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Negotiating the Challenges in Speaking English for Indonesian Undergraduate Students in an ESL University

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Abstract

In Indonesia, English is not widely used for communication. Hence, Indonesian high school graduates who desire to study abroad may encounter difficulties communicating in English. One of the destination countries Indonesian students choose to study in is Malaysia. When studying in Malaysia, some may transition from EFL (English as a Foreign Language) to ESL (English as a Second Language) speakers as they are required to speak English more frequently, especially in academic contexts. Thus, this study was conducted to investigate the challenges of speaking English for Indonesian undergraduate students, the contributing factors to the challenges, and the strategies used by the students to navigate the challenges. A number of 15 Indonesian EFL undergraduate students still registered as active students in an ESL university in Malaysia participated in this study. Data was collected via semi-structured interviews, transcribed, and thematically analysed. The findings were presented thematically with narrative excerpts to support them. The results indicated some challenges faced when students adjusted themselves in their higher education institution, including their psychological reactions,

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speaking academic English, and online learning. Therefore, to help EFL students be more prepared to speak English for academic contexts in an ESL environment, stakeholders in the education sector in Indonesia should consider providing more actions to focus on improving the English-speaking skills of students.

Keywords: Challenges, English-speaking skills, ESL environment, Indonesian EFL students, remote learning, transition.

1. INTRODUCTION

The process of delivering learning materials in an educational setting requires the appropriate use of language. This might not be an issue when the environment is wholly in the first language (L1). However, when the environment is in a second language (L2), a barrier in communication might be generated in the process. Specifically, students with identities as international university students might feel challenged.

One of the most wide-spoken global languages is the English language. As mentioned, some international students might face challenges regarding using L2 on campus, particularly in Expanding Circle countries such as Indonesia, where English is not spoken extensively for communicative purposes (Kirkpatrick, 2020; Monfared & Khatib, 2018). An English Proficiency Index (EPI), conducted in 2021 based on test results data from the EF Standard English Test (EF SET) by Education First (2021), indicates that Indonesia scored a proficiency of 466 and was categorised as Low Proficiency, ranking 80th out of 112 countries in the world and 14th out of 24 countries in Asia. Based on the 1989 Law in Indonesia, English is classified as a foreign language (Lauder, 2008; Mattarima & Hamdan, 2011). It is also not used widely in daily life or for communication in official domains (Lauder, 2008; Rahmi, 2015).

Hence, some Indonesian students who decide to study in English as a second language (ESL) countries, such as Malaysia, may experience difficulties speaking English daily or in classroom communication. Data from Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students (UNESCO, 2021) reported that from 53,604 Indonesian students studying abroad, there were about 8,440 Indonesian students (15.7%) in Malaysia, making it the second top destination for studying abroad after Australia (25.9%). One of the underlying reasons was the expectation of improving their English-speaking skills from frequent usage of English in Malaysia. Consequently, they may transition from an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to an English as a Second Language (ESL) speaker. However, the COVID-19 pandemic may have impacted this transition as the students could not study in face-to-face (F2F) situations, and most might return to their EFL environment for remote learning.

The pandemic has thus created a research gap, as most previous research focused on how EFL students overcame their challenges in English-speaking countries. There is little discussion on the effect of remote learning and its effects on students overcoming their challenges in English-speaking countries. Similarly, the process of transitioning from an EFL to an ESL environment has been the subject of numerous studies, but none during the pandemic, which is the subject of this paper. This paper illustrates the transition process in the context of an unanticipated COVID-19

pandemic that may have compelled students to return to an EFL environment. Thus, this study was conducted to identify the challenges faced by EFL speaker students, the contributing factors, and the strategies they used to navigate the challenges during their transition from EFL to ESL speakers and remote learning during the pandemic.

This study took a sample from a group of Indonesian undergraduate students in a private university in Malaysia which uses English as the medium of communication. The research objectives for this study were: 1) to investigate the challenges of speaking English faced by Indonesian undergraduate students in an ESL university, 2) to identify factors that contribute to the challenges of speaking English in an academic context, and 3) to explore the strategies used in navigating challenges in speaking English in an academic context.

Furthermore, the research questions below were designed to seek the answers to the research:

1. What are the challenges of speaking English faced by Indonesian undergraduate students in an ESL university?
2. What are the contributing factors to the challenges of speaking English in an academic context?
3. What strategies do the students use to navigate challenges in speaking English in an academic context?

