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Challenges Faced by Students in Authentic Speaking Assessment at SMA Swasta Santo Yoseph Medan

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the challenges experienced by students in authentic assessment of speaking skills and examines how these challenges influence their speaking performance. Speaking is considered one of the most important yet difficult skills in English learning, especially when students are required to perform in real communication tasks. The study was conducted at SMA Swasta Santo Yoseph Medan, involving 32 students of class XI-4. A qualitative descriptive design was applied to explore students' experiences in depth. The data were collected through questionnaire as the main instrument, supported by interviews and classroom observation to strengthen the findings. The data were analyzed through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that students face several major challenges, including anxiety, lack of confidence, difficulty in organizing ideas, limited vocabulary, and confusion about assessment criteria. These challenges significantly affect students' speaking performance by causing hesitation, reducing fluency, and making their speech less clear. In addition, classroom environment and time limitation also contribute to students' difficulties. However, support from teachers and classmates, as well as clear understanding of assessment criteria, can help improve students' performance. Therefore, it is important for teachers to create a supportive learning environment and provide clear guidance to help students perform better in authentic speaking assessment.

Kata Kunci

Speaking Assessment, Students' Challenges, Authentic Assessment, Speaking Performance, Classroom Environment

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INTRODUCTION

Speaking is one of the most important skills in learning English because it enables students to communicate their ideas, thoughts, and feelings effectively. Unlike other language skills, speaking requires students to produce language directly and spontaneously. Therefore, students need not only linguistic knowledge such as grammar and vocabulary, but also confidence and the ability to organize ideas quickly. In the context of English as a foreign language (EFL), speaking becomes more challenging due to limited exposure to the

language in daily life. As stated by H. Douglas Brown (2004), speaking is an interactive process that involves constructing meaning through producing and receiving information. This indicates that speaking is a complex skill that requires both linguistic and communicative competence.

In recent years, authentic assessment has been widely used in language learning, particularly in assessing speaking skills. Authentic assessment focuses on real-life communication and meaningful tasks, such as presentations, role plays, and discussions. According to J. Michael O'Malley and Lorraine Valdez Pierce (1996), authentic assessment evaluates students' ability to use language in real contexts rather than simply measuring theoretical knowledge. This approach is considered more effective because it reflects students' actual speaking ability. However, the implementation of authentic assessment in speaking is not always successful, especially from the students' perspective.

Many students experience various challenges when they are required to perform speaking tasks in authentic assessment. One of the most common problems is anxiety. Elaine K. Horwitz et al. (1986) explain that foreign language anxiety includes fear of making mistakes, fear of negative evaluation, and communication apprehension. In addition, lack of confidence also affects students' performance, as explained by H. Douglas Brown (2007), who states that affective factors play an important role in language learning. Besides psychological factors, students also face linguistic difficulties, such as limited vocabulary and difficulty in organizing ideas. Jack C. Richards (2008) emphasizes that speaking requires both linguistic and communicative competence, which can be challenging for EFL learners.

Furthermore, students' understanding of assessment criteria also influences their performance. In authentic assessment, teachers usually use rubrics to evaluate aspects such as fluency, pronunciation, and content. However, not all students fully understand these criteria, which may lead to confusion and ineffective preparation. In addition, classroom environment also plays an important role. Students may feel more anxious when they are being observed by many classmates, while support from teachers and peers can help improve their confidence and performance.

Although many studies have discussed speaking difficulties and language anxiety, most of them focus on general speaking problems rather than specifically examining students' challenges in authentic speaking assessment. In addition, studies that explore how these challenges influence students' speaking performance in real classroom contexts are still limited. This indicates a gap in understanding the relationship between students' challenges and their

performance in authentic assessment settings, particularly at the senior high school level.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the challenges experienced by students in authentic assessment of speaking skills and to analyze how these challenges influence their speaking performance. This study focuses on students of class XI-4 at SMA Swasta Santo Yoseph Medan. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to English language learning by providing insights into students' difficulties and offering practical implications for improving speaking assessment in the classroom.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a qualitative descriptive research design to explore students' challenges in authentic assessment of speaking skills and how these challenges influence their speaking performance. The research was conducted at SMA Swasta Santo Yoseph Medan, involving 32 students of class XI-4 as the participants. The participants were selected because they had experienced authentic speaking assessment in their English class, making them relevant to the purpose of this study.

