EFL Students' Experience in Speaking Practice on Discord Application

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Abstract. Being fluent in a foreign language requires many practices. However, Indonesian EFL learners might find it challenging to find a speaking partner to practice with as English is not widely used in the society. Moreover, the outbreak of Covid-19 has restricted people to communicate face to face, thus they seek for alternative modes of communication utilizing technology. This study was conducted in order to provide a detailed account and explanation of how learning English informally through a social media called Discord could be a better alternative to practice speaking English. The study involved two EFL students with different background based on their reason of joining the application. Narrative inquiry was used as the method of the study with data collected from interviews and observations to gather the stories on how they practiced their English in the application. The stories were then retold in a narrative account which then validated by the participants. The result includes a detailed account of the experience of practicing English in informal settings with an explanation of how these experiences reflected on the factors affecting speaking skill and ways to develop the three main aspects of speaking. With the results, Discord application shows the possibility to be an alternative for EFL students in finding a place and partners to practice their speaking.

Keywords: EFL; informal language learning; discord application; speaking skill

Pengalaman Siswa EFL dalam Latihan Berbicara pada Aplikasi Discord


Kata kunci: EFL; pembelajaran bahasa informal; aplikasi Discord; keterampilan berbicara
INTRODUCTION

As one of the productive skills, frequent speaking practice is deemed important in order to master the three main aspects on the nature of speaking which are pronunciation, fluency, and accuracy (Brown, 2001). However, in formal settings, EFL learners have faced several challenges in speaking practice, including the limited opportunity to actually speak the language during the learning process in the classroom. Liu & Jackson (2008) emphasize EFL learners are afraid of making mistakes during the practice which then leads them to have slow improvement in mastering the skill. Moreover, people’s attitude towards a foreign language can majorly affect the opportunity of EFL learners to practice their speaking skill (Getie, 2020). For example, when the people around them have negative attitude towards English, the EFL learners may feel uncomfortable and worried when they try to practice their English in public. It would also be difficult to find a partner who also wants to practice speaking because they are afraid of the judgement from the people around them.

Aside from the challenges, some other factors also contribute to the speaking practice of EFL learners. In mastering pronunciation and fluency in speaking, young learners can do it faster since do not feel afraid on making mistakes and just try to keep talking, while the adult learners can learn faster on the grammar or accuracy of their speaking (Lightbown & Spada, 2001; Shumin 2002). External factors like family and language exposure also affect EFL learners’ speaking skill. Latha & Ramesh (2012) mentioned that EFL students with whose parents are also good in the target language can support the learning process and speak the language with them. Another factor that could affect the speaking ability is exposure to the language. Nillo (2014) stated that the amount of exposure to the target language can improve the learners’ ability in speaking the target language. Brown (2001) also agrees that the learners need to be acquainted with words, idioms, and phrases of colloquial language in order to enhance their skill in speaking the target language.

Several methods have been used by the teachers to help the students practice and improve their speaking skill. Studies conducted by Albino (2017) about the use of TBLT approach shows that through the picture-description tasks, the students were able to maximize their speech production, increase their grammatical accuracy and feel encouraged to speak. Another method to improve the speaking performance was the use of mobile-assisted peer feedback which was studied by Wu & Miller (2020). The students in a Hong Kong university agreed that this method of feedback helped them improve their speaking skill.

However, these methods are used during the teaching and learning process at school in Hong Kong and Angola to improve the students’ speaking skill. There is no guarantee that the same method would affect positively to the students in Indonesia. Moreover, in a formal setting like at school, the development of foreign language learners' communicative abilities is often put aside and the main concern of teachers is usually helping students to pass the general exam causing the students lack competency in speaking (Yahya, 2013). Regarding this situation, the researcher thought that learning and practicing speaking in informal setting, outside school would be an alternative way to give students more opportunities to develop their speaking competency. This is also because learning a language in informal settings is thought to be one of the most extensive ways to learn a language because it occurs incidentally through interaction or exposure to the target language input through technology (Rogers, 2004; Bahrani & Sim (2012).