This research provides potentially significant findings to stakeholders. Firstly, Indonesian students interested in studying at a university that uses English as its primary communication medium can learn and prepare themselves with many efficient and effective strategies to overcome the challenges of speaking English. Secondly, EFL teachers and educators can use the findings to curate lessons that can increase speaking opportunities while being cognizant of anxiety and language support issues. Thirdly, educational institutions can use the findings to accommodate EFL students' issues and struggles in speaking English. Lastly, the findings may provide some insightful ideas for the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia to consider what strategies, approaches, or methods to design or amend a more effective national curriculum for English language subjects in secondary schools.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Speaking Proficiency for EFL Learners in Indonesia

The growth in popularity of English in Indonesia can be traced back to the 1980s when English was set as the first official foreign language in Indonesia based on the 1989 Law (Lauder, 2008; Mattarima & Hamdan, 2011). English was considered necessary given the usage of English as the lingua franca in global communication and relationships (Lauder, 2008; Rahmi, 2015). Moreover, the English language is widely used as a medium to access scientific knowledge and innovative technologies, which can be a competitive advantage in the global marketplace (Lauder, 2008).

However, the status of English as a foreign language may indicate that English is not extensively applied in daily life nor deemed to have an essential role in Indonesian society as it does not facilitate communication in official domains (e.g., government, law courts, and education) (Lauder, 2008; Rahmi, 2015). Consequently, most Indonesians are unfamiliar with the use of the English language and would find

it challenging to read, understand, or speak English in a scientific context (Paauw, 2009; Rahmi, 2015), and some Indonesian academicians even have low levels of English communication (Mappiasse & Sihes, 2014; Poedjiastutie et al., 2018). This situation raises a concerning issue since the English language is important, but most Indonesian learners may not have the qualified proficiency to communicate in it.

The contributing factors affecting speaking proficiency are elaborated on and categorised into extrinsic and intrinsic factors.

2.1.1 *The extrinsic contributing factors in English speaking skills for Indonesian students*

The extrinsic factors in English-speaking skills for Indonesian students are:

a. The notions about the English language in Indonesia

English is considered important by most Indonesians (Zein, 2017), as many books and information resources are published in the English language—indicating the significance of the English language’s contribution to national development (Lauder, 2008; Susanto, 2017). However, some Indonesians argue that mixing English and *Bahasa Indonesia* (or the Indonesian language) could indicate a decline in national idealism (Coleman, 2016, as cited in Alamsyah, 2018; Lauder, 2008; Paauw, 2009) and cause a negative impact on national identity and culture (Crystal, 2003; Panggabean et al., 2020). This negative perception of the English language may be related to concerns over post-colonial imperialism and liberal Western cultural values (Alwasilah, 1997, as cited in Lauder, 2008).

b. Curriculum about English language subject

English has been the official foreign language subject taught in secondary schools in Indonesia since Curriculum 1968. However, some high school graduates are still unable to communicate in English in a real-world context despite obtaining high marks in examinations or written proficiency tests due to low focus on speaking skills in school (Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia, 2014; Renandya et al., 2018; Riadil, 2020).

Under Curriculum 2013, English was taught as a compulsory subject in secondary school education (Alwasilah, 2013). This raised some debates about the necessity of teaching English at the elementary or primary level (Grades 1-6), where some education experts asserted that students in primary education should be focused on the development of children’s character building through religious and cultural values (i.e., the local language) before being introduced to foreign cultures (e.g., English language) (Zein, 2017). However, other parties proposed that English should be taught from the elementary or primary level to lengthen the duration of learning English (Panggabean, 2015). In addition, the inadequate time allocation for English language subjects (Mappiasse & Sihes, 2014) may also reduce opportunities to practice speaking English (Hadijah, 2014; Riadil, 2020).

c. The multilingual environment

A multilingual home and school environment might have influenced some Indonesian learners’ proficiency in English (Alwasilah, 2013) as this may be less supportive for students to practice their speaking in English (Hadijah, 2014). However, the multilingual environment has advantages since some low-proficiency students can use their first languages and dialects to learn Standard English, thus accomplishing a high academic standard (Ryan, 2006, as cited in Mukminin et al., 2019).

