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Feedback, Individual Differences And EFL Learners Productive Skill: An Analysis On High And Low-Achieving Students

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Abstrac: This study investigates how feedback is responded by learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) having distinctive individual differences, and how these two relate to their achievement in their Speaking ability as productive skill. A group of English Department students at Hasanuddin University comprising high achievers and low achievers is observed in an attempt to collect as much information as possible to get clearer picture of the role of feedback as the second source of input after the teaching materials presented earlier in class. Using descriptive qualitative method in analyzing the data, the study reveals that teachers' feedback as source of input plays important roles in helping learners gain better performance in speaking skills. However, in some cases, negative effect of feedback is suffered by certain students which lead to the conclusion that individual differences and teachers' feedback are detrimental in the achievement of EFL learners speaking performance.

Keywords: *feedback; input; individual differences; learners' achievement; productive skill*

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INTRODUCTION

A large amount of research on second language learning and related theories has given rise to the importance of input which can both come from the exposure to the second language and from the corrective feedback through interactions with other learners or teachers in classroom. This means that the language which the learner is exposed to (e.g. in the texts he or she is provided with for reading or listening) is a fundamental component of the learning process, as it contains and provides all the necessary evidence from which learners can form linguistic hypotheses (Van & Williams, 2007). In this respect, language instruction has traditionally been directed at developing rule-based competence (i.e. knowledge of specific grammatical rules) through the systematic teaching of pre-selected structures (Ellis, 2011)

The most influential propagator of the crucial role of input in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and considered as the father of several other SLA hypotheses was (Krashen, 1998)(Krashen, 1981)(Krashen, 1985). The fundamental concern that (Krashen, 1985) claims is that Input Hypothesis is the provision and availability of input that is just one level beyond the current state of the learners' second language

competence. (Krashen, 1985) formulates this issue as $i+1$ in which (i) is the current L2 knowledge or competence of the learners and (1) is the level of difficulty of the input. It is widely then accepted that $i+1$ is the only necessary condition for language learning provided the input is of interest and is relevant to the learner and is consciously paid attention to by the learner.

The objective of the present study is to answer three formulated questions, i.e., (1) how do individual differences play role in helping learners with their speaking ability as productive skill? (2) how is the feedback perceived, responded and interpreted by EFL learners? and (3) how do these three aspects relate to each other in terms of assisting learners achieve better performance in their productive skill?

In regard with these questions, this paper tries, firstly, to find out the distinctive individual differences of the learners. This is meant to initially elicit the nature of the learners in coping with the classroom tasks and activities. Secondly, the perception of the EFL learners about the teachers' feedback experienced during their study at English Department is scrutinized and lastly to reveal how these two aspects relate to each other in helping the learners perform better in their speaking ability as productive skill. The first

part of this paper provides information about the role of input (gained through feedback) in the process of second language learning and acquisition and this will form the theoretical framework for the empirical study described later.

METHODS

This research employs descriptive qualitative study involving a group of English language learners who were taking Speaking 2 class at the time this research was conducted. The class consisted of 19 students who were, for the purpose of this research, classified into 3 categories; successful, average and unsuccessful, depending on their final test result in Speaking. This classification can be seen in the following table

Table 1. Classification of students' achievement

Categories	Band score	Number of students
Successful (High Achievers) - HA	4-6	9
Average	3	6
Unsuccessful (Low Achievers) - LA	1-2	4

Context and participants

As part of a larger study about The Role of Individual Differences in learners' achievement in a Partial Immersion Program (PIP), this study examined the interconnection between teachers' feedback as source of input, learners' individual differences and the high and low

achievement of students in their Speaking 2 class. The study reported in this article focuses on 9 successful and 4 unsuccessful learners as presented in the above table. The other 6 Average students are not taken to avoid unreliable data. These participants are in semester 3 having undertaken Speaking 1 as prerequisite in the preceding semester. The researcher who taught this particular class herself has made use of her time to observe the class along with her research plan. The achievement of the students at the end of the semester was measured using Cambridge Speaking Performance Assessment Level B1 whose rubric is displayed in the following Figure:

