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Examining Students' Challenges in Oracy in Academic Context Classes

Bunga Ayu Wulandari

Universitas Jambi, Indonesia
Email: bunga_ad@yahoo.com

Matthew Piscioneri

Australian Institute for Science and Technology, Australia
Email: aist.education@gmail.com

Wahyuni Ikram

Universitas Jambi, Indonesia
Email: wahyuniikram123@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study identifies challenges perceived by Indonesian students of English as a Foreign Language in *Oracy in Academic Context* classes as well as possible causes of the problems. This subject was a new addition to the 2018 curriculum of the English Department of Teacher Training and Education Faculty at XXX University in Indonesia. The findings show the main problems students faced related to speaking issues, for example, lack of self-confidence, fear of making mistakes, ineffective class schedule, annoying audience behaviour, lack of vocabulary, lack of grammatical precision, poor pronunciation, difficult and uninteresting topics, direct or immediate corrective feedback, and problems coordinating group work. The students also pointed out that as listeners they perceived difficulties due to their lack of adequate background knowledge, unfamiliar vocabularies, anxiety, speakers' poor pronunciation, too fast or too long presentations, accents, clarity of the sound, seat positioning, room temperature, lack of concentration, and indifferent speakers. Based on analysis of the data, these problems are induced by several factors which include lack of linguistic proficiency, variable cognitive competencies, physical conditions, and most prominently psychological, social and emotional challenges. A set of recommendations to address these issues is also presented in the following paper.

Keywords: Oracy, speaking, listening, difficulties

Introduction

English has gradually increased in importance in Indonesia at all levels of education, more so than when it was appointed as the first foreign language to be taught in Indonesia after its independence in 1945 (Candraningrum, 2016). Significantly, English was not perceived as a foreign language that must be learned as the language of colonial powers (for example Dutch and Japanese). Indonesian authorities realized that English is a language of international communication, education, economics, and politics. Especially for the educational sector, the

demand to participate in educational events or to pursue higher education abroad has led to many English departments in Indonesian universities incorporating subjects that prepare students for a wide range of important applications (Candraningrum, 2016). Since 2018, a new subject, *Oracy in Academic Context*, has been included in the curriculum of the English Department of Teacher Training and Education Faculty of XXX University in East Sumatra, Indonesia. The main objective of this subject is to prepare the students to gain the ability to utilize their speaking and listening skills in English academic contexts as well as their future workplaces.

The department has offered the students *Writing, Reading, Listening, and Speaking* units since it was established in 1993. Conventional beliefs, in general, have suggested that students who come into the workplace primarily need the ability to write and read (Palmer, 2014). But, actually, over time these attitudes have changed. Palmer (2014) emphasizes the demand for the students to be proficient communicators, creators, critical thinkers, and collaborators. According to Palmer (2014), in the 21st Century, university graduates who come into the workplace, in particular, need listening and speaking skills more. And, these skills cannot be learned separately from each other. Therefore, it all makes sense for an English department in a country such as Indonesia to provide its students with the assistance to acquire those skills. The new subject *Oracy in Academic Context* has been one of the strategies designed by lecturers in the English Department of Teacher Training and Education Faculty of XXX University to help students gain these important skills.

Listening and speaking are considered fundamental to successful communication. By mastering those two skills, people receive and convey information or ideas as well as establish and maintain social relations (Anderson & Lynch, 1988). When people are engaged in conversation, they are committed to listen as well as to speak to interact with each other. Hence, these two skills are integrated or used as multi-layered activities. As Harmer (2015) argues, these connected skills are not supposed to be taught and learned in isolation. Thus, the merger of speaking and listening skills has been considered an important step to address these issues and in *Oracy* classes, speaking and listening skills are not learned and practiced separately.

