The Challenges Faced by Papuan Undergraduate Students in Enhancing Speaking Skills

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ABSTRACT
This article explored the challenges faced by Papuan undergraduate students in improving their speaking skills in English. Speaking skills are vital for academic success and future career opportunities, yet many students in Papua encounter significant difficulties in mastering this area of language proficiency. This study identified key factors contributing to these challenges, including limited exposure to English outside the classroom, lack of confidence, inadequate teaching methodologies, and socio-cultural factors. Through interviews and surveys conducted with 8 students from 2 universities in Timika Papua, the study provides insights into these challenges and suggests potential solutions to enhance the speaking skills of Papuan students.
Keywords: Papuan Undergraduate students, Speaking skills, The challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Speaking skills are one of the most important components of language proficiency, especially for students who study English as a second language. In the current globalized world, speaking English has almost become a necessity part of communication that increasingly is in demand in academic and professional life (Leba et al., 2021). In line with this, Putri and Amri (2020) stated that as a global language, English has become critical issue for getting hold of higher education, professional opportunities, and also participating in international discourse. For ESL students, developing their speaking skills are necessary to their development and acquisition as individuals and learners, because they can voice out thoughts clearly, join discussions, and gain confidence in using language (Hapsari, 2019).

Papua is known for linguistic and cultural diversity; hence, the acquisition of competence in the English language cannot be overemphasized. More than 800 indigenous languages are spoken in Papua, which is at the farthest corner of Indonesia to the east and the most linguistically diverse region on earth (Putri & Amri, 2020). Although Bahasa Indonesia is the official national language, formal communication happens mainly through Bahasa Indonesia while English remains a primary medium for higher education and career opportunities (Meinawati et al., 2020). More integration into the world's economy and education system only adds to this fact. Nevertheless, many undergraduates in Papua have difficulty perfecting their oral usage of English language that affects them during their school activities as well as in life generally.

In the Papuan situation, the gap would be the particular challenges that students can face in improving their speaking of English. According to Abrar et al. (2018), the formal education system does not emphasize English practice as the core of learning English, consequently most students cannot gain practice and assimilation into spoken English. Local languages will dominate communication within communities, and little opportunity exists for students to use English in their daily activities (Leba et al., 2021). This means that in most cases, students hardly hear or use the language outside class, which is the most essential area for fluency. Furthermore, due to the

linguistic heterogeneity of Papua, students find it difficult to understand the culture and specific English language registers, thereby making the job of speaking even more difficult.

Another serious barrier is not limited to the lack of exposure to the language in the lives of students; rather, some combinative barriers contribute to students' inability to speak well. The problem exists in a lack of properly qualified English teaching staff to teach these students how to be better at speaking. Many of the Papua English teachers possess great knowledge on grammar and writing but do not carry training and practice that would motivate students to cultivate good speaking in the classroom (Wea et al., 2020). The methods of teaching adopted may ignore speaking and communicative capabilities, giving instead greater emphasis on reading and writing. This also makes the issue even worse by keeping the children's speaking capability undeveloped.

An additional factor to complicate the teaching of speaking skills in Papua is the socio-cultural context. The importance attached to local languages and cultural activities may present a strong barrier to the adoption of English in everyday, informal conversations (Romrome & Ena, 2022). Socially, students may feel unwilling or apprehensive to speak in English because of the dynamics of their community, where knowledge of the local language or culture is viewed as of more value (Butarbutar et al., 2019). In addition, Wulandari and Amalia (2022) pointed out that the concern of making some mistakes or appearing to be assessed when speaking English can lead learners to avoid even practicing speaking English. This sets a big hurdle for teachers and policymakers who desire to enhance student speaking skills in English, not only through linguistic interventional strategies but also through attitude transformation towards language acquisition.

It must be noted that existing language acquisition research conducted in Papua cannot yet answer the concerns involving speaking skills in detail. There is an acknowledgment of the region to enhance overall language proficiency, but many approaches have been to focus on basic language skills or literacy. The research gap in developing speaking skills, positioned in a Papuan context, does not clearly outline what students' unique needs and barriers are when learning to speak the language of English. Understanding such challenges is crucial to inform effective interventions that might improve students' speaking abilities and bridge the gap between academic requirements and practical communication skills.

