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Male vs. Female EFL Students: Who is Better in Speaking Skill?

Nira Erdiana*
Syamsul Bahri Ys
Cut Nurul Akhmal

Department of English Education, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education,
Universitas Syiah Kuala, Banda Aceh 23111, INDONESIA

Abstract

This research is aimed to investigate whether or not female EFL students' ability in speaking skill is better than male students. It deals with the hypothesis that mentions female students are better than male students in speaking skill. The method applied is the descriptive quantitative approach in which ten male and ten female students of the first grade of one of the high schools in Banda Aceh, Indonesia, become randomly the samples. The speaking test is done in order to collect the data and it is conducted to identify the male and female ability in English speaking skill, especially in the five aspects of speaking skill: pronunciation, grammar, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary. The results show that the females actually dominate the higher scores in all aspects of speaking, however, the mean scores of male and female students are relatively similar, female students reach 68.5 while male students reach 63.3. The t-test is lower than t-table ($-1.67 < 1.72$), which means that the alternative hypothesis (H_a) of this study is rejected and the null hypothesis (H_o) is accepted. Therefore, it can be inferred that the first-grade female students of the high school under study have better performance in speaking skill than the male students, despite the difference is trivial.

Keywords: Male students, female students, EFL, speaking skill.

* Corresponding author, email: niraerdiana@unsyiah.ac.id

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1. INTRODUCTION

Generally, in a classroom, there are female and male students in almost all schools in Indonesia. They learn together in the same class, get the same lesson with the same teachers without discrimination. In addition, males and females get the same knowledge and the same treatment from the teacher. However, males and females are in unequal conditions, both of them are different. They are not only different psychically or mentally but they are also different in their ability in English speaking. Swann (1992) states that verbal ability is typically dominated by girls, meanwhile spatial ability is dominated by boys.

In addition, Viriya and Sapsirin (2014) say that males tend to be visual and females tend to be auditory. Moreover, males and females have their own style in a learning process which relates to their ability (Natsir et al., 2016). Apart from this, gender has been regarded as one of the important affective factors that play a specific role and influences second language acquisition (Zoghi et al., 2013). They also add that females and males also differ fundamentally in terms of cognitive ability and learning style, from the biological viewpoint. Furthermore, Zafar and Meenakshi (2012) state that one of the factors as influencing individual learner differences in language learning is sex. Therefore, language and gender have a big contribution to the learning process because males and females have a different ability which affects different achievement, especially in learning a foreign language.

Furthermore, dealing with female ability in speaking English, some experts say that females are better than males. Female students are commonly more active and get better scores than male students (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Besides, females are not only better in reading, but also in speaking and writing (The Education Alliance, 2007). In line with this statement, Boyle (1987), as cited by Qian (2015), did a survey to 490 Hong Kong students (233 girls and 233 boys) about their English learning, and found that the girls' English proficiency test scores were significantly higher than the boys in nearly ten times.

Meanwhile, a research conducted by Ismiati (2013) reveals that there is a significant difference in English speaking skill among male and female students. This study was conducted at SMPN 5 Purworejo, East Java, Indonesia, in the seventh grade. Her study reveals that there is a significant difference between the result of English speaking skill among male and female students. The percentage of the total score of female students (74.03) was higher than the percentage of the total score of male students (64.42). Therefore, the female students were found to be better in English speaking skill compared to the male students in that study. Another study by Halimah (2010) to fourth-semester students of IAIN Walisongo, Semarang, Indonesia, reveals that female students reach a higher score than the male students, in which the average score of the female students was 47.5 while the male students was 43.1.

Subsequently, based on a preliminary study by observing one of the classes at one of the high schools in Banda Aceh, Indonesia, which is SMA Lab School, the researchers found that the male students were more active and confident when they responded to questions in the teaching-learning process, participated actively in tasks, made lots of guesses, and called out answers when they took the speaking subject. Meanwhile, the female students tended to express anxiety about their performance and were seen to be more passive. This contradicts with the findings of the previous studies who claim that female language learners achieve better than male language learners. Therefore, in this study, the researchers are interested in conducting a comparative

study towards the male and female students of SMA Labschool, Banda Aceh, Indonesia, to investigate the following hypothesis:

H_a: The first-grade female students of the high school under study have better performance in speaking skill than the male students.

