

Autonomous EFL Learners' Ways of Practicing Speaking Skills During Pandemic of COVID 19; A Study of Engineering Fresh Graduates

Fidyati, Fidyati^{1*}, Idaryani, Idaryani², Suryani, Suryani³, Fhonna, Rahmi⁴,

Marina, Marina⁵

¹ Universitas Malikussaleh

² Universitas Malikussaleh

³ Universitas Abulyatama

⁴ Universitas Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry

⁵ Universitas Malikussaleh

*Corresponding author. Email: fidyati@unimal.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Learning English is learning skills in which practice plays the most prominent role. Among other skills, speaking has the highest interest to be mastered by English learners. Not only English students but also general English learners, fresh graduates in specific, retain spoken English to apply for their further study or future jobs. The pandemic disruption, undeniably, has limited access to an offline English practice. That is why some autonomous ways of learning spoken English are worth trying. This study is aimed at finding out the fresh graduates' way of improving their English speaking skills. Ten graduates of the engineering department were interviewed on their ways of improving their speaking ability in line with the absence of classmates or partners. The data were then analyzed descriptively. The findings showed that most of the respondents preferred to sing English songs in practicing English speaking skills. Some others chose to talk to themselves and use a mirror. Only a few of them focus on fluency, not grammar and none of them took online English courses. This indicates that sitting with classmates or having direct partners in improving spoken English is not a must.

Keywords: *English learners, autonomous learning, speaking skills, COVID-19*

1. INTRODUCTION

English is termed a foreign language (EFL) in Indonesia since it is a language in which children are most likely taught in schools and the one most available to adults in their educational years [1]. Not similar to the neighboring country, Malaysia, English in Indonesia is also learned by people who have already used at least one other language, and English is not normally used in the

whole community, especially in rural areas. What makes English in high demand in Indonesia is that English is very common in the daily aspects of life such as brochures, advertisements, product brands, offline and online informal information, and even in employment. Two surveys involving students and parents in 8 provinces in 1988 and 27 provinces in 1989 revealed that respondents

considered English to be essential for obtaining good jobs in the future[2].

For that reason fresh graduates, one of EFL learners group who is closed to the workplace, future job, or studies, need to prepare their English proficiency, especially in speaking skill ability. A Study of ESL learners' background [3] revealed that the work sector finds the English graduates do not have speaking skills which are appropriate to the need for working place [4]. This must be even harder for EFL learners. The problem surrounding this is when ESL learners can make use of English to communicate naturally, EFL learners hardly use English on a social occasion [3]. That is why the graduates in the EFL context need to maintain their daily use of English languages.

However, the pandemic of COVID 19 has impacted social distancing which may hinder the English clubs activities, offline informal courses, meeting friends with the same passion and interest in English, and other possible media of speaking skill learning. Not to stop there, other various factors are affecting the EFL learning process of language learners in such a situation, one of them is autonomy. Benson [5] advises that no matter how much students learn through the formal sphere, there is always plenty more they will need to learn by practice on their own. It is autonomous learning.

Research in EFL learners autonomous learning have varied from the use of task-based instruction in taking Spanish course [6], advantages and disadvantages of learner autonomy promotion in Vietnamese EFL education [7], to emerging technologies for autonomous language

learning including podcasts, blogs, wikis, online writing sites, and some other digital media [8]. Despite those contributions, gaps remain in the field of spoken English learners' skills. A study on using digital storytelling to develop autonomous learning for oral proficiency has been impacted positively [9]. However, the engagement and role of the instructor in the research by giving them feedback may support the autonomy indirectly. It is, therefore, worthwhile to research EFL learners; fresh graduates of engineering students of Universitas Malikusaleh, to find out their independent ways of practicing speaking skills. It is believed that those are the vital skill for them not limited to admission to graduate programs, job interviews in English-speaking settings, short course or exchange program, Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), International English Language Testing System (IELTS), and other proficiency tests.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 EFL Autonomous Learning

That English becomes a global language, it leads government authorities in many countries, including Indonesia, to choose English as the first foreign language to be taught in formal education. English has even become one of compulsory subjects for secondary schools and higher education even as an elective subject for elementary schools in some cities. The obvious goal for EFL learning was stated in the 1994 English Syllabus that is to enable the student to read English texts so that they can increase their knowledge of other general subjects including science, technology, and arts. This indicates that

English teaching in Indonesia has long been a part of its education.

Unfortunately, this long story of English language existence is also followed by a complex set of problems of failure issues. Curriculum and teaching methodology should be two first elements to be related, but it cannot be simply to blame them. In 1997, a researcher, Sadtono describes the condition as:

“flogging the dead horse due to insurmountable constraints ... many of which are beyond the teacher’s capability to surmount, such as a limited number of hours, class size ... and the social situation”[10].

