

Enhancing Understanding Through Conversation in English Language Learning Among University Students

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ABSTRACT

The ability to comprehend English functionally remains a challenge for many university students in Indonesia. Although students often acquire theoretical knowledge such as grammar and vocabulary, they frequently struggle with understanding real-life conversational contexts. This study aims to examine how the conversation approach helps build students' comprehension in English language learning. Using a qualitative method with a case study approach, data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation from final-year students at a university. The findings reveal that active engagement in conversation activities significantly improves students' contextual understanding, self-confidence, and critical thinking skills. These results are supported by key learning theories such as Communicative Language Teaching (Savignon), Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen), Socio-Cultural Theory (Vygotsky), and Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb). Moreover, conversation fosters a more humanistic, participatory, and contextually relevant learning environment. Therefore, integrating conversation methods into English instruction in higher education is highly recommended as a strategy to enhance deep and applicable language comprehension.

Keywords: Conversation, Understanding, Learning, Students

INTRODUCTION

English proficiency is essential for university students in the global era, especially to support academic activities and career preparation. Unfortunately, students in Indonesia still demonstrate low proficiency, particularly in speaking and understanding conversations. According to the 2024 EF English Proficiency Index, Indonesia ranks 79th out of 113 countries. Most students are more familiar with grammar and written vocabulary but struggle with spoken practice. This reflects a gap between theoretical knowledge and practical language use. One approach considered effective in bridging this gap is the use of conversation-based learning (Devi, 2025).

The main issue is students' limited understanding of how to use English in real-life contexts. Many still fail to grasp the full meaning of conversations, even after attending formal classes. A lack of speaking practice often leads to low confidence when communicating spontaneously. Learning processes that focus heavily on memorization and written tests are a major cause. In fact, conversation requires the ability to understand context, expression, and intonation. Therefore, it is important to explore how conversation can be optimized in English language learning.

The identified problem lies in students' weak functional understanding of English in practice. They often struggle to express ideas in real conversations, despite having theoretical knowledge. Conversation demands quick responses, contextual comprehension, and cultural sensitivity. When applied consistently, this method can help students develop more natural language understanding. However, many universities have yet to adopt conversation as a core teaching strategy. This research aims to assess how conversation contributes to building students' language comprehension.

Conversation serves as an interactive and meaningful learning tool. Students learn to choose appropriate words, construct sentences, and adjust their speaking style according to the situation. This aligns with constructivist learning theory, which emphasizes the importance of direct experience. Through conversation, students also learn from mistakes more easily. This process helps build deeper understanding rather than mere memorization. Thus, it is essential to examine how conversation is implemented and its impact on students.

This study is relevant due to increasing demands for graduates who can communicate actively in English. Unfortunately, not all study programs consistently integrate conversation methods. This approach is more affordable, easier to apply, and encourages participatory learning. If proven effective, conversation can become a primary strategy in English teaching at universities. This research is also expected to contribute to curriculum development. As a result, teaching methods can become more aligned with current demands.

In addition to enhancing understanding, conversation helps students build confidence in speaking. Many understand the theory but are hesitant to speak for fear of making mistakes. Conversation creates a relaxed, interactive, and low-pressure learning environment. This allows students to express themselves and gradually improve their comprehension. The findings of this study can also serve as a reference for lecturers in designing adaptive teaching strategies. Therefore, the urgency of this research lies not only in its academic value but also in its role in developing students' communicative character.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach using a case study method to explore how conversation contributes to building English language comprehension among university students. The research focuses on non-English major students at a university in Indonesia who have experienced English learning that integrates conversation-based methods. Participants were selected purposively based on their involvement in classes that implement conversation practices (Sumatera & Medan, 2021).

Data were collected through classroom observations, in-depth interviews with students and lecturers, and documentation of teaching materials such as syllabi and assignments. The data collection process was conducted over two months during regular English classes. Data were analyzed using descriptive qualitative techniques, including data reduction, categorization, and interpretation based on communicative language learning theories.

To ensure data validity, triangulation of sources and methods was applied, comparing results from observations, interviews, and documents. Member checking was also conducted to confirm the accuracy of the findings. This research was carried out in a university setting, focusing on the implementation and impact of conversation in English language learning.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The main issue identified in English language learning among university students is their difficulty in understanding conversational meaning in real-life contexts. Students tend to master grammar theoretically but lack the ability to use the language functionally. This results in poor comprehension and responsiveness during everyday communication. Observations show that students who are more engaged in conversation activities have better comprehension of communication contexts. They also demonstrate improved active vocabulary and fluency in speaking. Thus, conversation has proven effective in bridging the gap between language theory and practice. It offers students space to learn through direct experience. This is the key to developing deeper understanding.

Conversation provides interactive learning experiences, allowing students to use the language directly in social contexts. This aligns with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) theory proposed by Savignon (Bataona & Lake, 2021), which emphasizes real interaction as essential to language mastery. According to CLT, language proficiency is not only measured by structural knowledge but also by the ability to use language in communicative situations. In this study, students who attended conversation-based classes were better at interpreting intended meanings, even when using imperfect structures. This shows that conversation enables students to grasp meaning contextually rather than merely grammatically. As a result, language learning becomes more meaningful and applicable. Therefore, conversation-based strategies are highly relevant in higher education.