B1	Grammar and Vocabulary	Discourse Management	Pronunciation	Interactive Communication
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shows a good degree of control of simple grammatical forms, and attempts some complex grammatical forms. Uses a range of appropriate vocabulary to give and exchange views on familiar topics. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Produces extended stretches of language despite some hesitation. Contributions are relevant despite some repetition. Uses a range of cohesive devices. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is intelligible. Intonation is generally appropriate. Sentence and word stress is generally accurately placed. Individual sounds are generally articulated clearly. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initiates and responds appropriately. Maintains and develops the interaction and negotiates towards an outcome with very little support.
4	<i>Performance shares features of Bands 3 and 5.</i>			
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shows a good degree of control of simple grammatical forms. Uses a range of appropriate vocabulary when talking about familiar topics. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Produces responses which are extended beyond short phrases, despite hesitation. Contributions are mostly relevant, but there may be some repetition. Uses basic cohesive devices. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is mostly intelligible, and has some control of phonological features at both utterance and word levels. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initiates and responds appropriately. Keeps the interaction going with very little prompting and support.
2	<i>Performance shares features of Bands 1 and 3.</i>			
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shows sufficient control of simple grammatical forms. Uses a limited range of appropriate vocabulary to talk about familiar topics. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Produces responses which are characterised by short phrases and frequent hesitation. Repeats information or digresses from the topic. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is mostly intelligible, despite limited control of phonological features. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintains simple exchanges, despite some difficulty. Requires prompting and support.
0	<i>Performance below Band 1.</i>			

Figure 1. Cambridge Speaking Performance Assessment, Level B1 (<https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/images/168618-assessing-speaking-performance-at-level-b1.pdf>)

This study was conducted in a formal classroom setting of a 16-week compulsory English Speaking 2 class that met one hour and 40 minutes a week. During the course, the students were assigned to take notes and record every feedback they received from the teacher and their peers whenever interaction is taking place. Four times video recording was done to capture the nature of the students' responses when feedback was given. These recording were fully transcribed and were taken as the basis for further data collection through Stimulated Recall done after the completion of the program.

Data collection

Data for this study were gathered from week one through to week 14 in which feedback was given in various ways including recasts, clarification request, repetition, elicitations, metalinguistic clues, and explicit correction. (Milla & Mayo, 2013) The use of video recording was a great help since all the interactions were caught including the face and body language expressed by the students. Data for the students' achievement in speaking performance were taken after the administration of the final test, followed by semi-structured interview (see app. for the interview guide) and stimulated recall. Both semi-structured interview and stimulated recall were meant to collect information about the way students respond to the feedback given during classroom tasks, elicit the way they feel and take the feedback personally and draw lines between these aspects with the

students' achievement. Stimulated recall is especially employed to reveal every single aspect of the students' individual differences; motivation, learning strategies, attitude, etc., demonstrated implicitly during the capture of the video recording.

Data analysis

In order to appropriately answer the posed research questions, the data gathered through the triangulation of video-recordings, interviews and stimulated recalls were fully transcribed. A pure qualitative data analysis was employed according to (Miles & Huberman, 1994) data analysis scheme. The analysis was done through both inductive and deductive, and "it was an iterative and recursive process through 'constantly comparing one piece of data to another' (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

To investigate the interconnection between the three aspects, feedback, individual differences and the learners' achievement in speaking skills, the researcher particularly looked at the interview data in which learners' perception and their feelings toward the feedback they received are closely scrutinized in an attempt to draw conclusive and thorough analysis. Video data, triangulated with the stimulated recalls, were mainly analyzed to examine the reflection of the learners' engagement during the classroom tasks. This analysis is done repeatedly to be able to reach a general category about the students' actual

responses and feelings toward the feedback given.

At the final stage, all the data gathered including the speaking band scores of the learners were narrated following the data analysis procedure proposed by (Ferris et al., 2013). This enables the researcher to do in depth interpretation of the multiple sources of data.