This article attempted to identify challenges that hinder the development of undergraduate students' speaking skills in English in Papua. The article explores linguistic, educational, and socio-cultural challenges facing Papua in general, thereby helping to illuminate barriers to speaking proficiency for the students. Therefore, one research question was organized; what are the challenges that Papuan EFL undergraduate students encounter?

By delving deeper into this issue, the educators will find the concrete suggestions in terms of tackling the problems in such areas as curriculum development, teacher training, and an environment supportive of language learning which encourages students to speak inside and outside the classroom.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach, utilizing interviews and surveys as the primary data collection methods. A sample of 8 undergraduate students from 2 universities in Timika, Papua was selected for the study. Participants were asked to complete surveys that assessed their speaking difficulties, while in-depth interviews were conducted to gain deeper insights into the personal experiences and perspectives of the students. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify the common challenges faced by students in improving their speaking

skills. Ethical considerations, such as informed consent and confidentiality, were maintained throughout the research process.

RESULT & DISCUSSION

There were several key findings based on the results from the questionnaire: the undergraduate students in Papua faced several major challenges in developing their speaking skills in English. The challenge is attributed to a mixture of linguistic, educational, and socio-cultural factors that serve as obstacles in developing speaking proficiency. The major challenges identified in this study through responses from the students were;

1. English Exposure

One of the most common complaints mentioned by participants is the scarcity of exposure to English outside the classroom. In their daily lives, many students reported that they speak an indigenous language or Bahasa Indonesia and hardly have any opportunity to practice English in informal or real-life contexts. As one participant identifies,

> *"Teachers only speak English in the class. But outside of class, nobody uses it. I hardly hear others speaking in English, so it's difficult to exercise it." (Student 2)*

This result was the problem faced by Papuan undergraduate students. English is taught in class, but they were encouraged to use it outside of the classroom. Lacking informal, natural outlets to use the language, their practice settings, such as speaking skills, are underdeveloped.

Besides the constraints in the classroom, not having English around students in their immediate environment is another major obstacle to learning. Without any English media, conversation, or social interaction, there are very few opportunities to reinforce speaking skill that has been learned in the classroom. For them, English remains book knowledge, not a practical usage of the language. Therefore, most of the students can hardly reach fluency or become confident in speaking as they practice only in this formal context, which can be much less alive than natural speech. This finding was underpinned by Meinawati et al. (2020), who stated that enhancing students' speaking skills can be done by utilizing learning media. By using learning media, students can simplify the abstract things from the materials in the classroom.

Furthermore, the rural or isolated area students face worse situations. Geographical distance from cities and towns, where people are more likely to use English, limits their opportunities further. In these locations, students have fewer interactions with people who speak English, making it harder for them to engage in authentic language use (Ambu & Saidi, 1997). The lack of access to English-speaking environments means that students are less likely to encounter the language in various forms—whether through social interactions, media, or community events—thereby slowing their progress in acquiring practical language skills.

This means that a lack of English in students' everyday lives directly impacts their language development. Without opportunities to practice English in authentic, everyday settings, students have difficulty internalizing language patterns, vocabulary expansion, and fluency. Even if students attempt to use English in the classroom, without authentic experience, there is apprehension and a lack of confidence (Amalia et al., 2024). For most, it is unnatural pressure; it is an artificial setting, and the urge to speak there becomes something that is required out of necessity rather than being motivated by a need to communicate.

Ultimately, relatively limited exposure to the use of English outside of class develops a very vicious circle. Without the practice in real life that would afford them opportunities to enhance their speaking proficiency, students remain less confident in using the language. This, of course has implications for their general English proficiency and tends to lead the learners towards frustration and disengagement. Students are inevitably placed into a classroom setting which does not depict the real dynamism of using language outside, thereby failing to reach realistic fluency.

