

Learners' German Speaking Difficulties: A Case Study in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Speaking is a productive language skill that requires learners to produce words or sentences with a correct language structure and a good pronunciation in a relatively short time compared to other productive skills. Thus, learners often encounter problems in speaking. This study aims to determine learners' obstacles in speaking German as a Foreign Language. The research data were obstacles in speaking German that learners of German experienced as a Foreign Language Program in Universitas Negeri Malang, Indonesia. They were in the 4th semester and attended the Konversation (Conversation) class. The collection used an open questionnaire that resulted in qualitative data and was described descriptively. The study indicated that learners' obstacles in speaking German are linguistic aspects (e.g., lack of grammar mastery, difficult German pronunciation, and lack of vocabulary). In addition, learners also experienced certain difficulties in memorizing, understanding, and to respond their speech partners, which also become obstacles in speaking German.

Keywords: *DaF, German, Speaking, Obstacles in Speaking*

1. INTRODUCTION

Speaking skill is the main goal of language skills. A person can be said to have mastered a foreign language when s/he can communicate actively using the language. According to Alsamani [1], speaking has a crucial role in language learning because this skill is the key to the success or failure of a language learner. Even Wolf [2] states that on average we use 90% of spoken language and 10% of written language. Therefore, it is not surprising that speaking skills are the most important, crucial, and even the goals of language skills [1], [3]-[5].

Compared to other skills (writing, reading, listening), speaking has a higher and more complex difficulty level. It is often considered the most challenging language skill because learners need to go through a complicated process to speak correctly and understandably [6], [7]. To master speaking skills, learners must master many components, such as lexical knowledge (vocabulary), grammar, phonology, semantics, and other aspects related to linguistics [3]. In addition, speaking includes a combination of some cognitive and psychological aspects. To achieve successful speaking, students need to have sufficient language knowledge and an excellent psychological (mental) state [7]. Therefore, speaking

skills are considered the most complex and significant skills [1], [3], [5].

Speaking is one of the language skills that student should acquire should acquire in a foreign language class such as Deutsch als Fremdsprache (DaF) or German as a Foreign Language. For German learners and teachers, speaking has always been a challenge. Learners are required to communicate using German that is acceptable and can be understood by the interlocutor. In addition, they must be able to produce words with good and correct grammar and pronunciation rules in a relatively shorter time than other productive skills. Therefore, foreign language learners, including German Language students at Universitas Negeri Malang (Malang State University/UM) often encounter problems in speaking.

Because speaking problems often arise in foreign language learning, several studies address this theme. Nakhalah [8] explored the speaking difficulties encountered by English language students at Al Quds Open University. The results showed there were some difficulties in speaking the students due to some reasons such as fear of mistake, shyness, anxiety, and lack of confidence.

In addition, there are similar studies that find problems in speaking. Shen & Chiu [9] found the factors

that caused the EFL learners' English speaking difficulties are (a) psychological problems (e.g. nervousness, fear of making mistakes, and lack of confidence) was the primary reason for English speaking difficulties, followed by linguistic problems (e.g. insufficient vocabulary), and environmental problems (e.g. lack of learning context for English conversation). Meanwhile, Fitriani et al. [10] found that psychological problems are the most dominant problem faced by the third-semester students of the English Education Study Program of FKIP Tanjungpura University Pontianak. It was followed by linguistic problems and environmental problems. In these two studies, the problems that arise are not only from the learner's psychology but also from other aspects, such as linguistics and the environment. However, psychological problems remain the main problem.

The research above is a study with a similar subject to this research, namely the problems experienced by learners in speaking the foreign language they are studying. The difference is that the relevant research was conducted in English language learning while this research was conducted in German class. The study results may be different, considering the level of difficulty and the learners' perception of these foreign languages. In addition, speaking skills were reported as more complex in German [11].

There are similar minor studies in the context of the German language in Indonesia. Most studies discuss ways to improve speaking skills, such as efforts to improve German Speaking skills (Sprechen) through role-playing combined with composing the dialogue, task-based learning, etc [12]-[14]. There have been no studies that specifically address the difficulties in speaking German from the learner's perception. The results of this study can be used as empirical data regarding the main problems in German-speaking skills experienced by Indonesian learners.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research used a qualitative approach and was described descriptively. This study aimed to find out the obstacles or difficulties faced by Indonesian learners in speaking German. The research was conducted at the German Language Program at Malang State University (UM) in the Conversation course. The data in this study were the difficulties experienced by learners in speaking, while the data sources were students of German Language Program UM who took the Conversation course for the 2020/2021 academic year which consisted of 65 students (from three classes).

