# Students' Perception of Online Model United Nations in Improving EFL Students' Speaking Ability

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https://doi.org/10.24071/ijels.v8i2.5117
received 27 July 2022; accepted 31 August 2022

**ABSTRACT**
Model United Nations (MUN) is a formal activity for youth to have a simulation of the United Nations assembling. This activity requires formal and academic language proficiency, predominantly in English. MUN is quite typical for debate competitions. Nevertheless, since the terms of the pandemic, there have been several setting changes to MUN's procedure. MUN has been chiefly held in a virtual environment. Furthermore, this research is established to explore students' perception of the new online setting of MUN for their speaking ability. This research is phenomenological descriptive qualitative where it explored participants' perspectives in online MUN events. The data was taken with purposive sampling to collect participants with several experiences in online MUN events. Moreover, interviews will be implemented as a data collection method. It reveals most students infer that MUN allows them to gain confidence and fluency development in speaking components. On the other hand, it also provides a positive impact on their academic performance.

**Keywords:** Online, Model United Nations, MUN, Speaking Skill, Students' Perception

## Introduction

In this digital era, communication predominantly deals with online platforms. Since the breakout of covid-19, the innovation of online learning has been developed, including English-speaking practice platforms. Furthermore, Butler (2017) emerges that nowadays public speaking learning content is effectively established through online media. One of the alternatives which are dealing with speaking skills is the online Model United Nations. The Model United Nations (MUN) Conference itself has been started in the old times. The first Model United Nations conference was established in the United States and it was started as Harvard International Assembly ("The Harvard Crimson", 1923). MUN is a formal activity where each participant represents a country in debating the global issue in the simulation of the UN. It is predominantly participated by the varsity students of international relation major. However, as it was widely known and developed, it has also reached the students at the secondary level, specifically high school students (Hazleton & Mahurin, 1986). Furthermore, it is reasonable that in the current era, MUN should not be an unfamiliar term or activity. Moreover, MUN is not only restricted to international relations students. Most MUNs are provided to all students from any major and level. Referring to Engel et al. (2017) MUN is considered a learning-by-doing technique. They also mention that it is also dealing with how students have a discussion and have critical solutions brainstorming. Therefore, MUN is also relevant in this demanding era where skilful human resources with good intelligence are highly prioritised.

MUN has its specific procedure, approximating other formal activities. One of its procedures is concerned with a language policy. Several MUNs are able to be conducted in a specific language, however, it is substantially held in English. Moreover, MUN deals with the academic field. Therefore, in terms of MUN, it is very critical to conquer good English skills. MUN procedure requires participants to have speeches, a leaderless group sort of discussion, and paper writing. These are not common designations in MUN, henceforth it will be further elaborated on in sub-section two. Furthermore, the requirements' procedure and documents stand in need of excellent speaking and writing skills. As for speaking skills, there are many aspects to be considered including grammar, rich academic vocabulary, pronunciation, and well-delivered speech.

### *English-Speaking Components for EFL Learners*

Nowadays, English speaking is indeed very necessary to learn not only for English major students. Having a good ability to speak English has been a requirement in various fields. For years, on many occasions, proficiency in English has been regarded as a representation of someone's English skill level. It is undeniable because, in foremost communication, we started the interaction through oral communication. Furthermore, speaking is a skill that can be efficiently enhanced through continuous practice. As is implied by Abu-Ghararah (1989), in case students have more engagement with speaking activity, they will also have a higher chance to advance their speaking skills. In terms of English speaking, there are several components should be considered in general, including pronunciation, vocabulary (specific and generic words), grammar use, fluency, content information, and appropriate responses to an interlocutor (Goh & Burns, 2012; Hughes, 2003; Luoma, 2004; Chou, 2018). All of these speaking components should be concerned and mastered; hence it will show our quality in English and the purposive intention of our speech will be well-delivered by the audience.

Pratiwi & Ayu (2020) proposed that speaking skill is the most complicated skill to master, especially for young learners. Related to this, it is quite common to hear that students are anxious to speak in English. Language anxiety is a negative reaction like worries to talk or communicate in English (MacIntyre, 1999). This anxiety is concerned by several factors in speaking components themselves. In a purpose to have effective speaking, linguistic and sociolinguistic elements are the core factor, including grammatical, strategic, and discourse competence (Shumin, 1997). If students have a difficulty in speaking components and these elements, then they are most likely afraid to be involved in English conversation. Some shortage among the speaking components restrained their confidence. Whereas, confidence is the heart of speaking. In order to boost the confidence in Speaking English it is critical to have real exposure and activities in real-world situations (Songsiri, 2007; Boonkit, 2010). Moreover, research by K and Alamelu (2020) revealed that students believe seminars, discussions and presentations are beneficial for them as a strategy to improve their speaking. Most of the activities mentioned are linked and included in the MUN conference.