2. Lack of Confidence

The main problem faced by students while studying English was low confidence, especially while speaking. Many students were candid in expressing that they feared being judged and therefore were afraid to speak out clearly. This lack of confidence became very evident when students were afraid of making mistakes, which they feared would be judged by others. According to one student,

> *"I'm afraid I will say something wrong and my friends will laugh at me, so*
> *I just keep quiet." (Student 3)*

One of them also clarified that,

> *"When I want to speak English, the fear of making mistakes always haunts*
> *me, so that I will say nothing" (Student 7)*

This fear of committing errors not only is a personal concern but also carries cultural implications, too. In many cultures, errors are considered to have a negative connotation, which may be the reason students hesitate to talk in English (Harmer, 2007). This cultural context makes learners shy away from uttering words with one mistake, as perceived, point to failure. Thus, remaining silent becomes the best or the last solution, and avoidance of practice culminates with more lack of practice in the act of speaking. The behavioral pattern perpetuates itself into the cycle of learner's low language practice to give strength to this insecurity, lessening their effectiveness to use the languages.

This avoidance and fear cycle hinders students from becoming fluent in the target language. Speaking practice is a prerequisite to becoming fluent in a new language, but when the students become afraid to speak because of a lack of confidence, their language will never improve (Damayanti et al., 2020). They might not be able to speak and, hence, to improve pronunciation, vocabulary use, or fluency, all of which are intrinsic elements to become fluent in a new language. It can further limit the participation capacity of students during classwork to the fullest, giving them a sense of irrelevance in front of their mates.

Moreover, the fear of public judgment, which affects their ability to talk, can even prevent them from developing relationships with others in their surroundings in that classroom. Permanent silence or reluctance to participate can deprive learners of the potential to have great social integration, a very crucial step in the course of learning language. This will provide a relaxed environment for the interaction with classmates where they can comfortably and freely engage and gain confidence to speak (Sumuer, 2018). In this case, if students pull back due to fear, then they lose opportunities, which makes them even more isolated and more anxious about being low in confidence.

Therefore, students' lack of confidence needs to be addressed so that a productive learning atmosphere is created for the language students. Teachers and colleagues can contribute more to establishing a very safe and unjudging climate where students can fail and consider failures as a path to learning instead of being afraid. Encouragement of free dialogue, provision for positive

reinforcement and fostering of the mind-set for the growth in life can be effective against the vicious cycles of fear or hesitation to do things in regard to the understanding of English knowledge.

3. Inadequate Method of Teaching

Many Papua-based universities have openly spoken and expressed individual frustrations about the inefficiency of teaching methodologies applied in the instruction of English languages. Much of the complaint centers around too much focus on grammar, reading, and writing at the expense of speaking practice. Most students have complained that their classes spend too much time writing essays and reading comprehension; there is hardly any minute, not to say, space for developing speaking skills.

> *"In class, we focus on writing essays and reading comprehension. There's very little time for speaking practice." (Student 1)*

This imbalance in instructional focus leaves students with a limited ability to improve their spoken English, despite the growing importance of verbal communication in everyday life and professional settings.

The reliance on traditional lecture-based teaching methods and written exams further exacerbates this issue. More often than not, English language instruction is limited to a classroom environment where students are mostly passively learning by listening to lectures and making notes, rather than participating in discussions or practicing conversation skills (Al Hosni, 2014). Such instruction is viable for parts of language acquisition but not for the interactive or immersive experiences that would establish student confidence and fluency in speaking. Without such significant speaking experiences, students would not be adequately equipped to face real life, which speaks and communicates impulsively through word of mouth.

In addition to a lack of speaking experience, many teachers are not prepared nor qualified to teach in a speaking environment. Teachers may have knowledge in other areas, such as grammar and writing ability, but lack skills or methods to make teaching 'speak English' stimulating. However, some students pointed this gap out where they said

> *"Our teachers are good at grammar, but they don't give us activities to speak or practice conversation." (Student 8)*

Indeed, the current lack of adequate training in oral instruction means a lack of exposure to structured interactional exercises, as it would strengthen their spoken ability in English (Walkington, 2005). As a result, there is an evident imbalance in students' knowledge in written English as compared to spoken language.

A major deficiency in students' competence is left without speaking-focused activities. Students are not even permitted to demonstrate their skills in the ability to use spoken language effectively in cases of good performances in reading and writing. Speaking skills also require continuous, dynamic practice that ultimately takes place in real contexts, the lack of which students cannot experience within the traditional classroom (Siska et al., 2021). It not only thwarts their academic career but also reduces their confidence to use English in informal and professional situations.