RESULTS

In order to intertwine the nature of this study, brief information about the individual differences among adult EFL learners under study is presented below. As has been mentioned, this paper focuses its coverage on the relations between feedback, individual differences and EFL learners' speaking ability as productive skill.

1) Individual differences among EFL learners under study

Individual differences can be defined as those features or factors in learners which influence differential success in language learning, or which can be identified as accounting for such differences (Wenden, 1991). In the field of second language learning, these differences have received major attention in an attempt to investigate the contribution of these matters to the process of second language acquisition. (Ehrman et al., 2003) underline three major areas under which individual differences are usually reflected. These are: "learning style, learning strategies, and

affective variables". There are more areas of individual differences that relate to second language acquisition such as learning aptitude, gender, culture, age, and other demographic variables. In relation to the topic discussed in this paper, all these major aspects put forward by (Ehrman et al., 2003) are linked to the main core of the study, looking closely at how feedback and other input availability in language learning interplay with these individual differences and how these direct the EFL learners to be successful and unsuccessful.

2) *Learning style*

The term "learning style" was first used by Thelen discussing group dynamics in learning (Ehrman et al., 2003). It is frequently used interchangeably with 'cognitive style' which is seen as a subset of the more comprehensive 'learning style. It includes: "Cognitive, affective and physiological behaviours that indicate learners' characteristics and consistent way of perceiving, interacting with and responding to the learning environment; more concrete than cognitive style" (Wenden, 1991).

Referring to these notions, this study reveals that most students share similar learning styles even though there are slight differences found in more efficient learners whose preference in learning is 'group learning' instead of doing 'individual tasks'.

Excerpt 1: "I enjoy working in group because I can learn from others. It's fun when we do the work together. We can laugh, we can express things freely" (Std2/HA)

Excerpt 2: "Working in group is better because I can discuss the topic with my friends. Sometimes there are some difficult words. Our friends can help" (Std3/HA)

Excerpt 3: "I just like being in group. I like listening to my friends' ideas. (Std6/HA)

Excerpt 4: "Working in group is easier because we are given space to elaborate the tasks. We do not have to think alone." (Std19/LA)

Excerpt 5: "I prefer working in group because if I run out of ideas, my friends can help." (Std16/LA)

These 5 out of 13 excerpts are taken as representatives. The rest shares similar ideas except for some of the high achieving students who say that group work and individual work are both enjoyable. The above excerpts are answers to the interview question of "In all the subjects you study, which classroom arrangement do you prefer? Group work? Or Individual work?" It is clear that the preferred learning style the students have is mostly collaborative work and this reveals that they are sociable but they mostly rely on each other very much. Both high and low achieving students seem to be more confident when they are given time to complete their tasks in group. The learner's personality variables as (Ehrman &

Oxford, 1995) stated are clearly shown here. These learning style may determine ability, predict performance, and improve classroom teaching and learning (Reiff, 1992)(Ehrman & Oxford, 2001) (Ehrman & Oxford, 1995).

3) *Learning Strategies*

From the data analysis done on the strategies used when learning is in progress, it is found that high achieving students employ more learning strategies compared to the other group. They even employ metacognitive learning strategy which help them prepare for the lesson and monitor their progress. The excerpts below are answers to the interview question: “In order to understand and complete the tasks in the classroom, what strategies did you use?”

Excerpt 6: “I usually listen carefully to what the teachers instruct us to do. If I miss the information I ask my friends.” (Std 6/HA)

When the researcher continued with the question; “Why asking your friends when your teacher is around?” He replied,

Excerpt 7: “I only ask my teacher if I can not get the information from my friends. I do not want negative response” (Std 6/HA)

The above high-achieving student has good self-reliance which helps him completing his tasks at ease. His attentive attitude brings better engagement in classroom tasks. However, his trust to his friends is greater than that to his teacher because he does not have any burden of having to be rejected. He seems to have bad

impression on his teacher whom to his understanding is responding negatively to any of his queries.

