

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

English has been an international language since the 18th century, making English language skills necessary in preparing professionals who can compete in the tourism industry and other fields (Ratminingsih & Budasi, 2018). Being able to develop the four English language skills (i.e., speaking, reading, listening, and writing) is needed for successful English learning (Artini et al., 2020). Among the four skills, speaking is an essential aspect because it indicates the ability of learners to use English actively in real life. To become proficient in speaking, students must practice extensively and have a wide vocabulary (Kumar et al., 2022). Apart from vocabulary, teachers should teach other elements of speaking to students. The research identifies several essential elements that influence students' English-speaking skills.

According to Brown., (2004), there are five components of speaking skills, namely pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. Pronunciation is the process of producing the sound of a word using the correct articulation, emphasis, and intonation to guarantee that listeners comprehend the message correctly and there is no confusion. Grammar is a set of rules that control the positioning and connection of words in a phrase. Speaking skills is also heavily reliant on vocabulary. Students must have a broad vocabulary base since it allows them to express themselves more precisely and fluently (Kabinawa & Santosa, 2024; Zega, 2025). Fluency is the capacity to speak continuously without hesitating or stopping, while Comprehension refers to the ability to understand the context of

the discussion and respond appropriately based on the question (Hakim, 2023; Zega, 2025).

However, learning speaking skills at the elementary school level is frequently ineffective. Common problems in English speaking skills include lack of ideas, shyness, lack of confidence, fear of making mistakes, limited vocabulary and pronunciation, as well as the lack of learning media that accommodate students' needs and learning styles. These issues are often exacerbated by students' nervousness, anxiety level, and large class size (Heriansyah, 2012; Safitri & Misdi, 2021; Zhang, 2009; Syafrizal et al., 2020; Rahayu et al., 2022; Aditya et al., 2024). Addressing these challenges requires instructional strategies and techniques that are tailored to students' diverse ways of learning. This is particularly important, as previous studies have identified a strong relationship between students' learning preferences and their speaking skills (Rahayu et al., 2022). One widely used framework for understanding learning preferences is the VARK model proposed by Fleming, which categorizes learners into four types: Visual, Auditory, Read/Write, and Kinesthetic. A student's learning style is considered one of the essential factors influencing academic performance (Kirana & Mudhar, 2026), as a one-size-fits-all instructional approach often fails to accommodate learner diversity, especially in oral communication contexts (Westwood, 2018).

In addition to the challenges reported in previous studies, preliminary data collected from sixth-grade students at SD Negeri 1 Banyuasri indicate that students' speaking skills is still at a low level. An initial Speaking assessment administered prior to the implementation of this research revealed that only 3.4% of students were in the high category, 23.6% in the moderate category, and the majority, 73.0%,

were in the low category. These findings provide empirical evidence that the majority of students experience considerable difficulties in speaking English.

These classroom conditions help explain the low speaking performance reflected in the initial Speaking assessment results. A preliminary observation at SD Negeri 1 Banyuasri shows that English learning relies heavily on a single, uniform government-issued textbook, namely “My Next Words” for grade six. As highlighted by Pranyandari et al., (2024), this primary learning resource has a very limited ability to accommodate diverse VARK (Visual, Auditory, Read/Write, Kinesthetic) learning styles, making the existing materials monotonous and lacking in sensory variation. Furthermore, the instructional materials provided in the textbook predominantly focus on vocabulary memorization, spelling drills, and simple comprehension tasks where students only recall information or match words to pictures. In line with the findings of Fadila et al., (2025), such repetitive and memory-based materials restrict students’ opportunities to practice speaking naturally and spontaneously in real-life contexts, forcing them to rely on rigid textbook dialogues rather than engaging in authentic oral communication. Consequently, students’ speaking skills are not optimally supported, emphasizing an urgent empirical need for VARK-based differentiated English materials that cater to diverse learning styles while actively promoting meaningful oral interaction.

The implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) has emerged as a transformative pedagogical approach to addressing these diverse learner needs. The foundation of this inquiry begins with the developmental work of Putri et al. (2024), who specifically designed VARK-based differentiated materials for 6th-grade

students. These materials integrate local Balinese culture and are designed using the Canva application into an electronic book format. While their Research and Development (R&D) research confirmed the high validity and usability of these modules, it remained focused on the production stage without empirical testing in a live classroom setting. This creates a significant experimental gap that the current research intends to fill. To understand how such materials might perform, Galora and Salazar (2018) emphasized that successful productive skill development, such as speaking, must be grounded in an in-depth knowledge of students' needs and learning profiles. Their findings reinforce the rationale for using Putri et al.'s (2024) materials, as they are already tailored to the students' VARK profiles.

