Speaking Challenges in a Life Skill Program for Islamic Boarding School Students: A Case Study

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Abstract—**The aim of this study was to explore students' speaking challenges in a life skill program at an Islamic boarding school - *Al-Fahd,* South Sumatra, Indonesia. Through using a qualitative case study, we collected data by using in-depth interviews with participants at the research site. Our qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analyses by identifying, describing, organizing, and reporting them within a set of data in the form of themes. We structured our discussion around their viewpoints and the settings in which challenges they met appear. An exploration of the manuscripts or data revealed that major themes related to facing language boundaries, enjoying using mother tongue, coping with psychological issues, looking for interesting topics of conversation. The results of the study indicated that students were challenged by a variety of issues that had prevented them from having a good speaking skill in English although they were involving in a life skill program. Teachers and school leaders should provide them with a well-designed program in order to prepare them to face real life situations after finishing their program.**

Index Terms—**English speaking skills, Life skill program, speaking challenges**

I. INTRODUCTION

Mastering good communication skills refer to speaking performance and to communicate with foreigners, speaking is considered one of the most essential skills to be accommodated. The ability to communicate and deliver a speech is strongly recommended in many life aspects, particularly in education context. Rao (2019) supported that mastering speaking skill through speech allows students to give impressive and outstanding speeches on various occasions, to give public speaking openly, to give presentations for all purposes, to motivate and give impacts to people and to boost up self-confidence. It is in line with what Nunan (1995) states that the most crucial process in learning a second or foreign language is learning to speak in a target language, and the ability to perform a conversation in the target language is the measurement of the success of it. Moreover, Ur (1999) mention that speaking has been considered as the most significant skill among the four. Furthermore, Mukminin et al., (2015, as cited in Marzulina et al., 2021) state that speaking is one of the most challenging skills. Therefore, for foreign language learners, learning speaking has become the greatest interest. Besides, people learn a language in order to develop their proficiency in speaking the target language (Barnard et al., 2002).

Spoken language is different from written language for many reasons. One important reason is that it usually has to be understood immediately. For that reason, spoken language has many different features. Halliday (1989) mentioned that spoken language has several characteristics consisting of variation in speed, loudness or quietness, gestures, intonation, stress, rhythm, pitch range, pausing and phrasing. Moreover, a speech is successful when it has characteristics of effective speakers. Furthermore, King et al. (2009) found five characteristics of effective speakers in

their study; they are invention, arrangement, style, delivery, and memory that are important in spoken language. Although the above characteristics seem usual, but for junior high school students they are difficult as the students are not familiar in English and not get used to speaking English.

Consequently, many institutions have added an extra lesson and program to improve students' English speaking skills. Weaver (2010) defines programs as a group of related projects managed in a coordinated way to obtain benefits and control not available from managing them individually. Thus, speaking program is indeed an example of a group related project. According to Harmer (1998), with intensive teacher guidance, speaking activities can give students enormous satisfaction and confidence. Furthermore, Khaljoo (2013) and Marzulina et al. (2021) argued that there are several challenges in teaching and learning English. First are limited hours of English language teaching. Some experts complain about the amount of time devoted to the course and believe that in many cases teachers cannot teach all subjects in this limited time. Second, lack of interest and motivation for learning English. Most students are not interested in learning the language and just think about passing the course. Thus, because they are not interested, they do not listen to their teacher. They do not learn anything. Even if they learn something, they will forget it quickly because they are tired of its repetition. Third is the lack of concentration. When students do not have concentrations, they cannot learn the materials. The fourth is students who are ahead of others. Another difficulty in English teaching relates to those students who attend English classes outside of school. Next, most teachers are lack of proficiency in English language. Unfortunately, most high school teachers are not fluent in English and cannot teach the English language orally. The last is lack of repetition and frequent practices of students. Since students are not interested in learning English, so they will be tired of repeating and practicing the language. Therefore, Anggraini (2018) suggested in her study that English club and other additional English learning activities are needed to support the needs of students in learning English such as young learners. Thus, a good speaking activity would be highly supporting students' speaking ability.