H_o: The first-grade female students of the high school under study do not have better performance in speaking skill than the male students.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature notes that female and male students have their own characteristics and differences in learning English as a foreign language (Natsir et al., 2016). Females tend to be subjective, use more feelings, field dependent, right and left brain balanced, and cooperative. On the other hand, males tend to be objective, use more thinking, field independent, left brain dominant and competitive (Defluef, 2005). Moreover, most male and female students have their own capability, for instance, males are dominant in classroom tasks but females do better in verbal tasks such as spelling, fluency, etc.

Some other researchers agree that the linguistics skill of the females is developed better than the males. Sugiarto (2002) states that females' linguistics superiority has very little effect on their performance and ability. They refuse the opinion that gender differences are influenced by genetic factors, hormone or brain structure, but accept that they are more influenced by the environment and the socio-psychological factors.

Psychology studies have shown that the two hemispheres of the males and females are quite different in the development of speed and level of specialization (Qian, 2015). Qian (2015) also says that the males are using the right hemisphere which makes them better in spatial ability than the females are. Meanwhile, the females' ability to use their left hemisphere makes them better in terms of short-term memory and language expressions.

Speaking is the way an individual expresses opinions, thoughts, and feelings to other individuals orally. It is an interactive process between a speaker and a listener. Furthermore, Tarigan (2008) states that speaking is the ability to articulate or produce sounds, words to express, convey, or deliver thoughts, ideas, and feelings. While Bailey and Nunan (2005) say that speaking consists of producing a verbal utterance to convey meaning. It means that speaking is an interactive process which comprises of two or more people in order to deliver, receive and process information in the oral form. Speaking is a productive skill and a fundamental part or vital component in language learning so it needs practicing as often as possible.

Richards (2003) states that English learners often evaluated for their success in language learning, as well as the effectiveness of the English course, to further improve their speaking proficiency. So, to know the students' proficiency in English is by looking at the five vital components of speaking skill, namely: pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, fluency, and comprehension. The first aspect of speaking is pronunciation. According to Boyer (2002), pronunciation is a necessary part of speaking (oral communication) that involves making the correct sounds of a particular language and how the sound is put together in the flow of speech. Pronunciation is an act of producing sound because the way we produce the word, especially in the English language is very decisive. Furthermore, pronunciation is an important tool in the speaking aspect because it determines whether or not the listener understands what is

spoken. If students make mistakes in pronunciation, it will directly change the meaning or the listener would get misunderstanding. Therefore, knowing how to produce the English sound is a very important part of the speaking skill.

The next aspect is vocabulary. Vocabulary is a set of words for a particular language or a list of individual words that speakers of a language might use (Hatch & Brown, 2001). It is a word choice that we use either in spoken or written form. Vocabulary is a vital aspect of language learning, especially in a foreign language. To improve student communication skill, the students need to master vocabulary because vocabulary is the key to learn the language.

The third aspect is grammar. Every language always has rules and its rules are various, depending on the language. Grammar is the rules of language which helps them use appropriate sentences either in spoken or written forms. Brown (2000) says grammar is a system of rules governing the conventional arrangement and relationship of words in the sentence. In addition, Locke (2013) states that vocabulary is vast and grammar are complex.

The fourth aspect is fluency. It is the ability to speak fluently, such as normal speed of speaking without having small pauses while speaking, such as the use of 'um'. Pfauwadel (1986) says "a speaker is fluent when he speaks easily, with smooth onsets and transitions, and at a relatively rapid clip" (as cited in Zellner, 1994, p. 48). Besides, eloquence in a foreign language would facilitate the listener to seize the content of the conversation, if the students speak discontinuously, it would interfere with the listener. On the other hand, if the students speak too fast, it will be difficult for the listener to seize the conversation.

