



EXPLORING FACTORS AFFECTING EFL LEARNERS' SPEAKING PERFORMANCE: FROM THEORIES INTO PRACTICES

Irma Wahyuni¹

English Education Study Program, STKIP Muhammadiyah Bogor

wahyuniirma96@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Theoretically, the ultimate goal of any language learning including EFL (English as a Foreign Language) is to communicate, that is to exchange ideas, knowledge, and information. Among the four language skills the learners pursue in their language learning, they often value speaking more than the other skills – reading, writing, and listening. Some studies show that despite learners' strong motivation to learn and practice speaking in English, on many occasions they turn out to stay silent (instead of saying passive) rather than struggle to make any attempt to speak words. Exploring any possible factors causing this phenomenon to happen is of great value for teaching practitioners as it is commonly believed that speaking is interconnected with other skills. Therefore, the development in speaking is likely resulted in the development of the other language skills. In relation to the above issue, hence, this short article tries to examine factors affecting EFL learners' speaking performance and to identify some feasible ways of coping with the demotivating factors of the speaking performance. Drawing from some literature reviews it was found that EFL learners' speaking performance may stem from three major aspects, namely linguistics, socio-cultural, and affective factors which includes motivation and personality aspects such as anxiety, self-esteem, inhibition, risk-taking, empathy, and extroversion.

Keywords: *EFL (English as a Foreign Language), speaking performance /proficiency*

INTRODUCTION

Learning to speak a foreign language requires more than knowing its grammatical and semantic rules. As Shumin (1997) says learners must also acquire the knowledge of how native speakers use the language in the context of structured interpersonal exchange, in which many factors interact. For this reason, it is understandable that EFL learners find a significant difficulty to



speak the target language fluently and appropriately. Despite this fact, however, many learners often measure their success in language learning as well as the effectiveness of their EFL course on the basis of how much they feel they have improved in their speaking proficiency (Juhana, 2012). Currently, the tendency to prioritize the mastery of EFL speaking skill is even more increasing as English often serve as the *lingua franca* for the so called a global society. In response to this, in order to provide guidance in developing learners' speaking proficiency, this short article tries to examine factors affecting EFL learners' speaking performance and to identify some feasible ways of coping with the demotivating factors of the learners' speaking performance.

As stated above, many language learners often assess their language learning success from their ability to speak in the target language fluently and appropriately. In other words, they regard their speaking ability as the measure of knowing the target language. In order to have similar perception regarding the notion of speaking, initially this short article will discussed the nature of speaking especially the one which takes place in the second or foreign language learning context.

Speaking is a multifaceted construct. Quoting from some language experts(e.g. Thornbury and Slade, Nunan, and Van Lier) Nazara (2011) tries to define speaking on its threefold, that is based on its *features*, its *functions*, and its *conditions*. Those three aspects can be elaborated as in the following. Viewing from *its features*, speaking could be defined as a social, multi-sensory speech event, in which its topic is unpredictable. Speaking is social, in the sense that it establishes rapport and mutual agreement, maintains and modifies social identity, and involves interpersonal skills. The social element is expressed through wishes, feelings, attitudes, opinions and judgments, which can clash with the formal nature of the classroom when teaching speaking.

Based on *its function*, speaking is defined as a way to verbally communicate for mostly interpersonal and somewhat transactional purposes. Characterize by this function, speaking activities can be grouped into three categories, namely 1) interactive speaking, in which it focuses on primary social functions as meeting people, doing small talk, etc., 2) transactional speaking, in which it focuses on what is said or done such as conversation in a restaurant when someone orders drink or in the ticketing counter when someone books a ticket, and 3) performative speaking, in which it focuses on transmitting information before an audience such as in presentation, speech, etc.. Performative speaking is often called as non-interactive or one-way speaking in which the listener/audience acts as a passive speaking counterpart.