In addition, during this covid-19 outbreak, using the technology like social
media platforms as an alternative way to find a place or a partner to practice using English is also more preferable. One of social media applications called Discord provides virtual rooms called ‘channels’ which allow text chatting, voice chatting, video calling, media sharing, screen-sharing in order to communicate with a group of people. This can be beneficial for students and teachers in doing online teaching and learning. A study conducted by Wulanjani (2018) explores the use of Discord application in a virtual learning class. After joining 8 sessions of the course, the students were asked to share opinion based on their experiences. The feedbacks were mostly positive even though there were also some comments saying that they needed good internet connection to be able to experience the class smoothly.

Other than utilizing Discord as mean to conduct a virtual class, EFL learners are also able to use Discord to find friends since it is basically a social media. With the aforementioned features, Discord also offers more as this application allows users to browse various online communities, or the users usually call it ‘server’, like an art community, a gaming group, a school club and even a language learning community like English, French or Japanese. This means that the students can find other students who also enjoy learning English and this is important because positive attitude toward the target language is one of the main factors affecting the process of language learning. Due to these opportunities, the researcher then decided to find information about the experience of EFL students who have joined an Indonesian-based English learning server on Discord Application and expected that they would provide new insights on how they have learned and practiced speaking in the English learning server. With the stories provided by the students, the researcher was expected to give explanation on how learning and practicing language in an informal setting like on Discord’s learning community can be a better alternative to help EFL learners develop their speaking competency.

METHOD
Research Design
This is a qualitative research where narrative inquiry is used to carry out the research. This method was chosen because Gray, in Bell & Waters (2014) believes that it is the appropriate way to find out about human experience in details. Also, it requires the researchers to present a clear beginning, middle and end of the case that they are studying as the result of research, which would be a narrative account. Therefore, this method was suitable to give a detailed story of how the EFL students practice their speaking on Discord application.

Research Participant
The participants involved in this study were two EFL students (Student A and Student B). Purposive sampling was used to choose the students since this was a narrative study where the result depends heavily on the stories provided by the participants. The two students were chosen based on the amount of time they have spent on Discord to practice their English and their reasons of joining. This requirement was relevant because participants who have spent a long time on the application were more preferable so that they could provide the researcher more stories.

Data Collection
The instruments used in this study were interview and observation. The interview was done after four-week monitored experience on the English learning server to find out about their story and opinion during the experience. The interview questions include asking the reason why they joined the server, their experience in the server, their favorite channels to practice their speaking inside the online community and their opinion about the experience as a whole. The
observation was done inside the server to justify several information from the interview regarding their process of speaking practice in the English learning server. The data from interview transcripts were stories which were then retold in a form of narrative report with some data from the observation field notes. Collaborating with the participants, this narrative report was validated beforehand by the two EFL students as one of the means to present a valid narrative inquiry report (Barkhuizen et al, 2014).

Data Analysis
As the data were derived from interviews and observations that had been collected. The researcher needed to separate them into three categories so that it became a narrative or an account with a beginning, middle and an end (Bell & Waters, 2014).

The beginning of this narrative account was obtained from the first interview question where it was asking about the reason behind them joining the server. The process of the experience was the middle part of this account. This was obtained from the interview as well as the observation field notes. These two parts contributed the most for the story of them joining the English learning server. The ending part consists of how the participants feel about their overall experience in the English learning server and also the thoughts on the informal language learning using Discord application.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
In this section, the results of the interviews and observation field notes were made into narrative accounts. It provides information about the participants’ experience in the Indonesian-based English learning server. To easily identify the two participants, the research used pseudonyms Josie and Ben for student A and student B respectively. These results were then discussed to see whether they were in line with the factors affecting speaking skill mentioned in the introduction.

Josie’s stories and opinions of speaking practice in the English learning server on Discord Application
At first, student A (Josie) and B (Ben) joined an English learning server on Discord because of two different reasons. Josie joined due to the boredom from Covid-19 isolation.

