

EFL learners' challenges to speak English in online speaking classes

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Abstract: The purposes of this qualitative inquiry were to explore EFL learners' challenges in online speaking and their strategies in overcoming the challenges. To collect the data, semi-structured interviews and audio diary were employed to 12 EFL learners who voluntarily participated in the study. Based on data analysis, four interrelated themes and sub-themes about EFL learners' challenges in online speaking classes were identified, such as internet and technology related issues (poor connection and lack of technological knowledge); linguistic issues (limited vocabulary, lack of grammatical knowledge, fluency and pronunciation problem); psychological issues (anxiety, low motivation and insecure); and learning proponents (lack of topical knowledge and unsupportive peers). To overcome those encountered challenges, EFL learners used several strategies, including self-management (self-practice and being well-prepared); help from others (having discussions with friends and asking the lecturers); and technological support (taking advantage of entertainment platforms and language applications).

Keywords: *EFL learners' speaking challenges, overcoming strategies, online speaking classes, qualitative*

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia along with many other nations in the world, in early 2020, faced serious global pandemic caused by a virus called Covid-19. This pandemic impacted and even changed the activities of most sectors of society's life, including education sector (Allo, 2020). To prevent the spread of Covid-19, the government issued the policy for all educational institution to reduce the interaction of many people. The consequence of this policy is the switch of mode of learning from traditional learning methods to modern learning approaches from classrooms to online platforms, from seminars to webinars from individual to virtual (Misra, Gupta, & Shree, 2020) which is known as online learning.

Online learning is often referred to as 'e-learning'. It is generally defined as a type of learning that occurs through the use of technology and electronic media. This general assumption of online learning is in line with some scholars' arguments. Shank and Sitze (2004), for instance, outlined that online learning is a type of learning that involves using technologies and/or network technologies, such as internet connection. Moreover, Clark and Meyer (2016) argued that online learning or e-learning is a learning process through digital devices. In a more current literature, Abernathy (2020) asserted that online learning is a learning type which is carried out remotely using an internet connection. The students,

in online learning, can access learning materials anytime and anywhere. It is clear that online learning is dependent on technological device and internet connection. The absence of devices and poor connection may impede the nature of online learning.

In its implementation, the switch in learning mode from offline to online affected EFL learners' learning process, including in their speaking class. Speaking, in general, is defined as one of language's productive skills which helps humans express their thoughts, feelings, emotions and also exchange information among them (Burns & Joyce, 1997; Lazaron, 2001; Harmer, 2001). In the context of education, particularly language education, speaking is a skill that needs to be mastered by learners. Many researchers highlighted that the goal of learning language is being able to speak fluently (Niu & Niemi, 2020; Richard & Reynanda, 2002; Usmonov, 2002). However, to be able to speak fluently and appropriately, for language learners, is not as easy as it seems, especially learning speaking skill through online learning.

Based on our preliminary study by having an informal conversation with EFL learners, we found out that they experienced countless challenges in learning speaking online, including limited internet access, unclear lecturers' explanation, and unfamiliar learning application. Aside from the results of our preliminary study, the scarcity of the related study was another rationale of this study. A number of studies have explored online learning challenges (see Allo, 2020; Barrot, Llenares & Del Rosario, 2021; Bhuana & Apriliyanti, 2021; Hermanto & Srimulyani, 2021; Nartiningrum & Nugroho, 2020; Yuzulia, 2021; Wiratman & Rahmadani, 2022). However, only few studies focused on challenges on online speaking classes. One of the related research projects was a study by Bich and Lian (2021). They conducted a mixed-method study by administering questionnaire and interviewing some participants. Their study results indicated that the participants experienced several problems, including technological advances, Wi-Fi connection, speaking skill proficiency and sociolinguistics competence. Their research also revealed that more project-based learning and more video conferences would be expected solutions for the encountered challenges. The result of our preliminary study and the scarcity of documented studies on exploring online speaking class challenges during Covid-19 Pandemic motivated us as the researchers to conduct this inquiry. Additionally, this study is expected to fill the literature gap related to EFL learners' online speaking class experiences.

METHOD

This study aimed to explore EFL student teachers' experiences studying speaking online, especially the challenges they encountered and the strategies they employed to overcome the challenges. To achieve the aim of the study, a qualitative study with a case study approach was employed. Qualitative method seems appropriate for this inquiry because it can provide a comprehensive and detailed explanation of the phenomenon of interest (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Stake, 2010). Moreover, a case study approach is a qualitative tradition (Johnson & Christenson, 2008) which is intended to describe, explore and analyze a case or a bounded system comprehensively (Stake, 1995; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2014). In other words, this approach attempts to generate an in-depth exploration and analysis of a case and/or phenomenon in its real-life context. Therefore, this design was considered appropriate to use in this inquiry as it helped us as the researchers to holistically and comprehensively explain the case or phenomenon of interest.