Lastly, *viewing from the condition* when it takes place, speaking usually happens when people are face-to-face which makes it highly interactional and social. A long with the advancement of communication technology, however, speaking many not only be face-to-face but also can be

mediated by technology such as computer, internet, cellular phone and the like. Speaking happens within a shared context such as in situational, institutional, social, and cultural environments in real time and demands spontaneous decision-making and improvisation leading to a very dynamic discourse.

While acknowledging the three aspects above is important to all language learners before they carry out any speaking tasks, there are also three areas of knowledge which are paramount and need to be attended whenever they perform any speaking tasks. These areas of knowledge include mechanics, functions, and socio-cultural norms (Burnkart in Nazara, 2011; Bashir, Azeem, & Dogar, 2011). Mechanics comprises aspects such as pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary which altogether mean using the right words in the right order with the correct pronunciation. Meanwhile, functions involve transaction and interaction that is knowing when clarity of message is essential (such as in the transaction/information exchange) and when precise understanding is not required (e.g. in the interaction/relationship building). And lastly, socio-cultural rules and norms include turn-taking, rate of speech, length of pauses between speakers, relative roles of participants which mean understanding how to take account who is speaking to whom, in what circumstances, about what, and for what reason. Many EFL practitioners tend to agree that most of their EFL learners find performing speaking task as one of most stressing tasks.

One of Woodrow's study findings (2006) reveals eleven stressors that contribute to EFL learners' speaking performance. Those stressors, in order, are 1) performing in English in front of classmates, 2) giving an oral presentation, 3) speaking in English to native speakers, 4) speaking in English in classroom activities, 5) speaking in English to strangers, 6) Not being able to understand when spoken to, 7) talking about an unfamiliar topic, 8) talking to someone of higher status, 9) speaking in test situations, 10) When interlocutor seems stern, and 11) not being able to make self understood. Another Dunbar's finding indicates that the EFL learners response to those stressors within the three domains, i.e. physiological, cognitive, and behavioral reactions with the first being the highest and the last being the lowest in terms of learners' choices. Physioclogical reactions includes sweating, racing heart, and blushing while cognitive reactions comprise worrying about performance and mind going blank. Lastly, behavioral reactions include fidgeting, talking too much and stuttering.

Taking into account on those above identified stressors is of great importance for the EFL teachers in designing every step of learning process, from the course planning phase up to the learning assessment phase. Along with these stressors, the teachers also need to consider other learning components so that the learning purposes can be achieved effectively.

Factors Affecting Efl Learners' Speaking Performance

EFL learners' speaking performance is characterized by not only their knowledge but also their ability to attend to some linguistic elements of the language such as phonology, syntax, vocabulary, and semantics. Each of these aspects will be described as follows. For EFL learners, particularly Indonesian EFL learners, where their first language systems are quite different from those of English, phonology is quite a problematic aspect. It is widely understood that English is not a *phonetic* language, meaning that pronunciation of its words are not the same to its spelling.

On several occasions, it even occurs when words with the same spelling are pronounced differently due to its surrounding contexts, such as tenses and phonemes following them. This becomes one of the main reasons why non-native speakers of English often get confused in pronouncing many English words, especially if their first languages are phonetic in nature. It is widely known that English has its own standard accent, that is the up and down or stress pattern andrhythmical voice when ones speak the language. Similar happens in all other languages. For EFL learners, in particular, acquiring this standard accent becomes another constraint as they have already developed their mother tongue accent. Case of interlanguage interference is in fact what often happens in the real language learning process.

Beside knowing the pronunciation of the language, in order to convey meaning, the EFL learners must also have the knowledge of words and sentences. They must understand how words are segmented into various sounds, how sentences are stressed in particular ways (Latha, 2012). Grammatical competence enables speakers to us and understand the structure of English language accurately and unhesitatingly, which contributes to their fluency. Native English speakers can say what they want without much difficulty due to their familiarity of the language. If they have difficulty expressing a certain concept/thought in a certain way, they can just use other ways of saying those things. They may commit some mistakes in syntactical grammar, *but the mistakes do not distort or change the meaning of the utterances they want to convey*, thus, it doesn't give the listener much of a problem understanding them.

