SPEAKING PROBLEMS FACED BY THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT STUDENTS OF SYIAH KUALA UNIVERSITY

Hendra Heriansyah
Syiah Kuala University, Aceh
hendra_hrsyh@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper discusses the difficulties and causes perceived by English Department students of Syiah Kuala University in learning speaking and the efforts made by them to overcome their difficulties. From both observation and interview, this study reveals that all students encountered various difficulties in English speaking ability. The prevalent problem faced by the students was 'lack of vocabulary', while 'being afraid of making mistakes' was the prime cause of problem which hindered them to speak. The students had striven to cope with their problems in learning speaking, but their attempts had not been yet ample and successful.

Keywords: *cause, difficulty, effort, speaking*

A. INTRODUCTION

One of English language skills that must be mastered by any foreign language learner is the ability to speak. The common question that arises from anybody who wants to know one's ability in foreign language is whether he/she can speak English or not. In line with this, Nunan (1991) states that for most people, mastering speaking skill is the single most important aspect of learning a second or foreign language, and success is measured in terms of the ability to carry out a conversation in the language.

Speaking is required by people to interact among them. In speaking activity, many things that should be paid attention, not only relate to what is being spoken, what the language is used, but also who is our interlocutor. In addition, a good speaker should pay attention what the topic is being spoken by him, what the language that he/she uses in order to be understood easily by his listener, and to whom he/she speaks. Hence, speaking is a tool to communicate ideas that are arranged and developed accordance with listener's need (Tarigan, 1987, cited in Musaddat, 2008). It means that the speaker must strive communicate his/her ideas clearly so that those ideas can be accepted well accordance with what is wanted by the listeners.

For most foreign language learners, speaking in target language is not an easy thing to undertake because learning to speak a foreign language requires more than knowing its grammatical and semantic rules. Apart from these, Burnkart (1998) explains that language learners need to have three areas of knowledge involved within speaking namely (1) mechanics of language elements (pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary) which emphasize on use of right words in the right order with the correct pronunciation, (2) the functions of language that deals with speaking performance in the form of transaction and interaction (e.g. knowing how to change information and giving the clarity of essential message), (3) the sociocultural norms (such as turn-taking, rate of speech, length of pauses between speakers, relative roles of participants, understanding how to take into account who is speaking to whom, in what circumstances, about what, and for what reason). Furthermore, language learners must also acquire the knowledge of how native speakers use the language in the context of structured interpersonal exchange owing to the fact that effective oral communication is called for the

speakers to use the language appropriately in various social interactions. This involves not only verbal communication but also paralinguistic elements of speech such as pitch, stress, and intonation. In addition, non-linguistic elements such as gestures and body language/posture, facial expression, and so on, may accompany speech to convey messages directly. In other words, speaking is the most complex and difficult skill to master (Hinkel, 2005, cited in Nazara, 2011).

In general, from a variety of research reports and findings show that speaking is difficult. In dealing with this, Yusuf and Sewoyo (1997) asserted that senior high school (SMU) graduates should already have mastered the four English skills. Nevertheless, their research finding has shown that the SMU graduates' competence in English is still far from being adequate. Although communicative language teaching method which put emphasis on the use of language in real life situations and social interactions, has been introduced from secondary schools up to university level, the result is still far from satisfactory. Besides, some teachers' speaking abilities either in Junior or Senior High Schools are still low because some of them solely graduated from two- or three-year diploma programs. This aligned with the result of a national survey conducted by Director of Elementary and Secondary Education (cited in Huda, 1999) showed that teachers' proficiency in English was still low as it was only 4.8 % the English teachers used English in the classroom. It means that the difficulties in learning speaking are not only perceived by school learners and but English teachers also have the same problem. Meanwhile, a study conducted by Alwasilah (cited in Kasim, 2003) also revealed that the English language ability of students, including university students, was still unsatisfactory. At the university level, few students can communicate in English and give responses to their lecturer's questions. Most of others tend to keep quiet.

In this regard, the difficulties of speaking are also faced by the students of the English Department of Syiah Kuala University in which I teach. The frequent difficulties in speaking from what I notice during the process of teaching and learning took place were (1) students often have no ideas about what to say, so they tend to keep silent, (2) they are also shy and uncomfortable as well as not confident if they make mistakes., (3) the students are afraid of making errors in class as they will be laughed at by their friends., and (4) the students are not used to talking in class since their pronunciation and vocabulary are poor and confined.