Background

Wilkinson (1965) coined the term 'oracy'. He defined oracy as the capacity to use speaking and listening skills. He argued that oracy should be considered as equally important to literacy as writing and reading. Writing more recently, Alexander (2013) explained that oracy is a method implemented by schools to support children's development to use speech in conveying their ideas and dealings with others. The following table displays the four main categories of oracy skills based on research carried out at the University of Cambridge (Mercer, 2018):

Table 1. Four main categories of oracy skills	
1. Physical	1. Fluency and pace of speech, tonal variation, clarity of pronunciation, voice projection
2. Body Language	2. Gesture and posture, facial expression, and eye contact

Linguistic	
1. Vocabulary	3. Appropriate vocabulary choice
4. Language variation	4. Register, grammar
5. Structure	5. Structure and organisation of talk
6. Rhetorical techniques	6. Rhetorical techniques, such as metaphor, humour, irony, and mimicry
Cognitive	
7. Content	7. Choice of content to convey meaning and intention, building on the views of others.
8. Clarifying and summarising	8. Seeking information and clarification through questions, summarising
9. Self-regulation	9. Maintaining focus on task, time management
10. Reasoning	10. Giving reasons to support views, critically examining ideas and views expressed
11. Audience awareness	11. Taking account of level of understanding of the audience
Social and emotional	
12. Working with others	12. Guiding or managing the interactions, turn taking
13. Listening and responding	13. Listening actively and responding appropriately
14. Confidence in speaking	14. Self-assurance, liveliness and flair

In the *Oracy* classes conducted, the students are required to convey their understanding, opinions, ideas, and experiences, and also to listen to the spoken language of others. They are also required to provide responses, approvals, or disagreements. In 2018 *Oracy* classes, students had to present on different topics each week. The topics included reviewing books, evaluating movies, examining food, observing lifestyle, discussing characters, playing a role in improvised or scripted drama activities. As a new subject in the department, there has not been an evaluation of how students perceived challenges in *Oracy* classes. We aimed to explore the difficulties or problems experienced by the students to better understand the struggles they were facing while learning. We also aimed to seek the possible causes of the problems. Similar to a form of customer research and the provision of testimonials on a new educational product, this research collected data from students to refine the *Oracy in Academic Context* classes for the future.

Methodology

The data was collected through conducting semi-structured interviews with 12 (six females and six males) students of the English study program who took the *Oracy* subject in 2018 when the subject was first implemented. The participants were chosen by using opportunistic sampling, that is those representing the high achievers, middle achievers, low achievers, and gender balance. The open-ended questions prompted the interviewees to describe their difficulties in the *Oracy* classes and the possible causes of these difficulties. The interviews took place at XXX University. The researchers interviewed the participants one by one for approximately 20 to 30 minutes. The interview was conducted in *Bahasa Indonesia* (Indonesian language) so that the participants could express their thoughts unreservedly due to limited English expression or vocabulary. For confidentiality and ethical reasons, we do not disclose the students' identities.

In analysing the data collected, the researchers utilized several steps recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). Firstly, the researchers organized the raw data from the interviews to be

transcribed and translated into English. This data sorting process was undertaken by listening to the audio-recording of the interview for three times to get familiar with the data before transcribing and translating them into English. Secondly, the researchers explored the general sense of the data. Then, the data was segmented and labelled to form descriptions and broad themes, a process which is usually termed as coding. Next, the researchers reviewed the themes that emerged from the data. Subsequently, the researchers categorized the themes before analysing the themes developed. This approach to data presentation and analysis is best thought of as a type of thematic analysis because it involves the processes of coding, identifying themes, and interpreting the themes by seeking similarities or even comparison between the current studies with other research (Mills, Durepos, and Wiebe, 2010).

Findings and discussions

From the interviews with the participants, two prominent clusters of themes were discovered that related to problems the participants perceived in *Oracy in Academic Context* classes as speakers and as listeners. Discussion of these two main themes is presented below:

Challenges perceived by the students as they function as speakers and the causes of the problems *Lack of self-confidence*

Growing self-confidence for second language learners is often challenging and it was evident in this present study. In *Oracy* classes, students are asked to make a presentation in front of their classmates. According to several students in this study, this task was burdensome and they felt they did not have sufficient self-confidence to do this successfully. Second language self-confidence, as expounded by MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels (1998), correlates to “the overall belief in being able to communicate in the L2 in an adaptive and efficient manner” (p. 551). As the students in this study said, they felt they did not present their speech satisfactorily because they did not believe in their ability to speak effectively in English. This is relevant to what Cao (2011) suggested that if the learners have confidence, they will more assuredly participate in classroom activities. However, as Sadeghi, Mohammadi and Sedaghatgoftar (2013) argued, most of the less confident learners underrate their competence. In a similar vein, Alshowat (2016) stated that students who experienced self-confidence are usually too concerned with their appearance and worried about failing the course.

