

The Impact of Mother Tongue on Students' Speaking Skills

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Abstract

This study aims to describe the impact of mother tongue use on students' English-speaking skills in terms of fluency, accuracy, confidence, expression, and response. This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach and was conducted at SMP Negeri 7 Mappakasunggu, Takalar Regency, South Sulawesi. The research subjects consisted of six eighth-grade students selected through purposive sampling based on their tendency to use their mother tongue in English-speaking activities. Data were collected through classroom observation and semi-structured interviews, then analyzed using the interactive analysis model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana. The results showed that excessive use of the mother tongue had an impact on low fluency, grammatical errors, limited vocabulary, underdeveloped expression, and slow and brief responses. However, this study also found that the mother tongue has a positive and constructive role, particularly in helping students understand the material, formulate ideas before speaking, and increase their sense of security and courage through translanguaging practices. Thus, the mother tongue does not only function as an obstacle, but can also be a source of support for learning to speak English when used in a targeted manner.

Keywords: *Communicative Competence; EFL Speaking; L1 Interference; Mother Tongue Use; Translanguaging*

1. Introduction

Speaking skills are one of the most important competencies in learning English at the junior high school level. Through various speaking activities, students are expected to be able to convey their ideas clearly, respond accurately to questions, and actively participate in classroom interactions (Goh & Burns, 2012). Mastery of speaking allows students not only to communicate information but also to engage in social interactions, express opinions, and develop critical thinking through language (Richards, 2008). However, in the context of learning English as a foreign language, speaking skills remain the most challenging skill for many students due to limited exposure to the language and fewer opportunities to use it in meaningful contexts (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017).

One of the main factors impacting students' speaking skills is the habitual use of their mother tongue in daily life. In both school and community settings, students are accustomed to using Indonesian or regional languages, such as Makassarese, as the primary means of communication. This habitual use of the mother tongue often carries over into the English classroom, especially when students encounter difficulties in expressing themselves in English (Atmowardoyo et al., 2023). As a result, they may switch back to their first language, which affects the natural flow of oral communication.

The use of the mother tongue in English learning has often been viewed as a hindrance. Excessive reliance on L1 is considered to reduce students' opportunities to practice speaking in English, which can limit the development of fluency, accuracy, and spontaneity (Skehan, 1996). Students who depend too much on their native language may hesitate, make frequent pauses, or rely on translation before producing English sentences. These tendencies can result in slow speech, grammatical mistakes, and limited vocabulary, which in turn affect the overall quality of communication in English (Altunel, 2019). Furthermore, this linguistic barrier often triggers speaking anxiety, which significantly hampers the students' learning process (Zuhri et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, the mother tongue can also play a positive role in supporting learning. Using the native language strategically can help students understand instructions, organize their thoughts, and reduce anxiety when speaking (Horwitz et al., 1986). This support enables students to feel more confident and encourages them to try to speak in English, even when their language skills are still developing (Fitrah et al., 2024). In this way, the mother tongue functions as a cognitive and communicative tool that facilitates engagement, especially at the junior high school level where learners are still acquiring foundational skills in English (Ellis, 2008).

While previous studies have extensively documented the negative interference of the mother tongue on grammar and vocabulary, they often treat L1 as a static barrier to be eliminated. This study diverges from such singular perspectives by adopting a translanguaging framework, which remains under-researched in the specific context of Indonesian junior high schools. Unlike earlier empirical work that typically focuses on a single aspect of performance, such as retelling stories (Hardianti et al., 2023) or the use of specific media (Amar et al., 2023), this research offers a more nuanced novelty by examining the impact of L1 across five interconnected dimensions—fluency, accuracy, confidence, expression, and response—simultaneously. By doing so, it provides an integrated view of how the mother tongue serves as both a linguistic challenge and a strategic scaffold for meaning-making.

Considering these conditions, this study aims to explore in depth the impact of mother tongue use on students' English-speaking skills. By focusing on fluency, accuracy, confidence, expression, and response, this research seeks to provide a balanced understanding of the dual role of the mother tongue (Sulfitriani et al., 2025). The findings are expected to inform teaching practices that strategically integrate students' L1 to support language development, while gradually encouraging greater independence and competence in English speaking (Haidir et al., 2025).

