

Students' Experiences in Learning Language Skills

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Abstract

When learning a new language, students frequently face a range of challenges. To overcome these problems, they often employ multiple strategies. Variations in language learning experiences and proficiency levels can contribute to differences in the difficulties encountered and the strategies utilized by students. This study aimed to explore the weaknesses faced by students based on their language learning experiences, and the strategies they use to address these issues. Using qualitative research methods, interviews were conducted with 15 students from the English language education department. The findings reveal two primary problem areas: linguistic and psychological difficulties. Additionally, the students employed various strategies, such as self-study, regular practice, and joining campus student associations.

Keywords: Challenges, Strategies, Language skills

Abstrak

Ketika mempelajari bahasa baru, siswa sering kali menghadapi berbagai tantangan. Untuk mengatasi masalah ini, mereka sering menggunakan berbagai strategi. Pengalaman belajar bahasa yang berbeda dan tingkat kemahiran berbahasa dapat berkontribusi terhadap perbedaan tantangan yang dihadapi dan strategi yang digunakan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi permasalahan yang dihadapi oleh mahasiswa berdasarkan pengalaman belajar bahasa mereka, dan strategi yang mereka gunakan untuk mengatasi masalah tersebut. Dengan menggunakan metode penelitian kualitatif, wawancara dilakukan terhadap 15 mahasiswa jurusan pendidikan bahasa Inggris. Penelitian ini mengungkapkan dua aspek masalah utama: kesulitan linguistik dan psikologis. Selain itu, mahasiswa juga menggunakan berbagai strategi, seperti belajar mandiri, latihan rutin, dan bergabung dengan himpunan mahasiswa kampus

Kata Kunci: Tantangan, Strategi, Keterampilan Berbahasa

Introduction

Learning English provides numerous advantages, but students, particularly those studying it as a foreign language, also encounter various obstacles. These challenges can originate from within the learners themselves or from external factors. EFL students commonly struggle with limited vocabulary, which impedes their

ability to communicate effectively. Additionally, the atmosphere for practicing the language, especially speaking, is often restricted. However, the specific problems faced may vary from person to person, frequently due to personal characteristics and the learning.

Rather than remaining passive, some students actively address their language difficulties. They employ a variety of strategies to mitigate the problems they encounter, such as independent practice and analyzing their linguistic weaknesses. By adjusting their approach based on this self-assessment, these proactive students are able to overcome their language challenges. As Macaro (2001) noted, learners who take such initiative to improve their skills seem to demonstrate the most effective learning outcomes.

Investigating students' experiences in learning language skills is crucial, given the diverse challenges they face and the strategies that may best suit their needs. Understanding students' insights into their own weaknesses and the strategies they employ to overcome learning obstacles can inform and influence changes in educational practices. By closely observing their students, teachers can gain valuable insights into the specific challenges students face and the strategies they use to overcome them. This information can then help teachers refine their instructional methods and provide students with additional support and alternative approaches.

Results Literature Review

Students Weaknesses in learning language skills

The research has explored several challenges that students face when learning language skills, whether they focus on one or multiple skills. Susanto, Malik, and Mitrayati (2020) found that speaking is the most difficult skill to acquire. Factors such as lack of knowledge, vocabulary mastery, and grammar proficiency affected the students' speaking ability. Students struggled with pronunciation and felt embarrassed when they made mistakes, with their peers often laughing at them.

Speaking can be intimidating as students worry about grammatical errors, mispronunciations, or using the wrong words to express themselves.

Furthermore, Chen and Goh's (2011) study revealed that in speaking classes, most students did not actively participate due to differences in personalities, proficiency levels, and learning habits. They preferred self-study and felt ashamed to speak because of their non-English accents and lack of vocabulary and grammar knowledge. It can be inferred that speaking difficulties are influenced by factors such as lack of motivation, concentration, and confidence, leading to students' hesitation to speak. According to a study by Nor et al. (2019), most students at a Malaysian university struggled with speaking issues, such as worrying about making grammatical errors, feeling embarrassed about their low language proficiency, and being concerned about negative perceptions.

