

Lost in Translation: Students' Experiences of ELT Policy and Classroom Practice

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Abstract

This study aims to explore how secondary school students perceive the implementation of the latest English Language Teaching (ELT) practices under the Merdeka Curriculum in Indonesia, particularly in relation to communicative language teaching and student-centred learning. To address the research objectives, this study employed a descriptive qualitative approach using a questionnaire and focus group discussion (FGD) as the main research instruments of data collection. The questionnaire was distributed to 143 secondary school students from Surabaya, Gresik, Tuban, and Palembang using random sampling, while selected participants were involved in FGDs to gain deeper insights into their classroom experiences. The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes. The findings revealed that English teaching practices mostly dominated by grammar instruction, workbook exercises, and teacher-centred. Writing activities were reported as the most frequently practiced skills while listening and speaking activities got less attention. Besides, students also expressed their dissatisfaction with monotonous classroom routines and emphasized the lack of opportunities to involve in meaningful communicative activities such as discussions, role play and interactive speaking tasks. In addition, many participants reported experiencing low confidence and fear of making mistakes when speaking English due to limited exposure and insufficient classroom support. These findings raise concerns about the effectiveness of the current shift from teacher-centred to student-centred learning to align classroom practices with national curriculum goals. This study suggests the need for more intensive teacher training and greater emphasis on communicate, student-centred practices in Indonesian EFL classrooms.

Keywords

language learning strategies, strategy-based instruction, English as a second language, higher education, learner autonomy, self-regulated learning.

Introduction

No one would deny that English has been one of essential skills required to survive in this 21st century, as it serves as a global language of communication in various fields such as education, technology, business, science and international collaboration. In today's interconnected world, being able to speak or communicate with English becomes essential skills not only for academic purposes but also for accessing global information, participating in international networks, and improving career opportunities. Due to its importance, English has been a compulsory subject in secondary schools since 2006. The government's intention undoubtedly is to help young generations to compete at both national and international levels. Also, the government tries to equip students with communicative competence needed in the era of globalisation and technology advancement.

Therefore, English language teaching is expected not only develop students' linguistic knowledge, but also to support students in facing future challenges. Nonetheless, one of the major challenges in English language Teaching (ELT) in Indonesia lies in the gap between the expected outcomes and classroom practices.

Under the current curriculum known as Merdeka Curriculum, teachers are required to use student-centred learning, critical thinking, and effective communication skills (Latifa et al., 2023). According to Angga et al. (2022), the Merdeka curriculum aims to develop four key outcomes; (1) communicative competence, (2) critical thinking and problem-solving skills, (3) cultural awareness and global perspectives and (4) ability to work in team. These four objectives are considered essentials in the 21st century, wherein adaptability, creativity, and collaborative skills are highly valued for individuals to succeed in diverse situations and contribute meaningfully to society. Therefore, student-centered learning are central elements that should be promoted in classroom practice. However, teachers' willingness and capacity to continuously develop their professional competence are key factors to achieve these goals.

Prior to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, the Indonesian national curriculum had undergone several revisions. Such curriculum should be followed by the shifting classroom practices. In particular, teachers are expected to shift their pedagogical practice from a teacher-centred approach to a student-centred approach to gain the intended outcomes mandated by the curriculum (Mynbayeva et al., 2018; Sulaiman & Ismail, 2020). Previous studies have proven that student-centered approach not only promote students' critical thinking (Alam, 2023; Searles, 2022), creativity (Alam, 2023; Aytaç & Kula, 2020) as well as problem solving (Kassem, 2019; Nazim et al., 2024), but also enhance students' autonomy and self-directed learning abilities (Pastini & Lilasari, 2023). Furthermore, student-centred learning is designed to accommodate the needs and styles of individual students, ensuring that every student has the opportunity to thrive and succeed academically.