The participants in this study stated that the lecturer had given the topics just before their presentation so that they only had been given limited time to prepare their speeches. This issue has also been raised by Öztürk and Gürbüz (2014), who argued that students will feel more contented to speak if they have adequate time to prepare their speaking. Furthermore, the students asserted that they only had acquired very few prior experiences to speak in public which increased their feelings of insecurity. This is similar to what Brooks and Wilson (2014) identified in their study that the source of students’ unwillingness to speak is their lack of public speaking practice.

Some students in this study also admitted that they felt they had not been as good as their peers who had spoken very fluent English. Park and Lee’s (2006) study presents a similar finding: self-confidence encompasses the act of estimating someone’s quality. In the EFL learning class, this self-confidence decreases if the learner considers himself or herself as incompetent. However, if the learner has high self-confidence, he or she will accordingly perform well in oral tasks (Park & Lee, 2006). Some of the participants also said that they had been anxious that their friends would make fun of them. Koch and Terrel (1991) and Price (1991) discussed this issue in their research paper where their participants had a concern about being laughed at if they made

pronunciation mistakes, for example. This current research - as well as the previous studies - shows how peer evaluation plays a crucial role in students' self-confidence construction.

Fear of making mistakes

Another problem often faced by the students in *Oracy* classes is the fear of making mistakes. In the present study, it was evident that this feeling of fear or trepidation was prompted by several factors. First, the participants did not want other students to tease them. Secondly, they were anxious others thought they were incapable. Thirdly, they thought that one mistake led to other mistakes so that they kept thinking about the potential errors they would make. Lastly, they were worried that the listeners would misunderstand their presentations. These findings accord with Price's study in 1991, who explained that the participants in his research were anxious about making mistakes in their speaking performance and anticipated their friends laughing at them.

A study carried out by Tsiplakides and Keramida (2009) also revealed students' problems related to fear of negative evaluation from their peers and insufficient self-efficacy hindered the students from speaking successfully in the target language. In a study conducted by Sadighi and Dastpak (2017), fear of making mistakes was the most prominent cause of the participants' anxiety. The participants in their study also avoided speaking in the language learned. Therefore, the prevalent assumption amongst students that their friends will likely laugh at them once they make mistakes is evident in research on speaking in EFL. This is a theme that has been often addressed by researchers.

Ineffective class schedule

As the *Oracy in academic context course* combines the two classes, in this case *Speaking for Academic Context* and *Listening for Academic Context*, the duration of the class is longer than other classes in general. In 2018, the first class was held from 9 to 12.40 while the second class started at 11.45 to 14.25. The students in the second class criticized the timing because they said the class should be paused for the lunch break and prayer time for approximately 30 minutes. Consequently, this situation had an impact on students' performances where they had to perform in a rush so that all students could accomplish their performance tasks. Interestingly, an article written by Bardi (2020) on Nursing Times called out to all lecturers to provide Muslim students time to pray *as the prayer times come* and it can be a break time as well for others. According to Bardi, it is important to acknowledge how important prayer (*shalat*) is for a Muslim, but also the loss they will experience if they leave the lecture.

Research into the issues of class timing has so far mainly examined the relationship between school start time and students' achievements (see for example Boergers, Gable, & Owen, 2014; Carrell, Maghakian, & West, 2011). While in this present study, the students complained about how the duration of the lesson was broken into two sections which caused the lecturers to push the students to perform within the time frame before the break. This situation has impacted their performances negatively as claimed by several students. This corresponds to Tuan and Mai's (2015) research that affirmed time pressure affects students' speaking performance. Mak (2011) therefore recommended teachers allocate sufficient time for students to prepare their speaking presentation.

Several studies that examined the impact of taking a break from work or study time indicated the positive effect of the break time (Bershwinger & Brusseau, 2013; Godwin et al, 2016). In summary, if the students had the opportunity to rest, their attention will be renewed and they feel recharged when they come back to the classroom.

