

## Factors Contributing to Speaking Difficulties in Young EFL Learners: An Exploratory Study

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### ABSTRACT

*Many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, especially young beginning-level students with limited exposure to English, struggle to speak the language fluently. However, research specifically examining the obstacles to speaking skill development among young EFL learners is lacking, particularly in regions where English has no official status. This study explored Indonesia EFL teachers' perceptions of factors contributing to early primary school students' difficulties with spoken English. The goal was to establish a foundation for further research and pedagogical improvements. A questionnaire with Likert-scale ratings and open-ended questions was given to 194 teachers from 70 Indonesia public and private primary schools. Quantitative and qualitative analyses identified patterns and rationales in the teachers' judgments of sources of students' speaking struggles. Pronunciation, vocabulary gaps, grammar, lack of practice, and anxiety were most frequently cited as moderate to substantial challenges. Teaching experience and school type influenced perceptions of anxiety's role and scaffolding orientations. The findings offer initial insight into context-specific developmental and environmental constraints on young Indonesia learners' progress in speaking English. Future targeted research can build on this exploratory platform to inform responsive instructional interventions during this critical period of language acquisition*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Speaking is considered one of the most difficult English as a foreign language (EFL) skills for learners to master. Fluent speech requires coordinating grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and pragmatics, imposing substantial cognitive and linguistic demands even on advanced speakers. These difficulties tend to be greater for young learners with minimal target language exposure and still-developing first language skills.

While abundant research has examined speaking challenges among adolescent and adult EFL learners, far less has focused specifically on identifying factors underlying difficulties

among young or beginning-level foreign language learners. Exploratory research on this demographic can provide valuable insights into early speaking development obstacles, inform appropriate pedagogy, and guide future research.

This study explored Indonesia EFL teachers' perceptions of factors contributing to speaking difficulties among young learners in early primary grades. Indonesia, as an Expanding Circle EFL country, has prioritized English education even from first grade without sufficient resources for quality input and interaction. Thus, many young Indonesia EFL learners struggle with functional speaking proficiency.

Self-administered questionnaires were distributed to 194 teachers across 70 Indonesia public and private schools to elicit views on sources of students' oral language difficulties. Pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, lack of practice, and anxiety were most commonly cited as moderate to major challenges, echoing previous L2 research. Some variation emerged across school type and teaching experience regarding anxiety's role.

These findings provide an initial profile of factors Indonesia teachers believe undermine young learners' EFL speaking progress, with implications for context-appropriate practice. This study also helps fill gaps concerning this critical language acquisition phase in EFL settings. By highlighting key challenges, future research can examine their relative impacts and effective scaffolding to facilitate growth.

This literature review provides background on major issues related to speaking challenges faced by young English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. First, theoretical models of second language (L2) speaking processes are reviewed to outline the multiple complex dimensions underlying successful oral production. Next, research on developmental constraints on foreign language acquisition in childhood is discussed. Then, empirical studies on speaking difficulties among adolescent and adult EFL groups are analyzed to identify key inhibiting factors. Gaps in research focused specifically on beginner EFL learners are also highlighted to establish the need for exploratory research on this demographic. The goal is to situate and provide context for the significance of the present study on sources of speaking challenges for young Indonesia EFL learners based on teacher perceptions.

Key theoretical models map out the intricate processes underpinning oral language production and points where problems can arise. Levelt (1989) delineated conceptualization, formulation and articulation stages - generating ideas, encoding grammar and sounds, motor execution. Complex and accurate output taxes working memory and attention. Dell (1986) underlined the sustained activation necessary to continuously access and integrate vocabulary, morphology, syntax and phonology. Schuster (2014) portrayed speaking expertise as strengthening connections between semantic, lexical and phonological networks through repeated language experiences. Across models, difficulties in concept, language, cognitive or articulation capacities can impede fluent second language speaking (De Jong et al., 2012).

Childhood is considered the optimal period for native-like phonological acquisition, aided by heightened neural plasticity during this time (Long, 1990; Johnson & Newport 1989; Abrahamsson & Hyltenstam, 2009). Maturational explanations propose a sensitive period for speech learning ability that declines around puberty as language functions become more lateralized in the brain. Some studies also show even young learners with limited input can initially surpass older learners in pronouncing and perceiving L2 sounds, although older starters ultimately attain greater overall proficiency (Muñoz, 2008). Attention has also turned to cognitive maturity prerequisites like memory, literacy, and information processing that enable complex language learning. Such capacities may be underdeveloped in young foreign language learners, hindering acquisition without adequate first language academic skills (Nikolov, 2009). This research underscores the extended timeline for childhood L2 speaking proficiency development and the vital role of cognitive maturity along with environmental support.