2.1.2 *The internal factors in English-speaking skills for Indonesian students*

The internal factors in English-speaking skills for Indonesian students are:

a. Linguistic factors

These factors include pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary (Hadijah, 2014; Riadil, 2020). In addition, most Indonesian students tended to have two types of errors: 1) global errors (e.g., pronunciation mistakes, stress mistakes, part-of-speech errors, and grammatical inaccuracies.), and 2) local errors (e.g., tenses and conjunctions), which might cause comprehensibility issues and misunderstanding with the interlocutors (Gozali, 2018).

b. Psychological factors

Some studies on Indonesian students reported that psychological factors influence their English-speaking skills. Motivation is the first factor, as some students might feel less motivated to speak English if they were keener on learning other subjects related to their course (Brown, 2007). Another demotivation factor appears when they compare themselves to their friends who can speak English better than them (Riadil, 2020). Anxiety comes as the next factor because some students may feel anxious and worried about making mistakes when speaking English (Juhana, 2012). Self-esteem is reported in a study from Ariyanti (2016), where some students assumed themselves to be 'not capable enough' to speak English and tended to mix in Bahasa Indonesia when speaking English. Some related studies have reported shyness in speaking English (Ariyanti, 2016; Hadijah, 2014; Juhana, 2012; Riadil, 2020). Most students feared being ridiculed by their peers, so they were reluctant to commit errors.

2.2 The Transition from EFL to ESL Environments

For some Indonesian students who are interested in studying overseas, speaking English is a contesting task. Most of them are considered EFL speakers, and when they study in an ESL environment, they undergo an identity transformation from EFL speakers to ESL speakers. Nguyen (2011) found that the common problems of some Indonesian students in an English-speaking university were pronunciation, speaking, and plagiarism in writing. In addition, some Indonesian learners may have issues participating during the discussion, such as constructing sentences with appropriate tenses, choosing appropriate vocabulary, and conquering their nervousness about speaking in front of the class (Abrar & Mukminin, 2016; Kusuma, 2021).

In addition, Abrar and Mukminin (2016) discovered that some students may not be familiar with academic terminology and require additional time to process, comprehend, and respond to the topic. Interestingly, the different academic cultures also affected students' willingness to participate actively in discussions, as they were used to being passive learners—compared to some European schools, which allowed students and tutors to interact actively with each other (Abrar & Mukminin, 2016).

2.3 Online Learning during COVID-19 Pandemic

Online learning during COVID-19 may create some limitations to speaking English opportunities for students, such as limited communication activities and insufficient class conversations (Bich & Lian, 2021; Ying et al., 2021). Learners may

not only face extrinsic limitations as some may also feel intrinsic limitations, i.e., hesitant, tentative, and fearful of making mistakes (Ying et al., 2021).

Furthermore, online learning has its downsides, as some learners may experience speaking activities being more time-consuming, for example, recording their oral presentations (Ying et al., 2021). Online learning also mostly focuses on the senses of hearing and vision, which may reduce the opportunities to practice speaking (Al Rawashdeh et al., 2021). The dependency on a reliable internet connection has also impacted learners' experience as some learners may face difficulty in completing their online speaking assignments when the internet connection is slow (Fauzi et al., 2022).

3. METHODS

Prior to data collection, some ethical considerations were addressed in this study. The participants were required to fill out informed consent, and data collection was conducted after they signed their Interview Consent Form. They were re-identified with codes to ensure confidentiality, such as Participant 1 (P1), Participant 2 (P2), and so forth. This project has undergone an ethics application and has been fully approved by Swinburne University of Technology's Human Research Ethics Committee (SUHREC, number SUHREC 20215869-8524).

This study used qualitative research since it allowed for the flexibility and emergent nature of the process of research (Dörnyei, 2007). Case studies were used to explore the answers to the research questions. A descriptive case study was applied as it provided a narrative account (Yin, 1984, as cited in Cohen et al., 2007). In addition, this study used multiple case studies as it involved more than one respondent.

The population of this study consisted of Indonesian undergraduate students who were still studying Swinburne University of Technology Sarawak, Malaysia, or SUTS. Most participants were high school graduates from Indonesia, some from urban bilingual schools and some from rural monolingual schools. One participant graduated from a secondary school in Malaysia. Two criteria were used to select the potential samples: 1) they were still registered as active students, and 2) they used English as a foreign language. The sampling method for this study was non-probability sampling or snowball sampling by choosing the participants based on recommendations (Annan, 2019), which resulted in 15 participants participating in this study.