Regarding the research site, we conducted the study at one English language study program in Jambi. There were several considerations of choosing this research site, such as 1 the appropriateness for the research in EFL context; the availability of speaking course(s) as the focus of our study; and the availability of research access. In selecting the participants, a purposive sampling was employed. This sampling technique was employed because it purposely helped researchers to answer the research questions. We eventually recruited 12 participants. Those participants fulfilled the criteria we had set before recruiting them, including they had challenges with learning speaking online; they took all speaking classes online; and they were willing to participate voluntarily. Of the 12 selected participants, six of them were male and the other six were female. They, in detail, were (pseudonym), Dicky (male), Rana (female), Bastian (male), Jasmine (female), Harry (male), Ana (female), Teguh (male), Titi (female), Ryan (male), Dina (female), Josh (male) and Bunga (female).

In collecting the data of the study, we used two data collection techniques. The first technique was semi-structured interviews. With the help of interview protocol as the instrument of the research, the process of interview in this inquiry was generally well. At the beginning, the researchers explained the purpose of the research and interview procedures to the participants. After they understood, we began interviewing the participant one by one. Every participant was interviewed for approximately 25-40 minutes and was audio recorded. The language used in the interview was the participants' choices. Among 12 participants, only two of them had interview in English while the other 10 participants answered the interviewers in Bahasa Indonesia.

Another data collection technique in this study was audio diary. This involves participants' reflections in the form of audio recording over a period of time (Buchanan, 1991). For this data collection method, we asked the participants to record their feelings and learning experiences after their speaking classes. We asked eight audio diaries for every participant and the length of each audio diary was up to three minutes. From 12 participants, 10 of them sent 8 diaries, while the other two, Bastian and Titi, only sent five audio diaries.

In terms of data analysis, we employed thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clark (2006). There were six steps of analyzing the data. Firstly, we began familiarizing the data by listening to the interview recordings and audio diaries, transcribing the data, and reading the transcription for several times. Secondly, we generated initial data coding by highlighting important information in the transcription. The process of highlighting was done in the computer by bolding the texts and coloring them differently. Thirdly, we searched the theme by combining related data, separating the different ones, and naming the themes and sub-themes tentatively. Fourthly, we reviewed the themes by looking at the data in detail and ensuring the data and the themes and/or sub-themes matched each other. Fifthly, we defined and named the themes by reviewing the whole data and determining the final names of themes and subthemes. Lastly, we produced the report.

To ensure the trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and to verify the accuracy of data, we used member checking by returning the interview data (both languages) to the participants to get their feedback. Additionally, after the process of analysis, we shared the analysis data among us to ensure the accuracy of our interpretation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

From the result of data analysis, we identified four prominent themes regarding the speaking challenges faced by EFL students in online learning, such as linguistics issues, psychological issues, learning proponents, and internet and technological related issues. Detail information of themes and their interrelated sub-themes can be seen in the Table 1.

Table 1
Themes and sub-themes of speaking challenges

	Theme(s)	Sub-themes(s)
Speaking Challenges	Internet and technology related issues	Poor connection
		Lack of technological knowledge
	Linguistics issues	Limited vocabulary
		Lack of grammatical knowledge
		Fluency problem
	Psychological issues	Pronunciation problem
		Anxiety
		Low motivation
		Insecure
	Learning proponents	Lack of topical knowledge
Unsupportive peers		

The first theme of speaking challenge is internet and technology related issues. As shown in the Table 1, two subthemes were found. Poor connection turned out to be one of the most prevalent challenges for the participants to speak in online speaking class. All participants acknowledged that poor connection was one of their major problems to actively get involved and speak in online speaking classes. Due to Covid-19 outbreak, they studied from home and most of them stayed in the country side in which the internet connection was not stable. *Ana*, for instance, shared in her interview, “internet connection is a big challenge for me in online speaking class. Because of no offline classes, I choose to stay in my hometown. I could not be active to speak in class and even I could not join the online meeting because of poor internet connection”. Similarly, *Harry* commented in interview, “one of the challenges I face is bad signal. Every time the lecturer asked me to answer the question or speak, the signal was lost and it made me stressful”. Moreover, *Teguh* shared his online speaking class experience in his daily report. He noted, “today, we had group presentation... I found it ineffective because of poor internet signal. My signal was bad and I came out of the zoom. These data obviously indicate that the participants found it challenges to speak actively in their online speaking class due to internet poor connection.