Surveys across global contexts have consistently identified speaking as the language skill posing the greatest difficulty for adult English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners to

adequately develop (Al-Sibai, 2005; Tuan & Mai, 2015; Yeung & Wong, 2018). A detected gap between strong grammatical competence but weaker oral communication abilities points to enduring challenges mastering fluency and pronunciation (Zhang & Elder, 2011; Derwing & Munro, 2009; Alharbi, 2015). Documented obstacles include anxiety, insufficient vocabulary knowledge and recall, scarce authentic practice opportunities, negative feedback experiences, and cross-linguistic differences in phonemes and stress placement leading to persistent transfer errors (Rabab'ah, 2016; Alrabai, 2014).

While extensive research has examined adolescent and adult EFL speaking challenges, few studies have focused on the critical skill development period for beginning foreign language learners in childhood in Expanding Circle countries where English has no official status or practical usage beyond classrooms (e.g. Yang, 2016; Mai & Iwashita, 2012). As Lucas et al. (2008) advocate, understanding early trajectory obstacles can better diagnose persistent problems and inform responsive pedagogies tailored to developmental needs. This study aims to provide initial insight into teachers' views of factors hindering young Indonesia EFL learners' speaking progress, to establish foundations for further research and practice targeting this critical age group

## II. METHODS

This point discusses the research design, research procedure, technique of data analysis in completing the research paper. The description of the course of research should be supported references, so the explanation can be accepted scientifically.

This study employed a non-experimental, cross-sectional survey design to examine Indonesia English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' views on sources underpinning speaking difficulties among young learners across various instructional contexts. Surveys allowed collection of descriptive data reflecting participants' beliefs grounded in professional observations and experiences (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2009). Additionally, incorporating closed- and open-ended items enabled both quantitative analysis of tendency patterns and qualitative insight into the reasoning behind teachers' difficulty attributions.

### Participants

The 194 Indonesia English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher participants (24% male, 76% female) were from 70 public and private primary schools in Pondok Pesantren Al-Kautsar Simalungun. Convenience sampling was used due to accessibility limitations within the project timeline and budget. Most respondents (67%) were young teachers aged 20-30 years. Forty percent had 3 or less years' experience teaching Grades 1-3, while veteran teachers with over 10 years comprised 19% of the sample. Teachers were almost evenly distributed between public (47%) and private (53%) schools. The majority (84%) held a Bachelor's degree as their highest qualification.

### Instrumentation

The researcher developed a bilingual (English/Indonesia) questionnaire drawing on relevant literature concerning speaking challenges and child second language acquisition (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2009). It comprised three sections:

1. Demographic information
2. 5-point Likert scale ratings (from "not a source" to "major source") for 15 potential factors contributing to speaking difficulties related to cognitive, linguistic, sociocultural, pedagogical, and individual difference domains
3. Open-ended prompts eliciting examples and explanations of teachers' perspectives

Experts validated the questionnaire and 30 teachers pilot tested it, enabling minor modifications for enhanced clarity and cultural suitability. Analyses confirmed acceptable reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of .82 for the scales.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

After obtaining university Institutional Review Board approval, municipal education departments granted permission for teacher recruitment from chosen K-12 schools. Paper copies of the questionnaire were administered in person to volunteering teacher participants, who anonymously completed the form on-site with ample time and returned it directly to the researcher that same day. This allowed prompt data collection while avoiding risks associated with online circulation.

### **Data Analysis**

Closed scale responses were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Means and standard deviations summarized overall tendencies regarding perceived difficulty contributions across the sample. MANOVA tested for variation based on school type, age, experience, and qualification demographics. Open responses were iteratively coded to identify salient themes, categories, and explanations using predetermined and emergent codes. Integrating quantitative and qualitative findings enabled richer interpretation and offset limitations of singular analysis methods.

