

Unveiling the sources of English-speaking anxiety of a vocational school student: A narrative study

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ABSTRACT

The primary aim of this study is to explore the sources of English-speaking anxiety and ascertain the learners' future expectations regarding his English language proficiency. The study was conducted at a vocational school in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia, using a narrative inquiry design. A 10th-grade student from the Hospitality and Tourism Industry class was purposively invited to participate voluntarily. Data was collected through semi-structured interview and analyzed thematically. The findings revealed that sources of the student' anxiety when speaking English included a lack of English vocabulary capacity and a lack of exposure to English as oral communication. Furthermore, the findings show that the student's future expectation of learning English as a foreign language in the classroom include becoming familiar with speaking English and to be able to talk to foreign guests without being nervous. This study highlights the need for further investigations into effective strategies to facilitate students' efforts in speaking English comfortably.

Keywords: vocational school, English speaking anxiety, narrative study

INTRODUCTION

English is a core component of the curriculum in Indonesia, taught from elementary to junior high school. It is integrated as a local content subject in many elementary schools and is a mandatory subject in junior, senior, and vocational high schools. The government designates English teaching as a distinct position in the educational system. Speaking English, in particular, is a paramount skill for English as a foreign language (EFL) students. The four essential language skills - listening, speaking, reading, and writing - must all be mastered by English students. Among these skills,

speaking has garnered substantial scholarly attention, primarily because it tends to be more challenging than the others.

Nevertheless, many EFL students, especially in non-English-speaking countries like Indonesia, encounter difficulties in developing their English speaking skills. As per Suciati (2020), some Tadris Bahasa Inggris (TBI) students express apprehension about speaking in the EFL context. Speaking is occasionally recognized as a weakness among students studying English as a foreign language. According to Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986, p. 125), many learners excel in acquiring other competencies but face a “mental block” when it comes to speaking a foreign language. Numerous factors can impact students’ speaking abilities, with language anxiety being a prevalent issue that can hinder their speaking performance.

Horwitz, et., al. (1986) identified several factors contributing to foreign language anxiety, including communication anxiety, test anxiety, and apprehension of negative evaluation. At the vocational school level, numerous students commonly experience anxiety when speaking English, with these causes often intertwined. Vocational schools offer majors that emphasize English as a critical skill for their students.

Among these vocational schools, tourism schools particularly stand out. Proficiency in English is a requisite skill in such institutions, significantly facilitating their students' future employability and careers. As noted by Ningsih and Fatimah (2020), students specializing in tourism and hospitality, equipped with a strong command of English, are well-prepared for the global job market and can work effectively anywhere in the world. Striking the right balance between practical job training and language skills equips them for positions with ease.

Previous research has looked into students’ anxiety levels when speaking English in the classroom. Yet, using a narrative study approach, little is understood about vocational school. The current study attempted to fill that void by investigating what causes students’ anxiety when speaking English and their expectations of what they will be able to do in English in the future.

LITERATURE REVIEW

ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN THE INDONESIAN SCHOOL SYSTEM

The study of English by non-native speakers in countries where English is not the primary language is referred to as “English as a foreign language” (EFL). Given its status as an international language, English is taught in Indonesian elementary schools and universities, with English proficiency being a graduation requirement from elementary school to university in Indonesia. This necessity highlights the undeniable importance of English communication skills, especially if Indonesian students aspire to study abroad.

From the perspective of educational equity, it is imperative to address the current landscape of English education in Indonesia. Notably, a disparity in the quality of English education is apparent, distinguishing between urban and suburban areas as well as between most government schools and private institutions (Maduwu, 2016). Urban students typically have more favorable circumstances.

They can readily access quality English courses taught by local instructors or native speakers, avail themselves of abundant learning resources, and benefit from a variety of English language programs. In contrast, students in suburban and peripheral areas often encounter limited learning opportunities.

VOCATIONAL SCHOOL ENGLISH CURRICULUM

A Vocational High School serves as an intermediary institution where students are prepared to enter the workforce with specialized vocational skills. This form of education equips students to excel within specific professional domains compared to other job sectors. Upon completing their educational journey, students transition into their chosen careers and compete with fellow job seekers in the same field. Consequently, additional skills beyond those taught in the standard curriculum are often required to enhance their professional aptitude.