The instrument for collecting the data was semi-structured interviews. The interviews used six kinds of questions proposed by Patton (2002), namely: 1) experience and behaviour questions, 2) opinion and values questions, 3) feeling questions, 4) knowledge questions, 5) sensory questions, and 6) background or demographic questions. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic at the time, the interviews were conducted online via Zoom. The duration of the interviews ranged from 41 to 90 minutes. The interviews were recorded by using the Recording feature in Zoom. Later, the interviews were transcribed to start the data analysis.

The data analysis method for this study was thematic analysis to analyse the participants' answers during interviews (Riessman, 2008, as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2013, p. 189). The steps for this study's analysis were: 1) familiarising with the data: the interviews were transcribed and translated verbatim, 2) generating initial codes: the transcription was highlighted to find some codes related to the research question(s), 3) searching for themes: the codes were grouped based on their similarities to narrow

down into some themes, 4) reviewing themes: the themes were reviewed to answer the research questions, 5) defining and naming themes: the themes were named accordingly, and 6) producing the report: the themes were included in the findings result. After undergoing these steps, the findings were reported in a narrative approach, where some excerpts from the interviews were quoted to highlight the themes.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Participants' Perception of Speaking English at University

All participants positively perceived speaking English as they were fully aware of the advantages of possessing English-speaking skills. Three themes emerged, they are communication the university, job opportunities and network expansion.

4.1.1 Communication in the university

The students expressed their need to learn and use English to facilitate communication with their peers and lecturers, mainly to avoid misunderstandings during communication. This is as illustrated below:

- (1) All the [courses] are being taught in English, and we must communicate with other students in English. (P1)

4.1.2 Job opportunities

The students claimed that speaking English regularly in the university could give them a competitive advantage after graduation. A student explained that:

- (2) In this Industry 4.0 era, many companies hire foreign workers, and many Indonesians also want to work overseas. So, universities must use English to produce better quality graduates who are competitive in [the] human resources market. (P2)

4.1.3 Network expansion

The students believed that speaking English could increase their chances of expanding their future career network. An excerpt from data is as follows:

- (3) You can get more friends and increase your network gain, especially with international friends, maybe one day they can be your co-worker partners, or maybe there will be a future partnership between companies. (P3)

4.2 Challenges of Speaking English Faced by Indonesian Undergraduate Students in Malaysia

4.2.1 The transition from EFL into the ESL environment

The transition process might not be easy, as some respondents had to adapt to a new environment where English is the main communication medium. The following excerpts illustrate the challenge:

- (4) Oh, that was really hard. I mean, I was not used to speaking English, like, you have to speak English to everyone, especially the local students and the teachers who have asked in English... It was really hard because I have never tried to use, like, speak English, like every time in a day. (P1)
- (5) The funny thing is especially on my first day of lectures, where I actually did not understand at all. So, it was around a two-hour lecture, and I, 100%, did not understand what the lecturer was saying. (P2)

4.2.2 *Speaking academic English*

There were two sub-themes in this area: the lack of vocabulary knowledge and the pronunciation, which can be grouped under linguistic factors. Firstly, most respondents expressed their struggles in using more formal English words. They needed to go through a cognitive translation process to articulate their thoughts in English while learning new academic vocabulary. This situation may have led them to feel nervous, especially when they had to speak impromptu. Secondly, their linguistic ability about pronunciation was inquired, as some felt it difficult to pronounce the academic words correctly. The following excerpts exemplified this challenge:

- (6) Like I know how to speak, it is on the tip of my tongue but I do not really know how to express it. Sometimes, I just slip and I speak Bahasa Indonesia sometimes because I was too nervous. Yeah, nervous[ness] is one of the main reasons that I sometimes messed up my presentation... Sometimes we know how to speak...in Bahasa Indonesia, but do not really know how to express it in English. (P1)
- (7) ...for me, the words which are categorised as academic words are difficult. For example, 'comprehend'. Usually, I use Google Translate, but the first time I pronounced it, I did it wrongly. It should be /ka:mpri'hend/. Like 'emerge', which should be pronounced as /i'mɜ:dʒ/. I used to mispronounce it. (P4)

4.3 **Contributing Factors to the Challenges of Speaking English in an Academic Context**

4.3.1 *Past learning experiences*

Three sub-themes emerged for this theme: (1) the focus on non-speaking skills, (2) the usage of Bahasa Indonesia to communicate during English class, and (3) an unsupportive environment.