Further, the government has encouraged teachers to implement Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) into their teaching practice. Although CLT has ever been promoted in the 2006 curriculum, many teachers reverted to traditional teaching practices, emphasizing grammar and reading activities while neglected communicative activities. The use of CLT is meant for students to engage in meaningful conversation, understand diverse perspectives, express thoughts and opinions confidently, and develop linguistic and cultural competence (Adem & Berkessa, 2022; Losi & Nasution, 2022; Qasserras, 2023). Focusing on communication-based activities is crucial, as Indonesian teachers often tend to underemphasize productive skills. Language teachers should provide ample activities that emphasize on productive skills through interactive speaking exercises, role-plays, group discussions, and oral presentations into the curriculum can greatly enhance students' oral proficiency and fluency (Crisianita & Mandasari, 2022; Malasari & Purwanti, 2018).

Despite its importance and the policy that makes English as a must-teach subject for many years, the facts show that students are still struggling in using English to communicate (Boy Jon et al., 2021; Sari, 2021; Wijayanto & Hastuti, 2021). Even the latest survey of English proficiency of Indonesia done by *English First* showed that Indonesian are categorized as a low English proficiency (EF, 2024). This condition raises concerns regarding the communicative goals as mandated in curriculum. Previous scholars have found that many classroom activities are done based on teacher-centred approach (Efendi & Arijanto, 2023; Huda & Lubis, 2019). In many cases and contexts, English teaching tends to emphasise on grammar explanation, translation, workbook exercises, and written tasks rather than meaningful communicative practices. So, students often get limited opportunities to actively practice speaking and listening skills. In addition, this issue becomes even more crucial in Indonesia where English is taught as foreign language and students commonly have very limited to English exposure outside the classroom. Therefore, classroom practices have a vital role in shaping students' communicative competence, confidence and willingness to productively use English.

Most existing studies have examined ELT implementation from teachers' perspectives or through classroom observations (Laksono et al., 2024; Lestari & Margana, 2024; Mubarak & Sofiana, 2022; Rahmawati, 2018; Ridwan & Samanhudi, 2024). These studies revealed discrepancies between teachers' beliefs and classroom practices, often due to factors such as students' proficiency levels, motivation, class size, and institutional constraints. However, limited research has explored ELT implementation from students' perspectives in particular regarding how they experience communicative practices under the Merdeka Curriculum. Students' voice becomes important because they are the primary participants who directly experience classroom instruction and get the impact on their study. Exploring this issue may provide deeper insights into classroom practices that are not always visible through observations or teachers' self-report.

Therefore, this study aims to contribute to the ongoing discussion on ELT reform in Indonesia by providing valuable insights from students' perspectives of current English teaching practices under the Merdeka Curriculum. In addition, this research is manifested in exploring how students perceive communicative language teaching practices, speaking opportunities, and student-centred learning implementation in English classroom. The novelty of this study can be seen in its emphasis on students' lived classroom experiences across different secondary school contexts, which remain underrepresented in previous studies. Besides, this study is expected to provide both broader and deeper insights into the gap between curriculum policy and actual classroom practices. Practically, the findings will inform educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers, ultimately enhancing the quality of ELT and empowering Indonesian students to communicate effectively in English.

Method

Research Design

This study used a descriptive qualitative method. This study aims to figure out students' perceptions of the teaching and learning process in English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms, focuses on students' experiences, attitudes, and challenges in practicing communicative competence.

Participants

There were 143 secondary school students involved in this study. They were from junior and senior high schools in Surabaya, Gresik, Palembang, and Tuban. To ensure a diverse representation of participants, random sampling was used.

Data Collection and Instruments

Data were collected with two primary instruments: a questionnaire and focus group discussions (FGD). These two instruments helped the researcher gain both broad and in-depth perspectives on the students' experiences. The questionnaire was made in both closed and open-ended questions. It was meant to find out students' perspectives on the frequency of communicative activities, their engagement in speaking practice, challenges they faced, and their perception of student-centred learning approaches. To get a deeper information regarding teaching and learning activities, ineffective teaching strategies, engaging teaching methods, teachers' language instruction, engaging teaching methods, and their problems in speaking English 15 participants were selected.