First thing first, the pronunciation seems to be quite trivial for students. Nevertheless, mispronunciation can lead to misconception. Pronunciation can be difficult due to the indigenous background language of EFL learners. It also refers to the case study conducted in Sudan by Ahmed (2017), which argues that students found it difficult to pronounce some consonants that do not in line with indigenous Arabic as their mother tongue. On the other hand, most students hesitate to speak in English because they have limited vocabulary, thus they do not know how to talk English in some contexts. While, a fluent speaker should have a rich vocabulary (Nation & Meara, 2010; Taylor, 2020). Furthermore, the hesitation also deals with the lack of understanding of grammar. Students who do not have enough capability in constructing grammar and also gain vocabulary will not be able to further utter the proper information when speaking English. Gan (2013), in his research even disclosed that 93.9% and 90% of his research participants were showing a tendency for grammatical errors. In addition,

he added that it is hard for students to speak English with a complex structure. Therefore, communication with the interlocutor cannot be built as it should be.

### *Online Model United Nations*

Online or virtual Model United Nations is an alternative form of real-life MUN. Due to Covid-19, this virtual system has been much raised. It helps students to still conduct mode UN activity that is also in line with the Covid-19 terms and conditions. The virtual MUN is occasionally established by formal institutions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Initially, to enrol in online MUN also seems to be comprehensible. Kikuchi et al. (2020) argue that online MUN is more convenient than offline MUN. Somehow, the procedure of the online Model United Nations might be slightly different, but fundamentally the same. Equally to the offline MUN, all the schedules and requirements are the same. Moreover, online activity as distance learning systems make it more accessible (Liu et al., 2020). Therefore, the online MUN can reach wider participants around the world. Hence, the intercultural communication that will be built among participants will be more diverse. The Online Model United Nations is moderately held for 2 days.

There are several sessions to be highlighted in Model United Nations (TEIMUN, 2022) namely:

1. Committee session (Comses), is a main session of MUN where participants have a constructed debate in English. Occasionally, in online MUN, there will be other three elements which are also part of the Committee session.
2. General Speakers' List is when some participants should have their speech in the general side of the topic.
3. Moderated Caucus, it is a part of Comses where participants voluntarily raise their motion to debate. Some participants will have an English speaker on the specific motion. It is constructed and led by a chair.
4. Unmoderated Caucus is also a part of Comses where participants more freely communicate with each other, thus the autonomous English-speaking initiative of participants will be very critical here.

MUN primarily is the largest political skill area development (Williams, 2009). However, it is also able to bring specific impacts to other skills development. Levy (2017) implied that MUN conferences allow students to have debate, research, discussion, and problem-solving. All of its processes are provided in English. Nevertheless, it is quite rare to find researches that focus on the impact on English skill development, which is a medium of communication in MUN. Therefore, the researcher wants to resolve this gap.

### *Previous Studies*

Since the online/virtual model of the United Nations seems to start happening in the pandemic of Covid-19, then it is quite difficult to find related studies. Nevertheless, Kikuchi et al. (2020) conduct a two-year study of the MUN implementation in Japanese English language classrooms. It reveals three benefits including the post effect that students seem to enjoy more English communication outside the class, they also show an improvement in speech, and students' autonomy and initiative in the classroom increased. Somehow, previously before Covid-19 impacted some system changes of MUN, Nasution & Sukmawati (2019) researched offline MUN's impact on the improvement of English skills. They implied that MUN positively improved students' speaking skills including its relative importance such as improving the list of significant vocabularies, and determination of grammar. Furthermore, the recent research by Kartal (2020) implied that 15 weeks of MUN course implementation can enhance students' professional skills, including negotiation and public speaking. Therefore, as a continuation of limited related studies, researchers want to further explore, what is students' perception of the online Model United Nations in the improvement of EFL learners' speaking ability?