On the other hand, the mistakes many non-native speakers of English commit are those that often change the meaning of sentences they want to express, and thus create a misunderstanding. That's exactly the reason why non-native speakers have to study grammar more than native speakers.

The environment and family background plays a vital role in the EFL learning processand specifically on how the EFL learners perform their oral speaking. In most cases, learners who are raised within labor family background tend to show passive speaking performance, not to say lower willingness to communicate in English. Same case happens from those who come from less advantaged economic background. On the contrary, the EFL

learners who coincidentally grow up in more educated and well-established economic background tend to be more assertive in their speaking.

Latha (2012) discusses that rural background of learners where English is generally not used is another cause affecting the leaning process. Most of the learners coming from rural background are first generation learners of English language. Their parents being farmers and uneducated often results in the lack guidance the EFL learners receive from their elderly. When learners of such background are asked to do a speaking activity, they end up in saying nothing. Even if they try to speak, they often tend to use their mother tongue, resulting in the failure of the learning speaking process.

Motivation is constructed of some components; the essential one is attitudes (Merisuo-storm, 2007: 133). Motivation can affect and be affected by other essential components of learning as well. Thus Merisuo-Storm finds that an integrative and friendly outlook toward the other group whose language is being learned can differentially sensitize language learners to the audio-lingual features of the language, making them more perceptive to forms of pronunciation and accent than is the case for learners without this open and friendly disposition. If the learners' attitude is highly ethnocentric and hostile, many have seen that no progress to speak of will be made in acquiring any aspects of the language. Such

learners not only are perceptually insensitive to the language, but apparently are also unwilling to modify or adjust their own response system to approximate the new pronounciational response required in the other language.

The explanation above supports the idea that communicative competence is not enough for EFL learners to succeed with their speaking performance. Without positive attitudes that characterize their speaking motivation, the goal of speaking they perform can hardly be achieved.

The fear of speaking in a foreign language may be related to a variety of complex personality constructs such as anxiety, self-esteem, inhibition, risk taking, empathy, and extroversion. These personality factors are intertwined in which one factor is closely related to the others.

Speaking a second/foreign language in public, especially in front of native speakers often leads to anxiety. Sometimes, extreme anxiety results in the learners being tongue-tied or lost for words in an unexpected situation leading to discouragement and a general sense of failure in the learners (Bashir, Azeem, Dogar 2011). This statement seems to support what has been said by Woodrow (2006), almost a decade earlier. She said that Second language anxiety has a debilitating effect on the oral performance of speakers of English as a second language.

Unlike children, adults are very cautious about making errors in whatever they say. For them making errors would be a public display of ignorance which would be an obvious occasion of losing face. This is one of the major factors for the inability to speak in English.

Language speaking anxiety, particularly the one happens in the classroom learning, may stem from a classroom condition with a large and mixed ability

learners. In such classes, learners are quite often split up into two categories, i.e. strong and weak ones, where the strong and quick learners are often seen to be dominating and overtaking the slow and weak ones. The weak learners do not get opportunity in the presence of the strong ones which result in the shrinking of the weak learners as explained in Latha (2012).

The explanation above clearly shows that language anxiety is one of most detrimental factors contributing to the learners' low speaking performance. And in the EFL setting, Brown (2000: 151) has identified three components of foreign language anxiety, i.e. 1) communication apprehension, arising from learners' inability to adequately express mature thoughts and ideas; 2) fear of negative social evaluation, arising from a learner's need to make a positive social impression on others; and 3) test anxiety or apprehension over academic evaluation.

Brown (2000: 145) stated that self-esteem is probably the most pervasive aspect of any human behavior. It could easily be claimed that no successful cognitive or affective activity (including oral performance) can be carried out without some degree of self-esteem, self-confidence, knowledge of self, and belief in one's own capabilities for that activity. Brown supported Coopersmith's definition of self-esteem as a personal judgment of worthiness that is expressed in the attitudes that the individuals hold towards themselves. Of the most important part, in Brown (2000: 146-147) it was revealed that some studies carried out by some EFL practitioners (e.g. Adelaide Heyde (1979), Watkins, Biggs, and Regmi (1991), Brodkey and Shore (1976) and Gardner and Lambert (1972)) had resulted that self-esteem correlated positively with performance on the oral production measure.