Another challenge which belongs to this theme is lack of technological knowledge. two participants admitted that lack of knowledge in technology makes her challenging to be active in online speaking classes. *Dina* reported in her audio diary that she experienced difficulties in online speaking classes due to her limited knowledge of technology. She said, “I had online speaking class today and the lecturer used google meet for the class. It’s new for me and I found it challenging to follow the class, especially when I wanted to share screen before

presentation or to speak". Moreover, **Bunga** shared in her audio diary that she sometimes found it difficult to study with zoom due to her limited knowledge about some features of zoom application. She uttered, "I sometimes get confused to use zoom, for example how to raise hand and how to make someone a host". This shows that understanding the technology application is pivotal in online class.

The data analysis indicated that linguistics turned another prevalent challenge for the participants to speak in online learning. There were four interrelated subthemes, as shown in the table 1, were identified from the interviews and audio diaries. The first subtheme is limited vocabulary. Of 12 participants, eight of them acknowledged that lack of vocabulary became the stumbling block for them to actively participates verbally in online speaking courses. **Rana**, for instance, said in her interview "I have limited vocabulary and it makes me difficult to speak in zoom meeting". With a similar vein, **Ryan** shared during his interview "honestly, I am very lack of vocabulary. This causes me to keep silent in (online) speaking class. It's challenging for me to convey my ideas in front to the others". A different perspective issue in vocabulary was addressed by **Jasmine** in her audio diary. She confessed that vocabulary became a huge issue for her to handle because the speaking lecturer like to use unfamiliar or uncommon words. She specifically uttered in the recording, "Today, I [found] it difficult to understand vocabularies because the lecturer spoke with high level vocabularies. I just heard the words for the first time and this made me confused to understand the materials and respond the discussion verbally". These data obviously indicate that having limited range of vocabulary hindered individuals from actively participate in verbal activities, including online speaking courses.

Another linguistic issue identified from data transcription is lack of grammatical knowledge. Seven participants highlighted that grammar became one of causes that hindered them from actively speaking in online speaking course. **Dina** reported in the interview "grammar is one of the most barriers for me to speak [in online speaking class] and I find it difficult to arrange the sentences in a good arrangement". Similarly, **Dicky** commented in the interview that one of his major challenges in online speaking course is to speak in a good grammar. He explicitly voiced "I can say that grammar is one of my big challenges in speaking. My grammar is bad and I could not really be able to speak in correct grammar". Furthermore, **Ana** in her audio diary shared that it was not easy for her to speak English spontaneously with good grammar. She said, "In our online speaking course, we should talk spontaneously. The most noticeable problem for me in spontaneous speaking is arranging the words. I am sometimes not sure if I am speaking correctly and understandably or not". These data show that lack of grammatical knowledge potentially hampers participants from active speaking.

The other two linguistics issues, based on the data transcription, are fluency and pronunciation problems. In relation to fluency, six participants acknowledged that fluency or rate of speech rally mattered in their speaking online classes. Many of them argued that having mixed languages when speaking English influenced their rate of speech. For example, **Bunga** reported in his interview "sometimes, whenever I want to speak in zoom, I mix up English and Indonesian and it affects the smoothness or fluency of my talk. I feel bad when it happens". Similarly, **Dina** said in her interview that she often mixed the language in online speaking class and it contributed to her speaking fluency problem. She specifically uttered, "I know I am expected to speak full English in speaking class, but because I frequently

mix the languages, I have problem with the flow of my talk". With a different story, **Josh** recorded in his audio diary that his fluency problem was the result of his lack of vocabulary. He said "This week, the lecturer gave us assignment to analyze the conversation video and retell with our own language. I found it difficult to speak fluently because of my limited vocabulary". Aside from fluency, pronunciation is another linguistics issue. At least, four participants raised this issue. **Harry** explained in his interview, "I really have problem with pronunciation and my English is just like Indonesian English. That's why I feel reluctant to speak in online class". Another participant, **Dina**, reported in her audio diary that she got negative evaluation from her lecturer regarding her pronunciation. She shared "My lecturer gave me feedback for me today and he said my pronunciation needs to be improved. I just feel my poor pronunciation makes me hesitant to speak English in class". These data obviously indicate that both fluency and pronunciation problems are the challenges for participants from active speaking in online speaking classes.