These difficulties were supported by a research finding by Taiqin (1995) about non- language factors, which showed that ninety-five percent of students said that they had difficulty speaking because they were afraid of making errors in class, they had no idea what to say, they were not confident and comfortable if they made mistakes, and they were not interested with the topics that are given by the lecturers. Furthermore, Taiqin advocated that as the students are afraid of making mistakes and losing their self-respect, and we should have a stage called 'Survival English Oral Communication (S.E.O.C.).' which means functionally accepted communication without consideration of accuracy. In other words, as long as students can get their ideas across, they have completed the communicative process and have survived.

So far we can conclude that there are two kinds of difficulties that are often encountered by the language learners in speaking namely linguistic and non-linguistic matters. Brown (2001) points out that clustering, reduced forms, per-formance variables, and colloquial language are the factors that make speaking difficult. These difficulties related to linguistic problems will be explained in this below: (1) *Clustering*. Fluent speech is phrasal not word by word. Learners can organize their output both cognitively and physically (in breath groups) through such clustering. (2) *Reduced forms*.

Contractions, elisions, reduced vowels, etc; all form special problems in teaching spoken English. Students who do not learn colloquial contractions can sometimes develop a stilted, bookish quality of speaking that in turn stigmatizes them. (3) *Performance variables*. One of the advantages of spoken language is that the process of thinking as you speak allows you to manifest a certain number of performance hesitations, pauses, back-tracking, and corrections. Learners can actually be taught how to pause and hesitate. For example, in English our "thinking time" is not silent, we insert certain "fillers" such as uh, um, well, you know, I mean, like, etc. One of the most salient differences between native and nonnative speakers of a language is in their hesitation phenomena. (4) *Colloquial language*. Students should be reasonably well acquainted with the words, idioms, and phrases of colloquial language and get practice in producing these forms.

Meanwhile, Ur (1996) eludes four factors that make speaking difficult for second or foreign language students. The first is Inhibition. Unlike reading, writing and listening activities, speaking requires some degree of real-time exposure to an audience. Learners are often inhibited trying to say things in a foreign language in the classroom, worried about making mistakes, fearful of criticism or losing face, or simply shy of the attention that speech attracts. The second is nothing to Say. Even if they are not inhibited, we often hear learners complain that they cannot think of anything to say, they have no motive to express themselves beyond the guilty feeling that they should be speaking. The Third is Mother-Tongue Use. In classes where all or a number of the learners share the same mother tongue, they may tend to use it; because it is easier and unnatural to speak to one another in a foreign language, and because they feel less 'exposed' if they are speaking their mother tongue. If they are talking in small groups it can be quite difficult to get some classes particularly the less disciplined or motivated ones to keep speaking the target language. The fourth is Low or Uneven Participation. Only one participant can talk at a time if he or she is to be heard, and in a large this means that each one will have only very little talking time. This problem is compounded by the tendency of some learners to dominate, while others speak very little or not at all.

From the explanation above, we can draw a conclusion that students face difficulties in speaking that are related to such non linguistic problems as worry, fear, shyness, no motivation, and low participation in class, etc. The purpose of this study was to delineate the difficulties, the causes of difficulties, and efforts to overcome the difficulties in speaking by the students of English Department of Faculty of Teacher Training and Education of Syiah Kuala University.

B. Methodology

This study was conducted at the English Department of the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education at Syiah Kuala University. The subjects of this study were all the third semester students at the English Department who got the lowest passing grades in speaking class. Many students in these groups had low performance in Speaking Class. They were taking Speaking III. The focus of the study was on 10 students, selected from 25 students. The selection was done by using the students who got grade C (the lowest passing grade) in Speaking II, and also based on information about the low performance students according to the lecturer. The lecturer said that the students were considered as low performers with some indicators: (a) being afraid of speaking, (b) lack of vocabulary, and (c) not being good at grammar. There were ten weak students in this class. The writer chose the 10 students as they were who had low performance in Speaking class. It was also based on the preliminary research done by the researcher when he taught them in Speaking II. To collect the data this study used interview and observation as the main instrument, conducted by the researcher

himself. An interview was carried out to get the main data. The researcher interviewed ten out of the 25 students. Each student was asked with 3 questions, namely (1) What difficulties did you face or feel in speaking? (2) What were the causes of difficulties? (3) What efforts did you make to overcome the difficulties? In addition, the researcher also observed the speaking class. The observation was intended to crosscheck the problems faced by the students in speaking in class. The observation was conducted using an observation guide.