The data in this study were collected through an open questionnaire instrument through a google form with the question "What difficulties do you face in speaking German?". After the data was collected, data analysis was carried out to answer the objectives of this study. The

analysis is done by sorting the data, categorizing the things that become obstacles in speaking German, and reducing the data to produce significant data. After that, an in-depth analysis was carried out based on relevant theories and research.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The most dominant problems experienced by foreign language learners in the previous studies were psychological problems, followed by linguistic aspects and environment [8]-[10], [15]. Meanwhile, the main difficulty faced by Indonesian learners at UM in speaking German is the linguistic aspect (i.e., lack of grammar mastery, difficult German pronunciation, and lack of vocabulary). The findings will be presented as follows:

3.1. Linguistic Aspects

The linguistic aspect is the learners' main problem in speaking German. These findings indicate that the difficulties in speaking a foreign language experienced by English and German learners are slightly different. In previous studies, the most dominant problem in speaking English is the psychological problem. In this study, the most dominating problems are from the linguistic aspect, e.g. lack of grammar, difficult German pronunciation, and lack of vocabulary. This is under the opinion of Richards [10] claims that there are some typical learner's problems in speaking, e.g. lack of vocabulary needed to talk, poor grammar, and poor pronunciation.

3.2. Lack of Grammar Mastery

Lack of grammar mastery is the most common problem faced by learners when speaking in German. This finding strengthens the research result of Ishag et al. [11] that in the context of Indonesian learners, German grammar and speaking skills are considered more complex than English. More than half of the participants stated that they had difficulty speaking German because of its grammar. It can be seen in the following data:

1. *kesulitan yang umum dan masih sering saya alami ketika berbicara bahasa Jerman yaitu pada Grammatik 'the common difficulty that I still often experience when speaking German is the grammar'*
2. *Saya masih memikirkan grammar ketika berbicara 'I still think about grammar when speaking'*
3. *Belum bisa berbicara secara spontan mengingat Bahasa Jerman memiliki tata bahasa yang kompleks. '(I) have not been able to speak spontaneously considering that German has a complex grammar'*

4. *belum banyak mengetahui struktur kalimat '(I) don't know much about structure of some sentences'*

Based on data 1-3, it is known that learners think that the German language has complex and not easy grammar, so they have difficulty speaking fluently because they tend to focus on grammar. Data 4 shows that learners have poor grammar. This supports the opinion of Fitriani et al. [10] and Shen & Chiu [9] that poor grammar can be an obstacle in speaking a foreign language.

The problem of lack of grammar mastery as an obstacle in speaking a foreign language can also be seen in the following data:

5. *Berbicara langsung dengan Grammatik yang tepat 'to Speak directly with a proper grammar'*
6. *Grammatik yang sesuai dalam Bahasa Jerman 'appropriate grammar in the German language'*
7. *...membentuk kalimat yg baik dan benar '... to build a good and correct sentence'*
8. *Kadang masih bingung strukturnya apakah benar atau salah. 'Sometimes (I) still confuse whether the structure right or wrong is.*

Based on data 5-8, it is known that students have speaking difficulty because they tend to focus on forming grammatically correct sentences. It shows that their main concern is the appropriateness and accuracy of grammar, not the effectiveness or success of communication. Because of that, they tend to focus on constructing the correct sentence, not how my interlocutor can understand what I mean. This also can be seen in the following data:

9. *yang pertama kesulitan dalam mengolah kata untuk menjadi kalimat. 'The first difficulty is in processing words into sentences'*
10. *penyusunan kata kata dalam berbicara bahasa jerman 'the arrangement of words in speaking German'*
11. *Saya merasa sulit menyusun kalimat dalam berbicara bahasa Jerman 'I find it difficult to compose sentences in speaking German'*
12. *Bingung dalam menyusun kata-kata dan terlalu banyak dipikir jadi ketika berbicara sulit '(I) confuse in putting together words and thinking too much so it's difficult to speak.*
13. *Penyusunan kata hingga kalimat yang sesuai 'Arrangement of words to be an appropriate sentence'*

From data 9-13, it is known that students have difficulty constructing sentences in German. They confuse sorting and forming words into sentences. These data further confirm that learners tend to focus on grammar rather than communication success. Learners

do not use language as a tool to communicate but tend to learn a language. In language learning, it is important to consider that a target language is a tool or vehicle for communication, not jilts on the object to be studied [16], [17].