The development of vocational education is crucial for ensuring that Vocational High Schools produce competent graduates who meet the demands of the community, workplaces, professions, future generations, and the broader knowledge landscape. The Ministry of Education and Culture emphasizes that enhancing infrastructure, retaining qualified educators, and improving graduate outcomes are essential steps in this process.

According to Widiati, Rohmah, and Furaidah (2017), proficiency in high school English encompasses the ability to engage in three types of discourse: interactional (interpersonal and transactional), concise functional text, and extended essays, both in spoken and written form. These competencies manifest at a literacy level, allowing individuals to use English effectively in personal, social, cultural, academic, and professional contexts, employing a coherent structure and cohesive, suitable linguistic elements.

ENGLISH SPEAKING ANXIETY

Anxiety serves as a potent variable with the capacity to significantly impact the process of language learning. Within the realm of anxiety affecting language acquisition, Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) is a distinctive and noteworthy category. As defined by Horwitz, et. al (1986, p. 128), FLA represents “a unique complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, emotions, and behaviors associated with classroom language learning, arising from the distinctive nature of language acquisition”. Understanding and researching students who experience anxiety during foreign language learning is essential because anxiety is widely recognized as a substantial barrier to language acquisition (Horwitz et al., 1986).

Several factors contribute to students’ reluctance to speak English. Thornbury (2005) identifies some of the causes of speaking difficulties and heightened anxiety during language expression, including insufficient vocabulary, grammatical errors, and the fear of making mistakes. Language anxiety in students can also stem from factors such as a lack of proficiency in English, diminished self-confidence, the apprehension of receiving poor grades, and limited teaching experience (Mahmoodzadeh, 2012). Another type of language anxiety observed in the classroom is the social aspect, triggered by the competitive nature of the class

environment. Such language anxiety can detrimentally affect the overall learning atmosphere (Akbar et al., 2018).

Several studies have already explored students' anxiety regarding English speaking. For instance, Santriza (2018) conducted research on students' fear of public speaking at SMAN 5 Banda Aceh. The findings indicated that a significant portion of students experienced anxiety when speaking English: 73 percent of students felt anxious due to communicative apprehension, 72 percent experienced test anxiety, and 55 percent were anxious because of concerns about negative evaluation.

Another study by Insaini (2018) focused on students' anxiety regarding their English communication abilities in the English Department during their 5th semester at UIN Raden Intan Lampung. The research uncovered several factors hindering students' speaking performance. These included overestimating the requirement to speak in English, having irrational beliefs about English communication, sensitivity to anxiety, misinterpreting bodily signals despite being capable of expressing thoughts well in English, and low self-efficacy.

Asparanita (2020) conducted another study, revealing findings related to two aspects: types of anxiety and contributing factors. This research identified three types of English learning anxiety among students: state anxiety, trait anxiety, and specific-situation anxiety. Discovered anxiety factors encompassed communication anxiety, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Additionally, Subagiah (2018) explored students' English speaking anxiety at SMPN 11 Yogyakarta. The study found that speaking anxiety in English resulted from various factors, including limited vocabulary, difficulties in pronunciation, fear of making mistakes, and apprehension about negative evaluations.

The literature review presented above highlights the prevalence of English-speaking anxiety among students and the diverse factors contributing to this phenomenon. To comprehensively investigate this issue within the specific context of our study, we now turn our focus toward the method that guided our research.

METHOD

A narrative inquiry design was employed in this study, emphasizing the exploration of past experiences and their impact on the present and future (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The research was conducted at a vocational school situated in Banggai Laut, Sulawesi Tengah. A willing 10th-grade student within the Hospitality and Tourism Industry program participated in the study voluntarily. Data collection was carried out through a semi-structured interview method, and the analysis followed a thematic analysis approach. This approach is tailored to identify, analyze, and report the central themes inherent in the researched phenomena (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION PARTICIPANTS' PROFILE

The participant, referred to by the pseudonym Andi (male), is seventeen years old and pursuing a major in Hospitality at his school. He resides in Pasir Putih Village, which is quite a distance from his current school. His primary and secondary education took place in his hometown. Andi envisions a future where the town experiences a surge in hotel establishments within the next ten years, offering him potential job opportunities in the hotel industry. He recalled that he began studying English in the third grade of elementary school, but it wasn't until junior high school that his interest in English blossomed. Regrettably, his language anxieties have hindered him from becoming a proficient English speaker. The following sections outline the findings of this present study.