Annoying audiences

From interviews with the students, it was found that several students thought that audience members during their presentations could be troublesome for them as presenters. Some members of the audience completely ignored the speakers and preferred to chat with their classmates or were too busy preparing their own speeches to pay proper attention. Some members of the audience displayed intimidating expressions or verbally mocked the speakers' errors. Research by Sadeghi et al. (2013) in Iranian EFL speaking presentation contexts has also underlined that the audience's response has a strong impact on a speaker's performance.

Those aforementioned difficulties as told by the participants have rarely been mentioned by other researchers when discussing a speaker and his or her audiences in EFL learning contexts. Mostly, other research has revealed participants' anxiety about being laughed at by their audiences (Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2014; Price, 1991). The participants in this study pointed out the impact of their audience's lack respect when they were delivering their talks. This finding reveals that peer behaviour plays an important role in students' speaking learning processes in the context of EFL.

Lack of vocabulary

The various topics presented in *Oracy* classes were acknowledged by the students as making them aware that they have to learn specific vocabulary to convey their messages or information correctly. Previous studies in EFL speaking suggested that actual communication is constructed from vocabulary learning instead of grammatical learning. Hamad (2013) and Khan et al. (2018) indicated how a limited vocabulary prevented students from performing well in their speaking performances.

Students in this study realized that they had only learned general vocabulary in their previous schooling. Others stated they wanted to involve various lexical choices in their performance yet they had very limited knowledge of them. This is similar to what Khan et al. (2018) suggested: EFL students should be encouraged to have knowledge of an applicable vocabulary. The findings of this present study which revealed the shortage of vocabulary knowledge as one of the key problems students experienced in *Oracy in Academic Context* classes clearly justifies the need to address this issue in the future.

Lack of grammatical mastery

In the *Oracy* classes, the participants also mentioned that they had problems related to using grammar correctly. The errors in the use of grammar were varied, such as errors in applying present tenses and past tenses as well as inaccurate prepositions. Grammatical errors were also made in word form and subject-verb agreement. These problems gave rise to several difficulties, according to the participants, such as losing focus, feeling nervous, and wanting to end the speech immediately.

Alshowat's study in 2016 on Arabic students' foreign language anxiety also revealed that the participants in his study confessed that they suffered from anxiety due to the grammatical accuracy needed when speaking English. This challenge is especially acute because Arabic and English have different language rules so that students need extra work in the new language learned. This issue is also the case in the Indonesian language where it does not have the subject and verb agreement, for example, which causes overcautiousness amongst the students. This in turn becomes a problem perceived by many EFL students in Indonesia in using English.

Poor pronunciation

One of the participants confessed she experienced difficulty saying /th/ or [θ] sound. This sound does not exist in the Indonesian language. Huang and Radant (2009) have anticipated that from an inter-linguistic view, EFL learners find it challenging to pronounce sounds that do not exist in their language. Another student found it difficult to emphasise the sound /t/ at the end of the 'tent'. The Indonesian language never has two consonants at the end of a word such as occurs in the English word 'tent'. Some students also mentioned difficulties to articulate English words that have more than two syllables such as "necessarily". Also, several students reported it was challenging to utter the words they had only recently encountered, especially technical academic words.

Brown (2004) listed the ability to pronounce correctly as one of the speaking skill components that need to be acquired by students. Munro and Derwing (1997) stated that even though pronunciation does not determine good speaking ability, listeners' comprehension of the words uttered depends on the speakers' pronunciation. However, Horwitz et al. (1986) expressed concern that learners will likely feel pressured if they believe that pronunciation is of the utmost important quality of a language while they are facing difficulties in pronouncing certain words. Significantly, Pospieszńska-Wojtkowiak (2016) suggested that students who are educated to be English teachers should have good command in using and interpreting the principles and rules of phonology.

Broad and uninteresting topics of speech

The participants in this study indicated that the broad and uninteresting topics of speech assigned by their lecturers became one of the problems they experienced. Some participants, for example, said that they did not find it easy to talk about politics. They thought it was boring, too complicated, and they did not know much about politics. This is similar to what Anandari (2015), pointed out. A lack of related knowledge relative to an assigned topic resulted in the students feeling anxious and being unwilling to speak up.