The third emerging theme from the data is psychological. This theme mainly relates to individuals' motivations and/or feelings. From the data of interviews and audio diaries, three overarching sub-themes were identified. The first psychological issue that challenged the participants from active speaking in online speaking classes is the feeling of anxiety. Among 12 participants, eight of them mentioned anxiety as one of the challenges in their speaking class. **Titi** explained in her interview, "I often feel nervous and unease to speak English although the learning class is an online class. I don't know the reasons, just feel nervous. With a different story, **Dicky** explain that his personality changes from cheerful to nervous when he has to do presentation/speaking in front of the class both offline and online. He commented in his interview, "I love talking and sharing to other people, but when it comes into speaking or having a presentation in front of the class, I feel afraid and nervous which I think they contribute to my anxiety" Moreover, **Teguh** shared his similar experience in his audio diary. He reported, "in today's class, I didn't really have problems. But, when the lecturer asked me to speak in the zoom, I automatically became nervous and stuttering. I think it because the lecturer and my classmates will pay attention to me". These interview data show that being anxious can be an influential factor which hampers the participants' active verbal communication.

The other psychological issues that contribute to the participants' difficulty to speak in online speaking class are the lack of motivation and feeling insecure. In terms of low motivation, two participants explicitly explained that this factor made them difficult to study and/or speak English. **Jasmine**, a female participant, voiced, "You know, I think my motivation is low. It's just the second semester break and the learning's still online. I don't think it's easy to speak English though". With a similar vein, **Dicky** explained that online learning itself was the reason of his low motivation to be active in speaking online class. He uttered, "the mode of learning in this semester makes my motivation fades away and honestly it affects my eagerness and activeness to speak". Regarding insecure sub-theme, only one participant, **Titi**, mentioned this. She explained in her interview that her feeling of insecure became a serious challenge for her speaking progress. She said, "I am feeling insecure with my friends who are good at English. This feeling, at some point, makes me reluctant to be active in speaking online class. I am afraid if they my poor English".

The last theme of online speaking challenges is learning proponents. It relates to all supporting factors in the process of learning. Based on the data of interviews and audio

diaries, we identified two sub-themes, including topical knowledge and peers. Regarding topical knowledge, six participants acknowledged that lack of speaking topical knowledge causes their challenges to speak in online class. **Dina**, for instance, shared that she found it challenging to speak in an online speaking class because she was not really familiar with the topic of discussion. She noted, "I sometimes do not really understand the topic of discussion and therefore I better keep silent because it's too difficult for me". Similarly, **Bunga** shared, "Honestly, if I have less knowledge about a topic of speaking class, I don't talk too much. Furthermore, **Harry** shared that his lack of topical knowledge was the result of technical problem, such as his computer. He commented, sometimes, I had problem with my computer and I could not listen the lecturer's voice clearly. When, I was asked to speak, I did not have any idea to talk about". From these data, it is clear that lack of topical knowledge causes the difficulty to speak in class.

Besides lack of topical knowledge, another learning proponent issue identified from the data is peers. One participant, **Bastian**, stated in his interview that his classmates were not very cooperative and helpful. This, in a particular situation, made him struggle to study or even speak in his online speaking class. He uttered, "When I asked my friends about the materials or assignment, they told me that they didn't know either. What made it worse is that they did not really care when I need them to listen to my speaking. Whereas, when they asked me, I always told them the answer". This interview transcription clearly indicate that classmates could be reason of participants' reluctance to be active in online speaking class.

Going through thematic analysis, we also identified the participants' way to overcome their speaking challenges when learning online speaking classes. There are three main themes related to overcoming strategies and each themes encompasses more than one sub-theme. More detail theme and sub-themes can be seen in the Table 2.

Table 2

Themes and sub-themes of ways to overcome speaking challenges

	Theme(s)	Sub-Theme(s)
Ways to overcome speaking challenges	Self-management	Self-practice
		Being well-prepared
	Helping from others	Asking or having discussion with friends
		Asking the lectures
	Technological support	Entertainment platform
		Language application

Based on the data analysis, the first theme overcoming strategies is self-management. What it is meant by self-management strategy is the strategy initiated and done by the individuals themselves to manage their encountered challenges without any help from others. Regarding this, two sub-themes were identified.