1.1 Literature Review

Speaking skills in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) refer to the capacity of learners to use English orally in environments where English is not the primary language of daily communication (Atmowardoyo & Sakkir, 2021). In such contexts, speaking is often regarded as one of the most challenging skills because learners have limited exposure to authentic English input and few opportunities to practice meaningful communication (Richards, 2008). Mastering speaking in EFL contexts requires not only knowledge of linguistic forms but juga the ability to convey ideas clearly, interact socially, and maintain communication effectively under real-time constraints (Goh & Burns, 2012). Chaney and Burk (1998) define speaking as the process of constructing and sharing meaning through verbal symbols across different contexts. Effective speaking involves more than merely producing grammatically correct sentences; it requires a framework that balances linguistic elements with task-based implementation to achieve communicative goals (Skehan, 1996).

In this study, the students' speaking skills were analyzed through five main aspects: fluency, accuracy, confidence, expression, and response. Leong and Ahmadi (2017) state that these aspects collectively reflect both linguistic competence and communicative performance. While traditional scholarship often views ini as separate targets, they are deeply interdependent in the EFL classroom. Fluency refers to the ability to speak smoothly with minimal hesitation, while accuracy relates to the correct use of grammar and vocabulary (Brown, 2001). Confidence captures learners' psychological readiness to speak without excessive fear—a crucial factor since high anxiety can paralyze oral production (Horwitz et al., 1986). Expression involves organizing ideas coherently, while response is the ability to comprehend and reply appropriately, which is essential for sustaining interactive communication (Richards, 2008).

The role of the mother tongue (L1) in EFL development is often characterized by a tension between interference and support. Previous studies have mostly emphasized the negative impacts, suggesting that L1 habituation triggers errors in sentence construction and limits vocabulary growth (Altunel, 2019). These linguistic barriers often lead to a lack of self-confidence during speaking performances (Fitrah et al., 2024). However, this study seeks to synthesize these views by incorporating a translanguaging perspective, which frames the mother tongue as a strategic resource rather than a barrier. From this perspective, L1 allows learners to utilize their entire linguistic repertoire to build "polysemy awareness" and conceptual depth before producing English utterances (Amaliah et al., 2025).

By balancing the use of L1 with structured opportunities for meaningful English practice, such as collaborative learning or storytelling training, learners can gradually reduce dependence on the mother tongue (Haidir et al., 2025; Wahyuni et al., 2025). This approach highlights the importance of guided classroom practices that integrate both languages to maximize students' oral communication skills and foster more confident, competent English speakers in EFL contexts. This synthesis aligns with the need to understand how learners' internal styles and external strategies interact to produce successful speaking proficiency (Sulfitriani et al., 2025).

2. Methods

This study uses a descriptive qualitative research design. This design was chosen because the study aims to describe in depth the phenomenon of mother tongue use and its impact on students' English-speaking skills in a natural learning context. Qualitative research allows researchers to understand students' behavior, experiences, and perceptions holistically.

The subjects in this study were six eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 7 Mappakasunggu, Takalar Regency. The subjects were selected using purposive sampling techniques, considering that these students showed a tendency to use their native language when speaking English and had varying levels of speaking ability. The sample size of six students was deemed sufficient to achieve data saturation and provide rich, varied insights into individual speaking experiences within this specific case-oriented study.

The instruments used in this study included observation sheets and semi-structured interview guidelines. The observation sheet was used to assess students' speaking skills based on five aspects, namely fluency, accuracy, confidence, expression, and response. The interview guide was used to explore information about the habits of using the mother tongue, the difficulties experienced by students in speaking English, and their views on the use of the mother tongue in learning.

The data collection procedures in this study consisted of the following steps:

- a) The researcher conducted preliminary and classroom observations to examine students' English-speaking conditions, language use, and mother tongue interference during speaking activities.
- b) An observation checklist was used to record students' fluency, accuracy, confidence, response, and expression.
- c) Based on the observation results, six students were selected and categorized into high, moderate, and low speaking proficiency levels. This classification was based on a speaking rubric adapted from Brown (2001), where 'high' proficiency students demonstrated minimal hesitation and consistent accuracy, 'moderate' students showed intermittent fluency with frequent L1 translation, and 'low' proficiency students relied heavily on the mother tongue for almost all utterances.
- d) Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the selected students to gain deeper insights into their speaking experiences and the influence of the mother tongue.
- e) Supporting documents such as observation notes, interview transcripts, reflective memos, and students' work samples were collected to strengthen data validity.
- f) All interview data were transcribed and organized systematically.
- g) The collected data were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis to identify patterns related to speaking skills and types of mother tongue interference.
- h) Conclusions were drawn based on the analyzed data to explain the influence of the mother tongue on students' English-speaking skills.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the researcher employed methodological triangulation by cross-referencing data from observations, interviews, and supporting documents. This study used qualitative data analysis procedures consisting of four stages: data collection, data condensation, data display, and drawing conclusions (Saldana, Miles, & Huberman, 2014). Data condensation involved filtering interview results to extract key ideas, data display organized findings into descriptive narratives or tables, and the conclusion-drawing stage synthesized patterns and relationships to answer the research questions.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

This section presents the findings obtained from classroom observations and interviews with six eighth-grade students at SMPN 7 Mappakasunggu. The data were organized based on five indicators of speaking skills: fluency, accuracy, confidence, expression, and response.

