

Exploring Students' Perceptions of An Intensive English Course Program for Speaking Development

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Abstract

This research investigates students' perceptions toward the Intensive English Course program in developing speaking skills among EFL students at MA Unggulan Wahab Hasbullah. Employing an explanatory sequential mixed-method design, quantitative data were collected through a questionnaire distributed to students participating in the program, followed by qualitative interviews to obtain deeper insights into their experiences and opinions. The findings indicate that the Intensive English Course contributes positively to students' speaking development, particularly in building confidence, improving fluency, and expanding oral vocabulary through continuous speaking exposure and communicative activities. Most students reported that the program provided a supportive environment that encouraged active participation and reduced speaking anxiety. The qualitative findings also indicated that various speaking activities, such as free conversation and language shows, effectively supported students' speaking performance. Overall, the Intensive English Course was perceived as beneficial and effective in improving speaking skills and creating a communicative speaking atmosphere for EFL learners in this context.

Keywords: Students' perception; Intensive English Course; Speaking Skills; EFL Learners

INTRODUCTION

In today's world of globalization, English is undoubtedly the main tool of international communication, especially in the academic and professional fields. With this in mind, the Indonesian educational system introduces English as the primary foreign language in schools to prepare students for interaction in a global society. Speaking is possibly the most difficult of the four core language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. It requires learners to maintain fluency, grammatical accuracy, and self-confidence in real time. The speaking difficulties of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners are not confined to grammatical rules but also include complex psychological and social pressures.

To help students overcome these oral communication barriers, many educational institutions have turned to intensive English course programs. These programs are highly concentrated, structured practices beyond normal classroom hours. Their ultimate goal is to accelerate language acquisition with a strong emphasis on speaking skills through continuous exposure and active speaking. Previous research has shown that intensive exposure to communicative activities significantly reduces students' speaking anxiety (Saito & Samimy, 1996). But the real success of an intensive program is seldom uniform. It largely depends on the teaching methods, classroom atmosphere and individual characteristics of the students (Lightbown & Spada, 2020).

As a real example of the approach's application, the Intensive English Course (IEC) was implemented by MA Unggulan Wahab Hasbulloh Jombang for tenth-grade students. The program meets five times a week and focuses on developing speaking skills through interactive means and a variety of teaching media. Students are grouped according to their initial proficiency levels before starting and are required to use English actively during lessons. Yet preliminary observations and informal interviews on the ground showed a mixed reality. The IEC does a good job of building confidence, but students have different experiences with the program; some feel high learning pressure, others thrive on classroom interactions.

The existing literature repeatedly emphasises that the success of a program depends on students' perception of it. When learners hold positive views, their motivation, classroom engagement, and active participation naturally increase (Dornyei, 2019). On the other hand, negative perceptions can halt progress no matter how well the curriculum is designed. In Indonesia, students' attitudes to speaking in English are largely influenced by their classroom environment and peer support (Rao, 2019). Therefore, it is essential to explore students' perceptions to understand how an intensive course feels from the learner's perspective and how it impacts their speaking growth.

Previous studies found that intensive English programs positively impact students' confidence and speaking abilities (Maulidiyah & Afifa, 2022; Munir et al., 2023; Wahyu, 2020). However, most studies only described students' perceptions or evaluated English-speaking programs in general. Few studies have explicitly employed an explanatory sequential mixed-method design to investigate perceptions of an intensive English course that uses proficiency-based grouping and daily extensive speaking practice. Moreover, little research has combined quantitative findings with qualitative data to explain how and why these programs contribute to speaking development. This study fills this gap by examining students' perceptions of the intensive English course and how it helps them improve their speaking skills at MA Unggulan Wahab Hasbulloh.

Based on the identified research gap, this study investigates tenth-grade students' perceptions of the Intensive English Course (IEC) program at MA Unggulan Wahab Hasbulloh. It explores its contribution to students' development of speaking skills. The findings are expected to provide empirical evidence of how students perceive the program and offer practical implications for teachers and policymakers to improve speaking-oriented English instruction.