Other students admitted that they were not interested too with issues of plagiarism, global warming, or reviewing articles or books. They also said that entertainment issues should not be discussed in academic courses. Al-Nouh et al. (2015) suggested that the students should have the liberty to choose familiar topics that facilitate them to speak more competently. On the contrary, if the students are assigned to speak without familiarity of a particular speaking field, then it is likely the students will experience uncomfortable feelings and become overly worried which results in their failure to deliver their speech successfully (Kasbi & Elahi Shirvan, 2017).

Direct and immediate corrective feedback

Although the participants valued the direct corrective feedback the lecturers gave to them, there were several students who asserted that it disrupted their concentration when delivering their speech. They immediately felt disheartened. Hanifa (2018) argued that students often lose their self-confidence when the teachers or their friends correct them while they are speaking. Mak (2011) pointed out that students in his study reported that teachers' or peers' correction of their mistakes when speaking contributed to their anxiety. We believe that similar findings from our study contribute importantly to greater recognition of this key issue.

According to Young (1990), teachers' insensitive approaches to correcting their students' errors could also provoke anxiety. He further explained that students do not favour being projected as incompetent speakers in front of their classmates. Similar to the participants in Koch and

Terrel's (1991) research, the students in this study also did not mind receiving corrective feedback. However, the participants emphasized the point that their mistakes were fixed by the teachers and peers.

Difficulty to coordinate in group work

Difficulties associated with group work were emphasised proposed by a prominent student. She indicated that she did not particularly favour working in a group because she admitted she tended to be the dominant group member. She claimed that she allowed her friends to speak up, but most of the time her friends avoided it. She found it especially challenging with more than five members in a group. This is an interesting finding. Ellis (2012) claimed that interaction between learners is more effective for the learners in their attempts to acquire a second language than the interaction between learners and teachers. He explained that working in a group reduces students' tension because they are not necessitated to produce the language individually. Similarly, Richards (2005) explained that working in a group helps learners to process negotiation without pressure.

Several other researchers also point to the benefits of group work in EFL classrooms. Alfares (2017) stated that working in a group encourages students to become self-regulated learners because students can learn from each other. Group work also has been claimed by several researchers to provide students with more opportunities to rehearse with their friends in the group (Brown, 2001; Harmer, 1991). The learners who actively participated in group work also displayed significant improvement in the target language production (McDonough, 2004).

As mentioned previously, one of the students in this current study reported the issue that she did not feel working in a group to be effective. Several other studies have also discussed how similar problems can arise during group work (Cohen, 1994; Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). Dörnyei and Murphey (2003), for example, stated that students' distinct characters and behaviours will be recognised in group working. There will be students who typically assert themselves as the leaders, and there will also be students who are satisfied with the follower roles. Therefore, assigning specific roles to the students working in a group is an effective way to improve learning for every student, as well as to reduce students' apprehension because they can anticipate what they are expected to do.

Challenges perceived by the students as they function as listeners and the causes of the problems

Lack of adequate background knowledge

Several students claimed they had difficulties in understanding topics of discussions such as nuclear science, football, and politics. They argued they had limited knowledge about these topics and did not have much interest in them. Anderson and Lynch (1998) maintained that in listening, it is not only the speakers who have an important role but also the listeners because the latter have to actively use their previous knowledge to comprehend what they hear and the meaning intended. Goh (2000) also suggested that prior knowledge of themes influenced listening comprehension.

Ghoneim (2013) argued that even if the topic is appealing for the students in his study, they still perceived listening as challenging because they had to work hard to comprehend the meaning conveyed. Van Duzer (1997) stated that sufficient background knowledge possessed by the listeners enables them to achieve comprehension better and faster. Ghoneim (2013) highlighted that background knowledge helps the listeners to predict the meaning conveyed and interpret the message of the speech. Similarly, Yildiz and Albay (2015) said that learners need to have specific knowledge of the topic so that they can predict the spoken texts easily.

