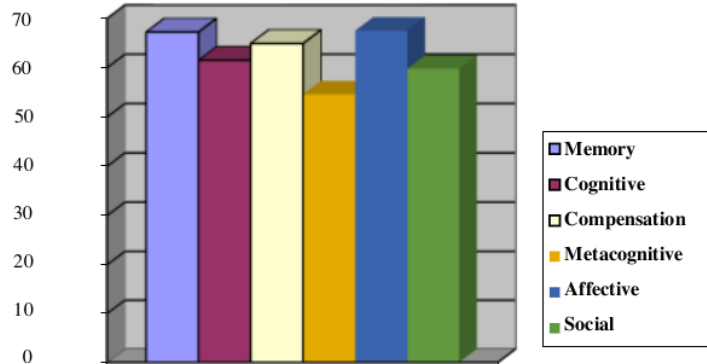


Figure 3. Strategies to Overcome the Problems

Based on Figure 3, the strategies most frequently used by the students to cope with their problems when speaking English were: (1) affective strategies (67.53%), memory strategies (67.25%), compensation strategies (64.93%), cognitive strategies (61.53%), social strategies (59.8%), and metacognitive strategies (56.4%), respectively.

The students' strategies in oral communication were divided into two categories: direct strategies and indirect strategies. Direct strategies consisted of memory strategy, cognitive strategy and compensation strategy. While indirect strategies comprised metacognitive strategy, affective strategy and social strategy.

#### a) Memory strategy

Memory strategy in speaking deals with how students remember language. The students remembered difficult grammar by reviewing it multiple times and remembered by using some new words in sentences. The data elicited from the questionnaire showed that 67.25% of the students used memory strategy, as one of the most frequently used strategies.

#### b) Cognitive strategy

Cognitive strategy guides the students to understand and produce new language by many different means, such as practicing pronunciation by saying English words over

and over, learning to speak by watching TV programs or movies, joining foreign language club and making a friend with native speaker or advanced learner. The data obtained from the questionnaire indicated that 61.53% of the students employed this strategy.

- c) Compensation strategy can help the students to make up for limited knowledge, such as use mother language when not knowing a word in English, using mime, gestures or physical movement, or using synonym. The data collected from the questionnaire showed that 64.93% of the students applied this strategy.
- d) Metacognitive strategy  
Metacognitive strategy facilitates students to focus, manage, and evaluate their own learning, for example organizing schedule to practice speaking, setting a goal to be able speak fluently, using checklist, learning diaries or journal to describe speaking learning process, evaluating the progress and correcting the mistakes. It was found that 56.4% of the students used this strategy.
- e) Affective strategy  
Affective strategy relates to students' strategies to develop self-confidence, such as taking a deep breath before starting speaking in front of people to reduce anxiety, saying positive statement which encourages to speak English, encouraging or rewarding themselves to improve speaking skill. From the data it was found that 67.53% of the students applied this strategy, as the most frequently used strategy of all.
- f) Social strategy  
Social strategy is used by the students to involve learning by getting interaction with others, for instance asking a native speaker or more advanced learner when not knowing how to express ideas, asking a native speaker or more advanced learner to correct speaking errors. The data indicated that 59.8% of the students used this strategy.

#### 4. Conclusion

2 Research findings indicated that the university EFL students under investigation faced problems in oral communication in the target language. Lack of vocabulary and poor grammar were their main problems. Psychologically, low motivational, fear of making mistakes, higher anxiety, and less confidence were essential part of their barriers to success in oral communication in English. In efforts to cope with their oral communication problems in English they used some strategies: affective strategy, memory strategy, compensation strategy, cognitive strategy, social strategy, and metacognitive strategy.

The strategy most frequently used among the students was affective strategy. They used it to develop self-confidence, such as taking a deep breath before starting speaking in front of people to reduce anxiety, saying positive statement which encourages to speak English, encouraging or rewarding themselves to improve speaking skill. They used memory strategy to remember difficult grammar by reviewing it many times and remember by using some new words in sentences. They used compensation strategy, e.g. by using mother language when not knowing a word in English, using mime, gesture or physical movement, using synonym. The students employed cognitive strategy, e.g. practicing pronunciation by saying English words over and over, learning to speak by watching TV programs or movies, joining foreign language club and making a friend with native or advanced learner. They used social strategies, by which they learned to speak by getting interaction with others, for instance asking a native speaker or more advanced learner when they did not know how to express ideas, asking a native speaker or more



advanced learner to correct speaking errors. And they used metacognitive strategy to support themselves to focus, manage, and evaluate their own learning.

Viewed from the strategy used, the EFL students under investigation were good in that they used fairly varied strategies to help themselves cope with their problems. The question is: Were the strategies effective enough to lead them to success in oral communication in English as the target language? Based on the authors' professional experience, speaking skill or oral communication is the most challenging to develop. With this in mind, (1) it is advisable that future studies involving learning outcome through speaking performance test or document be conducted, (2) it is important for university teachers of English to train (either covertly or overtly) the students' strategies, considering most effective strategies for speaking skill development.

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