However, at the end of the section Brown explicitly stated that up to this time, the answer to the classic chicken-egg question, "Does high self-esteem cause language success, or does language success cause high self-esteem?" remains unknown. Clearly, both are interwoven factors.

Closely related to and in some cases subsumed under the notion of self-esteem is the concept of inhibition. Inhibition is a feeling of embarrassment or worry that prevents someone from saying or doing what she/he wants (Cambridge A.L. Dictionary, 2008). All human beings, according to Brown (2000: 147) in their understanding of themselves, build sets of defenses to protect the ego. While making mistakes in EFL learning is part of the learning process, yet it surely poses threats to one's ego. These defenses discourage the learners to speak the language and tend to stay silent rather than being criticized or losing face in front of their speaking audience.

It looks obvious that risk-taking relates to inhibition and self-esteem. EFL learners with a low self-esteem seem to avoid taking a risk of making mistakes in their speaking activities which eventually lead to the inhibition to the improvement of their speaking proficiency.

Communication requires a sophisticated degree of empathy (Brown, 2000: 153). In further, Brown explains that in order to communicate effectively someone needs to be able to understand the other person's affective and cognitive states; communication breaks down when false

presuppositions or assumptions are made about the other person's state. So, in this foreign language learning situation, the problem of empathy becomes acute (Brown, 2000: 154). Not only must learnerspeak correctly identify cognitive and affective sets in the hearer, but they must do so in a language in which they are insecure. Then, learner-hearers, attempting to comprehend a foreign language, often discover that their own states of thought are misinterpreted by a native speaker, and the result is that linguistic, cognitive, and affective information easily passes in one ear and out the other.

It is not clear though whether extroversion or introversion helps or hinders the process of foreign language acquisition. The Toronto Study as quoted in Brown (2000: 155) found no significant effect for extroversion in characterizing the good language learner. Yet, any teacher needs to be considerably careful in their assessment of a student's presumed "passivity" in the classroom. In doing so, he/she certainly need to account for the cultural norms, where it is evident that American or western society values the stereotypical extroverts, while other societies, such as Asians, apt to be more introverts.

Brown cautiously explains that often people misunderstood the two terms because they tend to stereotype extroversion. Quite frequently they associate extroverts as gregarious, talkative, outgoing learners who participate freely in class discussion while conversely introverts are thought of as quiet and reserved, with tendencies toward reclusiveness, and therefore sometimes thought of as not being as bright as extroverts. This is extremely unfortunate to introverts as these stereotypes often influence teachers' perception towards them. The fact is that, contrary to the stereotype, introverts can have an inner strength of character that extroverts do not have. Above all, people in particular EFL practitioners need to be fully aware that it is apparent that cross-cultural norms of non-verbal and verbal interaction vary widely, and what in one culture (e.g. USA) may appear as introversion is , in another culture (e.g. Japan)respect and politeness.

Teaching proposal in coping with learners' speaking problems.

As reviewed above there are a number of aspects which can be detrimental to EFL learners' speaking performance. Despite the assumption that learners in the classroom generally want and expect their errors to be corrected, language teaching practitioners seem to agree that how to correct learners' errors is exceedingly complex. Teachers, therefore, need to develop intuition through experience and established theoretical foundations for ascertaining which correction option or combination of option is appropriate at a given moment. The best way to deal with the learners' speaking problems is by knowing the source(s) of the problems.

Some studies have been done in this field, resulting with several proposals in coping with the EFL learners' speaking problems effectively. Some of those are outlined as follows.

One of Woodrow's study findings (2006) indicated that there is a negative relationship between second language speaking anxiety (both in-class and

out-of-class) and oral performance. The study results also indicated that giving oral presentation in front of the class and communicating with the teacher are most stressful activities for the learners. In coping with the second language anxiety the learners reported some coping strategy namely perseverance, improving language/knowledge skills, positive thinking, compensation, and relaxation techniques.