The procedure of data analysis is as follows. After interviewing, the data were collected and translated into English. The data were grouped into problems, causes, and solutions. Then, the data were analyzed based on the student's difficulties in speaking, the causes of difficulty, the student's efforts in improving speaking in order to find the relationship of the problems, causes, and efforts to solve the problems.

Two procedures were used to validate the data in this study. The first was the involvement of the researcher in the research including preparation of the study, data collection, data analysis, and data interpretation. The second was triangulation. In this case, the researcher compared the data taken from interview with direct observation.

A triangulation was done to verify the data or information that the writer obtained from the respondents by looking at the source of data repeatedly to get the same conclusion. In terms of this, Hopkins (1993) contends that technique of triangulation can increase the validity of a category in verifying data.

To support the data to be more valid, the writer clarified every student's answer by asking them again each question that the writer asked to them, and to get reliable data, the writer wrote the result of interview as immediate as possible, not more than one day after the interview. The researcher did not use tape recorder to avoid the impression of too formal interview to the respondents.

C. Finding and Discussions

1. Kinds of Student's Difficulties in Speaking

From ten respondents that were interviewed, it was found that there were twelve kinds of difficulties that were faced by the students in speaking. The most problems felt by the respondents were: lack of vocabulary, not confident to speak, not used to talking in class, and difficult to express words or sentences.

The difficulties faced or felt by the students in speaking can be divided into two kinds of problems namely linguistic problems and non-linguistic problems. There were three difficulties related to linguistic problems. They were 'lack of vocabulary', 'lack of grammar knowledge', and 'poor pronunciation.' While, the 9 difficulties dealt with non-linguistic problems were, 'not being brave to speak', 'not being confident to speak', 'being afraid of speaking', 'being afraid of making errors', 'being afraid of being mocked by friends', 'being nervous to speak', 'not used to talking in class', 'difficult to express words or sentences', and 'confused how to use appropriate words.'

2. Kinds of Causes of Difficulty in Speaking

It was found that there were 9 causes of difficulty faced by the students with linguistic problems. They were 'lack of vocabulary', 'seldom memorizing vocabulary, 'words having more than one meaning', 'being confused about how to use appropriate words', 'lack of grammar knowledge', 'seldom reading grammar books', 'poor pronunciation.'

13 causes of difficulty related to non-linguistic problems. They were 'being afraid of making errors', 'being nervous to speak', 'not being confident to speak', 'often forgetting', 'dislike learning grammar', 'afraid of being mocked by friends', 'not being used to talking in class', 'better performance or ability in speaking by other students', 'the use of

Indonesian by other students', 'no friends at campus or home to practice English', 'difficult to understand the 12 tenses', 'seldom hearing English from their teachers at SMU', and 'ideas or opinions not accepted by friends.'

From the causes of the difficulty that were faced by the students in speaking, the writer found that one cause had some difficulties. It was given in detail the difficulties of each cause.

There were 5 difficulties ('not being brave to speak', 'not being confident to speak', 'not used to talking in class', 'being afraid of speaking', and 'difficult to express words or sentences') which had one cause: being afraid of making errors. Two difficulties ('not being brave to speak' and 'nervous to speak') came from one cause: not confident to speak. Two difficulties ('being afraid of making errors' and 'not being confident to speak') had one cause: lack of grammar knowledge. Two diffi-culties ('not being confident to speak' and 'difficulty expressing words or sentences') came from one cause : lack of vocabulary. From the number of causes of difficulty above, we can conclude that most students stated that 'being afraid of making errors' was their main problem.

3. Kinds of Student's Efforts in Speaking

Pertaining to the students' efforts to cope with their difficulties in learning speaking, it was ascertained that there were 22 attempts that they had done for these. They were (1) practice English with friends, (2) try to be braver in speaking, (3) making sentences from difficult words, (4) making English club, (5) sitting with friends who give support to speak, (6) looking up the dictionary for words, (7) doing exercises on grammar book, (8) memorizing vocabulary, (9) reading English grammar books, (10) reading English in order to get new ideas, (11) reading conversation books, (12) practice English by themselves, (13) listening to the radio, (14) listening English conversation cassettes, (15) listening to music, (16) watching TV, (17) asking friends if any difficult words, (18) studying 12 tenses, (19) reading English books, (20) looking for difficult words by reading book then memorize them, (21) taking English course, and (22) practice English at home.