More learning strategies are found to be employed by HA students. All the nine students are very strategic in their learning process. When they encounter problems in understanding new words, for example, they mostly use guessing from context and consult their smartphone for definition. Some of these HA students would find their own way of practicing their language. They claim that time to practice in class is too limited so they have to practice outside the classroom. These students seem to fulfil the three conditions to be called strategic learners as proposed by Ehrman (2003:315): (1) the strategy relates well to the L2 task at hand, (2) the strategy fits the particular students’ learning style preferences to one degree or another, and (3) the learner employs the effective strategy and develop a bridge to relate it with other relevant strategies. It is emphasized that when learners fulfil these conditions, the learning becomes more enjoyable, easier, faster, more effective and easily transferred to new situation. (Oxford, 1990) This will also enable more independent, autonomous, lifelong learning (Allwright, 1990; Little, 1991) cited in Ehrman et al. (2003:315).

Low-achieving students on the other hand are not as strategic as the high achievers. They admit that they entered English department

just to be prestigiously known as Hasanuddin University students (Hasanuddin university is the biggest state university in Eastern Indonesia). Three out of four low achievers considered themselves as being “trapped” in this situation and do not have enough courage to change and accept this condition. However, they are all trying their best to adjust and expect that they will be able to keep pace with their peers whose productive skill in English has far been advanced.

Even though “learning styles and learning strategies are often seen as interrelated in which styles are made manifest by learning strategies (overt learning behaviors/action)” (Ehrman et al., 2003:315), there is a discrepancy found in this particular study. As described above, both high and low-achieving students share similar learning style, (translated here as learning preference) especially when classroom arrangement is concerned. They both prefer working in group instead of working individually. This gives rise to a new pattern which reveals that learning style does not always go in line with the learning strategies the students employ in a given situation.

4) *Affective Factors*

The other aspect of individual differences elaborated in this study is the learners’ affective factors. These factors inhibited by students under study are identified through

several segments during the interview and video recordings. Three components of affective factors which were originally claimed by (Gardner & Lambert, 1959) were revealed; these are motivation, self- efficacy, and anxiety. These three components were sought among the learners under study and the result is reported below:

5) *Motivation*

The first interview question related to affective factors possessed by the learners is a question about their motivation. “What makes you interested in learning English?” was responded differently by most HA students and the LA ones. The HA students confessed that English is their favourite subject since they studied it at Primary school. They enjoy learning the language through songs and enriched their vocabulary by reading any texts they found written in English. Some of the statements about this can be seen in the following segment:

Excerpt 8: “I always enjoy studying English no matter how challenging it is. I used to look for my English teacher if he happened to be late to class. (smiling...)” (Std 3/HA)

Excerpt 9: “I would like to win a scholarship to study abroad. I believe that with good English I will make my dream comes true. That’s why I keep studying especially fixing my grammar” (Std 6/HA)

In the original version of Socio-educational Model of Language Learning, proposed by

(Gardner & Lambert, 1959) and various other colleagues, motivation is grouped into two categories; “integrative motivation” and “instrumental motivation”. Integrative motivation refers to positive attitude toward the foreign culture and a desire to participate as a member of the target culture. Instrumental motivation is possessed by those whose goal of acquiring language is to use it for a specific purpose, such as career advancement or entry to postsecondary education. It is widely accepted through empirical studies that students with integrative motivation are more successful language learners than those who are instrumentally motivated (Ehrman et al., 2003).

In addition, based on social psychology, early studies such as (Gardner & Lambert, 1972) treated second language learners’ motivation as a “relatively static trait”. It is suggested that learners who wanted to integrate into the target culture were more motivated and more proficient than those who were instrumentally motivated for reasons of academic or career advancement.

The ideas put forward in the preceding two paragraphs seem to be denied by what the 2 HA students proposed above. Both instrumental and integrative motivations play equal roles in attaining the learning objectives of the students. In addition, both excerpts 8 & 9 show that strong motivation encourages students to seek opportunities for better performance.

