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THE PARADOX OF ENGLISH LEARNING: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF LIMITED SPEAKING ABILITY DESPITE LONG-TERM ENGLISH INSTRUCTION AMONG UNIVERSITAS DHARMAS INDONESIA STUDENTS

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Abstract: Speaking ability is considered one of the most important indicators of successful English learning, especially in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. However, many students still experience difficulties in speaking English despite having received formal English instruction for many years. This study aims to explore the factors contributing to students' limited speaking ability after long-term English learning experiences. This study employed a qualitative research design using a descriptive qualitative approach. The participants were university students from Universitas Dharma Indonesia who were non-English major students and had learned English for several years through formal education. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and documentation, and the data were analyzed using qualitative data analysis techniques consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings revealed that long-term English instruction did not automatically guarantee effective speaking ability. Students continued to experience speaking difficulties due to several internal and external factors. Internal factors included limited vocabulary mastery, pronunciation difficulties, speaking anxiety, fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, and low motivation. Meanwhile, external factors involved teachers-centered teaching methods, limited speaking practice, limited exposure to English, unsupportive classroom environments, and lack of communicative activities. The findings also indicate a paradox between the length of English learning and students' actual speaking performance. Although students had learned English for many years, their speaking ability remained limited because learning experiences were often dominated by theoretical knowledge rather than meaningful communication practice. Therefore, English learning should provide more opportunities for active language use, interaction, and communicative activities to support students' speaking development.

Keywords: speaking ability, EFL learners, long-term English instruction, speaking difficulties, qualitative study

INTRODUCTION

English has become an important language for international communication, education, and professional development. In many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, English is taught as a compulsory subject in formal education. Students commonly receive English instruction for many years, starting from elementary school until university level. Ideally, long-term English instruction should help learners develop sufficient language competence, particularly speaking ability. However, in reality, many students still experience difficulties in speaking English fluently and confidently despite having learned English for an extended period.

Speaking ability is considered one of the most essential skills in language learning because it reflects learners' ability to use language for meaningful communication. According to Harmer (2015), speaking development does not only depend on language knowledge but also on opportunities for learners to use the language actively in communication. Similarly, Nunan (2015) explains that speaking competence develops through interaction, participation, and meaningful language practice. Therefore, students who receive English instruction without sufficient speaking opportunities may understand English theoretically but still experience difficulties in expressing their ideas orally.

In EFL contexts, speaking often becomes a challenging skill because learners have limited exposure to authentic communication. Richards et al. (2015) explains that many EFL learners experience difficulties in speaking because classroom activities frequently emphasize grammar, reading, and written exercises rather than communicative interaction. Furthermore, Thornbury (2017) states that speaking requires immediate language processing, which involves vocabulary selection, pronunciation, fluency, and confidence. As a result, learners may have knowledge of English structures but struggle when they need to communicate spontaneously.

Previous studies have reported similar problems regarding students' speaking difficulties. Mahrina et al. (2023) and Khairita et al. (2024) found that

students experienced difficulties in speaking English due to limited vocabulary, low motivation, and lack of confidence. The study showed that these factors influenced students' ability to express ideas orally. The findings also indicate that students' speaking performance is strongly related to their learning experiences and the amount of practice they receive during the learning process. However, the study mainly focused on identifying students' problems without exploring the relationship between long-term English learning experiences and speaking outcomes.

Furthermore, Anggraini et al. (2025) investigated speaking difficulties among university EFL students and revealed that linguistics factors, such as vocabulary limitations, pronunciation problems, and grammatical difficulties, as well as psychological factors including anxiety and fear of negative evaluation, significantly influenced students' speaking performance. Although the study provided a comprehensive explanation of speaking difficulties, it did not specifically examine why students still experience limited speaking ability after years of English instruction. This limitation suggests that further research is needed to understand the connection between the duration of English learning and students' actual ability to communicate orally in academic contexts.

Similar findings were also reported by Nor et al. (2019), who found that students' speaking problems were influenced by limited vocabulary, lack of confidence, fear of making mistakes, and insufficient exposure to English. In addition, Sayuri (2016) highlighted that university students faced difficulties in pronunciation, fluency, grammar, and vocabulary, along with psychological barriers such as nervousness and shyness. These studies demonstrate that students' speaking problems are influenced by various linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors.