Akbari (2016) reported that students experienced various problems in learning English, including insufficient vocabulary and grammatical mastery, as well as the inability to pronounce words correctly. Additionally, fear of making mistakes, insecurity, and lack of enthusiasm in studying were variables that contributed to these issues. On the other hand, Hibatullah (2019) found that the lack of vocabulary mastery impacted speaking skills, particularly in terms of word selection, listening comprehension, and understanding reading materials in academic contexts.

Speaking is closely linked to listening skills. Susanto et al. (2020) stated that listening is the second-hardest skill to learn. Students struggled to understand the speech speed and accents of native speakers, and even when the speed was adjusted, they still had difficulty due to insufficient vocabulary knowledge. This challenge led to misinterpretation as students struggled to comprehend the speakers' intended message or context. Hamouda (2013) also identified common listening problems include losing concentration due to anxiety, poor audio quality, fast speech, unfamiliar accents, and lack of vocabulary knowledge. Similarly, speaking speed and unfamiliar vocabulary were reported as the reasons of students' inability to

comprehend the listening. (Nor et al., 2019).

Susanto et al. (2020) found that students believe reading is not as difficult as other language skills, as they can find the correct answers in the provided texts. However, they still face challenges in interpreting the content due to limited vocabulary mastery. Without a wide range of words, students may misunderstand the meaning, especially in complex situations.

On the other hand, writing is indeed challenging for English learners, particularly in composing well-structured essays. Rahmatunisa (2014) found that Indonesian EFL learners experienced problems in writing, such as the inability to construct sentences, organize paragraphs, and ensure coherence. Hibatullah (2019) also discovered that students considered writing activities boring due to laziness in processing generalized ideas, and they believed the writing process was difficult and complex, especially when explaining complex concepts.

Strategies in Learning Language Skills

Most students believe that writing is a complex skill to be mastered. But Susanto et al., (2020) found that only a few students believe that writing is not a difficult skill to master because they follow several writing steps. These steps involve outlining, drafting, creating, editing, revising (verifying the accuracy and relevance of the content), and finally publishing. By following these processes, these students are able to enhance their ability to write well-structured paragraphs in English.

Research by Hibatullah (2019) found that providing students with feedback helps them identify their strengths and weaknesses in developing language skills. Feedback gives students valuable knowledge and guidance to improve competencies like speaking, listening, reading, and writing, thereby enhancing their overall English proficiency. For example, feedback after a test not only reveals students' current abilities, but also suggests ways for them to progress. This empowers students to actively engage in meaningful improvement. According to Klimova (2015), feedback

supports the learning process by pinpointing weaknesses and boosting students' abilities.

Moreover, Hibatullah (2019) reported that using supporting materials and technologies can help improve students' English language skills. For example, students can listen to English podcasts, watch movies, or use online resources like search engines and websites to practice and expand their vocabulary. By accessing these authentic materials integrated with technology, students are able to enhance their listening, speaking, and overall language proficiency.

In some cases, students were likely to do self-encouragement or self-controlling when experiencing learning difficulties. Hibatullah (2019) found that the students will close their eyes in order to maintain their listening and gain more focus. After that, many students are being well-prepared in order to increase confidence while learning English competencies.

As a conclusion, there are several learning difficulties that existed while mastering language competencies. However, several strategies also occur to overcome those learning difficulties.

Methods

This study applied a qualitative research design. To explore students' experiences in learning language skills, semi-structured interview served as the primary data collection method. The participants were 15 students from the English Language Education Department of UIN Ar-Raniry. They were selected because they met the criteria of having completed both basic and intermediate language skills courses, which are core subjects typically taken in the first and second semesters.

Moreover, the collected data were analyzed using the qualitative data analysis techniques proposed by Creswell (2014). The analysis involves several key steps to ensure thorough and accurate results: organizing and preparing the data, reading the data as a whole, coding the data, developing themes, and interpreting the findings.

Results and Discussion

This study investigated students' experiences in learning language skills, with a focus on the difficulties they encountered and the strategies they used to address them. Based on student interviews, the findings highlighted several key points. Most students reported challenges with both linguistic elements, like vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and spelling, as well as psychological factors, such as lack of confidence, fear of mistakes, and lack of enthusiasm. The students also discussed the strategies they employed to overcome these obstacles, offering valuable insights into effective approaches.

To streamline the identification process, all 15 participants were assigned initials such as S1, S2, S3, and so forth. This systematic labelling approach ensure clarity and structure when referring to individual responses across the course of the study.