“Because it is pretty boring during the pandemic and also the server features English and I didn’t see many learning servers before so I decided to join this one to practice my English speaking because not many of my friends are interested in practicing English.” (Josie’s Interview)

She decided to find a server where she could practice her English since her friends were not interested in practicing their English. Finding partners to practice English speaking is important in order to master the language. It was pretty difficult for Josie to find a speaking partner because she claimed to be bad at socializing in real life situation.

“…I’m also bad at socializing with people so I don’t talk that much. And also, most people still kind of like to discourage people to be different, talking in a foreign language for example.” (Josie’s Interview)

When Josie first joined the server, she did not know anyone there as she found the server from surfing the internet. From the beginning, Josie had some difficulties in trying to find a topic to start a conversation with other people whether it was online or in real life setting. However, not long after she joined the server, there was an English event called Debate Competition coming up and she decided to take part in it.

“At first, I didn’t talk much when the first time I joined the server, then I joined Debate competition and from there I learned about how to do a debate and guided by the staffs, not just doing the debate right away. The thing that I got the most out of it is confidence. Since that time, I have
been joining other voice channels to talk to people.” (Josie’s Interview)

She told more stories from her debate experience that made her feel more confident in talking with people. Prior to the day of competition, she said that she and the other participants were gathered to join a ‘training camp’ inside the server where they were taught by other more experienced members about how to be a good debater and where to find resources to support their opinions. This gave her the chance to talk about something with other debaters rather than trying to find a topic to start a conversation with a stranger. Soon after the debate competition ended, she felt more confident to talk with the friends that she made from the event and also with other new people.

Later on, Josie continued speaking English with other members in various channels in the server. From the observation, the topic she talked about varied from school stuffs, interests, and also tried to greet and get to know new people. The channels under *cosy vibe* category were the ones where she and other people used to talk about various things. When she was asked in the interview whether she was comfortable talking to more people in the server, she said yes.

“Yes, I feel comfortable. I usually do greetings and small talks and it’s not that hard to talk with them because it is just about where we are from and stuff like that. But when I talk with someone I already knew, we would talk about other things we like, for example, anime. I usually go to English Classroom, Book Club and Cosy Vibes Channel to talk with people.” (Josie’s Interview)

When the writer was observing the channels that Josie joined in and also other channels in the server, they were labelled with ‘English Required’ (see Figure 1), but the case was different for channels in *cosy vibe* category.

The channels under *cosy vibe* category have ‘free language’ label (see Figure 2) which means that the members can either use their native language or English. Josie mostly used English when she talked to people there but would switch to Bahasa occasionally when she could not explain things in English or when the person she was speaking to was using Bahasa too. However, she did not think this as a negative thing. She mentioned in the interview when she was asked which channel that help with her fluency and she said one of them to be channels in *cosy vibe* category

“I think it’s better to have daily conversations in English voice chats category or the cosy vibes so that I can keep talking to improve my fluency.” (Josie’s Interview)

Moreover, the members could play music while being in there by using the music bots feature provided in the server. Because of this, she felt that the environment was relaxing while also not feeling pressured to always use English while communicating or worry about the
using the grammatically correct sentences all the time.

Another channel that she used to practice her speaking skill was called book club. In this book club, the members who joined took turns in reading aloud a book which had previously been voted by the members of the club. This book club was led by someone whose job was to moderate the reading session, to pay attention closely to the pronunciation of each word read by the members, to give feedbacks on their pronunciation mistakes, to provide definitions of some difficult words or idioms inquired by the members and sometimes to lead a discussion about what they have read.

“Every session, each member will be given the option whether to read aloud or just listen, and once you’re done with the reading, the host of the session will give feedbacks on your pronunciation from the reading. Also, the host will also give information about some difficult words.” (Josie’s Interview)

Josie also added in her interview that this book club helped her greatly in pronouncing some words, enriching her vocabulary, getting to know more cultural facts from the books they have read.

In addition, Josie also said that she used another channel called word of the day and idiom of the day to practice writing sentences.