Data Analysis Technique

Thematic analysis was applied to interpret the qualitative data obtained from both instruments. The process involved familiarizing oneself with the data through repeated reading of responses, generating initial codes to categorize recurring patterns, and identifying overarching themes related to ELT implementation. Finally,

the themes were interpreted in relation to the research questions, allowing for a deeper understanding of how the Merdeka Curriculum aligns with communicative language teaching (CLT) principles. This systematic approach ensured a comprehensive and credible analysis of students' experiences and perceptions regarding ELT in Indonesian classrooms.

Findings and Discussions

This current study aims at figuring out secondary students' experience during the implementation of the current curriculum, Merdeka Curriculum. To deepen understanding of students' perceptions and the gap between policy and implementation in ELT in Indonesia within the Merdeka Curriculum, findings from both questionnaires and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) have been synthesized thematically. The following subsections reveal the key themes that emerged from the data.

Lack of Teaching Receptive Skills

The Merdeka curriculum seems conceptually ideal in the context of English language teaching and promises to boost students' English development with its progressive ideas. It has been designed accordingly step by step to elevate students' progress from elementary in phases A-C up to secondary school in phases D-F. Additionally, it is mandated to emphasize oral skills and productive skills. However, it is depicted in this study that the policy is "lost in translation"; the implementation is not as mandated. First, the implementation, according to the students, doesn't focus on communicative competence; the teaching and learning mostly focus on writing. It is revealed in the questionnaire that writing is the most emphasized activity, accounting for 35%, followed by speaking at 25%, reading at 28%, and listening at 12%.

The data is quite interesting since the teaching is mostly emphasized on productive but non-oral skills. Compared to other skills, listening followed by reading is the least activity students did in their English class. It indicates that the participants do not get enough exposure or language input for their English language development. Receptive skills (reading and listening) are as important as productive skills (speaking and writing). It can be seen in the following figure that the gap between listening skill and productive skills (speaking and writing) is quite far.

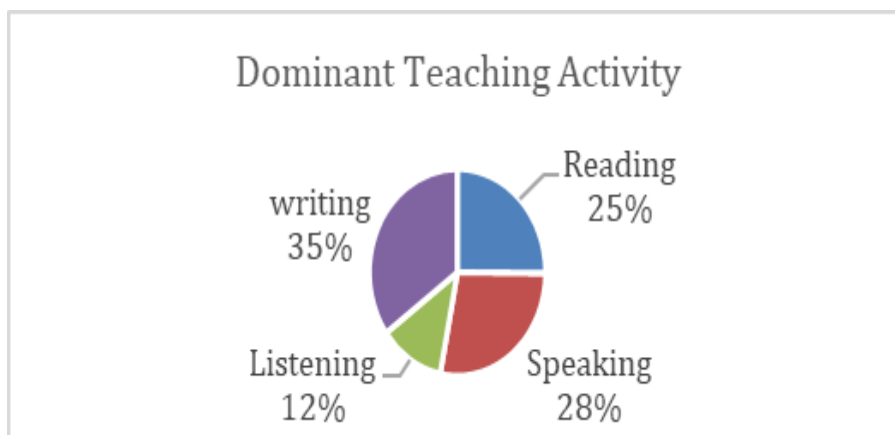


Figure 1. Teaching Activity

Listening is an essential factor to promote other skills. Listening helps students to understand spoken communication. However, listening is the least skill taught in EFL contexts (Suharmady & Suchahyo, 2022). In addition to that, according to listening is categorized as the weakest skill for EFL students due to limited exposure (Suwannasit, 2019), tedious activity (Agustiana, 2019) and difficulty (Erzad, 2020).