This implies that we cannot expect the teacher to adjust to the curriculum and apply outstanding methods while other factors are put aside. Besides, urging the students to be motivated to study English simply because it is mandatory is also a misleading concept. All factors surrounding EFL learners’ learning process should be empowered. Based on his study, Sadtono, contends that reading and speaking proficiency of the very small number of Indonesians is the result of attending private courses and self- study [10]. This strongly signs the importance of learning autonomy. Autonomy as it has been described by Khenoune [11] as essential for learners who learn English in a foreign language context in which the opportunities to hear and practice the language in the real world is lack.

So, what autonomous language learners should do in learning as described by Holec is:

“Determining his own objectives, defining the contents to be learned and the progression of the course, selecting methods and techniques to be used,

monitoring this procedure, and evaluating what he has acquired”. [12]

This is the most vital as it teaches us that autonomy is not an independent learning process without concepts. It needs the learners’ consciousness in identifying their purposes and goals, awareness in selecting the appropriate techniques, and responsibility for monitoring and assessing the process so that they can achieve the best outcome.

To foster autonomy, Fidyati [13] has elaborated on how using technology and media including distance learning and portfolios, and utilizing English resources such as books and worksheets work for EFL learners. Similar to the ideas, Husein [14], also suggests the most effective way for promoting autonomous EFL learners is by utilizing portfolios, learner diary, and vocabulary notebook. His study proved that autonomous learning and English language learning positively correlated. As a result, the learners can detect their weakness and strength, take responsibility that may increase their motivation in learning a language as motivation is one of the prominent factors to be successful in language learning [15]. Littlewood [16] summarizes the two core of the notion of autonomy are the learners' ability and willingness to make choices independently.

Besides, the EFL learners’ changing needs to English speaking skills also requires them to go back to learning several times in their lives. Engineering students, for instance, will need English speaking skills during their study for class discussion, student exchanges, presentations on academic seminars, and so forth. Having graduated, their English speaking skills may relate

to employment, English language proficiency test, and future study. Then again, they will need to be able to learn and practice it on their own. This is related to what Holec [12] states in his study that in choosing the methods of instruction, a self-directed learner may use trial-and-error. Due to this, Rahmawati and Wulyani's [17] suggestion that students are required to be more independent and responsible for their learning should be also taken into consideration.

2.2. How to Maintain English Speaking Skill during COVID 19 Outbreak

In recent years, proficiency in speaking skills has become a special concern raised by employers of some companies. In a study in Malaysia, graduates are found not widely marketable in the job market due to a lack of English proficiency which costs the nation a great deal of money [4]. It is also found a significant relationship between income levels and gender, duration of employment, self-esteem, ownership, academic major, and English proficiency[18]. A study investigating the role of the English language proficiency of Bangladeshi university graduates in the Australian job market against the backdrop of a globalized 21st century found that in various ways one's English language skills did influence their prospects of employment[19]. Undoubtedly, English speaking skill plays a role not only in making social interaction, or in building of social network but also in the possibility of secure and better employment.

To maintain English speaking skills, undeniably, needs partners. Before the coronavirus pandemic, EFL learners may join clubs, courses, or other kinds of learner group to practise. During the

outbreak, not only formal educational institutions like schools, colleges and offices are closed, but also the private ones. For some people, this is a disaster. But for others, the freedom of commute time to work are made use to advantageous activities at home. In the context of English speaking skill, there are numerous ways can be practised such as listening to podcast, audio books or drama, TV programs or movies, indulging in karaoke, and playing games with English language instructions.

Among those ways the followings are few ways in which the EFL learners may prefer during pandemic disruption:

2.2.1 Talk to Yourself

Trying to relax and encouraging yourselves to speak are two learning strategies offered in a study in Taiwan [20]. It was found that 39% of respondents felt timid when speaking English with other people. The timid feeling about speaking English was found to have significant negative correlations with functional practice strategies. In contrast to that, 38% disagreed that they felt timid [20] which shows that they used those two learning strategies to conquer their fear of speaking English. Above all, the most of respondents (81%) encourage themselves by every means possible when they were afraid of speaking English or making mistakes[20].

2.2.2. Use Mirrors

Good communication cannot be separated from pronunciation and grammar. Many ways of practicing pronunciation were introduced. One of them is by using mirrors. So, a mirror is no longer simply a common household item, it helps

language learner better study since it can help practicing sounds or words those are difficult to pronounce and watch the shape of mouth to shape it the same way of native speakers do[21].

Occupational English Test web [21] also states that having a mirror image while speaking will give an idea of having a conversation, improve fluency and build confidence.

2.2.3 Sing English Songs

Teaching English speaking through English song is always gives enjoyable moment for students either they are kids or adults. Not only the learners are faced by enriched vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, they also find enjoyable experience[22]. In the context of autonomous learning during pandemic, this way of practicing English speaking skill may become the first choice as the songs are available all through media both audios and videos. Singing English songs alone may also increase the learners' confidence in pronouncing English words.

2.2.4. Practice Tongue Twisters

A tongue twister is a sentence which is difficult to utter appropriately and need a lot of practice. Mu'in at.al [23] postulate on their study that practicing tongue twisters makes the EFL learners's learning more fun and joyful, and enhance the learners pronunciation, fluency, and learner motivation in practicing their English. This technique improve learners' speaking skills since it uses the repetition method.