Firstly, nine participants acknowledged that self-practice is one of effective strategies in managing their speaking challenges. For instance, **Bunga** explained in her interview that she managed her fluency and pronunciation problems by intensive self-practice in front of mirror. She said, "to handle my fluency and pronunciation, I just often talk to myself. I mostly talk in English in front of mirror". With a similar vein, **Ryan** mentioned in his audio diary that

talking in front of mirror is effective to alleviate his anxiety in speaking. He shared, "I am a nervous person to speak in front of the others. However, I usually practice alone in front of mirror. You know, it sometimes helps me reduce my nervous while having presentation in zoom". Another participant, *Ana*, noted in her interview that memorizing the vocabulary is one of the best options to overcome problem with vocabulary in speaking. She uttered, "I previously had limited vocabulary and this made me stuttering when conveying ideas in speaking class. I work so hard to memorize the vocabulary and you know it works". From these data, it is obvious that self-practice is an effective way to make improvement in speaking.

Secondly, the data indicate that another sub-theme of self-management strategy is being well-prepared. Two participants highlighted that being well-prepared is effective to alleviate speaking challenges in online speaking class. For example, *Dicky* mentioned in his interview that preparation is pivotal for him before speaking class. He noted, "the most important is preparation. I always prepare myself before speaking class, such as reading notes of last meeting and reading related materials. I find it helpful when I have to convey my opinion in zoom". Similarly, *Josh* emphasized the importance of well-preparation for him before taking speaking class in his audio diary. He commented, "it is important for me to be well-prepared before class. I do it because my speaking is pretty bad, so I make a script before I do an online presentation". The participants' statements clearly show that preparation is needed before speaking class in order to participate well in the class.

The second theme identified from the data is getting help from others. As seen in Table 2, this theme has two interrelated sub-themes. The first sub-theme is asking and/or having discussion with friends. For this, seven participants admitted that getting help from friends is one of the alternative ways for them to solve their speaking challenges in online speaking class. One participant, *Jasmine*, elucidated that she really depends on her friends. She often asks her friends' help to overcome her problem in studying, including speaking class. She specifically said, "whenever I find some problem in studying like problem in speaking, I always ask my friends to help. I even invite my friends to zoom to ask some studying problems and to practice English together". With a different perspective, *Harry* detailed in his interview that asking help from friends is a convenient way to deal with his study/speaking issues. He expressed, "if I find it difficult to practice my English or to do my assignment. I ask my friends to help me. I find it more comfortable to ask their help and to discuss with them even though we have different opinions". Furthermore, *Dina* reported in her audio diary that friends are the ones she exchanges ideas whenever she finds difficulty in learning and speaking English. She stated, "if I have difficulty in understanding the ideas and practicing my English, I usually exchange ideas with friends and it definitely helps me a lot". From the participants' data, it can be concluded that asking help from friends could be very useful to solve the issues in learning, particularly speaking skill.

Besides getting help from friends, four participants mentioned that asking lecturers is helpful for them when they have speaking challenges in online class. This was mentioned by four participants in their interview. One of the participants, *Titi*, spelled out in her interview that asking lecturer could be fruitful to alleviate the challenges faced in learning, especially speaking. She commented, "it's after second semester break, and I think my English speaking is getting worse. Therefore, I asked my speaking lecturer about how to progress it and she said that it is normal and I just have to keep practicing. Honestly, it's really helps me". With a different story, *Teguh* revealed that asking lecturer was his last option for help because

he felt uncomfortable to do it often. He conveyed, “when I know nothing about the lesson and friends can't help, I sometimes ask the lecturer, but it's rare because I feel awkward if I ask him”. From these data, it is clear that asking lecturer is beneficial for the participants to overcome their study issues.

Technological support is the last theme of overcoming strategies. This relates to technological platforms and applications that the participants utilized to deal with their speaking challenges. Based on the data analysis, there are two sub-themes for this. The first sub-theme is utilizing entertainment platforms. Seven participants expressed that they used some entertainment applications and/or platforms, such as movie websites, YouTube, Tik Tok and music applications to help them with language difficulty. One of the female participants, **Jasmine**, shared in her interview that she learned a lot from watching movie. She said, “I love watching movie in some free movie websites. This really helps me improve my English, including vocabulary, pronunciation and accent to be better”. With a different platform, **Bastian** reported in his audio recording that he sometimes solved his language problems by watching YouTube. He noted, “the challenge of speaking course last week was presenting a speech. I had never done it before. Therefore, I search the internet by watching YouTube on how to make good speech and it worked. My lecturer said that my speech was good”. Furthermore, **Ana** benefited multiple entertainment platforms to increase her English. She commented, “I use many sources to increase my English or to help me if I find difficulties, such as watching the tutor in YouTube, learning English in TikTok, practicing pronunciation in songs and movies”. These data clearly indicate that entertainment platform play a quite significant role as media to improve English speaking skill.