In solving this problem, it is recommended that universities revisit their present teaching methods; in fact, speaking ability should be emphasized as there is grammar, reading and writing ability. Therefore, there should be increased interaction through discussion groups or role-plays and among peers besides training teachers and equipping them with resources. By doing so, universities

will be able to provide students with more balanced and dynamic language learning approaches to equip them in their academic pursuits for both academic success and future careers in speaking skills.

4. Socio-Cultural Factors

Socio-cultural factors in Papua have an impact on the motivation and ability of students to learn English. The region is so diverse culturally with over 800 indigenous languages spoken, which makes the linguistic environment pretty complex for the students. Most students place more importance on their local languages or Bahasa Indonesia in their everyday lives. Consequently, there is little time to learn English. As one student pointed out,

> *"At home I use my mother tongue, and in the community, it's mainly Bahasa Indonesia. English is not really part of our daily life." (Student 6)*

Another respondent also admitted the fact that,

> *"I am not familiar with speaking English all the time, I generally speak bahasa Indonesia or my local language" (Student 8)*

This goes with the larger context of the culture in which English is not regarded as a medium of communication or interaction in society.

Use of local dialects and Bahasa Indonesia also affects attitudes toward teaching and learning of English since these are regarded as integral parts of individual identity and community relationships (Kamilah et al., 2019). In such a context, someone might not feel they need to learn to speak English. Inasmuch as the local language is more central to the family, cultural rituals, and social cohesion, it is common that students lack the need to prioritize English. This makes it more difficult for the student to expose himself to the native language in common situations, which makes speaking in English even challenging. The same finding was found by Rahmaniah and Asbah (2019), who found that most students still struggle speaking English since local language became the dominant language in daily conversation.

A second challenge is the lingua franca that is Bahasa Indonesia, which is a common language used in the region. Bahasa Indonesia is the common language for interfacing between the people of a different cultural background within Papua. Consequently, students use Bahasa Indonesia at school, in socializing, and even in informal communication (Romrome & Ena, 2022). That makes the purpose of learning English even less meaningful because the latter was not necessary for everyday communication. Such dependency on Bahasa Indonesia would only push English further to the periphery in the daily lives of students, therefore making it less relevant and less motivating to learn and use.

Mastering local languages acquires cultural meaning, which would prevent learning English. For many community people, having the fluency in local languages has been attributed to cultural identity and social affinity. The perceived importance of a local language because of its cultural importance could reduce that of English-especially if the latter has a foreign/outsider dimension. For that reason, students will be more relaxed and assertive when communicating in their local languages or Bahasa Indonesia, with which they are more familiar and fluent, than taking the risk of making errors in English (Butarbutar et al., 2019).

The socio-cultural environment in Papua poses unique challenges to students learning English. Here, it is presented how the dominance of local languages and the predominance of Bahasa Indonesia over daily life leads to marginality in English, reducing the motivation of students

to achieve fluency in speech. The challenges call for considering the cultural context in which students learn and finding ways to integrate English into life in ways that respect and complement the linguistic and cultural background.

5. The Need for Interactive Learning Environments

All students indicated a need for more interactive and communicative learning environments in their English language classes. Many students complained that they did not get much practice in speaking in class and felt the need for a more interesting teaching style. Some of the respondents mentioned that activities such as group discussions, role plays, or presentations would allow them to use the language more in real situations. According to one student,

> *"We need more activities that make us speak, like group discussions or debates. It will help us get used to speaking English in front of others."* (Student 5)

These kinds of activities are essential in helping students build fluency and confidence in their speaking abilities.

The students' feedback highlights a significant gap in the current teaching methods, which often focus more on grammar and written skills rather than communication. How obvious the grammatical, reading, and writing skills may become in learning any language, a student can note that without speaking, none of it applies outside of class. Increased focus on speaking in classroom activity will also mean the students spend more time exercising thinking on the spur of the moment and then speaking in English. It may eventually bring their conversations out very much to an effective means of everyday communication.