LA students conversely demonstrated low motivation in engaging with classroom tasks. Based on the capture of the video recording, all the four students did not make any move when the teacher instructed them to form a group. They moved only when the teacher approached them to find a group to be part of. This happened sequentially every time the class was recorded. When interviewed during the stimulated recall discussion, the four students gave almost similar responses. They were reluctant to participate in the group discussion because they feel inferior. It is clear that this feeling of inferiority interplays closely with their motivation to study.

6) *Self-Efficacy*

Although the significance of studying motivation from the perspective of socio-psychological domain in language learning is well established, other factors affecting the achievement of the EFL learning goals still remain as major issues among the observers. Self- efficacy is among others found to be very influential in the way EFL learners under study perform in Speaking tasks assigned to them. As Bandura (Schunk, 2003) postulated, “Self- efficacy affects an individual’s choice of activities, effort, and persistence”, both HA and LA students seem to be examples that confirmed this claim. The learners with low sense of efficacy for accomplishing a task always tried to avoid it. This can be seen from the fact that LA students did not make any move when

grouping arrangement was made by the teachers in some of the speaking activities conducted in class. However, different self-efficacy, which was later defined by (Bandura & Cervone, 1986) as “students’ personal beliefs about their capabilities to learn or perform behaviors at designated levels”, was well demonstrated by the HA students. The following segment taken from a speaking task [“Work in group of three and decide who will stay in the boat (during a heavy sea storm) as the most important person in the world”]

Excerpt 10: “Let me be the leader of our group....” (Std5/HA)

Excerpt 11: “Oh I know what roles are the most important.” (talking loudly, nearly yelling of excitement..) (Std2/HA)

In other occasion, when accomplishing a speaking task of performing “Talk show about ‘The Amazing role of internet in students’ life’”, one of the HA students voluntarily took the role as the Host. A role that can only be taken by an individual with very high self confidence. What (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003) stated that students with strong self-efficacy will always reflect on such question as: “Can I do this task in this situation?” is well demonstrated by this particular HA student. Beside having strong self-efficacy, this student had set goals in mind to be attained before carrying out learning activities. The substance of self-efficacy frameworks proposed by (Schunk, 2003)(Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003)

emphasizing the interrelated function of self-efficacy, goal, learning, and achievement is represented in this segment. This indicates the significant contribution of self-efficacy in language learning.

7) *Language anxiety*

It is surprising that two out of nine HA students under study still suffer from high anxiety in carrying out speaking activities in class. When given time to explain this situation during the stimulated recall discussion, the two students admit that they are always anxious at any initial stage of classroom tasks assigned to them. Once the situation can be controlled, the flow of excitement in doing the task will follow. In their further response, they emphasized that they had both experienced unpleasant treatments from their teachers at secondary school who were very hard to be pleased during the classroom contact. They were always anxious afterwards even if they are confident about their capability to accomplish the tasks. The other HA learners on the other hand have shown great confidence and thus do not inhibit any anxiety during the study.

Surprisingly still, the LA students did not show any anxiety during the classroom engagement. Their flat facial expression indicated their lack of interest in accomplishing the speaking task. When asked why they did not seem to be interested in the lesson delivered by the teacher, these four LA

students reluctantly responded that they are unable to perform better like their other peers. They are very afraid of making mistakes which might result in being bullied by others. This condition can be interpreted as 'covered anxiety' as a result of high apprehension. They obviously inhibited nervousness but they succeeded to hide it for certain reasons. These and the fact that they lack of motivation in studying might also due to the absence of punishment for those who did not actively take part in the classroom activities.

It is clear from the description of the notions of individual differences above that the three main components; learning styles, learning strategies and the affective factors comprising motivation, self-efficacy and learners' anxiety play similarly important roles in improving the students speaking skill. However, how these aspects are interrelated to each other in affecting learners interpret the feedback given during the accomplishment of their task needs to be explored in an attempt to provide expected outcome of this study. The next part of this paper will present the interplay of these three paradigms.

Feedback, Individual differences and EFL learners' achievement in Speaking skill

As has been introduced at the beginning, this paper takes into account how feedback, learners' individual differences, and their speaking performance interplay during a full semester study of HA and LA learners. The first

part of this subset deals with this effect on high-achieving students and later on the low-achieving ones.