SOURCES OF ENGLISH-SPEAKING ANXIETY

LACK OF ENGLISH VOCABULARY CAPACITY

Many EFL learners' real communication is greatly hampered by a lack of vocabulary knowledge. Foreign language learners, in particular, with a limited vocabulary take longer to learn new vocabulary items, understand text less well, and engage in less oral communication with their peers. Andi's interview response demonstrates his lack of English vocabulary mastery.

Excerpt 1

“Saya belajar Bahasa Inggris itu sejak saya kelas 3 SD. Waktu saya belajar Bahasa Inggris belajar tentang melafalkan kosa kata kemudian menghafalnya, seperti kosa kata angka, benda, hewan dll. Dibangku SMP pun masih diminta untuk menghafal. Diminta untuk menghafal kosa kata dengan jumlah yang lumayan banyak. Jujur saya itu lemah dalam menghafal, sehingga saya sering lupa artinya.”(Andi)

“I started learning English when I was in 3rd grade. At that time, learning English in class was by beginning to read and memorize vocabulary, numbers, objects, animals, etc. In junior high school, I was still asked to memorize. I was asked to memorize a fairly large number of vocabularies. Honestly, I am weak at memorizing, so I often forget the meaning.”
(Researcher Translation)

Andi shared his firsthand experience with learning English, commencing in the third grade of elementary school. Beginning English education in elementary school forms a crucial foundation for students to develop deeper language skills. Therefore, Andi possesses a strong grounding in English language learning.

However, despite the significance of vocabulary recognition as a fundamental speaking skill, Andi recounted his challenges in memorizing English vocabulary. During the interview, he candidly disclosed that one of his difficulties in learning English was memory retention. While he has acquired vocabulary, he faces difficulty recalling extensive lists and often forgets their meanings, leading to

limitations in his vocabulary. This vocabulary limitation can contribute to speaking difficulties and heightened speaking anxiety (Thornbury, 2005). Andi explained that the difficulty in memorizing vocabulary stems from his struggle to remember pronunciation and meanings.

This reinforces the importance of introducing English education at the elementary school level. Early exposure to English enables students to comprehend English materials more effectively and transition smoothly into subsequent learning stages. Younger students tend to be more receptive to language learning. Consequently, it can be inferred from the aforementioned insights that mastering the fundamentals of English, such as daily vocabulary memorization, represents the initial step towards achieving fluency in the language.

LACK OF EXPOSURE TO ENGLISH AS ORAL COMMUNICATION

Learning a second or foreign language places a strong emphasis on oral communication. The ability to speak English cannot be separated from the teacher's role in providing material knowledge that leads students to become accustomed to speaking English. According to the data, the participants were not given any instruction on how to speak English.

Excerpt 4

“Kami pernah diminta untuk memperkenalkan diri menggunakan Bahasa Inggris pada mata pelajaran Bahasa Inggris. Ketika giliran saya untuk memperkenalkan diri, saya sungguh gugup. Saya cemas padahal hanya memperkenalkan diri. Saya takut akan melakukan kesalahan karena sebelumnya saya tidak pernah berbicara bahasa Inggris.”(Andi)

“We were asked to introduce our names or data to others using English in English lessons. When it was my turn to introduce myself, I was very nervous. I was so worried even though it was introducing me. I'm afraid if I'll say the wrong thing because I've never spoken English before.”
(Researcher Translation)

In English classes, there are activities involving self-introduction. Andi recounted an experience when it was his turn to introduce himself in English. He confessed feeling nervous because he had never spoken English before. Andi had not received instruction or practice in speaking English or accurately pronouncing English words. Speaking English was unfamiliar to him, and this lack of familiarity contributed to his fear of making mistakes, consequently causing anxiety.

The absence of exposure to and practice in spoken English communication can significantly impact students' self-confidence. Becoming accustomed to conversing in everyday English sentences is essential for students. However, Andi's experience highlights that speaking English isn't considered necessary, which is indicated in the following statement.