The fifth aspect is comprehension. It is to understand the meaning of oral or written forms. Richards and Schmidt (2010) define comprehension as the identification of the intended meaning of the written or spoken communication. It can be inferred that the capability of understanding something is the key to know the level of students' knowledge in a foreign language.

3. METHODS

The research method applied in this study is the descriptive quantitative approach. The descriptive method is used to provide a systematic and factual description of the differences between the male and female students' ability in the first grade of the SMA Lab School Banda Aceh, Indonesia. Meanwhile, quantitative research deals with numerical data in order to give some explanations based on the fact that has been investigated.

The population of this study is the first-grade students of SMA Lab School Banda Aceh. There are four science classes and each class consists of 28 male and female students. The researchers used random sampling to select the participants. The samples were taken by using a draw. Class IPA-2 of the first-grade students was selected to be the sample of this study. The total students in the class are 28 students, but the researchers only selected 20 students as the sample which consist of 10 male and 10 female students.

To collect the data, the researcher used a speaking test in order to know the ability of the male and female students in speaking English. Arikunto (2006) says that test is one of the techniques in collecting data and used to measure the students' performance, intelligence, and knowledge. The researchers gave some pictures of basic, personal

and survival tools and asked the students to describe them. Each student was given three minutes to speak. Their speaking performance was recorded.

After collecting the data, the researcher determined the result through the students' scores. The researchers scored the speaking performance by using the scoring rubric as shown in Table 1. There are five scoring component scales as stated by Brown (2004, p. 173), namely: pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, fluency, and comprehension. So, the researchers divided the score into 20 for each component and the total score is 100. Tables 1-5 show the checklist and criteria of scoring speaking performance by Brown (2004, p. 175), but for this study, they were modified to suit the context of this study.

Table 1. Pronunciation scoring rubric.

<i>Score</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Indicator</i>
15-20	Excellent	Errors in pronunciation are quite rare.
10-15	Good	Errors never interfere with understanding and rarely disturb the native speaker. The accent may be obviously foreign
5-10	Satisfactory	Accents are intelligible though often quite faulty
1-5	Fail	Errors in pronunciation are frequent but can be understood by native speakers used to dealing with foreigners attempting to speak his language.

Table 2. Vocabulary scoring rubric.

<i>Score</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Indicator</i>
15-20	Excellent	Vocabulary is apparently as accurate and extensive as that of an educated native speaker.
10-15	Good	Professional vocabulary broad and precise; general vocabulary adequate to cope with complex practical problems and varied social situation.
5-10	Satisfactory	Vocabulary limited to basic personal and survival areas (time, food, transportation, family, etc)
1-5	Fail	Vocabulary inadequate for even simplest conversation

Table 3. Grammar scoring rubric.

<i>Score</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Indicator</i>
15-20	Excellent	Able to use the language accurately on all levels normally pertinent to professional needs. Errors in grammar are quite rare
10-15	Good	Control of grammar is good. Able to speak the language with sufficient structural accuracy to participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations on practical social, and professional topics
5-10	Satisfactory	Can usually handle elementary constructions quite accurately but does not have thorough or confident control of the grammar.
1-5	Fail	Errors in grammar are frequent, but the speaker can be understood by native speakers used to dealing with foreigners attempting to speak his language.

Table 4. Fluency scoring rubric.

<i>Score</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Indicator</i>
15-20	Excellent	Able to use the language fluently on the levels normally pertinent to professional needs. Can participate in any conversation within the range of the experience with a high degree of fluency.
10-15	Good	can discuss the particular interest of competence with reasonable ease. Rarely has to grope for words
5-10	Satisfactory	Can handle with confidence but not with facility most social situations, including introduction and casual conversation about current events, as well as work, family, and autobiographical information.
1-5	Fail	(No specific fluency description. Refer to other four language areas for the implied level of fluency)

Table 5. Comprehension scoring rubric.