“The English teachers will also give corrections for every submission if there was any mistake made. Even though it is writing practice, it is also helpful for the speaking skill because when I know how it is written in a correct sentence structure, I will remember to use the correct form while speaking. And when the teacher pointed out the mistake I made on my writing practice, I will remember not to make that mistake while speaking.” (Josie’s Interview)

From the observation, this word of the day and idiom of the day channel would provide a new word and idiom every day and the members could practice using the word or idiom in a designated text channel. Josie saw that this helped her in enriching her vocabulary and in making good sentences since there were other more fluent members who would point out mistakes that were made and correct her. Even though this was not done orally, she thought that it would still assist her both in practicing writing and speaking.

At the end, Josie enjoyed her overall experience to practice their speaking skill in the server. Although she felt a little troubled at first to make friends with other members of the server, she was able to find partners to practice her speaking skill and got the assistance she needed in order to improve the skill.

“But the debate competition kind of became the one that pushed me to try talking more. Before the competition, we actually got to practice first with the other debaters and told to collect information about the notions. The staffs that trained us also gave examples on what sentences to use during the debate. The whole experience is pretty interesting for me.” (Josie’s Interview)

There were also some moments where student A felt uncomfortable because some members in the server were messing around, saying inappropriate words and et cetera. However, this kind of issues were handled because the server also had members whose duty was to watch out for this kind of people. Members who were experiencing this disturbing behaviour would report this issue and the reported members would be thrown out of the server and banned from joining again.

Overall, Josie agreed that practicing that she prefers to practice her English in the server. “I still prefer to learn in a community like this because I can study freely. I know that we learn more theories in school but in a community like this we get that too and there is no rush in understanding those things. It is like we learn it naturally. The enthusiasm from the people around you who also want to learn English will actually boost yourself while learning.” Josie said in the interview. She also added another reason that joining this server is a good thing is because it is a way to meet more
people and make friends with people around the world. She said, “...I have met many natives, foreigners from some other countries like China and Brazil. So, while learning English, I get to meet and learn other cultures as well.” From this point of view, it can be inferred that Josie enjoyed her experience in both practicing her English skill and socializing in the server.

Ben’s stories and opinions of speaking practice in the English learning server on Discord Application

Josie and Ben first joined the server at different time. While Josie joined the server during the pandemic because she was bored while isolating, Ben, on the other hand, joined the server before the Covid-19 outbreak happened. Ben was waiting for the acceptance letter from a university that he tried to enrol in and he eventually thought that he did want to try to communicate with other people in English.

“I didn’t have anything to do as I was waiting for my college’s entrance test result. So, I decided to look for an English speaking community on Discord and I stumbled on this server. Also, I needed a social circle to speak English.” (Ben’s Interview)

To be able to speak English well, practicing it orally with other people is important. Ben did not have this opportunity before he joined the server.

“I started to talk to my online gaming friends from different nationalities. But we only communicated through text not spoken.” (Ben’s Interview)

It is certainly different when people talk in written text and when actually speaking it since one of the aspects of speaking is pronunciation and it would need the learners to actually pronounce the word to make them get used to language.

Since Ben’s main purpose of joining the server was to socialize with people while also practicing his English, he did not have problem to talk to new people when he first joined the server, unlike Josie. It was easy for Ben to start blending in with other members.

After some time, Ben said he made a lot of friends from the server and even became one of the staffs to take care of the server. Ben also said that he did manage to improve his English.

“I have more vocabularies to use and it makes me more confident to speak in real life situation.” (Ben’s Interview)

Despite the fact that Ben was not intentionally learn and practice his English in the server, there were several channels that had helped him in improving his spoken English. When he was asked which channel that helped him with his pronunciation, fluency and accuracy of speaking, his answer was the quite similar to Josie.