2.2.5 Focus on Fluency Not Grammar

Yang [10] finds the respondents of his study (92%) rejected the statement that "you shouldn't say anything in English until you can say

it correctly." However, over 80% of them agreed that if beginners were allowed to make errors in English without correction, it would be difficult for them to speak correctly later on. In other words, even though it was necessary to practice speaking English, learners may be worried about making mistakes, which might become an obstacle for later progress. That is why it need to urge the EFL learners to focus on fluency in practicing without ignoring grammatical point.

2.2.6. Take online courses

COVID 19 has brought revolution in language teaching learning that affect the academicians, educators, teachers, and student with very new and innovative method of online teaching learning. Online course has become solution for long distance learning for decades. Fatima [24] states that online teaching-learning contribute positive effect on learning but it is challenging for both learners and teachers. In terms of positive effect new opportunity by online learning, online teaching promotes independence for learners and more responsible with the authority of learning on their hands, besides, it also gives them opportunity to increase learners' discipline, learners skill in note-taking, time management and also test preparation.

Shahzad's statement that the online learning of video recording can be replayed by students for many time also indicates that online learning also benefits the learners in terms of budget.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative method through interviews. Due to the social distancing of

pandemic COVID 19, the interview was conducted via telephone. The respondents of the research are ten (10) fresh graduates of the architecture engineering department of Universitas Malikussaleh. Among the respondents, 3 of them are graduated in 2019, and the rest are in May 2020. The interview questions were 7 open-ended questions evolving their perceptions of English speaking skill and their ways of practicing their English speaking skills.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Answering interview

Question 1: Is the English language important?

Five respondents answer with yes important, and the other five say it as very important. Those answers show that all respondents have a positive perception of the English language.

Question 2: Do you still learn English?

Eight respondents answer with yes, one says sometimes, and the remaining respondent says no more.

Question 3: In the near time, what are you up to? Looking for a job or pursuing your study?

Seven respondents answer with looking for a job in which 3 of them have already been working in a very good company. While the other three are looking forward to applying scholarships for their future postgraduate study.

Question 4: According to you, does speaking skill will be beneficial for your future choice?

All respondents say yes to this question, even one of those who work claim that his workplace supports him in learning practising English.

Question 5: Mention any ways you utilize in practicing your English speaking skill during new normal of COVID-19?

Out of 10 respondents, seven of them like Singing English songs and watching movies. The next preference is talking to yourself techniques (5 respondents). Four of them also talk without focusing on grammar. One respondent practices tongue twisters and another respondent practice her English speaking skill in front of mirrors.

Question 7: Do you monitor the procedures of your learning process and make evaluation?

All respondents say no.

5. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

By looking at the respondents' positive perception either in English language or speaking skills, and its importance to their future careers and studies, it indicates that respondents may find some ways in practicing their English speaking skills in any condition, including during the coronavirus outbreak. The findings have revealed some information on some ways of fresh graduates' English speaking skills. Most of students are willing to improve their speaking ability by singing the English songs. They say new and difficult words and listen to the song repeatedly. This technique becomes the most favorite in consideration to an easy access to it.

Talking to yourself is the second highest choice after singing songs. 2 of 3 respondents who practice this way admit that they usually talk to

themselves after watching movies as if they repeat what they heard before. Others talk to themselves in any possible situation. 4 respondents who often talk by focusing on fluency add that they also check the grammar when possible. That only respondent practice tongue twisters may mean that other respondents may not take serious effort in to their learning process.

The interview also revealed that one respondent not only has a single way of practicing his/her English speaking skills but applies multiple ways at the same time. Another unique finding is that respondent who says no longer learn English, the researcher later finds him have some ways of practicing his speaking skills while he does not realize it as a learning process. Others 9 respondents who say they still study were found without monitoring and evaluating their learning process.

By looking back at the autonomy concept introduced by Holec above, these findings show that the respondents foster autonomous learning without realizing it. They do not understand well the concept of autonomy which may impact on their learning outcome. This is in line with the findings that none of them monitor and evaluate their learning process.

In addition, that 8 respondents are sure that they still learn English after graduation, none of them intends in taking online courses. This may relate to the urgency to the speaking skills and the availability of massive materials around which does not need specific rule of learning.

The overall finding seems support the autonomous learning during pandemic disruption

for EFL learners to be practiced to maintain their spoken English.

This study, however, is limited to small samples which cannot be generalized to many other EFL learners. A further in-depth approach and more numbers of respondents are needed to obtain more creative ways of autonomous learning on spoken English. Besides, that this study only limited to the purpose of speaking ability, study on writing ability is also worth conducting as writing skill is also prominent for EFL learners' good communication in workplace or further education.

Through this study, the researchers hope that findings would help all EFL learners out there to modify their learning to be in tune with new normal condition.

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