Unfamiliar vocabulary

Some vocabularies were acknowledged by the listening students in this study as having restricted their capacity to build a complete understanding of the speech heard. This is a common challenge in Indonesian EFL classrooms due to a vast variety of words in English. Speakers do not always use words that the listener recognises. Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011), and Ghoneim (2013) shared similar concerns. They argued that participants in their study had a restricted vocabulary range, and when the speakers used unknown words in their speech, the listeners ceased to put efforts into comprehending the spoken text.

Hulstijn (2001) explained that when the second language users identify the words and their general meanings, they subsequently can construct the semantic unit of the words. In a similar vein, Bingol, Celik, Yidliz and Mart (2014) also found that students find it easier to understand spoken texts containing words familiar to them. Vandergrift and Baker (2015) claimed that second language users' vocabulary knowledge has an important role in their listening comprehension. Familiarity with words in listening texts can also prompt students' interest and motivation to keep listening and to put effort into understanding the message delivered. Liu (2007) pointed out that unfamiliar vocabulary was one of her participants' problems in listening comprehension. This corroborates what Goh (2000) stated earlier that in the perception phase of listening, students often find challenges due to their unfamiliarity with the words they hear.

Nation (2006) contended a language learner needs to acquire around 6000 to 7000 vocabularies to be able to comprehend 98 percent of spoken texts. However, Brown (2001) notified that EFL students who usually encountered formal target language will likely find difficulties in comprehending "idioms, slang, and reduced forms" (p. 253). Ellis (2003) explained that native speakers rarely encounter difficulties to identify and understand a stream of words in a speech because they have been exposed to authentic spoken input since they were young. However, this is not the case for second language learners of English, for example. Therefore, it is understandable that second language users often face problems identifying unfamiliar vocabulary. Matthews (2018) stated that there is a positive connection between word knowledge and L2 listening. He suggested enhancing second language learners aural vocabulary knowledge will accordingly improve their listening competence.

Anxiety

Another problem related to listening as proposed by the participants in this study is the anxiety they experienced. Some students said that it was triggered by the task given by the lecturer who assigned them to make a review or summary of a talk from a YouTube video. The problems arose when the speakers on the video discussed unfamiliar topics for them or used advanced vocabularies that they had never heard before. Bloomfield et al., (2010) explained that the listeners will encounter difficulties in deciphering the meaning of what they hear if they feel apprehensive. Previously, Arnold (2000) had argued that listening activity in a second language initiated anxiety for the learners. In this particular study, this anxiety to function in a second language is even higher due to the burden of the unfamiliar tasks the students received.

Poor pronunciation

Another problem that was usually faced by the students as they functioned as listeners in *Oracy* classes was related to the speakers' pronunciation. As the students in the *Oracy* classes had to hear their friends and also several native speakers of English with various accents, difficulties

in 'catching' the words uttered usually arose. Consequently, it was challenging for them to form their understanding as to what the speakers were discussing.

One of the problems of listening to a speech is connected to speakers' pronunciation that has disparities from what the listeners are used to hearing (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). Yildiz and Albay (2015) suggested that the speaker's pronunciation and accent affect the listeners' listening comprehension. Bloomfield et al. (2010) argued that speakers' accents affect the listeners' listening comprehension. Listeners find it less difficult to understand speakers with familiar accents.

Field (2003) explained that this type of difficulty encountered by the listeners is due to perception problems. It means that the listeners are not able to differentiate the sounds and words in a stream of speech (Field, 2003). Goh (1999) argued that perception problems are often caused by the listeners' low language competence. However, Hasan's study (2000) justified that learners did find difficulties in the listening processes due to unclear pronunciation. In this particular study, the participants confirmed that the various unfamiliar various accents they heard had impacted on their listening comprehension, although this result quite possibly was also caused by the reasons proposed by researchers mentioned previously (see Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016; Yildiz & Albay, 2015; Bloomfield et al., 2010).

Fast rate of speech

Most of the interviewees argued that their ability to interpret meaning depends on the speech rate of the speakers when they were talking. The participants in this study stated that they could not understand the whole points of a speech if the speaker spoke too fast. Kusumarasdyati (2000) said that if the speaker's rate of speech is too fast, his or her listeners might be confused. This is because what they hear perhaps resembles mumbling sounds. The normal rate of speech ranges between 150 to 160 words per minute, which means a rate higher than 160 words per minute will cause difficulties for the listener to process the information conveyed (Stucky, 2015). Piolat et al. (2008) identified that the speed of speech distribution is beyond the listeners' control and they cannot have the words uttered repeated for them.