“For pronunciation, I think it’s the “book club” channel. Because sometimes I get corrected there when I mispronounce words…. For fluency, “cosy vibes” because as I said before you get to meet a lot of people there, you can speak to them and as you talk more and more, you get used to it.” (Ben’s Interview)

However, Ben had a different answer for the channel that had a potential to help with the accuracy or grammar of speaking. He mentioned about ‘lecture hall’, which was a text channel where members could ask anything related to English (see Figure 3). Ben said he rarely went there and did self-correction instead, he said on the interview, “...but I barely go there because learning isn’t really my intention in this server, but to communicate in English. I usually take my time to do self-correcting in written text. For fluency, “cosy vibes” because as I said before you get to meet a lot of people there, you can speak to them and as you talk more and more, you get used to it.”
Figure 3 The description of ‘lecture hall’

It was also found out from the observation that members could get more explanation about English language or ask something related to English like grammar or sentence structure in this ‘lecture hall’ text channel. The ones who would provide the explanation vary from native speakers, assigned teachers in the server which were chosen by their English qualification, or anyone else who thought they could help answer the questions asked by other members.

When Ben was asked which specific moment that made him think that his spoken English has improved, he said that it was one moment when he had to read a paragraph in the ‘book club’ channel. He said, “There was one time that I managed to read a paragraph from a book without a single mistake.” This meant a lot to him because to be able to read aloud in a foreign without a mistake actually needs a lot of practice, and he did so, as he joined the book club session often.

Ben did not talk much about other improvement in his speaking skill but he did say that the server helped him improve his English indirectly, just like how playing video games had helped him understand English better before he came to the server.

“I wouldn’t say it was actually learning, it was more like discovering the language like using English while communicating with people on video games. And somehow, I was able to understand the language. And also, I wasn’t aware that I was learning English, and I think it’s the most effective way in learning something new because if you enjoy the process, it will come naturally for you.” (Ben’s Interview)

Overall, Ben agreed that learning English informally like practicing English speaking in the server is better than learning English at school.

“I think it is better than learning it at school because at school you get pressured to do it, there will be exams and many things that you have to memorize. But then, it was also one of the ways to learn things. Although, I got more chance to practice the skill outside school like through games and movies.” (Ben’s Interview)

Factors Affecting Speaking Skill

Social media has been seen as a popular tool in doing informal learning as it allows its users to learn from anywhere in anytime with anyone and they can also determine the pace of learning on their own without feeling pressured (Song & Lee, 2014). This theory is in line with what Josie and Ben did on Discord and they enjoyed their experience there. There are several factors that made their speaking practice enjoyable there. As it was mentioned before in the introduction, one of the factors that made EFL learners had limited opportunities to practice their English was because people’s attitude towards the language they are learning (Getie, 2020). Negative attitude towards the language would hinder the EFL learners to use the language around those people. However, Discord made it possible to gather people not only from one country but from around the world to make a community where they share the same interest. In the server Josie and Ben joined in, the members were welcome to use English since it was an English learning community. The same interest of being able to learn and practice English between the members managed to make Josie felt more confident in speaking English. The server also required the members to use English most of the time and in most of the channels. This makes the members exposed to the English
language much more. In addition, two of the channels in the server provide new words and idioms daily. This is also in line with another factor affecting speaking skill that said exposure to the language is one of the key factors affecting speaking ability and being exposed to idioms and more words certainly help the learners with vocabularies in speaking. (Brown, 2001; Nillo, 2014).

In addition, Lightbown & Spada (2001) mentioned the personality also affects the speaking ability. People with anxiety or low self-esteem tend to always have doubts and not wanting to take a risk in making a mistake while speaking a foreign language. This certainly affects how their progress in English. However, in the English learning server, there were some competitions or events related to English that could be joined by the members. As mentioned by Josie, she was at first not confident enough to speak with other people but because of the debate competition that she joined, she was able to be confident enough to speak more because of the welcoming environment she felt during the ‘debate camp’ she was in. Eventually, she made friends with others who then became her partners in speaking English.