## Method

### *Research Design*

This study is compiled as qualitative research, specifically, it is phenomenological descriptive qualitative because the researcher has prior experience related to the topic. Furthermore, the phenomenological descriptive focus on the intention to reveal participants' pure experience from the researcher's perspective (Willis et al., 2016). Moreover, it is due to the need for an in-depth understanding of students' perception of the online MUN phenomenon as a restriction of covid-19 effects.

### *Data Collection*

In order to investigate students' perceptions, the researcher implemented semi-structured interviews to collect the data. It was held virtually through Zoom limited cloud meetings and Google Meet for around 20-30 minutes. The researcher has prepared a list of questions only for guidelines, while during the interview there are several follow-up questions occurred. The interview section was established with 5 participants from *Universitas Jember*, as it is in line with Dworkin's (2012) research that the interviewee in research is dominated by 5 to 20 participants. Participants are selected through a purposive sampling method. It requires a sample of EFL students who have experience in MUN activity. The researcher and interviewee initially came into agreement to conduct code-switching interviews in order to ensure the proper information.

Table 1. Background information of five interviewees

| Participants | Department/Major | MUN Experiences |
|---|---|---|
| P1 | Food Science and Technology | +- 2 years |
| P2 | English Language Education | +- 2 years |
| P3 | Indonesian Language Education | +- 1 ½ years |
| P4 | English Language Education | +- 1 ½ year |
| P5 | English Language Education | 5 months |

### *Data Analysis*

The data is analysed by thematic analysis and the researcher adapted Braun & Clarke's (2006) framework. This framework is recognised as one of the most significant ones for social science research. However, initially, the researcher transcribes the interview with the support of the *Live Transcribe & Notification* application. It allows transcribing audio with code-switched language. Then, researchers still rechecked the result of the automatic transcription. Once the interview has been transcribed into a written script, the analysis framework begins as follows.

1. Reading and understanding the transcript. Since the interview was conducted in both English and Indonesian, code-switching made the researcher easier to understand the pure utterance and expression of the interviewee. However, the researcher then also translated the transcription into English intending to reach international readers for this research.
2. Generating codes. In this section, the researcher manually highlighted the repetitive phrase and expressions in transcription to find critical points elaborated by the interviewees.

3. Searching for themes. Researchers start to identify the fundamental aspects of online MUN to speaking skills written in transcription and further will be considered as its theme.
4. Reviewing themes. Among all the fundamental aspects found, the researcher started to take in the most specific themes to include in the paper.
5. Defining themes. Each theme that has been decided will be put into the paper with understandable, optimisable, relevant names prior to the main topic of speaking and MUN.
6. Producing the report.

## Findings and Discussion

Regarding the decided themes, there are four main keys to underpinning students' perception of the topic: a) initial issues, b) intercultural communication, c) confidence building, d) fluency development, and e) academic influence. The theme will be elaborated through a brief initial explanation and then included its a quotation from the interviewee on the context. The theme will also contain subtheme/s for clearer explication.

### *Initial Issues*

Apart from its benefits, most interviewees mentioned their difficulty in the first attempt at MUN. The researcher thinks that it is also crucial to provide this as one of the themes since the initial difficulty is also part of their continuous improvement. Most interviewees mentioned that they find some difficulty in MUN procedures, therefore actually as a first timer, it is quite difficult for them to keep track of the topic being discussed. Most participants had the same difficulty from P2 who has the longest experience and P5 who has the shortest experience among all interviewees implied that actually, some vocabularies that she encountered in the MUN are not relevant to her academic background, thus she needs more preparation on it in her next MUN. Moreover, P2 also revealed that some delegations from a native speaker country usually speak quite fast and use unfamiliar vocabularies that she has not heard before.

> *"In my first MUN, GM MUN, I did not know how MUN works, which made me a silent delegate. I did not know what they were talking about, the issue, it was also due to limit preparation. Since it was an international event, there were some people from India and I cannot understand their accent, that is why I cannot catch up with what they talking about" (P2)*

### *Intercultural Communication*

English speaking and intercultural communication are related elements that cannot be separated. In order to enhance speaking skills, Intercultural Communication Competence should be considered. ICC can be inferred as an ability to interact properly with cross-cultural members (Chen, 1989; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009; Wiseman, 2003; Barker, 2015). In addition, Liontas and Siegel (2018) highlight the pedagogical implications to develop speaking skills in terms of intercultural communication, which is "exploit online resources to provide opportunities for intercultural communication outside the classroom" (p. 7). Furthermore, during online MUN, participants stated that they encountered many international students across the world. This phenomenon assists them in developing their intercultural communication. It also affects how they communicate in English. Thus, there are critical things they need to consider. One of the most influential in speaking is the accent. P1, P2 and P4 argue that sometimes they were confused by delegation with Indian and British accents. Nevertheless, we can see that this is growing their ability to comprehend various accents and cultural backgrounds that affect English speaking.