All the above students' efforts to overcome their difficulties in speaking matched with the characteristics of successful language learners according to Rubin and Thompson. It was intended to find justification for the students' efforts to solve their problems.

Rubin and Thompson (1982, cited in Brown, 2001) note that there are 14 characteristics of successful language learners in learning a second or foreign language. The 14 characteristics of successful language learners that are proposed by Rubin and Thompson, are all unique characteristics of successful language learners. From 22 kinds of the efforts that were used by the students to solve their problems, they only used 3 out of the 14 characteristics namely 'they make their own opportunity for practice in using language inside and outside the classroom', 'they learn certain production strategies to fill in gaps in their own competence', and 'they are creative, developing a 'feel' for the language by experimenting with grammar and words'. Based on the result of interviews many students said that their efforts did not meet their expectations maximally. Perhaps, it might be due to the efforts that they had made from no. 6 to no. 22 were deemed as common efforts. In addition, the students also did not have a variety of strategies and creativities to solve their problems. This may had caused their unsuccessful adequate efforts.

From the result of interviews with speaking lecturers about the difficulties that speaking students had, it was found that the difficulties faced by the students in speaking were 'difficulty speaking', 'lack of vocabulary', 'lack of grammar know-ledge', 'afraid of making errors' and 'less active in speaking.'

Four difficulties that Taiqin found were 'being afraid of making errors', 'losing confident to speak', 'feeling uncomfortable to make mistakes' and 'not having ideas

about what to say.' In this study the researcher found two problems addressed in Taiqin's finding, they were 'being afraid of making errors' and 'not being confident to speak or lose confident to speak.

From this study the researcher also ascertained that there was an inter-relationship between problems and the causes. In this case, problems could be the causes, and the causes could be the problem. Some examples are as follows. (1) 'Not being brave to speak' was caused by 'being afraid of making errors' and 'being afraid of making errors' was caused by 'not being brave to speak.' (2) 'Not being confident to speak' was caused by 'being afraid of making errors' and 'being afraid of making errors' was caused by 'not being confident to speak.' (3) 'Being afraid of speaking was caused by 'being afraid of making errors.' 'Being afraid of making errors' was caused by 'being afraid of speaking.' (4) 'Nervous to speak' was caused by 'not being confident to speak.' 'Not being confident to speak' was caused by 'nervous to speak.' (5) 'Not used to talking in class' was caused by 'being afraid of making errors.' 'Being afraid of making errors' was caused by 'not used to talking in class.' The data above showed that between problems and causes there was a cause-effect cycle.

Regarding students' efforts related to the difficulties in learning speaking the researcher classified the kinds of solutions that the students made to cope with their problems, from the 22 attempts the students only used three of Rubin and Thompson's ideas about the characteristics of a successful language learner in learning a second or foreign language.

In relation to this matter, the lecturers of the Speaking class have also attempted to solve the students' problems by encouraging the students to speak English, giving them a great deal of chances to speak, using English in class, asking them to make English speaking environment, using English with the lecturers such as when the students want to meet him/her,

and they are forced to use English with the lecturers at all the times.

After all the solutions that were applied by the students, the researcher asked the students whether the solutions that they had used had been successful or not, and the students said that some solutions that had been successful for increasing their ability to speak and overcome their difficulties, but there were also solutions that had not been successful in coping with their problems.

Some important suggestions are pro-posed. They are addressed to the following people. Firstly, for the lecturers of language skills, speaking skills do not stand alone but they are supported by the mastery of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation; accordingly, the lecturers of these subjects need to increase student's mastery. The input students for the English Department may not have had high and sufficient English ability when they entered Syiah Kuala University. The lecturers should pay attention to the weak students such as those in this study. Remedial measures have to be done if necessary so that the weak students are not left behind other students who, according to these students, had better speaking performance.

Concerning the lack of vocabulary, as felt by the respondents, the suggestions proposed by Brown (2001) can be considered, namely the lecturers allocate specific class time to vocabulary learning, help students to learn vocabulary in context, play down the role of bilingual dictionary, encourage developing strategies for determining the meaning of words, and engage in "unplanned activities."