METHODS

This study used a mixed-method explanatory sequential design. In the first phase, the researcher collected and analysed quantitative data, and then collected qualitative insights to explain and expand the initial statistical results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The research was conducted at MA Unggulan Wahab Hasbulloh, Jombang. The research subjects were 108 tenth-grade students. The subjects were drawn from three classes based on proficiency: Harvard, Oxford, and Cambridge. Quantitative data was collected through a 12-item questionnaire. This instrument consisted of 10 closed-ended statements on a four-point Likert scale (1 – Strongly Disagree to 4 – Strongly Agree) and 2 open-ended questions. These specifically measured important indicators such as speaking confidence, classroom activities, teacher support, learning environment, and overall learning outcomes. To ensure the instrument's validity, the items were checked for clarity, relevance, and compatibility with the research objectives by two experts (a university lecturer and a senior English schoolteacher) (Taherdoost, 2016).

To elaborate on the survey responses, the researcher collected qualitative data from semi-structured interviews. In this phase, students responded to 10 guiding questions about their overall impressions, speaking progress, teaching methods, classroom dynamics, teacher support, and suggestions for the program. The quantitative responses were calculated using descriptive statistics like mean scores, frequencies, and percentages. The qualitative interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis based on the interactive model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which includes data condensation, data display, and conclusion. This systematic dual approach is necessary for a holistic and balanced understanding of educational phenomena (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007). Lastly, this technique gave a holistic view of students' perception of the Intensive English Course in developing their speaking skills.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that students have very positive attitudes towards the Intensive English Course (IEC) and consider the program to be an effective tool to improve their speaking proficiency. The questionnaire data showed strong positive responses with the overall total mean score of 3.40 ($(M = 3.40)$). The scores for individual items ranged from 3.23 to 3.63 on the 4-point Likert scale. These ranges of statistics are well within the "Agree" and "Strongly Agree" ranges in which students

felt satisfied with their speaking confidence, instructional techniques, teacher feedback and classroom environment. These statistical ranges fall well within the “Agree” and “Strongly Agree” brackets, thus confirming student satisfaction with their speaking confidence, instructional methods, teacher feedback and classroom environment. This robust statistical baseline implies that there is enough space for interactive communication to practice oral English by learners under intensive setup.

Most participants said they gained a real boost in confidence and that their speaking skills improved remarkably after joining the IEC. The qualitative interviews strongly supported this tendency. The regular oral drills, including impromptu dialogues, group presentations, role-plays and storytelling sessions, gradually helped to lower students’ foreign language anxiety and encouraged them to communicate more confidently. This finding indicates that speaking practice alone was not the only reason for students’ confidence. The positive classroom environment and multiple opportunities to practise using English also helped students overcome their fear of making mistakes. This finding can be explained through Krashen’s (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, which proposes that language acquisition occurs more effectively when learners experience low anxiety and high self-confidence. Similarly, MacIntyre (1999) argued that reducing language anxiety increases learners’ willingness to communicate. Therefore, the IEC created learning conditions that supported both students’ psychological readiness and speaking performance.

Regarding instructional strategies, students perceived that the lesson materials were appropriate for their current language proficiency. The system of streaming by proficiency (the Harvard, Oxford, and Cambridge groups) was highly praised because it allowed learners to work with others of equal standing, making the lessons highly comprehensible. The most practical elements among the various modules were spontaneous debates and performance-based tasks such as the “Language Show”. These activities were designed to mimic real communicative contexts, forcing students to speak meaningfully. The instructors’ role was also highly appreciated. Teachers fostered motivation, and pronunciation errors were corrected, and positive feedback was provided in a way that normalized mistakes. It is known that a non-threatening learning atmosphere creates active student engagement and continuous participation in speaking tasks (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