Perseverance refers to not giving up when speaking while *improving language* refers to preparing utterances and studying to improve speaking. *Positive thinking* includes positive self-talk while *compensation strategies* includes smiling and volunteering comments. *Various relaxation techniques* were also mentioned by the learners such as deep breathing and conscious efforts to calm oneself. A more comprehensive construct, however, presented by Brown (2001:293) who identifies ten possible factors that any language instructors need to deal with learners' speaking errors. *First* is identifying the type of errors whether they concern with lexical, phonological, grammatical, discourse, pragmatic, or sociocultural errors. *Second* is identifying the source of errors whether they stem from learners' mother tongue, the target language, teacher-induced, other learners, outside second language input, or audio/visual/printed/ electronic media. *Third* is recognizing the linguistic complexity, whether the errors are intricate and involved or easy to be explained /dealt with. *Fourth* is identifying the translatability of errors, meaning that despite the occurring errors whether the utterance is interpretable (local) or not (global). Local errors can sometimes be ignored for the sake of maintaining a flow of communication meanwhile global errors by definition often call for some sort of treatment, even if only in the form of a clarification request. *Fifth* is deciding whether the errors are of performance slip (mistake) or competence errors. Mistakes rarely call for treatment, while errors more frequently demand some sort of teacher response. *Sixth* is deciding whether the errors made by the learners relates to their language ego concerning the learners' anxiety level, confidence, and willingness to accept correction. If the learners rarely speak in class or show high anxiety and low confidence when attempting to speak, it might be better to ignore the deviant utterance the learners' made. *Seventh* is recognizing the learners' linguistics stage of development whether they are in the emergent, pre-systematic, systematic, or post-systematic stage of learning. *Eighth* is considering the errors in relation to the pedagogical focus of the on-going learning process, such as the immediate task goal(s), the lesson objective, and course goals/purposes. *Ninth* is considering the communicative context of the errors, whether the learners in the middle of a productive flow of language, whether the learners are in the middle of individual, group, whole-class work, whether the learners are in the learner-learner or learner-teacher discussion/exchange. And lastly, *tenth* is considering the errors in relation to the teacher style. As for example if a teacher tends as a rule to make very few error treatments, a treatment at one point of time on a minor speaking mistake would be out of character and misinterpreted by the learners.

Conclusion

Despite the belief that currently many EFL learners valued speaking proficiency as the measure of their foreign language learning success, many studies had shown that it is in fact often perceived as the most difficult skill the EFL learners need to develop. There are many factors which clearly contribute to the EFL learners' improving their speaking performance. Identifying those factors is tremendously important so that both the learners as well as the teachers can take any appropriate and effective solution to overcome the learners' speaking problems.

References

Bashir, Marriam; Azeem, Muhammad; and Dogar, A.Hussain. 2011. "Factors affecting students' English speaking skills", In: *British Journal of Arts and Social Sciencies* 2(1): 34-50.

Brown, H. Douglas. 2000. *Principles of language learning and teaching. 4th Ed.* New York: Pearson Education.

Brown, H. Douglas. 2001. *Teaching by principles. An interactive approach to language pedagogy. 2nd Ed.* Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.

Juhana. 2012. "Psychological factors that hinder students from speaking in English class (a case study in a senior high school in SouthTangerang, Banten, Indonesia)", In *Journal of Education and Practice*, 3(12), 100-110.

Latha, B. Madhavi. 2012. "Teaching English as a second language: Factors affecting learning speaking skills", In *International Journal of Engineering Research & Technology (IJERT)*, 1(7), 1-6.

Nazara, Situjuh. 2011. "Students' perception on EFL speaking skill development", In *JET (Journal of English Teaching)* 1(1): 28-43

Shumin, Kang. 1997. "Factors to consider: Developing adult EFL students' speaking abilities", In *Forum*, 35(3), 8-NA. Retrieved from Woodrow, Lindy. 2006. "Anxiety and speaking english as a second language. *RELC Journal*, 37(3), 308-328.