The procedural efficacy of DI in improving speaking performance is further supported by several Classroom Action Research (CAR) studies. Purnamaningwulan (2024) and Sada et al. (2024) both proved that tailored tasks significantly raise students' oral proficiency. Purnamaningwulan demonstrated a remarkable mean score increase from 54.6 to 76.4 through tiered tasks, while Sada et al. found that DI could effectively remove the psychological "stigma" and anxiety often associated with English speaking. These results are consistently echoed by Kurniawan et al. (2025), who showed that DI allows teachers to cater to diverse proficiency levels within a single classroom. However, because these studies were primarily conducted in vocational schools or universities, there is a distinct need to replicate this success at the primary school level, specifically within the context of the Merdeka Curriculum as explored by Wahdaniah et al. (2025), who highlighted that teachers find DI essential even in resource-limited areas.

Beyond general academic improvement, DI has been proven to have a specific impact on both linguistic precision and student confidence. Nurelviani and Prastyo (2024) revealed significant gains in fluency, pronunciation, and vocabulary, which directly supports the use of the "speak clarity" and "using English words" criteria in this research. Furthermore, the importance of aligning instruction with specific learning styles is highlighted by Aprianto and Sutarman (2025), whose analysis found that kinesthetic learners achieve significantly higher speaking scores when provided with high-intensity instruction. This validates the use of Putri et al.'s (2024) materials in the current research, as they are rich in kinesthetic and active learning activities. These linguistic gains are deeply intertwined with the affective domain, as Arianto et al. (2023) demonstrated that matching instruction with students' interests significantly builds the confidence required for students to engage in interactive tasks.

As a result, this research aims to implement English learning material as developed by Putri et al. (2024) for teaching speaking in sixth-grade elementary school students at SD Negeri 1 Banyuasri. This research specifically utilizes four units of the developed book, namely Unit 1: "I will go to Bromo", Unit 2: "I will go to Dufan", Unit 3: "I will study at Junior High School next year", and Unit 4: "I want to be a pilot". These units are used to evaluate the effect of the differentiated materials on the students' English speaking skills. The assessment instrument for the posttest was a speaking assessment rubric adapted from Brown's (2012), 1) Speaking Clearly is the combination of pronunciation & fluency, 2) Using English Words is the combination of vocabulary & grammar, and 3) Understanding and Answering is the combination of comprehension & task fulfillment. The selection

of these three components attempts to simplify the process of assessment while still reflecting the ability to speak as a whole, taking into consideration the developmental stage of elementary school children.

1.2 Identification of Problem

The preliminary interview with the sixth-grade English teachers at SDN 1 Banyuasri highlights various issues with the English teaching and learning process, such as, the preliminary interview with the sixth-grade English teacher at SDN 1 Banyuasri revealed several issues in the English teaching and learning process, particularly in relation to the development of students' speaking skills.

1. Heavy Reliance on Uniform and Limited Textbooks

The preliminary research showed that the learning process relies heavily on a single, uniform textbook provided by the government, namely "My Next Words" for grade six. However, this primary learning source does not adequately support diverse learning styles. This problem aligns with a study by Pradnyandari et al., (2024), which found that the "My Next Words" grade six textbook has a very limited ability to provide varied content based on VARK (Visual, Auditory, Read/Write, Kinesthetic) learning styles. The book only partially supports students' sensory preferences and the instruction provided is lack of clear instructions for teachers to implement differentiated learning. Consequently, the existing materials become monotonous, provide limited variation, and fail to bridge teachers and students to achieve the goal of the Merdeka Curriculum.

2. Students' Low English Speaking Skills and Memorization Learning Activities

The preliminary data indicated that the students' overall English speaking skills remain low. The initial speaking assessment conducted during the observation phase. The assessment revealed that only 3.4% of the students scored in the high category, 23.6% were in the moderate category, and the majority, 73.0% of the students, fell into the low category. This data shows that the classroom activities have provided insufficient emphasis and meaningful practice to help young learners develop their speaking skills within the learning process. Furthermore, speaking activities are mostly limited to assessment purposes, where students are required to memorize textbook dialogues rather than engaging in spontaneous communication. This issue is strongly supported by Fadila et al., (2025) in their evaluation of the *My Next Words* textbook under the Merdeka Curriculum. They highlighted that books from many classes predominantly focused on vocabulary memorization, spelling drills, and comprehension tasks where students merely had to recall materials or match words to pictures. Consequently, such repetitive and memory-based activities restrict students' opportunities to practice speaking naturally and spontaneously in real-life contexts.