Several studies (Graham, 2006; Yildiz & Albay, 2015) highlighted that the main problems the participants had in listening were related to a fast speech rate. Therefore, speakers with a fast rate of speech usually cause difficulties for their listeners to grasp their message (Bingol, Celik, Yildiz & Mart, 2014). Blau (1990) suggested that moderate speed delivery is one of the strategies to help second language learners to listen and understand the speech.

Long speeches

Listening to a long speech, according to the students in this current study was challenging because too much information was provided. Long speeches also made them feel bored and eventually their concentration lapsed. Yildiz and Albay (2015) who studied factors affecting Iraqis' foreign language listening comprehension argued that a lengthy listening period is not conducive for students' listening comprehension because they cannot maintain their focus. While, as explained by Atkins et al. (1995), shorter speech times help maintain the listeners' attention and assist them in understanding the spoken texts. In short, Bloomfield et al. (2011) insist that the length of a speech affects listeners' comprehension.

Bingol, Celik, Yildiz and Mart (2014), however, argued that students' English proficiency plays a more important role in listening comprehension. They concluded that English beginner learners cannot listen productively to listening tasks of more than three minutes. Especially, when

the speech includes dense information which required a storing process where a high level of strategy and ability in listening is needed. The finding of this research corroborates what Bingol, Celik, Yidliz and Mart (2014) established.

Accent

Almost all participants in this study said that the British accent was difficult for them to understand either from native speakers or from some students in the class because the speakers' sounds were not very clear. Graham (2006) stated that learners often encountered challenges to comprehend the speech due to the speaker's accent. It became apparent that the students in the *Oracy* class were not used to hearing British accents. Interestingly, one of the participants mentioned she eventually got used to her classmate who had a very strong Javanese (one of the regions in Indonesia) accent. Yildiz and Albay (2015) in their study also found that the participants in their study confirmed that pronunciation and the accent of speakers are important factors for them to understand the speaker's meaning. Goh (1999) said that 66 % of learners in his study declared speakers' accents to be one of the important factors which affected their listening comprehension.

Hamouda (2013) argued that students are familiar with their teachers' accents and exposure to new accents might confuse them. Exposing students to a variety of accents might also risk the students' listening comprehension according to Munro and Derwing (1999). Buck (2001) highlighted that students who have only listened to American English will likely find it challenging when they are required to listen to Indian English, for example. Consequently, this situation will disrupt their ability to comprehend the spoken texts. Conversely, when the students are provided with familiar accents they will be more likely to get the messages from the speaker more quickly.

Clarity of the sound

From the data collected, students mentioned challenges to the clarity of their hearing due to the noises that came from the students who talked loudly when the speaker was talking. Unfortunately, the speakers' voices were so soft too and were flattened by the volume of others chatting. Moreover, there were also external factors from outside the classroom such as building construction, people passing by, and people shouting. These factors all contributed to the audience's difficulties to listen clearly to the speaker. Yildiz and Albay (2015) said that the listening setting should be unobtrusive. Therefore, they suggested that a quiet and encouraging listening setting should be provided.

Bloomfield et al. (2011) mentioned that noise and distortion are examples of auditory types that influence students' listening because these inhibit their comprehension. Hamouda (2013), Yagang (1994), and Hasan (2000) agreed that any noises have the potential to distract listeners' concentration. Thus, this study found similar concerns with other researchers in regards this issue.

Seat positioning

From the interviews, it was revealed that students who had high motivation usually sat in the front row. However, these groups of students sometimes had to sit at the back row if they came late and the front row had to be filled in. Those who sat towards the back of the room were disadvantaged because they could not hear the lecturers or the speakers properly. As a result, most of the back seaters lost focus easily and ended up chatting with their neighbours. Bingol, Celik and Mart (2014) explained that students who sit in the back rows or by the windows might experience difficulties in listening accurately. Therefore, they suggested that the teacher should take note and

act on this situation. The findings of this study discovered similar phenomena. Sometimes, the more motivated students did not intend to sit in the back rows but they had to because their peers had already occupied the front seats.