The second sub-theme of technological support, based on the data analysis, is language application. In this sense, language application refers to the specific application developed for language users or learners, such as google translate and online dictionaries. All participants acknowledged that language application is helpful for them with the language problems. For instance, **Titi** highlighted that she used online applications for her problems in grammar and vocabulary. She uttered, “I take advantage of many applications for my language issues, for example a website called Grammarly helps me check my grammar, google translate facilitates me for vocabulary and pronunciation issues”. Another participant, **Josh**, mentioned that he used a different online language application for his vocabulary difficulty. He stated, “I often find it challenging with the vocabulary. Some vocabularies are just new for me. I am lazy to open that ‘thick’ dictionary, so I just search the vocabularies and their meanings in an online dictionary called *kamusku*”. Moreover, **Ryan** in his audio diary reported that he installed a specific language application to help him practice his speaking. He shared, “there are many ways I do to improve my speaking and one of them is installing an application called Duolingo. This helps me practice my speaking and vocabulary”. The data from participants show that language application is indeed helpful to improve the language learning, including speaking skill.

The purposes of this inquiry were to explore EFL learners' challenges in learning speaking skill online and to unearth their overcoming strategies. In order to achieve research purposes, two research questions were formulated: what are EFL learners challenges in learning online speaking class? How do they overcome their encountered challenges?

From the result of data analysis, we found some interrelated themes and subthemes, including internet and technology related issues (poor connection and lack of technological

knowledge); psychological issues (anxiety, low-motivation, insecure); learning proponents (lecturers, classmates, topical knowledge); linguistics issues (vocabulary, grammar, fluency, pronunciation); self-management (self-practice and being well-prepared); helping from others (asking or having discussion with friends and asking the lecturers); and technological support (entertainment platforms and language application).

Among the challenges in learning online speaking class, the theme of internet and technological issues is the most common challenge for EFL learners. Regarding this, all participants admitted that poor connection was one of their major obstacles in learning online speaking class. This finding suggests that this issue seems to be a central issue in online learning. Many studies (Amir, *et al.*, 2020; Bhuana & Apriliyanti, 2021; Bich & Lian, 2021; Yuzulia, 2021; Muslimin & Harintama, 2020; Nartiningrum & Nugroho, 2020; Octavia, Dwiyanto, & Noviarita, 2021; Syafrayan, Ginting, Hasnah, & Saragih, 2022; Zboun & Farrah, 2021) have consistently revealed that the students find it challenges to attend the class and/or to participate in online learning activities because of unstable internet connection. Furthermore, Zboun and Farrah (2021) found that unstable connection eventually affects students' learning satisfaction. Speaking of unstable internet connection issue, it is unavoidable in Indonesian context because of several possible reasons, including geography and lack of internet facilities and infrastructures (Anonymous, 2017; Khidhir, 2019; Rosana, 2020). Therefore, unstable connection may remain as the main issue in online learning as long as internet facilities and infrastructures are not well-established.

Another issue of internet and technology is lack of technological knowledge. From the result of interviews and audio diaries, two participants found it difficult to participate in online speaking classes due to their lack understanding of online application. They even claimed that the applications were something new for them and this reason caused their hesitance to actively participate in online speaking class. This finding is surprising because in most related literatures, in relation to online teaching and learning, teachers and/or lecturers are the ones who lack of technological knowledge, not students (see Meirovitz, Russak, & Zur, 2022; Nambiar, 2020; Paudyal & Rana, 2021; Rahim & Chandran, 2021).

The second prominent challenge faced by the students in learning online speaking class is linguistics. It is a classical issue in language learning, including speaking skill. The majority of the participants addressed this issue in both their interviews and audio diaries. Among the linguistics issue, lack of vocabulary was identified as the most prevalent challenge for the participants to actively participate in online speaking class. In terms of communication, e.g., verbal communication, vocabulary is important because it is the basic language component which helps speakers convey their opinions or ideas (Richards & Schmidt, 2013). Therefore, a good range of vocabulary is pivotal for speakers to have effective communication. This finding is consistent with some other previous studies which focused on investigating speaking online classes. For example, Bich and Lian (2021) conducted mixed-method research to examine English students' challenges in learning English speaking online during Covid-19 Pandemic. In their study, they identified that students' lack of vocabulary is a problem for the students to study speaking online. In a different study, Herawati (2021) investigated EFL learners' speaking challenges in online learning during Covid-19 Pandemic. Their study result indicated that some students found it difficult to speak actively owing to limited vocabularies. In addition, abundant previous studies, both in online and offline mode of learning, also highlighted that limited vocabulary is a stumbling block for EFL learners to take part in

speaking discussions and classroom activities (Islam & Stapa, 2021; Jusuf, Fatsah, & Dako, 2021; Rani, 2020; Ratnasari, 2020; Vo, Pham, & Ho, 2018)

