

THE INTERPLAY OF PARTICIPATING IN ENGLISH COMPETITION AND SPEAKING SKILL DEVELOPMENT: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of participating in English language competitions on the development of speaking skills among EFL (English as a Foreign Language) university students in Indonesia. Employing a narrative inquiry approach, the research investigates two students' lifelong experiences engaging in public speaking contests, highlighting the emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions of their learning journeys. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed using thematic coding aligned with narrative structures. Findings reveal that sustained participation in competitions enhances not only fluency and accuracy in spoken English but also bolsters self-confidence, time management, and critical thinking. Competitions function as transformative spaces for language learning beyond the classroom, fostering resilience and intrinsic motivation. The study underscores the pedagogical value of integrating competitive speaking activities into language curricula and advocates for greater institutional support to cultivate students' communicative competence.

Keywords: Public speaking, English competitions, speaking skills development, narrative inquiry, EFL learners, university students

INTRODUCTION

Speaking skills are vital for effective communication, especially in educational contexts where students interact with teachers, peers, and society. Speaking proficiency is widely acknowledged as a critical component of language acquisition, particularly for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. In educational contexts, the ability to speak fluently and confidently influences academic performance, participation in collaborative tasks, and future career readiness. However, many students struggle with developing effective speaking skills due to psychological, cognitive, and environmental constraints, many also struggle difficulties in developing these skills, often due to lack of practice, support, or motivation.

This study is grounded in the understanding that real-world speaking opportunities, such as English language competitions, offer authentic platforms for learners to apply their knowledge in high-stakes, performance-based contexts. Participation in English competitions offers more than just language practice, it creates avenues for interaction, boosts confidence, and aligns well with educational goals. These competitions have been shown to foster improvements in speaking through public speaking challenges. They also motivate students to strive for excellence while enhancing communication and self-presentation.

Drawing upon a narrative inquiry framework, this research investigates the developmental trajectories of two university students who have participated in numerous public speaking competitions throughout their academic lives. Their stories reveal how such experiences shape language development, self-perception, and academic identity.

Therefore, this research focuses on students who have participated in English competitions from childhood through college. By narrating their journeys, this study seeks to understand how their speaking skills have evolved, what challenges they encountered, and which strategies help them most. The participant's lifelong exposure to competitions offers a unique lens to investigate speaking development in a deeper, more personal context. This research ultimately aims to fill the existing academic gap and highlight the significance of public speaking in educational and personal growth.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Speaking in EFL Contexts

Speaking is both a productive and interactive language skill that requires mastery over vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and pragmatics (Nunan, 2015). Unlike writing or reading, it unfolds in real-time, requiring the speaker to manage anxiety, retrieve language efficiently, and adjust to audience reactions (Brown, 2001).

Speaking Skill Development through Practice

According to Ergasheva et al. (2019), consistent practice in dialogical contexts enhances learners' fluency and confidence. Step-by-step exposure to authentic speaking tasks helps internalize language structures while fostering cognitive strategies such as planning and self-monitoring.

English Language Competitions as Learning Platforms

Competitions such as debates, speeches, storytelling, and drama have been shown to motivate learners and encourage high-level language use (Arroba & Acosta, 2021; Bylkova et al., 2021). These platforms also challenge learners to develop coherence, persuasion, and audience awareness.

PREVIOUS STUDY

Several studies have explored the development of speaking skills through various approaches, yet research focusing specifically on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) competitions remains limited. Zou et al. (2020) examined linguistic and critical thinking development through public speaking contests, finding that adequate input and peer interaction supported skill enhancement. Hartatik et al. (2021) identified challenges like nervousness and limited grammar knowledge during public speaking. Arroba et al. (2021) demonstrated the effectiveness of digital storytelling for improving speaking skills. Bylkova et al. (2021) emphasized rhetorical training and communication exercises as tools for development. Santoso et al. (2021) found that circumlocution helped students gain confidence and improve performance. El Bustomy (2022) confirmed that public speaking methods significantly improved student's speaking scores. Hidayah et al. (2023) highlighted emotional challenges and strategies like relaxation and prayer for overcoming them. Said et al. (2023) discovered that intrinsic motivation plays a stronger role than extrinsic factors in extracurricular speaking activities. Nisa et al. (2024) showed the benefits of *Muhadharah* in improving public speaking among boarding school

students. These studies point to a positive link between speaking activities and skill improvement but still leave gaps, especially regarding university student's experiences in competitions, which this research aims to address.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This research uses narrative inquiry as the design. Narrative Inquiry is to realize its potential for making a contribution to the study of human experience and lives (Clandinin, 2006). The reason why it uses this design is because it allowed the researcher to delve deep into the personal experiences of the participants, resulting in a richer and more contextualized understanding. The voices of the participants took center stage, allowing the researcher to understand social phenomena from their perspectives directly. Also, narrative research is able to capture the nuances of the complexity of human experience, which is often difficult to measure with quantitative methods.