In addition, there are specific grammar problems in speaking a foreign language. Specifically, the grammatical problems experienced by the learners in the previous research, which have been done in English classes, are they do have problems with their understanding in present tenses, past tenses, future tenses, they have problems in distinguishing parts of speech and using the modal verbs [11]. In this study, the grammatical difficulties experienced by the learners in speaking the German language are as follows:

14. *urutan urutannya dalam menyusun sebuah kalimat itu saya masih bingung, karena urutannya itu berbeda, misal kaya contoh buat kalimat pertanyaan sama jawaban, itu beda urutannya, dan contoh yang lain lainnya lagi juga gitu, saya masih sering salah disitu frau. 'I am still confused about the order in which I compose a sentence because the order is different, for example, question and statement sentences are different, and there are other examples too, I still get it wrong there, Mam.*
15. *Sulit untuk menyusun kalimat dengan benar dan tepat. Selain itu, juga belum hafal dengan perubahan- perubahan artikel dan kasus yang dikenai kata tersebut... 'It is difficult to compose sentences correctly and precisely. In addition, (I) also have not memorized the rules of articles and its cases...*
16. *Kesulitan menggunakan Artikel 'It is difficult to use articles'*
17. *Penempatan artikel dan penggunaan akkusativ dativ genetiv 'rules of articles and the use of accusative, dative, genetiv (case)'*
18. *... artikel, grammar 'articles, grammar'*
19. *Masih memikirkan artikel benda saat akan menyebut kata benda, terlebih jika ada preposisi. Contoh : der Stuhl. Ich will neben dem Stuhl sitzen. Saat akan menyebut "dem", terkadang saya masih berpikir, apakah benar dem atau tidak. '(I'm) still thinking about articles when I'm going to mention nouns, especially if there are prepositions. Example: der Stuhl. Ich will neben dem Stuhl sitzen. When I would say "dem", sometimes I still think, is it true dem or not'.*

Based on data 14, learners have difficulty arranging word order in a sentence because the German language has a unique and different order from English and learners' mother tongue, Indonesian. An example that can

be seen from data 14 is the word order in statement and question sentences. Also, in common German sentences, the verb is in the second position. However, the location of the verb can change if we use certain conjunctions.

The subsequent complicated grammars are articles, cases, and prepositions. Indonesian learners at UM have difficulty in memorizing and understanding the use of articles. There are three grammatical genders in German for masculine, feminine, and neutral. These genders change according to grammatical case and number, compared to only one fixed gender in English or the mother language of the participants, Indonesian. Therefore, understanding of articles is very important because articles affect Gender, Number, Cases, and Prepositions. German has difficult syntactical features, with its four cases, namely nominative, accusative, dative, and genitive for all nouns, pronouns, and adjectives. Thus it is considered as a highly inflectional and derivational language compared to English [11].

Articles and Cases in German grammar are also considered difficult because, in the context of students' first language, Indonesian, there is no similar grammar, so students do not easily understand it. While prepositions also become difficult because they are different from prepositions (data 19) in Indonesian, they are also related to understanding articles and cases.

3.3. Difficult German Pronunciation

The next problem from the linguistic aspect is pronunciation. Pronunciation plays a vital role in developing speaking skills. It has close connections to other fields such as listening and even grammar [10]. Thus, it often becomes an obstacle for foreign language learners. This study supports the previous studies that pronunciation is often a problem in speaking [9], [10]. These problems can be seen in the following data:

20. *Artikulasi atau pelafalan, terutama pada kosakata baru.* 'Articulation or pronunciation, especially the new vocabulary'.
21. ... *Aussprache.* '...Pronunciation'.
22. *Saya kesulitan di Pronunciation nya...* 'I have difficulty in its pronunciation...'
23. *pronunciation kurang tepat* 'unproper pronunciation'.
24. *Pengucapan beberapa kata* 'pronunciation of some words'
25. *Pelafalan yang baik dan benar* 'good and proper pronunciation'.
26. *pengucapan bahasa Jerman yang masih belum fasih* 'the pronunciation of German language that is not fluent yet'.

27. *Pelafalannya pada kata-kata kadang sulit di ucapkan* 'the pronunciation of the words that is difficult to spell'.

28. *kesulitan saya dalam berbicara bahasa jerman adalah prononsasi dan kelancaran saat berbicara* 'The difficulties I experienced in speaking the German language are pronunciation and fluency during speaking'.