Aside from limited vocabulary, another dominant linguistics issue is lack of grammatical knowledge. Based on the analysis, seven participants claimed that it was not easy for them to speak in a good structure although the class was online. Their difficulty seems reasonable because individuals, to be proficient in grammar aspect, are required to know how to combine the words into a good and meaningful sentence (Harmer, 2001). Grammar errors or mistakes when producing the language may cause confusion and miscommunication. The challenge of grammar aspect in speaking has been highlighted consistently by some researchers. Jaya, Petrus, and Pitaloka (2022), for instance, who investigated EFL learners' speaking performance and challenges found that grammar is one of the problems faced by EFL learners in their speaking. Furthermore, a qualitative study by Pratiwi and Prihatini (2021) which focused on exploring EFL learners' speaking problems during Covid-19 Pandemic revealed that worrying of making grammatical error is one of serious problems faced by the students to actively speak in an online speaking class. Moreover, EFL students' speaking challenges in one public university in Jambi (Abrar, Mukminin, Habibi, Asyraf, & Marzulina, 2018). Their finding suggested that the participants' low proficiency in grammar hinders them from active speaking. Besides, a plethora of related studies (Abrar *et al.*, 2018; Islam & Stapa, 2021) shows that other linguistics issues, such as pronunciation and fluency, are EFL learners' obstacles to speak in speaking classes both in offline and online mode of learning.

The next speaking challenge in online speaking classes is psychological. Regarding this, three sub-themes were identified, including anxiety, low motivation and insecure. Among them, the most dominant psychological challenge is anxiety. In the context of language learning, it is a psychological construct shown with the feeling of unease, worry, nervous, and apprehension which negatively affects the students' learning process and achievement (Abrar, Fajaryani, Habizar, Miftahudin, & Sokoy, 2022; Hilgard, Atkinson, & Atkinson, 1971; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1998; Scovel, 1978). The issue of anxiety in online speaking learning is not something new and surprising as it has been reported by some researchers in their studies. To illustrate, a mixed method study by Noviyanti (2022) which focused on exploring causes and effects of speaking anxiety in online learning revealed that EFL learners experienced a high level of anxiety in speaking. With slightly different research finding, Nan and Haoda (2020) who employed a mixed method research study reported that EFL learners experienced a moderate level of speaking anxiety in their questionnaire data. Their interview data showed that learners still feel anxiety when speaking and answering questions although online learning, to some extent, can relieve their learning anxiety. Moreover, Agussetia, Sri, and Triyanto (2021), in their qualitative study, investigated speaking anxiety in virtual mode of learning by interviewing two undergraduate EFL learners who had taken public speaking subject. Their findings showed that the participants still felt anxious in speaking. Besides, many current previous studies highlighted that anxiety is a serious issue that could possibly hinder the students from active participation in speaking learning activities and discussion (see Abrar, *et al.*, 2022; Chand, 2021; Nur, Baa, & Abduh, 2021)

The last theme of online speaking class challenges is learning proponents. What it is mean by learning proponents is the elements that support the process of teaching and learning. From the data, we identified two subthemes of learning proponents, such as lack of topical

knowledge and unsupportive peers. Between those two, more than half participants, to be exact seven, shared that their unfamiliarity to the topic of discussion caused their silence in online speaking classes. This finding is consistent with the results of many related previous studies. One of examples is a study by Riadil (2020). In his study, he tried to identify EFL learners' problems in speaking skill. His finding indicated that lack of knowledge is the main reason of students' speaking silence. Likewise, Juniati, Jabu, and Salija (2018) who explored the reasons of EFL students' silence in speaking classroom found out that lack of understanding or unfamiliarity with the topic triggered students' passiveness in speaking class. This suggests that providing familiar topic of discussion may motivate students' willingness to actively participate in speaking and/or classroom activities (Riasati, 2018).