Islamic boarding school *Al-Fahd* is as one of the integrated Islamic boarding schools in Palembang, Indonesia that implements a life-skill program as an obligatory program including speech and daily conversation for the English subject. As a foreign language, teaching English has challenges, such as a lack of proficiency in speaking skills. Mukminin et al. (2015, as cited in Marzulina et al., 2021) mention that speaking is one of the most challenging skills since there has been a lack of literature and information on EFL student teachers' experiences in speaking English in the context of Indonesia. The main purpose of a life-skill program is to enhance students' ability in speaking English and to support students' practice, especially in oral presentation performance. The preliminary study was conducted to find some issues managed by students regarding their speaking performance during the program. The difficulties in expressing the ideas in speaking English become the main problems faced by the students since they prefer to use Arabic to communicate. It is in line with what Songbatumis (2017, as cited in Marzulina et al., 2021) found that students are challenged in learning English by their lack of vocabulary mastery, low concentration, lack of discipline, boredom, and speaking problems. Looking at the issues discussed above, there was a need to conduct a study to explore English speaking challenges in a life-skill program faced by the students at Islamic boarding school *Al-Fahd* Palembang, Indonesia.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. The Nature of Speaking

Speaking is the verbal use of language to express ideas, opinion, and feelings. Thus, it is an essential element in delivering the information, communicating concepts, ideas, and knowledge to others. Furthermore, non-linguistic elements such as expressions, body language, and gestures are needed in directly conveying messages. Brown (2001) argues that the important key in interactive language function is social contact, in which the way you convey with body language, eye contact, gestures, physical distance and other nonverbal messages are playing a part. It can be assumed that speaking is a productive skill produced through both oral and body language. There are some types in speaking performance. Brown (2001) mentioned seven types of speaking performance; they are (1) imitative, the ability to imitate a word, phrase, or sentence; (2) intensive, the production of short stretches of oral language as stress, juncture, intonation, and rhythm; (3) responsive, including interaction and comprehension test but sometime in the form of a very short conversation such as standard greeting, small talk, simple request and comments; (4) interactive, the length and complexity of the interaction as a longer way which sometimes includes multiple participants or multiple exchanges. (5) Extensive, monologue including story-telling, presentations, or speeches. (6) Transactional, exchanging or conveying specific information in the form of extended responsive language. (7) Interpersonal, maintaining social relationship for the transmission of information and facts.

Speaking is a complex skill which needs simultaneous use of different abilities, and often develops at different rates. As Harris (as cited in Kurniati et al., 2015) classified the components of speaking into five categories; they are (1) comprehension, the ability to understand by a reasonable comprehension of the subject or as the knowledge of what a situation is really like. That's why it is a need to make people get the information they deserve. (2) Grammar, knowing a certain amount of grammar and vocabulary is important in order to produce the correct sentences in conversation, (3) vocabulary, the basic elements in language. Folse (2016) comments that vocabulary is a set of phrases, variable phrases, single words, idioms, and phrasal verbs. A barrier that hampers the students from learning a language is included into

limited vocabularies, (4) pronunciation, the ways to pronounce the words in the correct way using the appropriate intonation and stress, as well as speaking in connected speech. In order to make the process of communication easy to understand, pronunciation plays a vital role, (5) fluency, the ability to read, speak, or write easily, smoothly and expressively.

B. The Important of Learning Speaking

English is served as the idea of connecting people who live in various regions, countries and continents. Besides, speaking also plays a necessary role in our lives. Barnard et al. (2002) declare that for many foreign and second language learners, the speaking skill mastery in English is a priority. Then, Ur (1996) mentions that speaking skill as the most vital skill as compared to other three English skills (reading, writing, and listening). It is because people who actually know language are indicated as speakers of a particular language. Thus, using a language is more meaningful than just knowing its implementation. In this globalization era, everything is connected through speaking skill. Brown and Yuke (as cited in Rao, 2019) said that the skill that the learners judge most in real condition or situation is speaking skill. Moreover, the ability to speak is necessary for learners who intend to build up career, raise up confidence level, do international business, interact with people around the globe, deliver speeches and presentation, conduct interviews, conduct debate, and participate in discussions or various conferences. The one who has a good ability in speaking can face the world. The job seekers must have a better oral communication. This is in order to obtain better job opportunities. Presenters should present the presentation properly to get the attention from the audience. It is in line with what Westrub (2003) states that a student who can speak well may have a greater chance for further education, find employment, and gaining promotion.