Data 20-28 show that learners experience difficulties to pronounce some words in the German language. They find it difficult to spell and often mispronounce the German words. ... stated that German pronunciation and spelling tend to be easier than English because the way the words are written in German is mostly identical to their pronunciation [11]. On the contrary, this study finds that pronunciation becomes the second most problem experienced by learners in speaking the German language.

Pronunciation problems that the learners face are as follows:

29. *kesulitan saat harus praktik berbahasa jerman, karena perbedaan beberapa huruf dalam pelafalannya.* 'The difficulty when I have to speak German, the pronunciations difference in some letters.
30. *Pengucapan saat huruf vokal bertemu dengan huruf vocal.* 'the pronunciation when a vowel meets a vowel'

Data 29 shows the difficulty of pronunciation due to differences in speech in certain letters. In general, German as well as English and Indonesian have 26 alphabets, but German also has additional umlaut letters, namely ä, ö, ü and ß. In general, the pronunciation is almost the same, except for the letter j, which is read like the letter y (ja sounds ya). Additionally, there are also diphthongs and special sounds. The combination of some letters can form a new sound. This is also a problem for students as in data 30. For example, the words Ei sound like the English I, eu which sounds oi, and then sch, ch, st, etc. In addition, in line with the study result of Fitriani et al. [11], learners also have difficulties in the intonation of the German language.

The next difficulties of pronunciation as one of the obstacles in speaking the German language are an accent that can be seen as follows:

31. *Aksen* 'accent'
32. *pelafalan masih terbilang kurang karena masih terbawa logat* '(my) pronunciation is still poor because I have a strong (first language) accent'

Data 31-32 show that learners have obstacles pronouncing German accents because they have a strong first language accent. Like Shen & Chiu's study, they might believe that if they could speak with near native-

like intonation and pronunciation, they would feel prouder and become more confident in communicating with other people [9]. In addition, a learner explains that he/she has problems pronouncing the letters ä that should be pronounced /e:/ and r that should be pronounced /εR/. It is possibly because learners are not used to using the letters ä and the pronunciation of r in German, English, and Indonesian are different.

3.4. Lack of Vocabulary

The next difficulty in speaking the German language from a linguistic aspect is vocabulary. Vocabulary learning is central to language teaching and is of paramount importance to a language learner [18]. Thus, a lack of vocabulary can be a barrier to speaking a foreign language. It can be seen as follows:

33. *Penggunaan beberapa kosakata yg masih belum diketahui...* 'the use (meaning and context) of some vocabularies'

34. *penguasaan kosakata yang belum banyak...* 'lack of grammar mastery'

Vocabulary problem is still becoming a huge problem towards students' speaking performances. It supports the study that vocabulary significantly affects speaking performance [19]. Learners with a lack of vocabulary tend to face difficulty in speaking. From data 35-39 can be seen that learners are experiencing a lack of vocabulary. They might have an idea and know what to speak in their first language, but they have no idea how they should tell it in the German language. Moreover, they do not know or forget some vocabularies as following data:

35. *Susah mengingat artikel maupun Wortschatz...* '(it is) difficult to remember articles and vocabulary...'

36. *Terkadang lupa vocabulary nya Frau.* 'sometimes, I forget the vocabulary, Mam'

Data 37-38 strengthen the findings that learners are having lack vocabulary, which hinders their speaking performance. It supports the finding in the previous study, that lack of vocabulary can be an obstacle in the speaking performance of the foreign language learners both English and German [9], [10].

The problems of vocabulary occur when someone lacks the vocabulary needed to talk and does not know how to combine the vocabulary into a good sentence [10]. In other words, vocabulary is closely related to grammar. Even if a person has much vocabulary, but if he/she cannot combine it in a correct structure and proper context, it does not mean anything. Nevertheless, some learners are mastering grammar and vocabulary, but they still have difficulties in speaking. A certain psychological problem could cause such a situation.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Speaking is one language skill that has a higher and complex level of difficulty. The difficulties that Indonesian learners experience at Universitas Negeri Malang in speaking the German language are linguistic aspects (e.g., lack of grammar mastery and difficult German pronunciation, and lack of vocabulary).

By knowing those problems, we suggest applying learning methods that emphasize the function of language as a communication tool, not studying a language. In addition, we should create a comfortable learning situation that is fun and not stressful so that learners relax and do not feel tense or afraid to speak. We must also convince learners that making mistakes is okay so that they are not fear of making mistakes and are not afraid to speak up. Finally, based on the results of this study, other studies related to methods, strategies, or media can be carried out to overcome problems in speaking a foreign language.

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