The students’ selection of activities such as free conversation and the Language Show suggests that

authentic communication was a significant element in their development of speaking skills. Rather than memorising language forms, students were encouraged to express their ideas in meaningful contexts. The findings support the claim by Lightbown and Spada (2020) that language develops more effectively when learners use the target language actively in communicative situations. Hence, the effectiveness of the IEC was not only affected by the intensity of instruction but also by the quality of the communicative learning experiences provided during the program. In addition, teacher feedback was also important in supporting students’ speaking development. Students were more confident and willing to participate in speaking activities because they viewed mistakes as a normal part of the learning process, supported by constructive criticism and positive encouragement. The finding is in line with Dörnyei’s (2019) assertion that supportive teacher-student interaction increases learners’ motivation and engagement in language learning. Therefore, the use of communicative learning activities and the provision of supportive teacher feedback were effective in improving students’ speaking abilities using the IEC.

Students also reported other linguistic gains aside from psychological ones. They noticed an increase in vocabulary knowledge and pronunciation abilities, which directly boosted their oral fluency. Students still experienced slight anxiety and momentary lapses in vocabulary knowledge. However, learners reported that the program allowed them to conquer these challenges slowly. One could conclude that consistent practice speaking allowed students to improve their vocabulary and pronunciation by using the language purposefully. Lightbown and Spada support this notion (2020). They concluded that learners of a language would not become successful until they had opportunities to use the target language in real communication. Thus, learners’ linguistic benefits could be attributed to consistent practice and purposeful communication during IEC. Finally, students were overall pleased with the program, indicating that IEC caters to their immediate needs.

The quantitative and qualitative results complement each other, showing that learners’ positive perceptions contribute to improvements in speaking skills. Although the questionnaire results indicated that students agreed they felt confident speaking English, participated in various learning activities, received teacher support, and learned from the course, interview results allowed students to explain how these factors helped them improve their speaking. Similar to other studies where students reported having positive perceptions of their intensive English courses (Maulidiyah & Affifa, 2022;

Wahyu, 2020; Munir et al., 2023), these results expand upon the literature by identifying how proficiency-based groups, authentic communicative activities, and teacher encouragement coherently allowed students to learn the language and feel confident using English. Thus, the success of the IEC is not just due to the intensity of the curriculum, but also to the environment it creates for learners to practice English through authentic communication.

In general, the results suggest that a variety of factors contributed to the success of the Intensive English Course, beyond intensive speaking practice alone. These helped to create a student-centered learning environment that engaged my students and enhanced both their language abilities and their confidence in using English. Thus, the current results offer additional support for the idea that English programs can benefit speaking when fostering a communicative context.

Abbreviations and Acronym

EFL – English as a Foreign Language; IEC – Intensive English Course; MA – Madrasah Aliyah (Islamic Senior High School).

Table 1
Questionnaire Indicators

No.	Indicator	Item Number
1.	Speaking Confidence	1-2
2.	Learning Activities and Method	3-6
3.	Teacher Support and Feedback	7
4.	Learning Environment	8
5.	Learning outcomes and Satisfaction	9-10
6.	Students' Challenges (Open-ended)	11
7.	Effective Activities (Open-ended)	12

Table 2
Interview Themes

No.	Theme	Question Number
1.	General Perception	1
2.	Speaking Improvement and Confidence	2-3
3.	Materials and Teaching Methods	4-5
4.	Speaking Activities	6
5.	Teacher Support and Environment	7-8

6.	Program Evaluation and Suggestion	9-10
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CONCLUSION

In short, this study provides evidence that the students of MA Unggulan Wahab Hasbulloh had very good perceptions of the Intensive English Course (IEC). Supported oral production and mitigated language anxiety, the learners experience the program as a purposeful and encouraging platform. The convergence of empirical and narrative data affirms the IEC as a constructive catalyst for oral growth, with significant gains in student confidence, speech fluency, vocabulary acquisition and pronunciation accuracy. Real-time conversational activities, level-based streaming of students, encouraging teacher feedback are all features that combine to reinforce active student engagement and willingness to speak. Thus, the IEC framework provides a practical and strategic approach to enhance speaking skills in foreign language classes. This intensive system should be maintained and improved by academic administrators to guarantee sustainable and long-term outcomes in language learning (Stoller, 2004).

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