3. No Initial Identification of Students' Learning Styles

The teacher does not conduct an initial assessment or diagnosis to identify students' learning styles and preferences. As a result, the learning process becomes homogeneous and does not consider students' individual

preferences or strengths, which may hinder the creation of an effective learning environment.

1.3. Problems Limitation

Based on the identification of problems, this research focuses on students' speaking skills, specifically the three criteria: 1) Speaking Clearly is the combination of pronunciation & fluency, 2) Using English Words is the combination of vocabulary & grammar, and 3) Understanding and Answering is the combination of comprehension & task fulfillment, adopted from speaking components by (Brown, 2004). Speaking was chosen as the research focus because previous interview indicated that students' speaking skills were the lowest among the four English skills and existing materials do not suitably support speaking development. Furthermore, this research does not look at other English skills like listening, reading, or writing. It also does not look at non-instructional factors such as students' motivation, attitudes, or teachers' qualifications.

The research is conducted with students in sixth grade at SD Negeri 1 Banyuasri during the academic year 2025/2026. The research is limited to four units of Putri et al., (2024) differentiated English learning materials: Unit 1: "I will go to Bromo", Unit 2: "I will go to Dufan", Unit 3: "I will study at Junior High School next year", and Unit 4: "I want to be a pilot".

1.4 Research Questions

Based on the limitations of the problem in this research, the question that the researcher wants to answer is:

1. Is there a significant difference in the speaking skills of sixth-grade students who are taught using differentiated English material compared to those taught using conventional materials, by controlling for their initial speaking skills?

1.5 Research Objectives

Following the research question, this research has an objective, which is:

1. To investigate the effect of differentiated English materials on the speaking skills of sixth-grade students in comparison to those taught using conventional learning materials, by controlling for their initial speaking skills.

1.6 Significance of Research

There are two significances of the research: theoretical significance and practical significance.

1.6.1 Theoretical Significance

This research is expected to give theoretical significance to several fields, namely Differentiated Instruction (DI), Speaking Skills, and Teaching English for Young Learners (TEYL)

1.6.1.1 Differentiated Instruction (DI)

This research adds to the theory of differentiated learning by providing actual evidence that instructional materials suited to students' learning styles increase learning results. This reinforces Tomlinson's (2001)

theoretical framework, which highlights the importance of differentiating learning materials, procedures, and products to fit the requirements of different students. The outcomes of this research reinforce the theoretical basis for implementing differentiated teaching materials in English language classrooms, particularly at the elementary school level.

1.6.1.2 Speaking Skills

This research reveals how significant customized teaching materials are in enhancing primary school students' speaking skills. The findings support the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, which emphasizes the importance of meaningful and student-centered activities in improving fluency and confidence in speaking.

1.6.1.3 Teaching English for Young Learners (TEYL)

This research hopefully gives a theoretical contribution to the field of Teaching English for Young Learners (TEYL) by demonstrating how the use of differentiated English learning materials can affect elementary school students' speaking skills. In the context of TEYL, the learning approach that considers the characteristics and the needs of children is essential.

1.6.2 Practical Significance

Apart from theoretical significance, this research is also expected to give practical significance to the teachers, the students, and the readers.

1.6.2.1 For the students

This research is beneficial to give more interactive and enjoyable learning experiences for students because the materials suit their learning

styles. The books that are used in this research allow students to access the material flexibly; thus, they could learn individually or in groups.

1.6.2.2 For the teachers

It is expected that this research can provide an innovative source in the English learning process, particularly when implementing differentiated learning in accordance with the Merdeka Curriculum. With the presence of material designed based on various students' learning styles, teachers can more easily adjust teaching materials and methods to the students' individual needs.

1.6.2.3 For the school

The results of this research can help the school adopt more inclusive and effective English instruction by encouraging the use of differentiated materials to accommodate students with different learning needs. The usage of materials adapted to students' learning styles is consistent with the Merdeka Curriculum and promotes the school's purpose of improving students' speaking skills.

1.6.2.4 Other Research

The results of this research may be useful for future researchers who want to investigate the effect of differentiated instruction in English language teaching. Research options include creating resources that accommodate learners' preferences and assessing their impact on other language skills besides speaking, such as reading, listening, and writing.