Although previous studies have discussed students' speaking difficulties, most of them mainly focus on identifying factors affecting speaking performance or describing learners' problems. Limited attention has been given to the phenomenon where students continue to experience limited speaking ability despite receiving English instruction for many years. This condition creates a

paradox in English learning, where the length of learning does not always result in effective speaking competence. Therefore, further investigation is needed to understand how long-term English instruction relates to students' speaking ability and what factors contribute to this phenomenon.

Based on the gaps identified in previous studies, this study focuses on examining the phenomenon of limited speaking ability among university students who have experienced long-term English instruction. Unlike previous studies that mainly discuss general speaking difficulties or factors affecting speaking performance, this study specifically explores why students still face challenges in speaking English despite years of formal learning. This study investigates students' experiences, perceptions, and challenges in developing speaking ability, including internal and external factors that influence their oral communication performance. Therefore, this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between long-term English instruction and students' actual speaking competence in an EFL context. The findings of study are expected to contribute to the improvement of English learning practices by emphasizing the importance of meaningful communication, continuous speaking practice, and supportive learning environments.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore students' experiences and perceptions regarding their limited speaking ability despite long-term English instruction. A qualitative approach was selected because this study aimed to obtain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, opinions, and difficulties in learning English speaking skills. According to Creswell & Creswell (2018), qualitative research is appropriate for investigating a phenomenon by exploring the meanings individuals or groups assign to a particular problem. This approach allows the researcher to examine the phenomenon from the participants' perspectives and to obtain detailed information about the factors that influence their speaking performance. Therefore, a qualitative design was considered suitable

for this study because students' speaking difficulties involve not only language competence but also personal experiences and learning conditions.

The participants of this study were university students who had learned English for several years through formal education. The participants were selected using purposive sampling based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. Purposive sampling was applied because the researcher intended to select participants who had experience related to the phenomenon being investigated. As explained by Sugiono (2015), purposive sampling allows researchers to choose participants based on certain considerations that support the purpose of the study. The selection of participant was conducted to ensure that the data obtained represented students who had experienced long-term English learning but still faced challenges in developing speaking ability. Through these participants, the researcher was able to explore their experiences and perceptions related to English learning more deeply.

To collect the data, this study used semi-structured interviews as the primary instrument. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they provide flexibility for participants to share questions focused on students' experiences in learning English, their speaking difficulties and factors affecting their speaking performance. This type of interview also allowed the researcher to ask follow-up questions when participants provided important information related to their learning experiences. Therefore, the interview process could produce richer and more detailed data regarding students speaking problems.

In addition, documentation was used as supporting data to strengthen the findings. The documentation included interview records and transcripts obtained during the data collection process. The use of multiple sources of data helped the researcher obtain a more comprehensive understanding of students' speaking experiences. The documentation process also supported the accuracy of the analysis because the researcher could review participants' responses during the interpretation stage. Furthermore, it helped maintain consistency between the collected data and the reported findings.

The collected data were analyzed using qualitative data analysis procedures consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Miles et al. (2014) explain that qualitative data analysis involves organizing, selecting, and interpreting data to identify important patterns and themes. Therefore, this analysis technique was considered suitable for identifying the factors influencing students' limited speaking ability. During the analysis process, the researcher carefully examined the interview results, categorized relevant information into themes, and interpreted the relationship between students' experiences and their speaking difficulties. This process allowed the findings to be presented systematically and supported by participants' actual experiences.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Students' Experience in Long-Term English Learning

The findings of this study reveal that students still experienced limited speaking ability despite having learned English for many years through formal education. Most participants reported that they had received English instruction since elementary school until university level; however, the length of learning experience did not automatically improve their ability to communicate orally. The participants explained that they still faced difficulties in expressing ideas, maintaining fluency, and speaking confidently in English. This finding indicates the existence of a gap between the duration of English learning and students' actual speaking performance. Although students' had been exposed to English for a long period, many of them were still unable to use English effectively in real communication situations.

This condition suggests that long-term English instruction alone is not sufficient to develop speaking competence. The participants' experiences showed that English learning was often dominated by theoretical materials, grammar explanation, and written assignments rather than direct speaking practice. As a result, students became more familiar with English as an academic subject rather than as a language used for communication. This finding is consistent with Harmer (2015), who explains that successful language learning depends not only on the

amount of time spent learning a language but also on meaningful opportunities to use the language actively. Similarly Nunan (2015), emphasizes that speaking ability develops through continuous interaction and communication practice.