C. Challenges in Speaking Activities

There are multiple factors that cause difficulties in speaking. Abrar et al. (2018) found that language barriers are usually found such as vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, and grammar as the challenges in speaking English. In addition, Ur (1996) classified some problems in speaking into four areas: 1) inhibition: learners are fearful of critic, worried about making mistakes, or simply shy. Furthermore, Littlewood (2007) added that apprehension and inhibition can also appear in language classroom and cause difficulties for the students. 2) mother-tongue use: learners tend to use their mother-tongue in speaking class due to its effectiveness. Then, Lynch (2008), Fajaryani et al. (2018), and Marzulina et al. (2021) mention three most crucial challenges in teaching and learning English in classroom. First is lack of motivation in which learners may not have inspired and interested towards the learning of English language. They fear failure in exams and even in classroom interaction, so they cannot get involved easily in classroom interaction and learn the language comfortably. They must be motivated by teachers to learn English in classroom interaction. Second, insufficient time allocation, resources, and materials, English is a foreign language, and hence it cannot be learned and taught as easily as a mother tongue or first language. And when it is learned or taught as a second language, it requires a long time and simultaneously adequate resources and materials to create an English classroom climate that facilitates teaching-learning process. Third, over-crowded classes, the number of students in a classroom can range from one, for those who teach individual private students, to fifteen or twenty students in a typical classroom up to multitudes of thirty-five or forty or even fifty or more students packed into a language leaning situation. The large classes create several problems such as discomfort, less attention, evaluation, difficulty in managing class, maintaining learning effectiveness, etc.

Furthermore, Manrique (2013) argues that mispronunciation and grammatical mistakes are the most usual varieties of interference between the mother tongue and target language. Then, it is supported by Harmer (2015) that there are some reasons why learners keep using their mother-tongue during speaking class. First, they have not enough knowledge about the topic that the teachers ask to talk about. Second, if the teachers do not urge their students to talk in English, they will naturally use it. In addition, if the teacher regularly use their students' mother-tongue language, they will feel comfortable to do so. 3) Low or uneven participation: in a class with a large number of students, each of them has very limited time to talk since some of them probably dominate the whole class while the others talk very often or not at all. 4) Nothing to say: learners have no motivation to express themselves. Rivers (as cited in Pratolo et al., 2019) mentions that students do not have something in mind because the teachers give them a topic that is not suitable for them. Also, Westrup (2003) adds that when the teacher ask students to tell things in a foreign language, it is difficult for students to answer when they have little opinions about the topic, or when they do not know what vocabulary to apply and how to use grammar correctly. In addition, Raba'ah (2005) in her study found many factors that cause difficulties in speaking English among EFL learners such as the speaking environment, the curriculum, teachers themselves, and the teaching strategies. Furthermore, Xiao and Wong (2014) found other factors that language anxiety as a negative feeling and psychological tension experienced by students in learning language. Then, Pratolo et al. (2019) also found that external factors such as classroom environment, negative comments from friends or uneven participation can also prevent students from being active in speaking.

D. English Speaking Program

Speaking program is a group created to stimulate students to be active in speaking activities among others. It is in line with what Weaver (2010) states that speaking program is a collection of strategies designed to strengthen the

process of teaching and learning activities to achieve the target. The programs are designed to support the students to have good academic achievement, particularly speaking mastery. Students are able to speak in English by joining the speaking program happenings (Moulida, 2019). In our study, boarding school is the institution providing English speaking program for students. The program has an important role in teaching. The implementation of English speaking program in boarding schools should be based on the program supporting students in learning speaking through speaking activities. Harmer (1998) mentioned that speaking activities can give students enormous confidence and satisfaction, and with intensive teacher guidance can encourage them in their further study. Therefore, good speaking activity should support students' speaking ability. It is supported by Shi and Nunan (2000) that mastering speaking is the most important aspect of learning a second or foreign language, and the success is measured in terms of the ability to carry out a conversation in the target language. Additionally, this statement is also supported by the Indonesian Ministry of Education (2002) that suggests a life skill program as the one intended to provide knowledge, skills, attitudes and practical and functional abilities to work independently, open employment and business fields and take advantage of opportunities so that they can improve the quality of their welfare. In order words, life skill programs in Islamic boarding school, *Al-Fahd* is defines as a program that provides multiple kinds of subject skills to support the needs of students to face the demand of life in English speaking activities. The main purpose of life skill programs in Islamic boarding school, *Al-Fahd* is to support student's practice and to enhance their English, especially in oral presentation performances. The program is meant to train the students in delivering speech and to practice their languages as well. Thus, life skill program can give positive impacts on the students in speaking performance as well as their English competence.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

The participants of this current study were eight EFL learners in an Islamic boarding school - *Al-Fahd* Palembang, Indonesia. Participants were selected by using a purposeful sampling method. There were some characteristics in selecting eighth students as the participants of the study. First, since the study was conducted at an Islamic boarding school, only female students were allowed to be selected as the participants of the study. Second, only the students who had already joined at least one year the life skill program were accessible for the participants.