The finding is even more reflected in the questionnaire when, in the FGD, the participants elaborated that the teaching and learning were heavily conducted based on workbook exercises and grammar drills. Additionally, they pictured routine activities such as teacher presentation followed by workbook exercises. Students noted that this approach often felt disengaging and disconnected from the communicative goals of language learning. They were aware that learning language should have been more practice in listening and using the targeted language, not only doing paper exercises. The following is the excerpt of the student expressing his thought during FGDs:

“The teacher usually comes to class and explains materials for a while, and then we are told to do the LKS (worksheet). If the learning itself seems to be more grammar, learning like the past tense, simple present, and that's it. But yes, it's not used to speak, even though it's important.”

Another student claimed that listening activity was rarely done in the classroom. She added the same expression that the English class was just like a “normal” classroom she used to attend previously; the teacher explained teachers gave written exercises, discussed, and were done. The following is the excerpt:

“Among other skills, I think listening is the least lesson I had. I rarely had listening activity in the classroom. We mostly just did what she said: listen to the teacher, do exercise, and discuss it sometime.”

Teaching receptive skills is pivotal to gaining students' productive skills. These two should be taught simultaneously. Even though receptive skills are seen as ‘passive,’ they are not actually passive; they are used to understand and interpret language input. According to [Abdushukurova \(2024\)](#), they play a significant role in developing language components (vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation). So, it is imperative for language teachers to maximize students' potential through teaching receptive skills. Exposure plays an important role in developing language learners' skills. One of the pivotal exposures in the EFL classroom is through language use in the classroom. Unfortunately, the participants in this study reported that English was rarely used as the main medium of instruction. This case revealed their exposure to authentic language input and reduced chances to boost listening and comprehension skills.

Further, in the FGD the students reported that Indonesia and local language was mostly used in the classroom, they acknowledged that they still struggled with English, so they preferred gradual immersion rather than full dependence on translation. They also suggested still using *Bahasa Indonesia* in case they had a hard time understanding the instruction.

“In my class, the teacher mostly translates English to Indonesian; for example, she reads a paragraph, then she translates it for us. She also used *Bahasa Indonesia* when she explained grammar and hard things when students did not understand what she said.”

Another student added that her teacher sometimes made mistakes in pronunciation, but when she was questioned, she said, “Never mind.” It could lead to the assumption that there are teachers who lack self-confidence in speaking and are ignorant in accepting they make mistakes. The following is the excerpt of her expression:

“My teacher rarely asks to practice speaking, and she also rarely uses English in the classroom. It was quite often she mispronounced words, and I tried to remind her politely, but she said, ‘Never mind’ to me.”

The interaction and practical use of the target language have been mandated in the Merdeka curriculum through the use of *Communicative Language Teaching* (CLT). First, CLT encourages interactive tasks such as role-playing, discussions, and problem-solving activities in order to develop both linguistic and pragmatic competence (Gallo & Jennelyn L. Raymundo, 2024). Second, it makes learning more engaging and relevant to real-world language use. Also, it promotes critical thinking and creativity as well as collaboration and effective communication.

Tedious Lesson and Teacher-Centred

The participants expressed their dissatisfaction with how the teaching and learning are carried out; they believed that lecture, grammar-based, workbook-based, and translation was ineffective in the English classroom. Further, the participants said that doing role-plays and group discussions are more interesting than the teacher explaining in front of the classroom, as shown in the following figure:

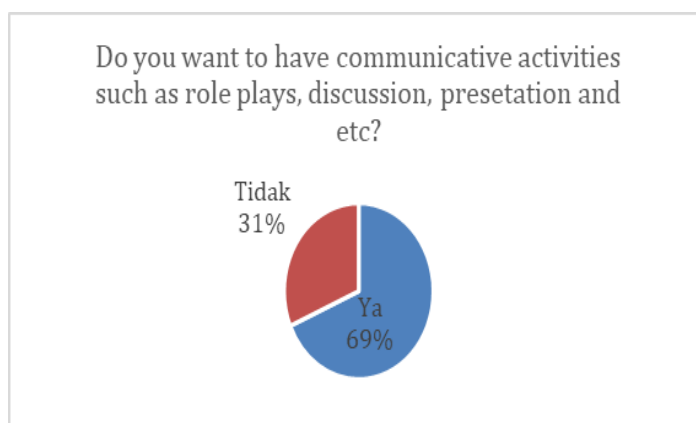


Figure 2. Students' Willingness to Participate in Communicative Activities

Further in the FGD, the participants wished that they wanted to do something out of their routine. The teacher's explanation somehow bored them because they listened to long explanations or looked at the teacher reading the PowerPoint. This finding shows that the students prefer interaction and practical language use rather than grammar, listening to the teacher's long explanation, and doing workbooks. The following is an excerpt from one of the FGD participants:

"I sometimes get bored in the classroom, listening to the teacher's explanation, looking at her reading slides on PPT (PowerPoint Text). We do the same routine and nothing new. Just like what the others (other participants) said that teacher explains, we do exercise, and sometimes we discuss it. We repeat that every day in the classroom."

On the contrary, the data from the questionnaire showed that the trend of implementation of student-centred learning is positive. Most of the participants' teachers incorporate student-centred learning; 38% of them reported that student-centred learning is used "sometimes" (38%), followed by "usually" (34%). These results indicate that the practice is common, yet it is considered not consistent with what was found in the FGD.

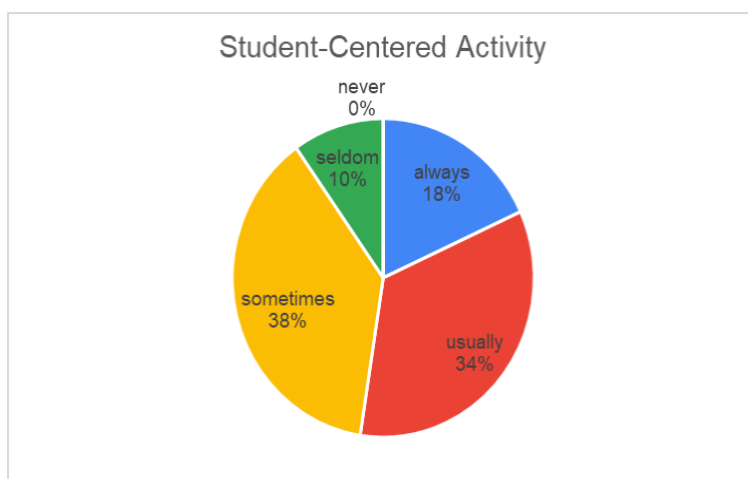


Figure 3. Students' Perception of the Implementation of Student-centred Activity

The findings suggest that there is a strong attempt for teachers to use this approach, even though some teachers are still using a traditional or teacher-centred approach. There still remains room for growth in shifting to student-centred. Teachers have to be aware that student-centred learning is crucial to supporting Indonesian students towards a competitive workforce. With the advance of technology and globalization, students need to survive; teacher-centred, as depicted by the students, only brings boredom, while student-centred offers a more dynamic classroom, and students sharpen their four skills and 4C's skills i.e. *critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication* (Chikileva, 2020; Indrapurnama et al., 2022; Xhomara, 2022).

Lack of Speaking Opportunities

The data portrayed a significant gap in the frequency of speaking practice. As shown in figure 4, almost half of the participants testified they only "sometimes" practiced speaking. Very few reported they "often" or "always" had opportunities to speak English in class.