## **III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

This preliminary study found that Indonesia EFL teachers believe a variety of interrelated issues present moderate to significant speaking challenges for younger students. The most often mentioned barriers to adult and teenage skill acquisition were pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, lack of exposure and chances for communicative practice, and anxiety (Alrabai, 2014; Tuan & Mai, 2015; Zhang & Elder, 2011). However, depending on the kind of school and the backgrounds of teachers, considerable differences in perceived challenge levels and sources appeared

Pronunciation was considered the biggest barrier in public school settings, ranking as the most challenging issue overall. Teacher explanations demonstrated how inadequate phonics instruction and feedback are hampered by large class sizes, student variability, and limited English provision. When compared to English, a large percentage of Indonesia vocabulary has unknown phonemes and phonotactic restrictions, which creates ongoing pronunciation acquisition obstacles that need constant remediation (Saengboon, 2004). Even though kids in private schools face comparable language barriers, more intensive phonics instruction may quicken recognition and self-awareness training to make up for it (Chang, 2009).

As would be expected of inexperienced learners still acquiring lexical familiarity, gaps in vocabulary knowledge were another major obstacle. However, it was thought that production fluency problems were made worse by nervousness and a reluctance to talk without fully understanding. Teachers in public schools described their kids as more vulnerable to rigid instruction that unintentionally discourages speaking up. Many educators believed that poor L1 academic language ability hampered L2 lexical retrieval and usage, mirroring the views expressed in earlier fellowships (Nikolov, 2009). In order to reduce anxiety and establish habitual retrieval, recommendations focused on enhancing vocabulary exposure through multimedia activities, translation connections, and regular low-stakes speaking practice.

Teachers with fewer than three years of experience reported much higher levels of worry and confidence deficits than veterans. Qualitative studies showed that new teachers frequently set unrealistic expectations at first, believing that students will mimic the oral fluency levels of their first language. This causes students to become uncomfortable. Veterans suggested using more scaffolding strategies in order to support students' autonomy and linguistic security first. The critical stages of self-concept and comparability awareness correspond with the developmental period between the ages of 5 and 9 (Harter, 1999). In order to prevent innate

speech inhibition, senior educators stressed the importance of providing age-appropriate, friendly, but softly challenging instruction that is adapted to emergent cognitive maturity.

In conclusion, results support For young Indonesia EFL learners, speaking is a crucial developmental goal that necessitates multifaceted scaffolded support that is aware of contextual affordances that are localized. While more extensive study combining learner views and classroom observations can deepen our understanding, this exploratory project provides useful first steps in filling in the gaps in our knowledge of the early stages of foreign language speaking skill acquisition. Understandings can be used to better design responsive curricula and instructional strategies that support the foundations of oral competency during this crucial learning time

#### **IV. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION**

The purpose of this exploratory questionnaire-based study was to fill in knowledge gaps on the early speaking difficulties that young EFL learners face in an Expanding Circle setting. The results showed that worry, poor exposure and practice, grammar, vocabulary restrictions, pronunciation, and anxiety were thought to be the main barriers preventing Indonesia students from developing their oral English in a variety of learning contexts. The findings, which profile the factors influencing primary students who are still acquiring the fundamentals of the interlanguage system, are consistent with and expand upon earlier research on adolescent and adult populations.

Although linguistically-based limitations in relation to L1 Indonesia continue to exist in various circumstances, the differences found between public and private schools emphasize the crucial role that the environment and educational affordances play in supporting or impeding the development of skills. The tendency of seasoned educators to prioritize providing scaffolding security over expected output highlights the significance of developmentally appropriate and anxiety-reducing methods throughout early infancy stages when self-concept is still developing.

This work contains limitations as an early experiment that encourage more research. While generalizing from the convenience sample should be done with caution, trends found through triangulation between statistical and qualitative studies are somewhat reliable. Explanations can be strengthened by adding classroom observations, student viewpoints, longitudinal tracking, and case studies of effective presenters. Mature restrictions may be further clarified by comparing early and later starts. Promising future avenues include investigating teachers' scaffolding tactics and the effects of language policy changes on grassroots practice.

However, by highlighting the perspectives that educators have gained from working with young students on a daily basis, this exploratory project lays important groundwork for future research and responsive pedagogies that are suited to the dynamic process of early skill development. The EFL landscape in Expanding Circle areas that aim to fulfill the increasing global communicative demands within constrained L2 exposure settings can be transformed by addressing speaking fluency difficulties early on rather than allowing permanent fossilization. The purpose of this study is to provide guidance for developmentally appropriate and contextualized teaching strategies that will eventually enable the next generation of developing Indonesia speakers to attain English.

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