The second, lecturers of speaking the linguistic problems can be dealt with by the lecturers of language element subjects (vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation). Speaking lecturers need to pay attention to non- linguistic problems. The most common non-linguistic problem faced by most students was "fear". The lecturers should make them brave to speak.

Speaking lecturers should not criticize any mistakes made by students in

vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation but give more praises for student's progress. Mistakes can be discussed separately. In speaking activities, the focus should be on expressing ideas/contents well, not on forms. The lecturers should provide the students with the expressions that are needed for speaking (such as conversation gambits and ideas) before the students do speaking practice, and create speaking classes that are enjoyable and comfortable for students so that they are interested in learning speaking. Besides, the lecturers who teach speaking should create communicative and fun activities as well as select appropriate topics in teaching so that the students are motivated to speak because speaking is one of the difficult language skills for the students. The lecturers should also be friendly to the students. They should be willing to help the students who have problems in speaking. The lecturers should give more exercises for speaking while they are teaching speaking so that the students can present, produce and practice the language more. Speaking lecturers should also give more opportunities to the students to speak in class through small group discussions so that the students are accustomed and not shy and afraid to speak. It is also better for lecturers of speaking should provide their time to address such issues as how to teach speaking well, the interesting materials and topics for speaking including communicative classroom activities, as well as the books that are used in speaking. From the entire things, the most pivotal thing is how the lecturers can stimulate their students in speaking so that they are eager to speak. The lecturers also try to persuade the students not to be worried or afraid if they make mistakes in speaking. As proposed by Brown (2001:62), lecturers of Speaking should provide affective supports, such as: (a) showing a supportive attitude to the students, (b) selecting challenging topics and activities, (c) considering students' language ego states, (d) showing patience and understanding to the students.

The key factor to the success of learning speaking is the students themselves. It is suggested that the students be braver to speak, without feeling afraid of making mistakes. They should be creative to find their own ways to develop their speaking ability. The students should use every opportunity to practice English in and out of class. They may make commitments with classmates to use English as much as possible in their daily communications. For increasing vocabulary, there are some ways that can be done by the students including consulting the dictionary if they find difficult, watching TV, listening to the radio or music, etc. The students should also provide specific times for reading extensively every day because reading can add and increase their vocabulary. Another strategy is to get students to try to memorize a number of vocabulary items every day and use them in sentences so that the words that have been memorized are not easily forgotten.

This research focused on students' perceptions of their problems in speaking class, and the causes of their problems were that they were afraid. It may be interesting for other researchers to study the lecturers' behaviors which can facilitate or hinder the students' learning.

From the 10 students who become respondent in this study, all of them said that they had problems in speaking, so it will be interesting for other researchers to conduct another research involving more respondents because the researcher believes that not only these respondents who have difficulties but also other students may face problems in speaking.

It is also intriguing for other researchers to probe deeply what makes the students not speak due to "fear" as the cause of difficulty most students felt or faced in speaking.

Thereare some phrases that the students stated to describe their fear in speaking such as 'being afraid of speaking', 'being afraid of making errors, and 'being afraid of being mocked by friends'. It needs to be explored furthermore because these deal

with non-linguistic problems. Other researchers ought to think of the factors that cause the students to be afraid in speaking in order to find the best solutions to cope with the problems.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTION

Based on the research findings and discussions, it can be concluded that the 10 students of English Department at Faculty of Teacher Training and Education of Syiah Kuala University faced some problems in speaking.

The problems that most students faced in speaking was 'having a lack of vocabulary', 'not being confident to speak', 'not being used to talking in class', and 'difficulty expressing words or sentences.' The cause of problems most students faced was 'being afraid of making errors'. There were two kinds of problems faced by the students in speaking that the researcher found in this study, namely, linguistic problems and non linguistic problems.

From the characteristics of successful language learners as proposed by Rubin and Thompson, it can be concluded that the strategies that were used by the students to solve their problems only a few matched with Rubin and Thompson's ideas, so their efforts had not been enough.

Based on the discussion, some suggestions have been proposed. The most important one, speaking skills do not stand alone but they are supported by the mastery of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation; accordingly, the lecturers of these subjects need to increase student's mastery.

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