The data were collected using three techniques: questionnaire, interview, and observation. The questionnaire was used as the main instrument to identify students' challenges. It consisted of 20 statements covering several aspects, including anxiety, confidence, understanding of assessment criteria, speaking performance difficulties, and classroom environment. The questionnaire used a Likert scale with five options: Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree.

In addition, interviews were conducted with several students to gain deeper insights into their experiences during speaking assessment. The interviews were conducted through direct questions to make students feel more comfortable in expressing their opinions. Observation was also carried out to support the data obtained from the questionnaire and interviews. During the observation, the researcher focused on students' behavior, such as hesitation, confidence, participation, and interaction in the classroom.

The data collection was conducted during the teaching and learning process in the classroom. The questionnaire was distributed to all participants, followed by interviews with selected students and classroom observation. This procedure was conducted to ensure that the data represent both students' perceptions and actual classroom conditions.

The data were analyzed using qualitative data analysis techniques, including data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The

questionnaire data were first calculated in percentages to identify general patterns of students' responses. Then, the results were interpreted descriptively. The data from interviews and observation were analyzed to support and explain the findings from the questionnaire. This process allowed the researcher to understand the relationship between students' challenges and their speaking performance.

To ensure the validity of the data, this study applied data triangulation by combining questionnaire, interview, and observation. This approach helps to verify the consistency of the findings from different data sources. However, this study has some limitations, such as the small number of participants and the focus on one class only, which may limit the generalization of the findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that students experience several challenges in authentic assessment of speaking skills, which significantly influence their speaking performance. Based on questionnaire data from 32 students, supported by interviews and classroom observation, the main challenges include anxiety, lack of confidence, difficulty in organizing ideas, limited vocabulary, confusion about assessment criteria, and classroom environment factors.

Anxiety is identified as one of the most influential challenges. Although most students (74.2%) selected neutral when asked about general nervousness, a significant number of students agreed that they are afraid of making mistakes (41.9%) and being judged by their classmates (42%). In addition, nearly half of the students (48.4%) stated that nervousness negatively affects their speaking performance. This finding is supported by Elaine K. Horwitz et al. (1986), who explain that foreign language anxiety includes fear of negative evaluation and communication apprehension. This result is also in line with Liu and Jackson (2008), who found that anxiety can reduce students' willingness to communicate in a foreign language.

The interview data provide deeper insight into this condition. One student stated, "I feel scared when I speak because I think my friends will judge me if I make mistakes." Another student said, "When I am nervous, I forget what I want to say." These responses show that anxiety is not only a feeling but also affects students' cognitive processes during speaking. Classroom observation further supports this finding, as several students showed hesitation, avoided eye contact, and paused frequently while speaking. This indicates that anxiety directly reduces students' fluency and clarity in speaking performance. This condition can be explained by MacIntyre and Gardner (1994), who argue that

anxiety interferes with cognitive processing, making it difficult for learners to retrieve vocabulary and organize their ideas during communication.

Lack of confidence is another major factor influencing students' speaking performance. The data show that many students are not fully confident, with 48.4% choosing neutral when asked about their confidence. In addition, 38.7% of students admitted that they hesitate when speaking English, and most students (71%) agreed that low confidence makes their speaking performance worse. This finding is in line with H. Douglas Brown (2007), who states that affective factors such as self-confidence play an important role in language learning.

The interview results strengthen this finding. One student explained, "I know what I want to say, but I am not confident to speak in front of the class." Another student stated, "Sometimes I feel shy, so I speak very slowly." These responses indicate that students' problems are not always related to their knowledge, but rather to their confidence in using the language. This suggests that psychological factors play a crucial role in speaking assessment, as students may have the ability but are unable to perform well due to low confidence. This finding is also supported by Leong and Ahmadi (2017), who state that speaking performance is influenced by factors such as confidence, fluency, and language mastery.