SETTING AND PARTICIPANT

This research was conducted at two well-known private universities in Madura, East Java. Located in two different districts, Pamekasan (Universitas Wiraraja and Universitas Madura). Both are quality and competitive universities in Madura by continuing to establish good coordination, communication and cooperation, and are able to produce graduates who have morality, become inspiring role models, have entrepreneurial skills with national character so that they can contribute to the progress of the nation in global competition. The participants in this research consisted of two students, who were top students at their respective collage, because of their extraordinary public speaking skills, and had a history of many EFL competition experiences during their lifetime. As for the specific criteria for the participants I recruited, they are active students who are still actively developing their speaking skills, it can be seen or assessed from the achievements and experiences that he participated in the University. The process of recruiting the two participants in this study by contacting them through WhatsApp and interviewing them via voice notes, coincidentally my two participants were one of the participants in the competition that I had also participated in, that's where I began to recognize and consider them to have potential, in English as well as in speaking skills.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

Data were collected through in-depth interviews conducted in Indonesian with two experienced EFL competition participants. The interviews, conducted via Zoom meeting, aimed to create a relaxed environment where participants could freely share their experiences. The questions were designed to explore the participants' perceptions of how the competitions affected their speaking, focusing on the challenges they faced, the strategies they used to overcome these challenges, and the overall impact of the competitions on their confidence and English proficiency. In addition, the interviews also explored the types of competitions the participants had participated in, the frequency of their participation, and the support they received from their peers and teachers. In this study, in-depth individual interviews by Zoom meeting were employed as the primary method of data collection. These interviews were conducted in Indonesian to facilitate open and honest communication with the participants. The interviews were designed to elicit rich and detailed narratives from participants regarding their experiences in participating in EFL competitions and their subsequent development of speaking skills.

DATA ANALYSIS

In this study, data analysis was conducted using the narrative inquiry approach as proposed by Creswell (2017). The data analysis process included several stages. The data obtained from in-depth interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. Subsequently, open coding was employed to identify initial themes and categories related to students' experiences in English competitions. Axial coding was then used to further develop these categories and explore the relationships between them. Through selective coding, a core category emerged, highlighting the key factors influencing students' success in competitions. Finally, a narrative was constructed to weave together the findings and present a coherent interpretation of the data. To ensure the validity of the findings, member checking was conducted by sharing the analysis with participants for verification. Additionally, the findings were cross-referenced with existing literature to strengthen their credibility.

FINDINGS

This research identified that students develop speaking skills by participating in competitions for years, from when they were in school. Participant 1 (P1) stated, "In one year I

can participate in 5 to 7 competitions. My motivation... is because I want and am very eager to explore new things... build self-confidence, and make a positive contribution.” Similarly, Participant 2 (P2) shared, “Since I was in elementary school, I like to participate in speech competitions, especially poetry... gain new experiences, new relationships, and challenge myself to be more productive.” As their education level progressed, the types of competitions they joined expanded from poetry to debates, ambassador elections, and scientific papers. Their experiences before, during, and after competitions reflected personal growth. P1 said, “I usually feel enthusiastic and nervous... try to focus on the goal... relief and pride in the effort,” while P2 echoed, “Before joining the competition I had a high spirit... During the competition I was fully focused... After... there is satisfaction.”

Participants also revealed multiple challenges they encountered. P1 said, “I feel mental pressure, Nervousness or fear of failure often arises... Time management... Complex material.” Meanwhile, P2 admitted, “Difficulties due to internal factors... fear of failure, anxiety, focus on competitors, lack of preparation, and lack of confidence.” Despite this, both showed active efforts to overcome them. P1 explained, “I overcome it with regular exercise, positive thinking... look for additional references and discuss with more experienced people.” P2 reflected, “I had to finish with myself... realizing that what is needed is the process not the result... many people are happy and waiting for success.” Their responses highlighted how internal motivation and external support systems played crucial roles in overcoming barriers.

The impact of these competitions was significant. P1 mentioned, “Participating in competitions has improved my speaking skills... trained me to think fast... speak confidently even under pressure... helped me to overcome nervousness.” P2 said, “Before I actively participated... I still felt insecure... But after I was active... these habits began to diminish.” They both experienced transformations in self-confidence, speaking fluency, and mental resilience. P1 noted, “I became more skillful in managing my time... disciplined and goal-oriented,” while P2 added, “It motivates me to study harder... increase my discipline in various matters, including learning.” These reflections show how public speaking competitions not only enhance language abilities but also positively shape their academic and personal lives.