This also would provide a supportive environment in which more interactional activities could be included in the curricula of educational institutions for students to practice speaking without fear of judgment or error. Many expressed that they experience nervousness or self-consciousness as they speak English in front of others, especially in more traditional lecture settings (Saeheng, 2017). Debating, role playing, and group discussions make students feel that making mistakes forms part of the learning process and finally makes them less fearful and silent during sessions. They will eventually become more confident in speaking, which would lead to proper academic and professional prosperity.

It also enhances a sense of community between the learners. In group discussions or collaborative projects, the interaction of the group would enhance the language skills and increase connection among fellow students. The interactions will provide ample practice opportunities that will help students connect better with the process of learning (Romrome & Mbato, 2022). It is also a tool in cooperation that calls for peer support where students learn from each other and give constructive feedback, thus enhancing language development.

The findings seem to point to a need for teachers to rethink their teaching methodologies in light of communicative approaches. The teachers ought to devote more time to speaking exercises during classes, create situations where students will practice their English, and make the class communicate rather than perfectionist (Lunenberg et al., 2014). By embracing these changes, educators can create a more engaging and effective learning environment that helps students not only improve their speaking skills but also develop the confidence to use English in a variety of contexts.

6. Role of Technology in Enhancing Speaking Skills

Students have increasingly recognized the potential of technology to enhance their speaking skills, especially in a context where face-to-face interaction in English is limited. Many participants highlighted how online platforms, apps, and virtual exchange programs could offer valuable opportunities to practice speaking. One student shared,

"Practice more and improve speaking through apps like Duolingo or online conversations with people from other countries". (Student 4)

Students can use these tools to practice speaking with native speakers and engage in conversational English outside the walls of the classroom. Those who use English only a little in their daily lives would benefit the most from these digital tools.

But particularly for students in Papua, where English is not spoken very much outside the school environment, such technological resources offer them a more accessible and flexible way of speaking practice (Irwanto et al., 2022). Traditional classroom-based learning usually confines students to formal, teacher-led lessons with minimum opportunities for spontaneous interaction. In contrast, online mediums provide for more informal and conversational, time-driven discussions wherein a student is provided with a wide opportunity for practice in pronunciation and vocabulary enlargement besides exposure to several accents and dialects. That flexibility in such technology can offer students a range of options, should they find environments where native English speakers are rarely constant.

It also offers a chance for the student to exercise on their own (Ariantini et al., 2021). For example, exercises in applications such as Duolingo are designed in such a way that the learner will gradually build up his or her speaking ability without creating a stressful situation. Virtual exchange programs provide an immersive experience where students can interact with peers from other countries, hence making it possible for students to practice English in real-world contexts (Pratiwi et al., 2021). Such media offer opportunities for students to practice outside the classroom while interacting in an authentic manner in communication, a core of the development of a new language.

Furthermore, application of technology fills a deficit felt by the majority of the students while practicing speaking as it gives scarce chance of one-to-one or face-to-face practice (Atmowardoyo et al., 2022). It's really hard to find English-speaking partners or communities to engage with outside of school because local languages and Bahasa Indonesia dominate everyday communication in Papua. This barrier is removed through technology because access to a global network of speakers is given to students who can practice anywhere and at any time. This can substantially improve the confidence and fluency of the students since they get to practice real communication with other people, and also receive instantaneous feedback concerning their performance in speaking.

To sum it up, technology could provide a breakthrough in students' effort to gain mastery of speaking in English. Limited exposure to the target language is offset by apps, online platforms, and virtual exchange programs offering new, flexible ways to practice. Also, in a time when educational institutions increasingly use digital tools, technology will likely play an even more central role in the future of language acquisition to help students build the speaking skills they need to succeed in both academic and professional environments.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the results indicate that Papuan undergraduate students face complex challenges in developing their speaking skills in English. These factors include lack of exposure to English, low confidence, inadequate teaching methodologies, and socio-cultural factors. The responses from participants suggest that creating more interactive, communicative, and supportive learning environments along with the integration of technology can help address these challenges and improve students' speaking proficiency. By understanding these issues and subsequently acting on them, teachers and policymakers may be able to facilitate a better learning experience in languages for Papua students, which might have spillover benefits for improved school outcomes and subsequent success beyond school.

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