Lack of concentration

Numerous factors were indicated by the students as having affected their concentration when they listened to others' speeches. In addition to the factors that have been discussed previously such as hot temperature, temptation to chat with neighbours, interference from mobile phones, there were also sudden random thoughts about what the students' will have for lunch, what time to take a bath, what movie to watch, empty or full stomachs, or feeling suffocated as the classroom was small. These sorts of factors were all acknowledged by the students as issues that could easily distract their focus.

Ghoneim (2016) reminded that even a tiny distraction can obstruct students' attention and comprehension in listening. Goh (2000) also mentioned that an inability to focus or even too much focus on the speech could also lead to comprehension difficulties. Especially, as Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011) stated, it can be more challenging to focus in a foreign language. Classroom temperature was majorly mentioned by the participants in this study as one of the problems they had during *Oracy* classes. The students very often had to study in a high-temperature classroom due to power cuts and malfunctioning air conditioning devices. This uncomfortable situation also led to more odor from the smell of the floor carpet. This factor was admitted by several students as distracting them from learning attentively.

Indifferent speakers

In the *Oracy in Academic Context* class, students are encouraged to speak and also to listen to spoken languages of others as well as to provide responses, approvals, or disagreements in English fluently and precisely for each performance. This aim of the course was considered not to be fully achieved as the interview data shows the audience found some attitudes of the speakers were hostile towards the audience's responses. As long ago as 1984, Boyle mentioned how the attitude of the speakers might influence the listeners' listening comprehension. As this research revealed, the speakers often were not pleased if they were asked questions, and pulled indifferent facial expressions. Otherwise, they answered the questions quite aggressively. This in turn, made the listeners reluctant to respond accordingly.

Conclusion and suggestions

The *Oracy in Academic Context* unit covers two skills, speaking and listening, simultaneously. As indicated by the unit itself, the problems perceived by the students demonstrated problems related to both speaking and listening. If we further examine the problems, then we discover that the sources of the problems were derived from internal and external factors. Related to students' roles as speakers, the internal factors which contributed to their perceived problems were lack of self-confidence, fear of making mistakes, lack of vocabulary, lack of grammatical mastery, poor pronunciation, and difficulty to coordinate in group work. If these internal factors were categorized further, we find they were influenced by psychological and competence aspects. Meanwhile, the external factors which contributed to their challenges in *Oracy* classes were an ill-timed class schedule, annoying audiences, broad and uninteresting topics of speech, and direct corrective feedback.

2 The challenges the participants in this study found when they functioned as listeners were lack of adequate background knowledge, unfamiliar vocabularies, anxiety, poor pronunciation, fast and long speeches, accents, clarity of the sound, seat positioning, room temperature, lack of concentration, and indifferent speakers. These problems were also sourced from internal and external factors. We clarified further that most of the challenges experienced also related to competency, psychological, and environmental factors.

As indicated by the findings, the lecturers or instructors, and yes even the students, should pay attention to the problems which emerged in *Oracy in Academic Context* classes. It is therefore incumbent upon the lecturers or instructors to better equip the students with a range of skills involved in giving the presentations and to alert them to possible difficulties in the oral presentation contexts. It is not advisable to give students speaking tasks without sufficient preparation time. Even this small amendment would reduce students' anxieties and boost their confidence. The findings related to peers' negative evaluations or responses have also the implication that the lecturers should facilitate a more sincere or empathetic atmosphere in the class where students are encouraged to respect and help each other to improve their oracy skills.

As regards to the difficulties perceived related to listening skills, the aforementioned factors can be attended with care. Lecturers should also realise that students with poor grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation knowledge will end up having trouble comprehending the listening tasks. It can also be recommended to the lecturers to carefully choose the topics of speech or listening tasks to match students' level of proficiency in English, background knowledge, and interests. And lastly, not only lecturers but the University or Department has an important role to provide a special presentation space with soundproofing for the students to conduct their speaking and listening tasks, making sure there are no unnecessary noises disrupting the students' journey to gain enhanced and clearly valuable oracy skills.

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