3.1.1 Impact of Mother Tongue on Fluency

Fluency in speaking involves the ability to express ideas smoothly without long pauses. Observations and interviews indicate that most students still struggle with continuous speech. They often pause to think, hesitate, or self-correct pronunciation mistakes, which disrupts the natural flow of conversation.

Extract 1

"...Usually, my English is sometimes fluent, but often stutters. When I make a mistake, I usually pause first before remembering the right word. Sometimes I continue, but not very fluently."

Extract 2

"...When speaking English, I usually pause to think first. I can't speak immediately."

Extract 3

"...When speaking English in front of the class, I often hesitate and am afraid of making mistakes. So, I don't speak fluently."

These findings indicate that students' fluency is still at an early stage. Frequent pauses and hesitation show that they need more practice to develop the ability to speak naturally in English

3.1.2 Impact Mother Tongue on Accuracy

Accuracy involves correct grammar, appropriate vocabulary, and sentence structures conforming to English patterns. Observations reveal that many students still rely on Indonesian or Makassarese patterns when constructing sentences. Beyond vocabulary choice, students often apply L1 syntactic structures to English, such as omitting the verb 'to be' or using Indonesian word order (e.g., "I no school" for "I do not go to school").

Extract 4

"...Usually, when speaking I choose words that are familiar or easier to pronounce. For example, if I want to say 'cantik', I usually choose 'beautiful'. There are other words like 'pretty', but I choose the one I often easier to pronounce."

Extract 5

"...I usually choose vocabulary that is easy to pronounce, not difficult. Because if I try new words, I might make mistakes or not know when to use them."

Extract 6

"...When speaking English, I usually translate it first into Makassar or Indonesian, then say it."

These results suggest that grammatical transfer from the mother tongue is a significant barrier to accuracy. The habit of direct translation and limited mastery of English syntax hinder the development of accurate language use.

3.1.3 Impact of Mother Tongue on Confidence

Confidence includes eye contact, voice stability, and willingness to speak spontaneously. Findings show that most students still have low confidence, often looking down and speaking softly.

Extract 7

"...When asked to speak English in front of the class, I feel scared and nervous. I'm afraid of mispronouncing words or giving the wrong answer to the teacher. But I think it's okay because mistakes can be corrected."

Extract 8

"...I dare to speak without being asked because I don't feel too tense. If I know the answer, I immediately raise my hand and speak. Even if I sometimes make mistakes, I still try to speak."

Extract 9

“...I’m not confident when the teacher tells me to speak English. I feel very afraid of making mistakes, thinking that my friends will laugh at me. So usually, I just stay quiet.”

Low confidence prevents students from taking opportunities to practice, slowing their development.

3.1.4 Impact of Mother Tongue on Expression

Expression refers to the ability to construct clear and coherent sentences. Students still depend on their native language to formulate ideas, resulting in short and sometimes incomplete sentences.

Extract 10

“...When speaking English, I usually translate it first into Makassar or Indonesian, then say it. It cannot come out directly, I have to think first.”

Extract 11

“...When arranging words, I usually think first in Indonesian, then say it in English. Sometimes it takes a long time because I don’t know how to say it, so in the end I just say it.”

These extracts reinforce that students’ expression is limited due to heavy reliance on their mother tongue structures.

3.1.5 Impact of Mother Tongue on Response

Response skills involve understanding questions and providing relevant answers. Most students give short, incomplete answers and struggle to sustain interactions.

Extract 12

“...When the teacher asks in English, I usually give a short answer. Sometimes it is not complete because I don’t really understand the question.”

Extract 13

“...I just answer based on what I know. If it is a long answer, it’s difficult, so I answer only a little.”

Extract 14

“...In conversation, it usually stops quickly because I don’t know what else to add. So, I just answer briefly.”

Limited vocabulary and reliance on L1 for processing meaning hinder the flow of response.

Overall, the findings show that the mother tongue significantly affects students’ English-speaking skills. While students display some ability to self-correct and attempt communication, their fluency, accuracy, confidence, expression, and response remain low. The dominant use of L1 slows thought processing, limits vocabulary and sentence complexity, and reduces spontaneity.