To overcome the challenges, the participants employed some strategies and one of them is self-management. What it is meant by self-management strategy is the strategy initiated and done by the participants themselves without any help from others. Regarding this, the majority of participants believed that self-practice is an effective way to overcome their challenges in online speaking classes. They further argued that self-practice, e.g., self-talk in front of mirror and memorizing, is suitable to improve their language proficiency, such as vocabulary, pronunciation and fluency. This supports the argument of Shekan (1998) that practice including self-speaking practice is effective for non-native learners to overcome speaking challenges and to achieve language proficiency. Additionally, this finding confirms some previous related studies (Abrar, et. Al., 2018; Hazairin, 2017; Takkaç Tulgar, 2018) that self-practice, e.g., self-talk and memorization, is one of helpful ways to overcome speaking challenges, especially linguistics issues.

Another strategy employed by the participants to alleviate their speaking challenges is helping from others. Based on the data from participants, the most dominant way in this strategy is asking or having discussion with friends. Some participants even argued that they felt more comfortable to get help from their classmates than their lecturers. This finding is relevant to some previous studies. For instance, a study from Barrot *et al.* (2021) which highlighted that one of students' strategies to cope with their online learning challenges is seeking-help, such as having consultation with classmates. In a different study with a more specific speaking issue, Abrar *et al.* (2022) explored the factors influencing EFL learners' anxiety and the way they overcome the factors. Their result indicated that getting help from friends is an effective way to alleviate their anxiety.

The last strategy employed by the participants to overcome their speaking challenges in online speaking classes is benefiting technology. The use of technology in learning, especially during pandemic, is unavoidable because learning process itself is done online due to the social distancing norms and nationwide lockdowns. In this sense, technology is used not only as a medium of learning but also as a platform to make the students learn effectively and comfortably. Regarding this, all participants acknowledged that they took advantage of language applications in their online speaking learning, including google translate and online dictionary. They further argued that language applications helped them in many ways, including alleviating their speaking challenges and improving their language proficiency. This research finding supports the finding of Saud, Susanty, and Pattiasina (2023) who conducted research on the strategy, impact and challenges of online resources technology for foreign language learning. Their findings suggested that some participants maximized their used language application to help them cope with their language difficulties. In a

different study, Kusmaryani, Musthafa, and Purnawarman (2019) investigated the influence of mobile application, e.g., learning and language applications, on students' speaking skill. They revealed that their research participants found it helpful and effective to improve their learning through the use of some language features in their mobile application, such as online dictionary, language translator, speaking English, English grammar, speech to text and critical thinking.

Aside from using language applications, some participants took benefit of entertaining platforms, including YouTube, Tik Tok, music and movie applications. They shared that entertain themselves and improve their English simultaneously by using such applications. The benefit of entertainment platforms in language learning has been consistently highlighted by researchers. A study by Narasati (2021), for instance, investigated the influence of animated films with speaking improvement. The result of her study revealed that the use of animated film can improve speaking skill. In a different study, Pratiwi, Ufairah, and Sopiah (2021) who explored the use of Tik Tok as a medium for learning English revealed that Tik Tok can help students enhance their literacy and speaking skill. Furthermore, Syafiq, Rahmawati, Anwari, and Oktaviana (2021) focused their study on the use of YouTube to improve students' speaking skills during online learning in Pandemic Covid-19. Their finding of the study indicated that YouTube could improve students' speaking skill in many aspects, including grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency and language material content.

CONCLUSION

The purposes of this study were to explore EFL learners' challenges in online speaking classes and the strategies they employed to alleviate their encountered challenges. The results of this inquiry suggested that the participants found it challenging to actively participate in online speaking challenges. Some of the challenges are: internet and technology related issues (poor connection and lack of technological knowledge); linguistics issues (limited vocabulary, lack of grammatical knowledge, fluency problem, and pronunciation problem); psychological issues (anxiety, low motivation and insecure); and learning proponents (lack of topical knowledge and unsupportive peers). The findings of the study also indicated that the participants used several strategies to overcome their challenges, including self-management (self-practice and being well-prepared); helping from others (asking or having discussion with friends and asking the lecturers); and technological support (taking advantage of entertainment platforms and language applications).

Despite comprehensive discussion on EFL learners' online speaking challenges and their strategies to overcome the challenges, this is not to say that this inquiry is flawless and has no limitations. Firstly, this study was only limited to 12 EFL learners. Therefore, the results of this study cannot be generalized to other EFL learners. Future researchers can include a larger sample and use a different method, e.g., quantitative with survey, to get data generalization. Secondly, this inquiry only focused on the students' challenges studying speaking online and lecturers or teaching staff were excluded. Further researchers can explore the similar issue/phenomenon from the perspective of lecturers.

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