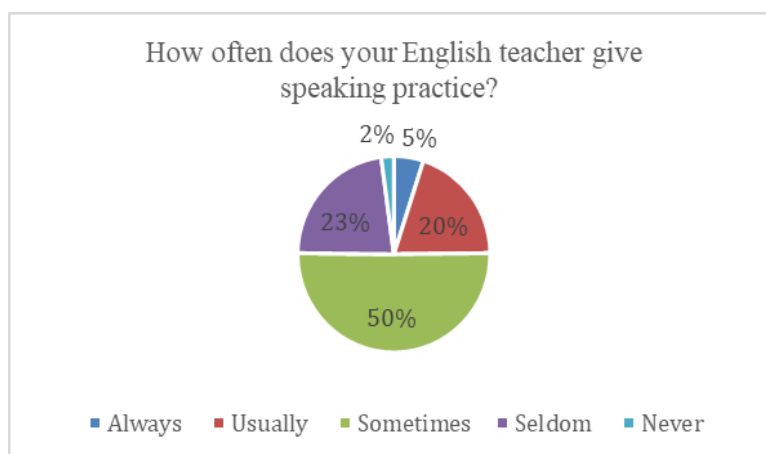


Figure 4. Speaking Practice Frequency

The finding was supported in FGDs, where students expressed their craving for more speaking-focused activities like group discussion and anything that could boost their English-speaking development. Even though the curriculum is designed to balance focus on all aspects or areas of language skills, the classroom implementation often neglects communicative activities or oral communication.

This fact illustrates how the Merdeka Curriculum becomes “lost in translation” in providing an ample communicative atmosphere. As one of the participants in the FGDs reported,

“At school, I rarely practiced speaking; sometimes I was told to practice in dialogue, make dialogues, or read in the stories that were written. Yes, I learn the language so that we can speak and use it in conversation, right? But at school I rarely practice speaking.”

Further, it was reported in the questionnaire that they only “sometimes” engage in communicative activities such as discussion and role-plays in English class. Only a few “always” did it. As show in the following figure:

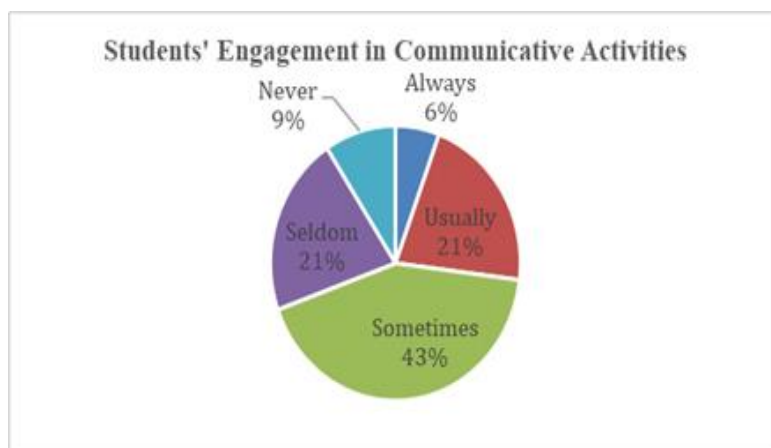


Figure 5. Students' Engagement in Communicative Activities

Language learners need to be exposed in a meaningful context to develop their fluency and accuracy so that they can produce productive skills (speaking and writing). The minimum exposure to speaking opportunities hinders students from internalizing and applying their language knowledge. One of the essential factors that lead to successful learning of a foreign language is exposure. It helps learners immerse themselves in the language's unique features and complexities. By regularly engaging with authentic conversations, written texts, and cultural materials, language learners can steadily improve their skills and understanding (Huy et al., 2024; Muñoz & Cadierno, 2021; Al Zoubi, 2018).

Barriers to Communicative Practice

In FGDs, students mentioned that somehow, they could not speak in the classroom; they could not express themselves in English. To add, they felt insecure when they were about to talk or speak in English. Also, it was found out that they reluctant to engage in communicative activities like discussions and role plays in English class.

The following is displayed: the result of students' opinion on their experience in engaging in communicative activities such as discussions and role plays in English class. A lack of the students' engagement in communicative activities was highlighted in the result of the questionnaire. Almost half of the participants, 45 students, chose “sometimes,” and 22 participants chose ‘seldom’ to describe their engagement in communicative activities. Only 4 participants and 17 participants tend to engage in communicative activities. Just a few respondents, fewer than 15, claimed they never engaged in communicative activities.