B. Data Collection and Analysis

In this study, interviews were used to collect the data on students' challenges in improving their speaking through life skills program. Gilham (2005) defines interview as a conversation between two people where a response of a particular purpose is needed. In this study, interviews were used by asking respondents orally in order to obtain the information for research (Muazza et al., 2018; Muazza et al., 2019). One-on-one interview was used in this study (Mukminin & McMahon, 2013). Creswell (2012) defined one-on-one interview as a process of data collection in which questions are asked to one participant only, and the answers were recorded at the time. Furthermore, open-ended questions were used to gain a lot of information from the students' challenges in speaking English in the life skill program. In this process, the interviews were taken verbally and recorded for 5-15 minutes to collect the data. To analyze the data on students' speaking challenges in life skills program, several steps in thematic analysis were accomplished. There are six steps in thematic analysis, they are: analyzing, identifying, describing or organizing and for reporting a theme within a set of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

IV. FINDINGS

The results of the present study were categorized based on emerging topics from the results of the interviews. The results showed some challenges faced by the students when speaking English in life skill program. The following results of interviews showed the students' challenges in speaking English in life skill programs. The challenges faced by students in speaking English in life skill program were divided into four categories, including facing language boundaries, enjoying using mother tongue, coping with psychological issues, looking for interesting topics of conversation.

TABLE 1
THEMES AND CODES FOR CHALLENGES FACED BY STUDENTS IN SPEAKING ENGLISH IN LIFE SKILLS PROGRAM

No	Themes	Codes
1.	facing language boundaries	No fluency in speaking and hard to produce a good sentence during the life skill program. Limited vocabulary and poor pronunciation Complicated to use different forms of verbs properly in speaking
2.	enjoying using mother tongue	Often use their mother tongue to speak Often mix the words with their mother tongue in speaking
3.	coping with psychological issues	Feel anxious in speaking to others
4.	looking for interesting topics of conversation	Find some interesting topics that challenge them to speak

A. *Facing Language Boundaries*

Based on the data from the interview, it was found that some challenges related to language boundaries such as fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar were faced by the students. First, all of the participants shared their experiences with the researchers related to the program they preferred to learn in English and to have interest in learning the language. However, they sometimes faced some difficulties. Vocabulary was mentioned as an obstacle in speaking English. Student 3 said, "*When it comes to English speaking I always think about the vocabulary first, sometimes I forgot the vocabulary I've learned right before I want to speak*" (interview, January 19, 2021). Meanwhile, 5 other participants stated the similar obstacle. Pronunciation is revealed as a problem like vocabulary and has challenged students in speaking English. They said that pronunciation was one of the factors that were complicated for them in speaking English. Some of them stated that some words were difficult to be pronounced. Student 1 mentioned, "*It's difficult because of my pronunciation, I feel like I still often made a lot of mistakes when I speak*" (interview, January 19, 2021) while the other 5 had the same opinion about pronunciation.

The data from interview showed that students encountered some problems in using correct English grammar. Some students said that grammar was difficult for them due to the terms of sentence structure. They worried that others might misunderstand them. Student 5 stated that, "*I feel that it is quite complicated because the verb of English has many forms and it makes me confused when I want to speak English, I am afraid that I would make a mistakes and cause a misunderstanding*" (interview, January 19, 2021). Students 6 and 8 also said the similar opinion about it. Fluency was also revealed by the students as a challenge in speaking English. Based on the interview, the students said that it was hard for them to speak English fluently. As student 7 said, "*I'm not fluent in English so I often mix it with other languages as well*" (interview, January 19, 2021). Student 2 and 8 also said the similar things about fluency.

B. *Enjoying Using Mother Tongue*

The data from interview showed that students had difficulties in speaking English because of the influence of their mother tongue. Student 4 stated that, *"I feel that my speech is still influenced by my mother tongue. I used to speak Indonesian so it becomes really stiff when I speak in English"* (interview, January 19, 2021). Students 5 and 6 also said the same thing on the influence of their mother tongue. They also used their mother tongue because lack of vocabulary in English. Students often mixed an English sentence with their mother tongue. Based on the interview, student 3 said, "*when I don't know the meaning of a word I will mix it with my mother tongue*" (interview, January 19, 2021). Student 1, 6, and 7 also said the same opinion about their mother tongue.

C. *Copying with Psychological Issues*

Beside language boundaries, we found that psychological issue can also influence students' speaking performance. Based on the data obtained from interviews, the researchers found that most of the students felt anxious when they were speaking English in front of teachers, classmates, and other people. Student 1 claimed that, "*I feel nervous when I speak in front of my teacher. I also feel kind of anxious because I'm afraid that my friends will make fun of me when I made a mistake*" (interview, January 19, 2021). Student 6 also said that, "*I feel shy and kind of nervous when I have to speak in front of the teachers, and it's awkward when I speak English to my friends because I'm not used to it yet.*" (Interview, January 19, 2021). Meanwhile, the other 4 participants mentioned the same opinion.