> *"When other delegates have a speaking fluency just like a native speaker, sometimes I do not understand it. Moreover, usually, the delegation from India has a unique accent and perhaps I only understand 10% of their speech, they also talk too fast, and it was really not in my league. They also used words that were not in my prior language reference, so I did not really understand it"* (P3)

Furthermore, due to some difficulty in the first attempt, P2 is aware that she must have better preparation in terms of speaking skills, including intercultural communication itself.

> *"Before we start the MUN, we should comprehend the documents given by the committee, since there are some policies of our country's representation that we need to learn. Another way, learn to speak in formal situations. Also surfing YouTube about Indian and other countries with English unique accent, so we can further comprehend what they are talking about because in MUN there many people from different countries" (P2)*

***Confidence-building***

In order to build good speaking competence, practice is essential to do. MUN provides students with a platform to intensively practise their English speaking. Furthermore, it is equivalent to the need of developing confidence. The more confidence students have, the more they are persistent to speak English. While EFL students usually have some sort of limitation to practice their speaking (Zhang, 2009; Boonkit, 2010). Additionally, Boonkit (2010) also disclosed that most students usually do not have the opportunity to communicate with the international community. Hence, the online MUN is fundamental as an accessible and flexible platform for them to enhance their English-speaking skill at any time and anywhere. This fact is strengthened by the interview reports.

> *"In my first attempt in MUN I was planning to be a passive participant, but once I tried to speak, then it became an addiction to speak in front of other delegates. Thus, my vision was that as long as they understood the intention of what I was talking about it would be okay. I was confident since that." (P3)*

When the researcher asked her whether she enjoys developing her speaking skill in online MUN or not, she excitedly answered as follows.

> *"Of course, yes, how bad our speaking skill is, there are no judges from everyone, whenever they do not understand what we are talking about, they will ask for repetition with appropriate manners, that is why I keep doing MUN even though my ability is not that expert. It can be effective and efficient learning media." (P3)*

> *"I believe confidence can be built, maybe with the first experience in MUN there would be some anxiety, but MUN for me is addictive. There would be some motivation that I want to do better in my next MUN. And it will not decrease your confidence in speaking English at MUN as long as we understand the context discussed, or it could be otherwise if we do not understand it." (P2)*

***Fluency Development***

The threat that is faced by participants mostly only occurred in their first attempt. Henceforth, the remaining attempt seems to be to support participants' speaking skills, especially in their fluency. P1 and P3 stated that their fluency significantly increased after they

joined the MUN Club at university and some MUN activities. The English-speaking fluency they gained includes the development of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation.

*Vocabularies*

Besides the impacts on confidence as the most mentioned impacts, participants disclosed their vocabularies as one of the biggest improvements. It comes from several crucial factors, namely meeting native speaker delegations, mandatory formal English, and a variety of global issues to discuss in MUN.

> *"In MUN it is mandatory to use formal English language, therefore I listened to other delegations. In my first MUN, I always took note of new and unfamiliar vocabularies. As an example, we usually use an expression like "maybe and sorry", while the other delegation use "perhaps and apologise", I highlighted that and, in the future, I practice it, I follow how they communicate in English." (P3)*

> *"Previously I did not know what is meant by 'under the chair's discretion, I moderately knew about 'command'. There is also 'point of inquiries', I did not know its meaning, while what I mostly heard previously is only questions. Then, I found both have the same meaning." (P4)*

*Grammar*

Initially, P1 prefers those components, especially grammar, in English speaking that are used in MUN are not that necessary, as long as the intention is clarified. P4 also inferred the typical preference on this, she implied that in MUN there is a restricted time to speak which is why it is better to not much consider the grammar if it only prevents us to elaborate our intention. However, all participants also highlighted that grammar is important when it comes to writing a position paper in MUN, but it is less important when it comes to speaking English.