8) Learners' belief in Teachers' feedback

From the questionnaire and the interview, it is revealed that high-achieving students enjoy having feedback from their teachers as they are very eager to find out the result of their learning process in classroom. Most of them feel the benefit of being corrected and being close to their teachers. Their self-confidence as being smart students with high scores in their productive skills increases their motivation to do even better. Feeling of comfort in communicating with their teachers is a crucial aspect to allow learning to take place. Some instances of the students' response to the interview when asked "How good is your relation to your English teachers?" can be seen in the following segment;

Excerpt 12: "From Elementary to high school, I was very close to my teacher because they were very friendly to talk with us (students) especially when we have problems in our lesson.

However, it is different from that at the university. Maybe because the teachers want to be highly honored by their students...." (Std5-HA)

Excerpt 13: "Yes. I am very close to my teachers since Elementary school to university. This is because the intensity of consultation regarding lessons with these teachers. Moreover, the

teachers are very kind and friendly. This makes it comfortable to interact with them.” (Std8-HA)

The above excerpts show the primary importance of the role of teachers in assisting the learners to obtain highly distinctive result in their study. Kind attention, care and positive corrective feedback provided for them become very resourceful and beneficial. An example of how feedback affects the learners’ individual differences can be seen in the segment below.

When asked whether corrective feedback affects their personality, the high-achieving learners all confirm that:

Excerpt 14: “When feedback is given, the feeling of excitement is always flowing, giving more space for self-confidence to develop even better.” (St8-HA)

Excerpt 15: “I become more confident because I mostly make very little mistakes. My teachers always put big smile on my paper. I like it.” (smiling) (St5-HA)

When the same question is posed to the low-achieving students, different responses are received.

Excerpt 16: “My teachers never appreciate my work. I make a lot of mistakes in my writing and my pronunciation is corrected all the time. This has happened since elementary school. I don’t like this subject even though I like looking at people speaking in English.” (St15-LA)

Excerpt 17: “Once, my teacher yelled at me in class because I couldn’t answer her questions properly. Since then, I always left the English class. I don’t want to experience the same trouble anymore. It is too embarrassing.” (St19-LA)

The main point which is highlighted in the above segment is the importance of teachers’ understanding toward the nature of their role. They are supposed to provide conducive and supporting environment in teaching language skills which has to be free from stressful condition (Krashen, 1981).

The effect of feedback and the available input surrounding the EFL learners are clearly shown during the classroom interaction. The high-achieving learners are much more active and seem to enjoy the learning process while the low-achieving ones are mostly quiet and busy talking in their first language with their peers. Less attention is paid by these learners to the teachers’ instruction.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Having analyzed all the data gathered, the researcher comes up with compelling findings reflecting the interconnection of the scrutinized aspects; the effect of the teachers’ feedback on the EFL learners’ individual differences under study and their speaking performance as productive skill. The result indicates the strong influence of the teachers’ feedback, on the EFL learners’ personality, self-confidence, motivation, learning

strategies and respectively, “attitude”. Both high and low- achieving students confirm that teachers’ teaching approach and the nature of their feedback are vital in shaping the students’ individual differences. Learning experience from the learners’ childhood brings positive and negative attitude toward English which is hard to change. While the high- achieving learners enjoy receiving feedback from the teachers due to their keenness and self-confidence, the low-achieving students do not pay enough attention. For these weaker students, feedback and input available to them to acquire sometimes become a heavy burden which they try to avoid.

To improve the quality of the English teaching and learning practice in South Sulawesi Province and to change the attitude and perception of the weaker students in learning English, this study put forward two important issues to be implemented. Firstly, it is recommended that Teacher Professional Development to be extensively carried out in the region to equip them with sufficient pragmatic knowledge of teaching practice focusing on the essence of “Academic care’ and better interactions in terms of feedback provision. Secondly, students need to be exposed more to natural language acquisition both inside and outside the classroom to develop more confidence and self-esteem which may lead them to be more comfortable in any classroom situation and treatment.

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