Interview results also indicate that students feel more confident when engaged in conversation-based learning. They find the method more enjoyable and less intimidating than conventional approaches focused on grammar and written tests. This is supported by Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (Zamzam & Putri, 2024), which states that a low-anxiety learning environment lowers emotional barriers and enhances language acquisition. In such a setting, students can absorb language input more effectively. Thus, conversation benefits learners not only cognitively but also affectively. Relaxed classroom conversations create a supportive atmosphere for language development. This contributes to greater comprehension and students' willingness to speak English.

Documentation further reveals that classes incorporating conversation in their lesson plans tend to be more flexible and responsive to student needs. Lecturers do not rely solely on textbooks but also adapt content based on current situations and student interests. This supports Vygotsky's (Bima, 2024) socio-cultural theory, which views social interaction as the foundation of cognitive and language development. In this context, students learn through peer and teacher interaction, making learning less one-directional. Through conversation, they build meaning collaboratively. Therefore,

conversation reflects a dynamic and interactive learning process. It fosters greater student engagement and participation.

One of the key findings is that students actively engaged in conversation better understand the relationship between language form and meaning. They learn when and how to use certain expressions appropriately. This aligns with Michael Halliday's (Harahap, 2019) Systemic Functional Linguistics, which posits that language serves specific social functions. In this context, conversation helps students understand the pragmatic function of English, not just its structure. They learn that word choice, intonation, and expression depend on context. Thus, this method effectively builds comprehensive language understanding – not only linguistically, but also functionally and socially.

Active student participation in conversation also promotes critical and reflective thinking skills. During conversations, students are required to listen, interpret, respond, and adapt quickly. This supports Kolb's (Dian Fadhilawati, 2015) Experiential Learning Theory, which emphasizes that learning is a process derived from direct experience. Through conversation, students learn by doing and reflecting. This enables them to understand language as it is used in real life, not just theoretically. Students not only learn to speak but also to think while speaking. This strengthens their ability to navigate various communicative situations.

However, implementing conversation-based methods also presents challenges. Some lecturers report difficulties in managing time and assessing learning outcomes objectively, as conversation is context-dependent and subjective. In addition, shy or less confident students tend to be passive without proper support. Therefore, specific training is needed for lecturers to apply this method effectively. According to Biggs' (Anum, 2018) Constructive Alignment theory, effective learning occurs when objectives, activities, and assessments are aligned. In this regard, conversation activities must be designed with clear goals and appropriate evaluation systems. With proper planning, conversation can become a fair and measurable method.

Overall, using conversation in English language learning has proven effective in enhancing students' comprehension, both linguistically and socially. Students become more active, confident, and sensitive to communication contexts (Nursyahida et al., 2024). The method also supports the development of communicative character, which is crucial in both academic and professional environments. These findings align with the demands of 21st-century education, which emphasize critical thinking, collaboration, and communication. Therefore, conversation is worth adopting more widely in university curricula. Lecturers, as facilitators, need to be more creative in designing conversation-based activities. This will create a more engaging and meaningful learning environment.

Based on the findings and theories discussed, it can be concluded that conversation is not just a speaking exercise but a comprehensive learning strategy (Sabrina et al., 2024). It strengthens the learning process through social interaction, direct experience, and reflection. With support from the theories of Savignon, Krashen, Vygotsky, Halliday, and Kolb, conversation proves to have a strong theoretical foundation in language education. Thus, integrating conversation into English language learning at universities should be further encouraged. This research provides

empirical evidence of its positive impact on students' comprehension. Further development can focus on curriculum support and lecturer training. As a result, English learning will become more contextual, communicative, and aligned with real-world needs.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that conversation plays a significant role in enhancing students' comprehension of English, especially in real-life communication contexts. Through active engagement in conversation-based learning, students demonstrate improved confidence, vocabulary usage, and contextual understanding. The findings show that conversation bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, which has long been a challenge in traditional English language instruction.

The effectiveness of conversation is supported by various learning theories, including Communicative Language Teaching (Savignon), the Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen), Socio-Cultural Theory (Vygotsky), Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday), and Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb). These theories emphasize the importance of interaction, real experience, and emotional readiness in language acquisition. Conversation allows students to construct meaning, reflect critically, and engage actively in the learning process, making it not just a method, but a comprehensive learning strategy.

Therefore, integrating conversation into English language teaching in higher education is both relevant and necessary. It supports the development of communicative competence, critical thinking, and student engagement—skills essential in academic and professional settings. Future implementation should include structured planning, lecturer training, and appropriate assessment methods to maximize its potential and ensure sustainable impact in language education.

SUGGESTIONS

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that universities begin integrating conversation methods more systematically into the English language curriculum, especially for non-English majors. Lecturers should receive training to design contextual, engaging, and relevant conversation activities tailored to students' needs. Additionally, assessment methods should not focus solely on written aspects but also include comprehension of meaning and oral communication skills. Institutions are also encouraged to provide adequate facilities and media that support students in practicing conversation actively and continuously, both inside and outside the classroom.

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