> *"Basically, speaking about pronunciation, grammar and others, when we talk to another delegate when joining MUN, is not that important in my honest opinion, because sometimes if we just want to speak by using the right grammar is kind of hard. The very important here, MUN is about diplomacy, and how we communicate well. So, if we can deliver well, why must we think hard about grammar? But it is a different thing when it comes to English proficiency test" (P1)*

*Pronunciation*

Online MUN is known as an international virtual youth event, where people from various backgrounds have deep debate and discussion, including inner, outer, and expanding circle countries. Therefore, many people would have different utterances and accents of some specific words. As EFL learners, interviewees think they usually learn many correct pronunciations from the native speaker they meet in MUN.

> *"There were sometimes where some delegations, who were occasionally natives, pronounced the same words in different ways. I was wondering why they did it differently. After that, I would compare and do research on the internet on how to pronounce a certain word. It helps me finding out pronouncing the word in a perfect way" (P2)*

***Academic Exposure***

MUN is an outside classroom learning activity for EFL learners. Somehow, it does not only have an impact on their daily English-speaking ability but also on their performance in

academic activity. Three interviewees from English education major significantly infer their participation in the classroom, which requires English communication, is developed.

> *".. I realised that I need to stay or to join more MUN and improve my English, especially when I need it in an academic setting like for proposal presentation or maybe in classes…. since I was gaining more confidence in MUN, I feel that I have more participation in the classroom, specifically in this semester and my academic record is quite increased" (P4)*

> *"As I accustomed to have English speaking in MUN, I also become braver to actively participated in class whether to verbally elaborating our opinion or answering the lecture's questions" (P5)*

While remaining interviewees from different majors also feel the benefits of their insight apart from their background knowledge.

> ***"****Even though I am from Indonesian language major, through the online MUN I feel that my insight is developed. Thus, I think that our knowledge is not only limited to where we are formally learning…, I also usually like to post social medias status which contains me verbally talking about some issues (in English), for instance, problems in our university, and my friend gave me positive feedback that they like how I talk. My current speaking ability is so much improved compared to the old me" (P3)*

As MUN is a platform to gain many competencies, including speaking skills, the learning or training preference of English speaking of each student can also be affected. Three of the interviewees claimed that they had a different learning or training preference before MUN, namely formal debate, storytelling, and also speech. However, predominantly the interviewees implied that their preference in learning English speaking has been biased toward MUN. P2 inferred that she feels better benefits from her speaking training in MUN rather than formal debate. While remaining interviewees also stated similar preferences.

> *"In formal debate, it is like a war, while for MUN we are discussing with each other some solutions, and in a debate, we are more likely to maintain our argument, that is why debate gives me more nervousness than MUN. Moreover, in MUN we have more time to focus on improving our formal speaking ability since we are not so defensive and it is less anxious for me, while in a debate we are too focused on winning our argument" (P2)*

P1 feels that her active participation in MUN even led her to be more recognized by people that which gained her more confidence. P1 was the most outstanding student in her faculty, which being most outstanding students foremost required good public speaking, and it seems to be better in English. Nevertheless, three participants think offline MUN is better than offline MUN for intensive speaking development since the participants can have direct face-to-face interaction. On the other hand, P1, P3, and P5 infer that online MUN is affordable compared to the offline one. This leads to great accessibility for English-speaking learners beginners.

**Conclusion**

Approximating other research, this research deals with the limitation of data collection. The research will be much better if it is compiled not only concerning the interview, but also further real-time observation. However, the researcher realised it was quite difficult to find

participants with specific requirements for the observation method. Additionally, it has been mentioned before that researcher found it difficult to discover related online MUN research since it is newly raised in the pandemic. Therefore, it will be a relevant implication for future researchers to be concerned about related issues with greater data collection as it disclosed many benefits to speaking development for EFL learners. Referring to this research findings, EFL learners from *Universitas Jember*, who have experiences of online MUN in this pandemic, considered that online MUN provides many beneficial and significant impacts on their speaking ability. They assume that online MUN is an accessible and flexible platform to practice their English speaking. Regarding speaking competency, they realise that online MUN advance their list of vocabulary and pronunciation for formal English-speaking settings by having intercultural communication with new relatives from various countries. On the other hand, they do not put much concern on grammar in online MUN through speaking. However, they do not consider it unimportant but less necessary to the purpose and intention of their speech. Moreover, this research reveals that online MUN is a prominent platform to increase EFL learners' formal speaking ability.

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