Firstly, most participants vividly mentioned that their schools did not focus on speaking skills as they were more taught in reading, writing and grammar. Secondly, most respondents indicated that their English-speaking skills did not improve as they were allowed to use Bahasa Indonesia during English lessons. Thirdly, some respondents experienced unsupportive environments, which impeded them from speaking English in an EFL environment. They encountered some discouragement from their peers, which resulted in losing confidence to speak English—as illustrated by the following excerpt:

- (8) Most of the students that come from rural area[s]...will feel like a little uncomfortable and not confident to speak in English even though we can... There was a time when I was in high school when I actually tried to speak with my teacher in English, and the whole class suddenly yelled at me like 'What on earth are you doing? Are you showing off by speaking English?' (P2)

4.3.2 *The unawareness of English language support*

The campus has provided some English language support, such as Intensive English (IE) Short Course prior to undergraduate studies and English Clinic to support students' enhancement in academic performance. However, some respondents mentioned their unawareness of this facility. On the other hand, there were some respondents who were aware of this facility but chose not to join it as the English-speaking environment (i.e., daily communication at campus) was sufficient, or their hectic schedule occupied them.

- (9) I can say that (the campus) helps me improve my English in other ways, such as providing an environment...where I need to speak in English most of the time, all of the time...until this point, I don't get the benefits of having a certain session to improve my English. (P2)
- (10) Oh, yeah, I (have) heard (of) those language clinics, but...I am very busy, ...so I have no time to go to the kind of places...but...I have heard of language clinics that help students with their English. However, no...I never went there before. (P3)

4.3.3 *The effect of remote learning due to COVID 19 pandemic*

In 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic happened, students were required to do remote learning, which most participants returned to Indonesia to do so. During remote learning, most respondents agreed that their English-speaking skill was impacted due to their tendency to use written forms (i.e., typing feature) rather than verbal forms (i.e., turning on the microphone). The first reason was related to their psychology, as some respondents felt shy to speak. The fear of making mistakes prompted some respondents to type, making up the second reason as they preferred being able to check their grammar and better their vocabulary in their responses. For the third reason, some respondents vividly mentioned that most non-Indonesian classmates also prefer to type. Views that illustrate this finding are:

- (10) I felt easier when I typed the answer rather than spoke because I was too shy. I felt shy if I had to speak English suddenly (...). I am afraid to make mistakes. (P12)
- (11) Because when I type, I can check my grammar, so yeah, to avoid any grammatical mistakes, and I even can use a better vocabulary when I type. I can choose which one is better. (P13)
- (12) Sometimes, in my unit, we rarely talk. I mean, we talk in small groups, but sometimes we only text and do not speak. (P14)

4.4 **Strategies Used by the Students to Navigate Challenges in Speaking English in an Academic Context**

4.4.1 *Joining English language intensive programs*

Before enrolling in their first-year undergraduate courses, most participated in English language intensive programs to prepare for the mandatory competency examination. The program also equipped them with speaking skills, which helped them to adapt during the transition. This is expressed below:

- (13) It quite helpful because in high school, I did not use English and I felt quite shocked when I learned everything in English here. In Intensive English (IE), it was quite often to talk with friends in English. [Communicating with] the [IE] lecturers were quite useful because sometimes I asked questions in English. I think if I did not take IE and went straight to Degree, I would be struggling. (P5)

Some respondents also used self-improvement strategies to practice their English speaking. Responses to illustrate this finding are:

- (14) I just read English books or maybe watched English movies because I needed to improve my English because, you know, my English was very bad back then, and now I think it has become better and better. (P8)
- (15) I bought a book focused on grammar, and then I learned independently from the book. I also read English news daily, so maybe I learned from that. I read it aloud, looked at the grammar and learned from it. (P11)

4.4.2 *Adjusting the mindset*

Most respondents decided to force themselves to speak English and overcome their fear of making mistakes and shyness. Retorts to illustrate this finding are:

- (16) I used the 'shock' feeling to push me. I mean, because I am here, I have paid, so I cannot just surrender and do nothing. So, using that shock feeling, I force myself to speak English even though I am not fluent in it. I just try to be brave to speak it. (P5)
- (17) For the first time, I had to speak English and be with strangers or other people; I needed to increase my bravery to speak. So, even though I made some errors the first time, I was still brave. There is no need to hold the shyness because surely, we will make mistakes when speaking, so it is okay. (P4)

4.4.3 *Preferring to communicate more with non-Indonesian coursemates*

Some respondents chose to speak more with other international and local Malaysian friends since they can use English as the lingua franca. A sentiment to illustrate this is:

- (18) I tried to befriend more friends from other countries because we had no other choices other than talking in English. And I think I can practise more. (P6)

4.4.4 *Overcoming the challenges in the linguistic factors*

For this theme, three sub-themes emerged. Firstly, some respondents utilised *Google Translate* to translate, produce sentences, and learn pronunciation, such as explained below:

- (19) There are still so many English words that I still need to learn and understand. So, it is quite hard, especially the words related to business and finances. It is still confusing, so I need to use *Google Translate* sometimes. I need to understand it more. (...) If I do not know how to pronounce those words, I go back to *Google Translate* and listen to how they speak. (P3)

Secondly, some respondents chose to use simpler English words to deliver their ideas to mitigate the possibility of being misunderstood:

- (20) For difficult words, I used to speak basic words like the basic communication words. So, it will not make other people misunderstand or even understand what I am speaking. (P8)

Lastly, some respondents described ideas in detail when they could not recall the exact term:

- (21) So, usually, if I cannot deliver in English, I choose to be silent. Or if the lecturers ask me, I will explain, but it is a bit convoluted. (P11)

4.4.5 *Maintaining the English-speaking skill during online learning*

Firstly, some respondents did autonomous learning to practice their English speaking. Replies that illustrate this finding include:

- (22) I talk to myself. Honestly, before I bathe or sleep, I use English to tell [a] story about my day. At least, I use English. I am afraid that it will disappear if I do not use it. (P7)
- (23) I think listening to English song[s] and singing the song can help. Trying to mimic their accents and pronunciation really helps a lot. (P6)

Secondly, some respondents preferred to maintain verbal communication with campus-related people through discussions for tutorials or group assignments and joined students' clubs to create more chances to speak English.

- (24) Usually, it is discussion for tutorial. The tutor places us in a breakout room, then we discuss there for, let's say, 10 minutes. So, like it or not, we must speak. Then, like group discussion, it also requires us to speak although it is virtual. So, sometimes there are some discussions via Zoom that require us to speak. (P11)
- (25) I have. Since I'm part of the [a student club] and yeah, I do. I do have virtual meetings with them that requires me to speak in English. But yeah, I think I can use that opportunity to practice my English. (P3)

Lastly, some respondents practised their English with non-campus related people through virtual communication platforms, such as Free4Talk, or online games.

- (26) Up until now, I mean, as time goes by, usually I use one website to talk—is it Free4Talk? So, I join (it), talk in a group (speaking). When I have spare time, I join in a room, people are there to talk about any topic, I just join (them) and talk. (P5)
- (27) Maybe when I play online games, I usually speak English with the other people in my games, especially like Valorant games. That's very famous right now. Because all the online players speak English since they're from different countries, not only from Indonesia. (P8)

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 The Challenges in Speaking English Faced by Indonesian EFL Students

Based on the findings, the Indonesian EFL students felt the challenges when transitioning from an EFL to an ESL environment while studying in Malaysia. This challenge was also related to the requirement of speaking in an academic context, as they felt it was more challenging as the findings indicated that the respondents were more concerned with insufficient vocabulary than grammar knowledge.

During the transition, the lack of vocabulary knowledge could create a communication barrier, mainly when both the respondents and their interlocutors were not using English as their first language. The limited vocabulary knowledge could cause some communication not to flow well, as some ideas were not understandable. This finding was confirmed by a study by [Shen and Chiu \(2019\)](#) on some Taiwanese EFL tertiary students—more than half of the EFL students (55.4%) felt annoyed when they were not understood or misunderstood during the oral practice in English.