When asked what prevented them from practicing English in the class. More than half of the participants, 53%, were afraid of making mistakes. Then, respectively, they felt unconfident (20%), lacked opportunity (15%), and were dominated by the teacher in the classroom (12%).

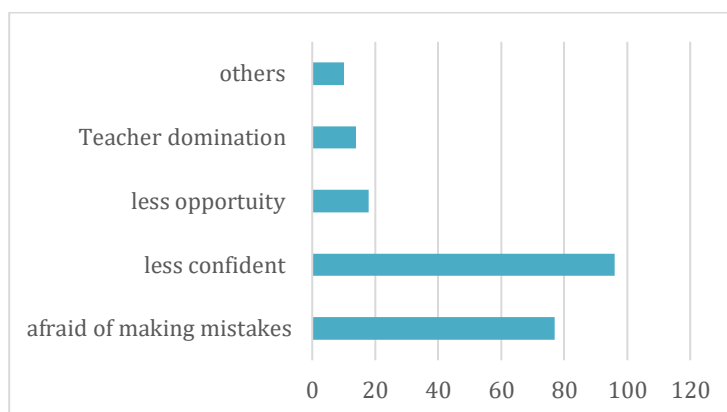


Figure 6. Students' Barriers in Participating Communicative Competence

Confirming what issues, they had in speaking in the English class, they reported that the classroom did not support them in a way they could speak English without hesitation. Another student said that he never had an English classroom that used English as a means of language instruction. Everybody, even the teacher, spoke in *Bahasa* or the local language, so he felt awkward when he spoke English.

"Nobody speaks English so when I tried to practice my speaking, it feels awkward to me because it is only me. Even, in the lesson my teacher mostly used *Bahasa Indonesia* so yeah I rarely practice English."

Providing students with sufficient opportunities to participate in communicative activities holds significant potential for easing their speaking anxiety, enabling them to enhance their language skills and confidence. In particular, for many learners, the complex nature of the English language serves as a major contributing factor to feelings of fear and self-doubt when expressing themselves verbally (Abduh et al., 2022; Franscy & Ramli, 2022; Maji et al., 2022). Therefore, by integrating more opportunities for students to practice speaking in English, teachers can effectively address these highlighted sources of anxiety, giving students the space to make mistakes, learn from them, and ultimately build their self-assurance in using the language.

However, the lack of speaking practice as depicted in this study has an impact on how the participants make an attempt to use English. As it is found that linguistic and non-linguistic factors can hinder the development of English proficiency, in particular speaking skills (Giantari et al., 2023). Those are relevant to this current study's findings; they confirmed in the questionnaire, as shown in figure 5, that there are three major reasons why they are reluctant to engage in speaking activities: fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, and teacher dominance. They agreed and were aware that they lacked time for practicing speaking; most of them showed their willingness to get more chances to sharpen their speaking skills since they thought communicative competence was essential.

Conclusion

This study revealed the constant gap between Indonesia's current curriculum objectives and its practices in the actual classrooms based on the students' views. Although the curriculum mandates communicative competence and student-learning, this study depicts a misalignment. This study revealed that the classroom practices are still largely dominated by teacher centered that overemphasis on grammar and writing, lack of opportunities for listening and speaking practice as well as the teacher dominant that fails to engage learners. Also, the students felt devastated with workbook exercises and not enough interactive activities. As a result, many students perceived English was a monotonous lesson and less communicative.

In addition, this study indicates several barriers that hinder students from actively engaging in communicative practices such as afraid of making mistakes, low confidence, limited exposure to English, and lack of speaking opportunities. The role of English as a foreign language in Indonesia should be a key to support students with more communicative development. As a result, insufficient communicative practice may negatively have effect on students' confidence and willingness to use English in real situations. This study implies the need for greater alignment between curriculum objectives and classroom practices. Professional development program focusing on communicative and student-centred learning strategies should be done to support teachers continuously. More interactive activities such as role plays, discussions, presentations, and collaborative tasks should be consistently used to create a more engaging learning environment.

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