Main Aspects of Speaking

During their speaking practice in the English learning server on Discord, Josie and Ben said that they managed to improve their pronunciation, fluency, and accuracy. These are the three main aspects of speaking according to Brown (2001). Although they were practicing English in informal settings, it is important to pay attention to these aspects if the learners want to master the speaking skill.

Josie and Ben chose channels in easy vibe category to be the one that help them the most in practicing their fluency in speaking. The students felt no pressure while practicing their speaking here because they could easily switch between Bahasa and English. Bilingualism factor may affect the development of the fluency of the learners (Putri et al, 2019), however students feel no pressure since no one would judge their English skill, unless if they wanted people to correct them. Moreover, from the observation in these channels, they still mostly spoke in English with their friends and this is important since Putri et al (2019) also mentioned that the frequency of input and exposure affect the fluency of speaking greatly. Unlike in a formal setting like in at school, they would feel the pressure from their teacher and their friends since they were expected to do things right. This situation made them feel discourage to speak English. Josie also revealed in the interview that in this learning server, she could enjoy the learning process because it was in her own pace and no one would rush them into mastering the skill quickly.

The book club channel was also chosen by both students as the channel that helped them in pronunciation. Since pronunciation is also one of the major aspects of speaking skill, it is important to be good at it too. According to Brown (2001), one of the ways to improve pronunciation is by reading aloud. The book club channel, as it was mentioned before, had a reading aloud session and the host or moderator leading the session would give feedbacks of their pronunciation. Ben revealed that he was quite happy that there was a moment where he was able to read a whole long paragraph without making any mistakes and that the host or moderator sometimes would give correction to others that he could learn from as well. This reading session also gives exposure to the students about the language they were learning since from a book they could see how sentences were formed and some colloquial language existed on the book. As it was mentioned before, it is very important to be exposed to some idioms and new words (Brown, 2001) since it would enrich the learners’ vocabulary in speaking.

Accuracy refers to the ability of the learner to produce grammatically correct
sentences and the learner should not only know correct grammatical rules of the language but also able to speak and write accurately (Narzullaev, 2015). In terms of learning and practicing the accuracy of the speaking skill, several text-channels in the English learning server played an important part, like lecture hall, word of the day and idiom of the day. The channels provide the opportunity for the students to practice the new words and idioms and get correction. Ugli (2018) stated that practices that focus on repetition of newly introduced words, idioms, and forms of grammatical structures are thought to help improve the accuracy of the language that the students learn. Ugli also claimed that although this approach was thought to lack of effectiveness in the long run and may cause boredom to the students, some EFL teachers actually favour this viewpoint. Eventually, both students agreed that trying to improve the accuracy of the grammar in their speaking or writing requires them to have a good understanding in it and an expert to guide them as well as a lot of practices.

CONCLUSION
Learning a foreign language can be challenging especially when the environment does not support it. Exposure to language, attitude towards the language, opportunities to practice the language are some of the major factors to be fluent in the target language. The findings of this research showed that learning the language informally gave them better chances in being fluent in the language because they were able to learn on their own pace without being pressured by their teachers or being afraid of their friends’ impressions. The Indonesian-based English learning server became a place where the two students could enjoy practicing their spoken English because they could feel the other members’ positive attitude towards English. They also made friends with people who also wanted to speak English with them, making it easy for them to get used to speaking the language. Not to mention that the server is an English learning server where English is mostly used in almost every channel inside the server, making the members get more exposure to the language. Regarding the main aspects of speaking, the students also revealed that they were able to practice their pronunciation and fluency in a fun way through the book club channel and channels in cosy vibe category. Although accuracy can also be learned and practiced in this server, it is better to do it in a formal setting with actual English teachers at school. This is due to the fact that teachers assigned in this server were not those with specific educational or English teaching background but just members who were selected due to their fluency in English and also because some were native speakers. However, it can be concluded that from the narrative account, this English-learning server on Discord can still be an alternative for other EFL learners to practice their speaking skill. Also, for further research, some other researchers can try to find out about how effective this learning server is in order to improve their speaking by finding out more data about the students speaking skill before and after they join the server.

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