Interestingly, grammar was not a dominant challenge for respondents as they were not afraid to make grammatical mistakes—they were aware that the fear of making mistakes might hinder them from speaking English. They were also open to correction from their interlocutors' comments. [Shen and Chiu \(2019\)](#) also found that insufficient grammar knowledge was the least essential linguistic factor for English speaking challenges for EFL learners, among other factors.

The respondents also felt psychological reactions when they used English daily, as some experienced hardships during their first weeks on campus. A study from [Haidara \(2016\)](#) on tertiary students reported some similarities as the manifestation of the students' psychology might negatively impact their performance in speaking English despite learning it for years. [Riadil's \(2020\)](#) study on tertiary students in an English Department shared the same finding: most students felt afraid of making mistakes when asked to speak in front of the class, discouraged by their friends' fluent speech, low self-confidence, and shy to speak. The lack of academic vocabulary knowledge may also affect their psychology as they fear making mistakes, as confirmed by a study from [Kusuma \(2021\)](#) on some Indonesian students who studied at a US university: they felt nervous when expressing their opinions. They preferred to be silent to avoid mispronunciation, misunderstanding and being out of context.

Subsequently, when some participants were required to speak impromptu, they would feel anxious and speak in ungrammatical sentences or even code-switch to their L1 as a last resort. This finding was confirmed by a study from [Pratama and Zainil \(2019\)](#) on some undergraduate students from the English Education Department in an Indonesian university, as they also used code-switching when required to speak English.

5.2 The Contributing Factors to the Challenges in Speaking English in an Academic Context

Experiences before university being a fundamental cause behind the challenge of speaking English was also reported in a study by [Sawir \(2005\)](#) about how some Asian students adjusted themselves in Australia due to minimal exposure to the English language before university. Given Indonesia's limited usage of English,

Indonesian students may need a longer time to acquire their English-speaking skills (Panggabean, 2015).

However, the duration of learning English may not guarantee the improvement of speaking skills for some EFL learners as all respondents have studied English from the primary level, yet they were still unprepared to speak English confidently. The unprepared condition may be related to how they focused more on writing skills and how the teachers preferred not to use authentic books. Some students were not proficient enough to communicate in English verbally and were unfamiliar with real communication after graduating from high school (Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia, 2014). The unfamiliarity with authentic communication may hinder a learner from acquiring proficiency in a language. One of the most effective ways to learn a foreign language is to absorb the language in natural contexts (Benson & Lor, 1999, as cited in Sawir, 2005).

Another barrier to speaking English fluently was the flexibility of teaching English using students' L1, which may not optimise some Indonesian students' English-learning skills, leading to less vocabulary knowledge acquisition (Sibarani, 2019). Some teachers opted to teach English by using students' L1 since a number of students were reluctant to speak English (Hernandez & Faustino, 2006, as cited in Viafara, 2011) as students' attitudes (e.g., apathy, fear of being laughed at) could lead to irregular English language practice. The students' reluctance may be linked to the lack of support from their environment, as it could negatively affect students' confidence in speaking English. In a study by Xuan (2014), some Vietnamese tertiary-level students lacked the motivation to engage in English verbally as they were afraid of being criticised or regarded as showing off by their communities.

Nonetheless, the respondents managed to overcome those barriers after the transition process. However, remote learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic had many respondents reporting that their English-speaking skill was significantly impacted. They were not able to communicate F2F with their lecturers and peers. This result aligns with a study by Alawamleh et al. (2020), where most respondents' communication with lecturers was negatively impacted during online learning.

Furthermore, their return to an EFL environment worsened the lack of chances to communicate directly (i.e., face-to-face) as they spoke Bahasa Indonesia more frequently than English. Moreover, most respondents preferred using written communication during online learning. The students' preference for written communication was not a detriment because they could improve their vocabulary and grammar skills by proofreading their work beforehand. However, it became worrisome when the use of written communication surpassed the use of verbal communication. Verbal communication has an important role in building EFL students' English-speaking skills, as the more frequently they practice speaking, the more fluent they can be (Gultom, 2015).

5.3 Strategies to Navigate Challenges in Speaking English in an Academic Context

Despite most respondents being in EFL environments, they had carried out some strategies to prevent their English-speaking skills from declining. Autonomous learning, such as self-talk, was claimed to provide almost similar experiences to being in an ESL environment. Besides, singing English songs was also preferred to practice

their pronunciation. These strategies were also found in a study by [Fidyati et al. \(2021\)](#), where some Indonesian EFL fresh graduate students in Indonesia used the singing method as the most effective strategy, followed by self-talk in the second position.