1. Challenges in learning language skills

Students faced numerous challenges in developing their language skills, which manifested differently across the areas of listening, reading, speaking, and writing. These difficulties were linked to a range of factors, including limited vocabulary, grammatical errors, pronunciation issues, contextual barriers, accent differences, problems organizing ideas, low self-confidence, pace of communication, lack of motivation, insufficient practice, and anxiety.

a. Linguistic problems

The most significant challenge students face, which greatly impacts their overall language proficiency, is vocabulary. Many students reported that their limited vocabulary made it difficult to comprehend listening assignments. For instance, S1 noted, "*... my struggles are, it's still hard for me to understand when there is a listening task. ... I'm not familiar with the vocabulary.*" This problem also extended to writing and speaking, as S10 mentioned, "*... my lack of vocabulary also makes me confused when speaking, as well as when writing because writing skills really require vocabulary.*" Reading

comprehension was similarly affected, with S10 stating, *"In reading, I still lack vocabulary, so I don't understand the text."* Across the board, every student acknowledged that having inadequate vocabulary was a major obstacle to developing their language skills. The findings of this study corroborate previous research (Susanto et al., 2020; Akbari, 2016; Hibatullah, 2019; Nor et al., 2019), which indicates that a lack of vocabulary often hinders students' language proficiency.

Grammar was another substantial obstacle for some students. As stated by S14, *"I often find myself confused in identifying different types of sentences, understanding the usage of tenses, and using prepositions correctly."* Moreover, pronunciation issues were also reported. S4 admitted, *"I am still not able to say the words well"*. For other students, understanding context in writing was problematic, as S3 mentioned, *"My weakness is in writing. Sometimes I don't understand what is being explained..."* Similarly, S2 noted, *"The problem with writing is that I don't understand the topic so I don't know how to write."* Even though some students were familiar with the context, they still struggled with organizing ideas effectively. As stated by S11, *"And I sometimes find it hard to write an answer when there is a writing test and reading even though I understand what it means."* S10 added, *"... and I have difficulty constructing sentences properly."* Problems with pronunciation in speaking, as well as grammar in both writing and speaking were also found in previous research (Susanto et al., 2020; Akbari, 2016; Nor et al., 2019). Researchers have also reported that students face difficulties in organizing their ideas (Rahmatunisa, 2014; Hibatullah, 2019).

Another obstacle was the barrier posed by accents, particularly when it came to listening comprehension. The use of unfamiliar English accents in the listening materials tended to hinder the students' understanding. As S6 reported, *"I also find it difficult to understand accents or clear articulation in native or speaker conversations."* Similarly, S8 affirmed, *"Difficult accent is a barrier for me to understand the listening material."* The speed of speech also presented additional challenges. The fast pace of the listening materials made it hard to grasp the meaning. As S7 noted, *"I often feel*

uncertain about the information, especially if the speaker talks quickly." Furthermore, S13 added, *"... and the listening was too fast so I had difficulty catching the meaning of what was being said."*

b. Psychological problems

The students' speaking abilities were significantly impacted by their self-confidence. S9 admitted, *"I'm not good at speaking because I'm not confident talking in front of many people."* Similarly, S10 noted, *"... less confident in communicating, especially in front of crowds or in situations that require clarity and assertiveness."* In addition, S2 mentioned, *"For speaking, I don't think it's too bad because I really like speaking English to myself, but I'm too afraid to speak English with other people."*

Motivation also played a crucial role, as S12 confessed, *"... while learning, I experienced difficulties in writing because basically I don't like writing."* and S15 shared, *"I don't like reading so it makes my reading skills decline."* Moreover, lack of practice also related to low motivation. Students admitted that insufficient language practice influenced their language proficiency. As S8 confessed, *"... lack of listening practice, I can't hear clearly."* In addition to this, S5 noted, *"Lack of speaking practice makes me speak incoherently."*