<i>Score</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Indicator</i>
15-20	Excellent	Can understand any conversation within the range of his experience
10-15	Good	Comprehension is quite complete at a normal rate of speech
5-10	Satisfactory	Can get the gist of most conversations of non-technical subjects (i.e., topics that requires no specialized knowledge)
1-5	Fail	Within the scope of this very limited language experience can understand simple questions and statements if delivered with slowed speech, repetition, or paraphrase.

The researchers applied t-test to know the differences between the two group means (i.e. males and females). Before analyzing the data, the researchers used the mean score (M) of each group to find out the students' ability. Furthermore, to analyze the speaking test, the researchers described the scores between the male and female students in English speaking skill.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Results

The following figure illustrates the students' scores in English speaking skill. The distribution in Figure 1 shows that there are three male students who got a score below 55, one male student got 59, two male students got 61, two male students got 62 and 63, one male student got 70, and 1 male student got 95. Meanwhile, Figure 1 also shows that one female student got 53, two female students got 57, two female students got 64, one female student got 68, two female students got 73, and the rest of female students got 90 and 92.

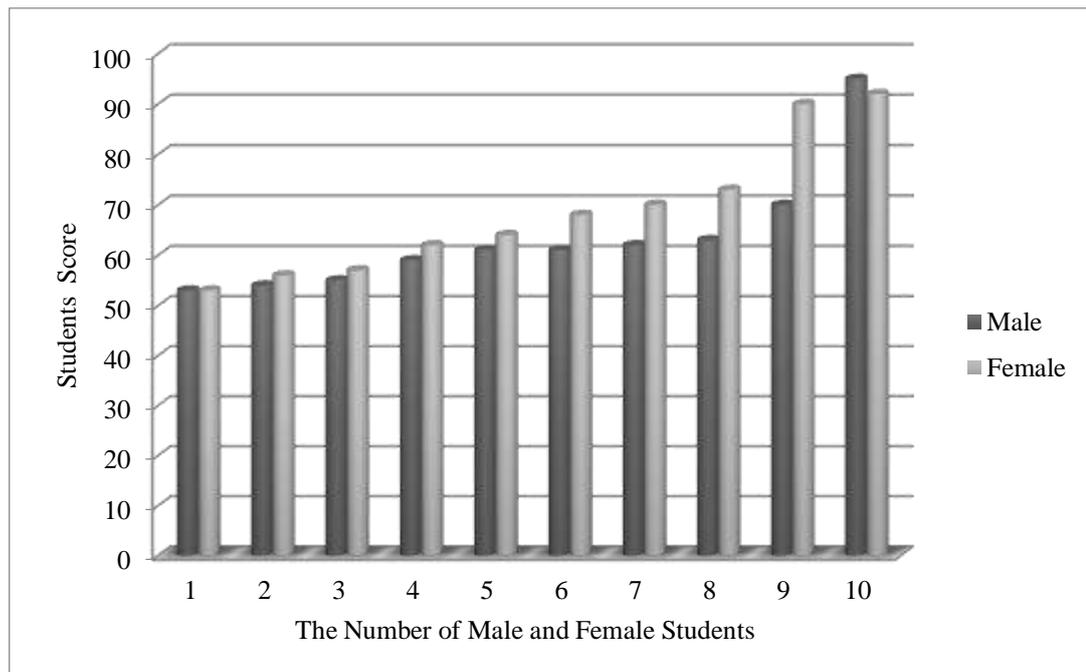


Figure 1. The scores of male and female students in English speaking skill.

Figure 1 represents the scores of male and female students in English speaking skills. The X-axis represents the number of male and female students, while the Y-axis represents the student mean scores which are obtained from the speaking test. It can be seen that none of the male students got 100. From the speaking test, it can be seen that only one male student got 95. Meanwhile, there is one male student who got 53, which is the lowest score in the speaking test. Figure 1 also shows that there is one student who got 70 while the other students did not get above 70. They only got 54, 55, 59, 61, 61, 62, and 63. To conclude, there are only two male students who achieved high scores in the speaking test, while the other male students achieved the lowest scores.