Furthermore, several participants stated that they understood basic English rules, such as grammar and vocabulary, but they still struggled when they had to speak spontaneously. They often experienced difficulties in organizing sentences, choosing appropriate words, and responding during conversations. This shows that students may have developed linguistic knowledge but still lack communicative competence. According to Richards et al. (2015), many EFL learners experience this situation because classroom learning frequently focuses on accuracy and written language rather real-life communication. Therefore, limited exposure to speaking activities becomes one of the reasons why students continue to experience speaking difficulties despite years of English instruction.

The findings highlight that the main problem is not the absence of English learning experience, but the imbalance between language knowledge and language use. Students need more opportunities to practice speaking through meaningful interaction, discussions, presentations, and communicative activities. Without sufficient speaking practice, learners may understand English theoretically but still lack confidence and fluency in actual communication. Therefore, English instruction should provide a balance between theoretical understanding and practical language use to support students' speaking development.

Internal Factors Affecting Students' Speaking Ability

The Findings of this study indicate that students' limited speaking ability was influenced by several internal factors, including limited vocabulary mastery, pronunciation difficulties, speaking anxiety, lack of confidence, and low motivation. These factors show that speaking problems are not only related to students' knowledge of English but also involve psychological and personal conditions that affect their willingness to communicate. Many participants explained that they often understood the meaning of English expressions but experienced difficulties when they had to produce sentences orally. This condition caused them to hesitate and

avoid speaking activities, especially in classroom situations where they had to communicate in front of others.

One of the most frequently mentioned problems was limited vocabulary mastery. The participants reported that they often struggled to find appropriate words, arrange sentences, and express their ideas clearly during speaking activities. Although some students had learned English vocabulary for many years, they still felt that their vocabulary knowledge was insufficient for spontaneous communication. This findings supports Richards et al. (2015) explanation that vocabulary limitations can prevent learners from maintaining conversations because they are unable to express their intended meaning effectively. Therefore, insufficient vocabulary knowledge became a barrier that reduced students' fluency and confidence in speaking English.

In addition to vocabulary problem, pronunciation difficulties were also found to influence students' speaking performance. Several participants stated that they felt confused about English pronunciation because the way words are written and pronounced is often different. This problem made them afraid of producing incorrect sounds and reduced their willingness to speak. Pronunciation difficulties were not only related to accuracy but also influenced students' confidence during communication. As Harmer (2015) explains, pronunciation plays an important role in oral communication because unclear pronunciation may affect both the speaker's confidence and the listener's understanding.

Another significant finding was related to psychological factors, particularly speaking anxiety and lack of confidence. Many participants admitted that they were afraid of making mistakes, being laughed at, or receiving negative comments from others when speaking English. As a result, some students preferred to remain silent even when they knew the answer or understood the topic being discussed. This finding is in line with, who state that learners' emotional readiness strongly influences their willingness to communicate. In addition, low motivation also affected students' consistency in practicing speaking because some participants felt that improving speaking ability was difficult and required more effort. These findings demonstrate that improving speaking ability requires not only language

practice but also psychological support to help students become more confident and willing to communicate.

External Factors Affecting Students' Speaking Ability

Besides internal factors, this study also found that external factors significantly influenced students' speaking ability. The participants explained that their difficulties in speaking English were also related to learning conditions, teaching methods, classroom environment, and limited opportunities to use English. Although students had received English instruction for many years, the learning process did not always provide sufficient opportunities for active communication. These findings indicate that students' speaking development is strongly affected by the quality of learning experiences they receive, not only by their individual abilities.

One of the main external factors identified in this study was teacher-centered teaching methods. Several participants explained that English learning activities were often dominated by teacher explanations, grammar lessons, and written assignments. Speaking activities were less frequently conducted, causing students to become passive learners during the learning process. This finding supports (Nunan, 2015) view that language learning becomes less effective when students have limited opportunities to participate in meaningful interaction. When classroom activities focus more on receiving information rather than producing language, students may understand English concepts but still experience difficulties in using English orally.

Limited opportunities for speaking practice were also found to be an important factor affecting students' speaking ability. The participant stated that speaking activities were usually limited to presentations, reading texts, or answering short questions, while activities such as discussions, conversations, and interactive communication were rarely conducted. Consequently, students had fewer chances to develop fluency, pronunciation, and confidence through regular practice. This findings is consistent with Thornbury (2017), who emphasizes that speaking competence develops through continuous practice and active language

use. Without frequent speaking opportunities, learners may find it difficult to communicate spontaneously.