Excerpt 5

“Kami tidak diharuskan berbicara bahasa Inggris dengan baik. Oleh karena itu, tidak ada siswa, termasuk saya, yang fasih berbahasa Inggris. Kayanya karena bahasa Inggris itu sulit, apalagi disuruh berbicara.”(Andi)

“Students were not required to speak English well. Therefore, none of the students, including myself, can speak fluent English. I think English is difficult, especially when asked to speak.” (Researcher Translation)

Speaking English is a source of concern for some students, as in Andi’s case. He asserted that fluency in English was not common among his classmates because it was not a requirement. This leads Andi to the conclusion that English is a challenging subject, particularly regarding spoken English. Students who experience anxiety when speaking to individuals or groups often struggle to maintain control in communicative situations. Their limited experience in spoken English, along with infrequent practice, further compounds this issue, ultimately impacting their public speaking abilities (Mahmudi & Anugerahwati, 2021). In this context, the role of teachers is pivotal. Teachers play a crucial role in teaching students how to effectively communicate, actively listen, and negotiate meaning within a shared linguistic framework (Asparanita, 2020).

**FUTURE EXPECTATIONS
BECOMING FAMILIAR WITH SPEAKING ENGLISH**

Speaking exercises, which can be assisted by the teacher, are one possible way to reduce anxiety level when speaking English. Andi mentioned that speaking practice could be a fun way to avoid feeling rushed. The following statement from the interview demonstrates this.

Excerpt 13

“Mungkin belajar dan focus menerima materi. Jangan malas. Selain itu, sering latihan mengucapkan kata-kata Bahasa Inggris. Guru juga bisa bantu siswa untuk lebih banyak latihan tapi dengan cara yang mudah sehingga bisa membuat siswa semangat serta tidak bosan.” (Andi)

“Maybe learn and focus on receiving the material. Don’t be lazy. In addition, often practice pronouncing words in English. The teacher may also help us practice a lot of English in an easier way that can make the spirit of the class so that it doesn't get boring.” (Researcher translation)

Participating in English lessons can be an effective approach to alleviate anxiety. Andi believes that through focused learning, students are more likely to readily absorb the information provided. Additionally, Andi suggests that teachers

can significantly contribute by guiding students in engaging and easily comprehensible exercises, which can help prevent monotony while practicing spoken English. Increased practice and better preparation have been shown to assist students in conquering their fear of speaking, a point emphasized by Liu (2007). The ingenuity of English teachers plays a pivotal role in fostering a comfortable and supportive classroom environment for English language learning. Consequently, it is important to identify the specific causes of anxiety in order to provide appropriate support and intervention for students.

TALK TO FOREIGN GUESTS WITHOUT BEING NERVOUS

By majoring in hospitality at a tourism vocational school, Andi hopes to become one of the workers who can speak good English without feeling too nervous.

Excerpt 15

“Jika suatu saat nanti saya bekerja di hotel, saya harap saya bisa berbicara bahasa inggris dengan orang asing dengan baik tanpa rasa gugup.”(Andi)

“If one day I get work in a hotel, I hope I can speak English well with foreigners without feeling nervous.” (Researcher translation)

Based on Andi's earlier response, he aspires to pursue a career in the hotel industry. By majoring in hospitality at a tourism vocational school, he hopes to become a proficient English speaker, enabling him to easily assist foreign visitors when necessary. Furthermore, the school offers a practical advantage as it has a hotel where students can hone their skills. Recognizing the significance of English proficiency in the workplace, employees in the tourism and hospitality sectors prioritize this skill. Students also receive instruction in supplementary subjects like language to enhance their communication abilities. Within hospitality-focused institutions, foreign language skills hold exceptional importance as they enable the delivery of superior customer service, as highlighted by Zahedpisheh, Abubakar and Saffari (2017).

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study is to investigate the sources of students' anxiety when speaking English and their future expectations. The findings from this study are expected to motivate students to actively engage in English language speaking classes. Additionally, it can help educators in identifying and addressing student's speaking anxiety. This research also underscores the need for further investigations into effective strategies to enhance students' English speaking performance. Creating a conducive environment for classroom interactions is crucial in promoting a supportive atmosphere and reducing anxiety, particularly during speaking activities. In the future, researchers should focus on determining the optimal classroom setup to maximize the efficiency of teaching and learning

activities. This will play a pivotal role in advancing the quality of English language education.

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