Based on the findings of the speaking test, it showed that actually, the female students were not better than the male students in English speaking skill. They were only slightly different in the scores, in which the female students got higher scores than the male students. However, when the researchers gave the speaking test to both male and female students, they found that almost all of the male students were more confident, active, and enthusiastic compared to the female students in describing pictures given though they had some problems with vocabulary, grammar, and fluency. But, the female students slightly excel in comprehension and pronunciation.

In the pronunciation aspect, female students got higher scores than male students. The scores of female students were 144 while male students reached 131. From the individual scores, there was only one male student who got in the category of an 'excellent' score in pronunciation, while the other male students only got 'good' scores. Thus, two female students got 'excellent' scores while the other female students got 'good' scores. The result also showed that some of the students who had an average value of 'good' scores had difficulty in perceiving the pronunciation, especially in producing the sounds or the English words while speaking.

In vocabulary use, most of the male students reached 128 of vocabulary items and the female students reached 134. There were only two female students who lack vocabulary when describing the picture of basic, personal and survival tools. Meanwhile, half of the male had some problems in choosing the appropriate words to describe the tools, they tended to directly translate from the mother tongue, or mix both languages (Indonesia and English) when speaking. The other half of the male students were able to speak the language with sufficient vocabulary.

In the aspect of grammar, fluency, and comprehension, the female students were still stronger. It showed that the female students reached 123 while the male students reached 113. In fluency as well, the female students reached 135 and the male students reached 128. Meanwhile, in comprehension, the female students reached 149 and the male students reached 136.

Although the range of scores between the male and female students was slightly different, the result of this research proved that they were different because the t-test was lower than t-table ($-1.67 < 1.72$). So, the null hypothesis (H_0) is accepted and the alternative hypothesis (H_a) is rejected. In line with these findings, the previous studies conducted by Halimah (2010), Ismiati (2013), and Qian (2015) also got similar findings as have been explained at the beginning of this paper. Although these studies are conducted at a different place, time, and with different sampling technique and population, the results are similar, in which female students performed better than the male students in English speaking skill, with the level of differences vary from major to minor.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the result of the speaking test given to the first-grade students of SMA Labschool Banda Aceh, Indonesia, it can be concluded that the female students of this school are better in speaking skill than the male students, in which the female students reached the mean score of 68.5, and the male students reached 63.3. Even though the range of the females' score is only a slight different from males, the t-test was lower than t-table ($-1.67 < 1.72$) and this result has the null hypothesis (H_0) to be accepted and the alternative hypothesis (H_a) to be rejected. However, the findings in this school cannot be generalized to all students of EFL because results depend on every researcher's location of research, time, subjects, and types of speaking tests.

Regarding this study, the researchers recommend that English teachers should remember and practice of reducing gender bias in the classroom and give opportunities to all students to speak in class speaking practice to avoid the domination of some students. Moreover, teachers also need to help students build their confidence, reduce anxiety and fear of making mistakes, and further encourage students' activeness in-class activities better express their ideas, thoughts, and opinions in speaking practice.

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THE AUTHORS

Nira Erdiana is an English lecturer at the English Education Department, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Syiah Kuala University, Banda Aceh, Indonesia. She was born in Lamme Garot on March 2, 1984. She received both her Bachelor's and Master's degrees from Syiah Kuala University in 2007 and 2012. Her research interest is in education.

Syamsul Bahri Ys is a lecturer at the English Education Department, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Syiah Kuala University (Unsyiah), Banda Aceh, Indonesia. He got his Master's degree from Warwick University, Coventry, England, majoring in Teaching English to Young Learners. Since he returned from his study, he was involved in teaching English for young learners in his region as an instructor and provided training for elementary school teachers. He also wrote the course book for

the primary level called 'Let's Learn English'; the book is used for grades 4 and 5 at the elementary school level.

Cut Nurul Akhmal completed her degree in Bachelor of Education at the English Education Department, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Syiah Kuala University in 2017. Her research interests include English teaching, learning, and education.