Another external factor identified was limited exposure to English outside the classroom. Many participants explained that they rarely used English in their daily environment because people around them did not commonly communicate in English. As a result, they had limited opportunities to listen to authentic English, practice pronunciation, and apply vocabulary in real situations. According to Lightbown & Spada (2013), language development requires sufficient exposure and meaningful interaction with the target language. In addition, the classroom environment also influenced students' willingness to speak. Some participants reported that they felt uncomfortable speaking because they were afraid of being judged or laughed at by others when making mistakes.

Overall, the findings suggest that learning environments play an important role in developing students' speaking ability. A classroom that provides supportive interaction, communicative activities, and opportunities for language practice can encourage students to participate more actively. Therefore, English instruction should move beyond theoretical learning and provide more students-centered activities that allow learners to use English naturally and confidently.

The Paradox of Long-Term English Instruction and Limited Speaking Ability

The findings of this study reveal a paradox in students' English learning experiences. Although the participants had learning English for many years through formal education, their speaking ability remained limited. This condition shows that the length of English instruction does not automatically guarantee the development of communicative competence. Most participants reported that they had studied English from elementary school until university level; however, they still experienced difficulties in expressing ideas, speaking fluently, and communicating confidently. This finding indicates that the problem is not related to the absence of English learning exposure, but rather to the effectiveness of the learning process and the opportunities provided for students to use English.

The participants' experiences demonstrate that English learning was often focused on language knowledge rather than language use. Many students explained that their previous learning experiences were dominated by grammar explanations, vocabulary exercises, and written tasks, while speaking practice was less emphasized. As a result, students became familiar with English as a subject that needed to be studied but not necessarily as a tool for communication. This finding supports Harmer's (2015) argument that successful language learning requires meaningful communication and active language practice. Learning a language for a long period of time will not be effective if learners do not have sufficient opportunities to apply the language in real situations.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that students' limited speaking ability was caused by imbalance between theoretical understanding and communicative practice. Several participants mentioned that they understood basic English rules but still struggled when they had to speak spontaneously. They often needed more time to organize sentences, choose appropriate vocabulary, and overcome fear when communicating. According to Richards (2017) many EFL learners experience difficulties because classroom activities frequently emphasize accuracy and written competence rather than interaction and fluency. Therefore, students may achieve academic knowledge of English while still lacking the ability to use English naturally.

This paradox also highlights the importance of creating learning environments that encourage continuous speaking practice. The participants expressed that interactive activities such as discussions, conversations, role plays, and collaborative tasks could help them become more confident in speaking English. This finding is in line with Nunan (2015), who explains that communicative interaction plays an essential role in developing speaking competence. Without regular practice and supportive communication environments, students may continue to experience speaking difficulties despite years of English instruction.

Overall, the study shows that long-term English learning should not only be measured by the duration of instruction but also by the quality of learning experiences provided to students. The development of speaking ability requires a combination of linguistic knowledge, psychological readiness, meaningful

interaction, and continuous practice. Therefore, English education needs to shift from a mainly theoretical approach toward a more communicative approach that enables students to use English actively in real communication contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that long-term English instruction does not always result in effective speaking ability among EFL learners. Although the participants had learners English for many years through formal education, they still experienced difficulties in speaking fluently and confidently. The findings reveal that the duration of English learning alone is not sufficient to develop speaking competence because students need meaningful opportunities to use English actively in communication. The gap between English knowledge and speaking performance occurred because learning experiences were often more focused on theoretical understanding, grammar, and written activities rather than continuous speaking practice.

The study also concludes that students' limited speaking ability was influenced by both internal and external factors. Internal factors included limited vocabulary mastery, pronunciation difficulties, speaking anxiety, fear of making mistakes lack of confidence, and low motivation. Meanwhile, external factors involved teacher-centered learning methods, limited opportunities for speaking practice, insufficient exposure to English, and classroom environments that did not always encourage active communication. These findings indicate that speaking ability is a complex skill influenced by linguistic, psychological, and environmental conditions.

Therefore, improving students' speaking ability requires a balanced approach between language knowledge and communicative practice. English learning should provide more interactive activities that allows students to practice speaking, express ideas, and communicate without excessive fear of making mistakes. Supportive learning environments and regular speaking opportunities are essential to help learners develop confidence, fluency, and communicative

competence. The paradox identified in this study emphasizes that leaning English for a long period of time is not enough unless learners are given meaningful experiences to use the language in real communication.

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