Furthermore, they also maintained their communication in English even though they were in EFL environments, as this action was supposed to 'replace' their F2F speaking activities. They also communicated with other strangers via an online language exchange platform, namely Free4Talk, which was found by [Gelen and Tozluoglu \(2021\)](#) as an inspiring social learning environment, opportunities for cultural exchange, and a relatively secure environment for language practice. Besides, the respondents also chose to play online games to improve their English-speaking skills as they were engaged in English with other players from other countries. A study by [Wijanarko et al. \(2021\)](#) reported that some Indonesian EFL students obtained advantages from playing online games to increase their English-speaking skills, particularly during online learning when they lacked chances to practice their speaking skills.

However, the strategies to maintain communication listed above might not be effective enough to enhance their English-speaking skills academically. As a lack of academic vocabulary was one of the prominent challenges, they used online translation tools, such as Google Translate, to assist them in understanding their subjects, learning pronunciation, and enriching their vocabulary knowledge. [Murtisari et al. \(2014\)](#) also found that Indonesian EFL undergraduate students used Google Translate more for enriching vocabulary than learning pronunciation. A study by [Khademi \(2021\)](#) also reported students' improvement in phonological awareness and aural differentiation abilities but not in oral production. In other words, Google Translate might be more effective at enhancing vocabulary knowledge than pronunciation.

Some respondents preferred to mitigate the risk of being misunderstood by using simple vocabulary over academic jargon. In addition, they also chose to explain the definition of a word when they could not coin the correct term for the word. These choices should be considered a better solution to stimulate students to speak English rather than letting them be silent as psychological factors (e.g., discouraged, shy, lack of self-confidence) may influence their willingness to speak English in an ESL environment.

5.4 Implications of Study

Based on the discussion above, some implications from this study are presented. this study recommends the following. Based on respondents' answers during the interview, they recommended storytelling, reading and practising dialogues in English, speaking in front of the class, casual speaking, doing role play, public speaking, drama and fun games as activities to enhance English speaking skills. In addition, the significance of the study is for the improvement of English language teaching and learning in Indonesia, therefore, the syllabus in high schools should be improved by including some authentic materials in an academic context to prepare students for further study in university. Last of all, the findings reported that speaking skill was focused the least during English language lesson; therefore, English language teachers should communicate in English fully to deliver their lessons to familiarise students with English in an academic context.

6. CONCLUSION

This research concludes that the main challenge faced by Indonesian undergraduate students in speaking English in an ESL university was the transition process they had to undergo from EFL to ESL learners. After they barely managed to adapt themselves due to the COVID-19 pandemic, they regressed to EFL learners during remote learning. Some contributing factors to their English-speaking challenges include how their past schooling experience informed their skill, their awareness of the language support provided by the campus, and how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their speaking skills during remote learning.

The participants prepared themselves with English language courses or self-improvement to navigate the challenges before starting university. They also adjusted their mindset to avoid making mistakes while trying to befriend local and other international friends to increase their chances of speaking English. For academic English, they navigated the challenges by using some assistant tools, e.g., Google Translate. Lastly, during remote learning, they managed to maintain their communication in English, whether with their campus-related or non-campus-related English-speaker friends.

The implications of this study suggest that Indonesian students must develop their academic vocabulary before enrolling in university; hence, the relevance of vocabulary instruction in schools should be emphasised. Secondly, all four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing are equally important to ensure student success in an English-speaking university, and this way, the high school teachers should allocate proportional teaching of the four language skills.

This study acknowledges the following limitations. Firstly, while this study's qualitative nature captures a detailed description of students' experiences and challenges, the sample is small compared to a typical quantitative study. Thus, findings may not be representative of all Indonesian student's experiences. Secondly, while not intended, participants who agreed to this study were all from one region in Indonesia and may not represent the views of students hailing from Indonesia's vast and varied regions. To end with, as a suggestion for further improvement and follow-up studies in the future, the researchers recommend the inclusion of classroom observations, as data can be triangulated from interviews and observations for a more accurate and objective representation of the findings.

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