Technology was another crucial factor supporting their development. P1 shared, “I use several media or technologies to practice speaking, such as Zoom, Gmeet, speech practice apps,

voice recording platforms and YouTube.” P2 added, “I understand how people outside perform... have some idols like Vina Muliana... I practice imitating and taking knowledge from them through social media.” These tools enabled them to observe others, practice independently, and reflect on their performance. The integration of technology helped them simulate real competition environments and provided flexibility in learning. It proves that combining competition with digital resources strengthens the effectiveness of skill development, enabling students to grow holistically.

DISCUSSION

Based on the results of interviews and observations, speaking competitions were more than just performance stages—they were vital for building confidence and resilience. Both participants shared how early involvement shaped their speaking development. P1 stated, “I can participate in 5 to 7 competitions per year... build self-confidence,” and P2 noted, “By participating in competitions I can also gain new experiences... challenge myself.” These insights echo Wang & Chen (2024), who highlighted that competitions help students adapt to changing situations. Likewise, Jones et al. (2017) emphasized how competitive environments train clarity and logic under time constraints. Participants affirmed that through constant exposure, they developed critical thinking and emotional control, showing the value of such real-world speaking experiences.

Challenges were unavoidable, but they were also formative. P1 described, “Nervousness or fear of failure... Time management... Complex material.” P2 elaborated on, “Fear of failure, anxiety, focus on competitors, lack of preparation, and lack of confidence.” These findings align with Hidayah et al. (2023), who listed nervousness, fear, and self-doubt as common obstacles in public speaking. However, participants also showed remarkable problem-solving. P1 shared, “I overcome it with regular exercise, positive thinking... discuss with more experienced people,” while P2 emphasized emotional resilience: “Realizing that what is needed is the process not the result.” Their statements reflect research by Brown & Evans (2020), who found that structured preparation and feedback reduce speaking anxiety and improve outcomes.

The impact of competitions extended beyond language skills. P1 said, “Participating in competitions has improved my speaking skills... helped me to overcome nervousness... more

confident,” and P2 added, “Before I actively participated... I felt insecure... habits began to diminish.” These transformations support Olindo et al. (2024), who found that Muhadharah speech training improved students’ public speaking confidence and community involvement. Students also developed transferable skills: time management, discipline, and focus. P1 explained, “I became more skillful in managing my time... disciplined and goal-oriented,” showing how these experiences shaped her academic habits and character. These findings confirm that competitions develop not only skill but also mindset and behavior.

Technology amplified these benefits by providing platforms for self-directed learning. P1 mentioned using “Zoom, Gmeet, speech practice apps, voice recording platforms, and YouTube,” and P2 said, “I understand how people outside perform... practice imitating and taking knowledge.” These digital strategies resonate with studies by Himmah (2020), Islamiyah (2024), and Ismiatun (2022), which found that technology enhances speaking interaction, reduces anxiety, and expands access to authentic resources. By combining tech with real-world competition, students gained both theory and practice, reinforcing their speaking ability holistically. The interviews clearly show that competitions, supported by digital tools and personal motivation, effectively elevate students’ communication and personal growth.

CONCLUSION

The results of the interview showed that the two participants in this study were students who had a very strong desire to learn speaking. This can be seen by looking at the interview answers. They really learned from zero until now. The influence of students' enthusiasm for learning plays a very important role in the development of their speaking skills. High enthusiasm for learning encourages students to practice more actively, face challenges, and not give up easily when faced with difficulties in the learning process. This enthusiasm leads them to continue to find ways to improve their speaking techniques, either through independent practice or by participating in competitions. With strong enthusiasm, students become more motivated to improve their pronunciation, argumentation, and anxiety management deficiencies. In addition, high enthusiasm also allows students to be more open to the feedback they receive, making them develop faster in honing their speaking skills. This enthusiasm for learning, in other words, not only affects the frequency of practice, but also improves the quality of the practice they do.

Participating in competitions has been proven to significantly improve students' speaking skills. Speaking competitions provide direct experience in speaking in front of an audience, which encourages students to practice and hone their speaking skills in real situations. In preparation for the competition, students are required to formulate clear arguments, manage their time, and speak confidently. This directly trains them to think quickly, speak with good structure, and overcome nervousness and pressure that arises. In addition, the experience of competing also provides an opportunity to get constructive feedback from the judges and other participants, which helps students correct weaknesses and improve their speaking techniques. Participants in this study also utilized technology as an important tool to improve their speaking skills. Various digital platforms, such as speaking practice applications, video tutorials, and social media, were used to enrich their learning process. Technology allows participants to practice anytime and anywhere, providing flexibility in arranging practice time. In this study, participants experienced positive lifestyle changes after frequently participating in speaking-related competitions, such as increased discipline and time management. These changes indicate that speaking competitions not only improve speaking skills, but also contribute to students' personal development in terms of self-management and communication skills.

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