In terms of linguistic and performance difficulties, more than half of the students (54.8%) reported difficulty in organizing their ideas. In addition, 45.1% admitted that they sometimes forget vocabulary, while the most dominant problem is fluency, with 71% of students agreeing that they find it difficult to speak smoothly. Furthermore, 67.7% of students stated that limited time makes speaking more difficult. These findings are consistent with Jack C. Richards (2008), who emphasizes that speaking requires both linguistic and communicative competence. These results also align with Leong and Ahmadi (2017), who highlight that fluency and vocabulary limitations are key factors affecting students' speaking performance.

The interview data further illustrate these difficulties. One student stated, "I have ideas, but I don't know how to say them in English." Another said, "Sometimes I forget words, so I stop and think for a long time." These responses show that students struggle not only with language knowledge but also with real-time language production. Classroom observation also revealed that students often produced incomplete sentences and experienced long pauses, which indicates difficulties in organizing ideas and maintaining fluency during speaking tasks.

Another important finding relates to students' understanding of assessment criteria. Most students (64.5%) agreed that they understand how their speaking performance is scored, and 51.7% stated that they know what aspects are assessed by the teacher. However, a notable proportion of students (45.2%) still feel confused about how their scores are determined. At the same time, a large majority (74.2%) agreed that understanding the scoring system helps them prepare better. This finding supports the view of J. Michael O'Malley and Lorraine Valdez Pierce (1996), who emphasize the importance of clear and transparent assessment criteria.

Interview data confirm this issue. One student stated, "I know there is a score, but I don't really understand what the teacher looks at." Another student added, "If I understand the scoring, I can prepare better." This indicates that unclear assessment criteria can create uncertainty, which may affect students' preparation and performance.

Classroom environment also plays a significant role in influencing students' speaking performance. Although many students (45.2%) felt neutral about classroom comfort, around 45.2% reported feeling more nervous when many classmates are watching them. On the other hand, most students agreed that support from teachers (61.3%) and classmates (67.8%) helps them feel more confident and perform better.

This finding is also supported by interview data. One student said, "I feel more confident when my friends support me." Another stated, "When the teacher encourages me, I feel more brave to speak." These responses show that a supportive classroom environment can reduce anxiety and increase students' confidence in speaking.

Overall, these findings explain how students' challenges influence their speaking performance. From a psychological perspective, anxiety and low confidence lead to hesitation, reduced fluency, and lack of focus. From a cognitive perspective, nervous students tend to forget vocabulary and struggle to organize their ideas. This is supported by Stephen Krashen (1982) through the Affective Filter Hypothesis, which explains that emotional factors can hinder language production. As a result, students' speaking performance becomes less fluent, less clear, and less confident.

The findings of this study are generally consistent with previous research on speaking anxiety and language learning. However, this study highlights that challenges in speaking are not only related to students' ability, but also strongly influenced by the context of authentic assessment and classroom environment. This provides a more specific understanding of how assessment practices shape students' speaking performance.

In terms of implications, this study suggests that teachers need to create a supportive classroom environment, provide clear assessment criteria, and give more opportunities for speaking practice. These strategies can help reduce students' anxiety and improve their speaking performance. However, this study has some limitations, such as the small number of participants (32 students) and the focus on one class only, which may limit the generalization of the findings. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve more participants and explore different contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that students face various challenges in authentic assessment of speaking skills, particularly related to anxiety, lack of confidence, linguistic difficulties, limited understanding of assessment criteria, and classroom environment. These challenges significantly influence students' speaking performance, as they affect both psychological and cognitive aspects during the speaking process. The findings indicate that students' difficulties are not only caused by their language ability, but also by internal factors such as emotions and confidence, as well as external factors such as assessment practices and classroom conditions. Therefore, speaking performance should be understood as a combination of students' competence and the learning environment that supports or hinders their ability to perform.

The findings of this study highlight the importance of creating a supportive and well-structured learning environment in speaking assessment. Teachers play a crucial role in reducing students' anxiety, building their confidence, and providing clear assessment criteria to help students prepare effectively. In addition, classroom interaction and peer support also contribute to improving students' speaking performance. This study suggests that authentic assessment should not only focus on evaluating students' ability, but also consider students' emotional readiness and learning conditions. By addressing these factors, speaking assessment can become more effective and meaningful in supporting students' language development.

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