D. *Looking for Interesting Topics of Conversation*

It was found that most of the students were influenced by the topic of conversation shared by their teacher. A certain topic can influence them to speak. Student 3 stated that, "*If the topic is interesting, I'll get excited about it*". (Interview, January 19, 2021). Student 1 also said that, *"Topics about ambition, family, and best friends usually make me excited and challenge me to speak English more".* (Interview, January 19, 2021) and student 4 shared a similar opinion, "*there are some topics that make me want to speak English. I like the topic about letter because it is fun."* (Interview, January 19, 2021). The data indicated that topics of conversation should be considered as it can get more attention from students.

V. DISCUSSIONS

The results of analyzing data using thematic analysis found some challenges faced by students in speaking English in life skill program. They are facing language boundaries, enjoying using mother tongue, coping with psychological issues, looking for interesting topics of conversation. The first is language boundaries. It was found that some challenges related to language boundaries such as fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar were faced by the students. This finding is in agreement with a previous study conducted by Abrar et al. (2018) who found that the challenges that was usually faced by students in speaking English was the language barrier such as vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and fluency. The students agreed that having a limited number of vocabulary is one of their weaknesses in speaking English. This is supported by Pratolo et al. (2019) who found that vocabulary was mentioned as the main obstacle in speaking English and it made students passive to speak. Pronunciation was revealed as another problem beside vocabulary, students agreed that pronunciation was one of the factors that complicate them in speaking English. This finding is supported by Abubakar et al. (2017) who found that some students had difficulties related to pronunciation as they did not know how to pronounce the words correctly. The other language barrier such as

grammatical issues is related to the finding of a study conducted by Rahayu (2015) who found that lack of understanding of grammatical patterns is one of problems that students faced and lack of knowledge in grammar may influence students to speak in English.

The second issue is mother tongue. It was used by students when they forgot some words in English or when they encountered difficulties to pronounce a certain word in English. The finding indicated that most of the students had difficulties in speaking English due to the influence of their mother tongue. Marcela and Manrique (2013) say that mispronunciation and grammatical mistakes are the most usual varieties of interference between the mother tongue and target language. This finding is in agreement with the study of Al-Hosni (2014) who found that one of the main speaking difficulties encountered by students is the use of mother tongue. They are unable to speak in English because they are lacking in vocabulary items, grammar structures and sentence formation skills which result in the use of mother tongue. It is supported by the study of Leong and Ahmadi (2017) who found why learners use their mother tongue in speaking classes are because they are asked to talk about the topics they do not know. When the teachers do not urge them to speak in English, it is normal for them to use their mother tongue.

We also found that psychological issues influenced students' speaking performance. The finding indicates that most of the students feel anxious when they speak English in the front of their teachers, classmates, and other people. This finding is in agreement with the study of Pratolo et al. (2019) who found that anxiety reveals as one of the challenges that are mostly faced by students. They believe that anxiety makes them hesitate to speak. Woodrow (2006) adds that anxiety has a negative effect on the oral performance of English speakers. This finding is supported by Park and Lee (2014) who found that students' anxiety level had a negative relationship to their oral performance.

Another interesting finding is the topic of conversation. Our finding indicated that most of the students revealed that the topic of conversation influenced their speaking skill in the classroom. Some students said that the topics were sometimes difficult for them and not interesting. Rivers (as cited in Pratolo et al., 2019) said that students often have nothing to say probably because an appropriate topic is selected for them. They also have not enough information about the topic. The above idea is supported by Baker and Westrup (2003) who state that students have difficulties to answer when the teacher asks them to tell things in a foreign language when they do not understand or even are not familiar with the topics.

VI. CONCLUSION

Based on the results of data analysis, the findings of this study indicated that challenges faced by students during the life skills program were facing language boundaries, enjoying using mother tongue, coping with psychological issues, looking for interesting topics of conversation. This research only focused on analyzing the challenges that the students faced during the program without giving the solution to overcome the students' challenges due to time limitation and access to get the data. By knowing the factors that challenged the students during the program, we expect the students to improve their English competence such as grammar, pronounce and vocabulary. We hope that the students try to be more confident to speak English, so they can reduce their anxious feeling. Subsequently, for the teachers, it would be better if they could make a syllabus of what the teachers are going to teach. It also would be better if the teacher could facilitate the needs of students by providing various methods, approaches, strategies, and techniques to improve their vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and fluency as the effect of mother tongue in speaking English is no exception. Last, we hope the next researchers who are interested in conducting similar research could explain on the effective strategies in order to cope with the speaking challenges which are not clearly explained in this study.

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