Another language challenge that the students experienced was anxiety. One of the problems was concentration difficulty. This may be triggered by their anxiety. As S8 said, *"The main problem I had and the most influential was difficult to concentrate."* Likewise, S11 added, *"I am easily distracted by things while learning."* Meanwhile, S4 admitted that she lost concentration when speaking because of anxiety. She said, *"I also struggle with speaking, I often stumble or lose my words when talking. Sometimes, when I want to express something, my thoughts become muddled."* Another student expressed frustration because they failed to catch the information in listening tasks. S14 stated, *"I feel frustrated because I often struggle to grasp the details of conversations from audio materials played. This impacts my understanding of the materials and overall academic*

performance." Moreover, other students were afraid of making mistakes, and speaking in front of other people. S13 said, *"My weakness when practicing writing is I am afraid of using incorrect grammar."*

2. Strategies to overcome language skills problems

To improve their language skills, the students applied various strategies, such as practicing English regularly, learning independently, and joining a student organization.

a. consistent practice

Many students found that practicing their speaking skills, either alone or with friends, was an effective strategy. As student S6 explained, *"I talk to myself and my friends to improve my speaking skills."* Additionally, some students, like S2, established a regular practice schedule, noting, *"I make a routine practice schedule and talk to myself."*

b. asking for clarification

Students sometimes become confused during lectures due to a lack of understanding or inattention to the material being explained. As student S1 mentioned, posing questions can be an effective strategy for dealing with this challenge. In her own words, *"I try to listen more to what is explained and ask for clarification if I'm not sure about the material."*

c. Self-study

According to students, independent study was an effective strategy that allowed them to independently organize their learning and select materials aligned with their preferences. As participant 2 noted:

"... and I also read English books to improve my reading skill. I also improve my listening skills by listening to English songs and watching English movies without Indonesian subtitle."

The participant claimed that using English books, songs, and movies for self-learning enhanced both her reading and listening skills. In addition, other language learning

media such as moving image media can also be used (Adami et al., 2023)

d. Joining an organization

A student reported that participating in campus student organizations was one of his strategies. He claimed this provided benefits, including gaining more insight into college life, learning how to address study-related issues by discussing them with his senior, and improving his language skills through practice. As stated by S7:

"... and I join an organization namely English Department Student Association (EDSA) to add my experience and know more about college life by gathering with senior who had many experiences in college.

The research reveals a novel strategy that does not appear to have been reported in previous studies.

e. Writing journals

Keeping a writing journal can help students enhance their writing abilities. Students can write freely about their personal experiences and life events. By regularly documenting their thoughts and activities, students can overcome the challenge of having limited ideas for writing. Furthermore, the act of writing itself can help students learn how to organize their written work more effectively. Participants have stated that not only did their writing improve, but their confidence also increased. Some students mentioned that:

S4 stated:

"In terms of writing, I have started to make progress because of writing journals. From being passive, I am now more active in writing even though I still use a lot of incorrect grammar. But I have tried to correct every mistake in writing in class.

S4 added:

"I write journals, I feel that there is an increase in skills in the writing section. I feel that I am much easier and more confident when writing a topic. There are many things that I have learned and it is very useful in terms of developing my writing skills, whether it is making a coherent and cohesion paragraph or in determining major and minor in a paragraph."

f. Using online resources

Online learning applications have become popular due to their high level of effectiveness, as they provide more comprehensive and mobile learning programs. Using current technological tools like application-based learning platforms can offer advantages for students to improve their language proficiency. For instance, student S5 used these tools to practice and improve her writing, stating that, *“I have frequently practiced writing in English using AI applications.”*

Hibatullah's (2019) study yielded similar findings, in which students used the internet to practice their language skills. However, the present study differs in that students utilized current AI-powered applications for language learning and practice.

Conclusion

The current research findings indicate that students continue to struggle with various language skills. Despite prior experience with these skills, the same problems persist. This may be attributed to the integrated nature of the material, where nearly all skills are taught simultaneously, leaving insufficient time for students to fully grasp the concepts. For instance, listening exercises are often neglected due to time constraints, and the opportunities for explanation and practice to deepen student understanding are limited. The integrated approach, while intended to be efficient, may not allow for the necessary support and reinforcement required for students to master the language skills.

Many students employ strategies to overcome challenges in learning language skills. Lecturers can further support these students by introducing additional strategies and providing motivation to improve their language proficiency. For instance, lecturers could supply supplementary materials from diverse sources and design tasks that give students opportunities to practice individually or collaboratively. Encouraging self-directed learning can help address the limitations of classroom-based practice. In addition, provide regular feedback of students learning progress can also have a beneficial psychological effect on students.

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