3.2 Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the mother tongue (L1) plays a dual role in shaping students’ English-speaking skills, acting as both a source of interference and a strategic scaffold. Unlike previous empirical studies that often view L1 purely as a barrier, these results provide a nuanced picture of how regional languages like Makassarese and the national language, Indonesian, interact with English acquisition in a rural junior high school setting.

Students’ fluency remained low because many processed their ideas in Makassarese or Indonesian before attempting to speak in English. This behavior confirms that fluency develops only when learners can retrieve language forms quickly and effortlessly (Ellis, 2008). In the context of SMPN 7 Mappakasunggu, this mental translation process creates a significant cognitive load, suggesting that fluency is not just a matter of practice but also of reducing the 'translation gap' between the L1 and the target language. This is consistent with findings that fluency improves through repeated, meaningful interaction and structured exposure to authentic input (Goh & Burns, 2012).

Accuracy was heavily influenced by students’ tendency to process ideas in their mother tongue, resulting in grammatical and lexical patterns that resembled Indonesian or Makassarese (Rahman et al., 2021). Syntactic interference, such as the omission of 'to be' or the use of L1 word orders, was

prevalent. This aligns with the view that accuracy is a gradual developmental process requiring constant exposure to correct linguistic models. To mitigate this, the implementation of structured methods like the audio-lingual approach can be utilized to reinforce grammatical patterns while acknowledging the student's linguistic starting point (Skehan, 1996).

Confidence emerged as a critical factor; many students avoided participation due to a fear of social judgment. This aligns with the concept of foreign language anxiety, where high anxiety levels restrict language output (Horwitz et al., 1986). However, in this study, the mother tongue served as an 'affective anchor,' allowing students to express themselves when they felt stuck, thereby lowering their anxiety. This supports the idea that positive student perceptions of classroom activities, such as presentation tasks, can significantly bolster their willingness to speak (Musri et al., 2022; Sakkir et al., 2022).

Students' utterances were often fragmented because they needed time to organize thoughts in their L1 before producing English. Clear expression requires logical organization and cohesive devices, which students develop through guided practice (Richards, 2008). Furthermore, the use of interactive speaking activities and digital tools, like Duolingo or presentation-based learning, can promote real-time communication and increase engagement levels (Harmer & Cates, 2007). These findings suggest that 'expression' is the bridge between mental conceptualization and oral production; when built using L1, the output is functionally communicative despite structural deviations.

Overall, the findings emphasize that the mother tongue should not be viewed solely as an obstacle. From a translanguaging perspective, the use of Indonesian and Makassarese represents a natural and strategic resource in constructing meaning (García & Wei, 2014). This study demonstrates that for early-stage EFL learners, the mother tongue is a cognitive necessity that helps organize ideas and maintain participation. Therefore, rather than an absolute English-only policy, teachers should adopt a strategic 'L1 management' approach. By providing structured opportunities for interaction and gradually increasing English exposure, teachers can help students transition toward more fluent, accurate, and confident speaking performance (Haidir et al., 2025).

4. Conclusion

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the students' speaking ability at SMPN 7 Mappakasunggu is significantly influenced by the use of their mother tongue, either Makassarese or Indonesian. This influence is evident in several aspects of speaking, including fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, and responsiveness, as many students process ideas in their first language before producing English utterances. While this process may result in pauses, hesitations, grammatical inaccuracies, limited vocabulary, and non-target-like sentence patterns, it also reflects students' natural cognitive strategies in constructing meaning. Interview data indicate that students rely on their mother tongue to organize ideas, reduce anxiety, and gain confidence when speaking English. From a translanguaging perspective, the mother tongue functions as a supportive linguistic resource in the early stages of language development. Therefore, rather than completely eliminating mother tongue use, it is important to manage it strategically by providing rich English exposure, supportive feedback, and meaningful speaking opportunities. Through this approach, students can gradually reduce excessive dependence on L1 while developing more fluent, accurate, and confident English-speaking skills.

Despite these insights, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the small sample size of six students and the focus on a single school context limit the transferability of the findings to broader EFL environments. Second, the study primarily relies on qualitative observations and interviews, which provide depth but lack the longitudinal data needed to track long-term language development. Future research should consider involving a larger and more diverse group of participants across different geographical areas in Indonesia to validate these patterns. Additionally, further studies could explore the effectiveness of specific translanguaging teaching models to determine the optimal balance between mother tongue support and English-only immersion in the classroom.

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