

## **Facilitating disabled athletes' English learning through an intensive English-speaking coaching program**

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### **Abstract**

Increased communication possibilities and access to vital social capital make English proficiency crucial in sports and the larger society. As a result, athletes must be proficient in speaking English to expand their communication opportunities, particularly disabled athletes. In response, this case study explored the implementation of an English-speaking coaching program for disabled athletes in Indonesia, focusing on its impact on facilitating their speaking skills. It explored the nuanced experiences and perspectives of disabled athletes participating in the program, shedding light on the effectiveness of tailored language coaching in improving their communication abilities. The study employed in-depth interviews and participant observations to capture the lived experiences of disabled athletes engaged in the coaching program. Fifteen national disabled para-cycling athletes participated in this study. We designed the coaching program to accommodate their needs, incorporating interactive sessions, role-playing scenarios, and real-life communication simulations. We identified four themes in this study: increased confidence, enriched vocabularies, enhanced professional opportunities, and improved English proficiency. The results indicated that the tailored coaching program positively facilitated the disabled athletes' English-speaking skills. Through rich narrative accounts, athletes expressed increased confidence in using English, a more remarkable ability to communicate effectively with coaches and peers, and a heightened sense of empowerment. This study further concludes that English-speaking skills for athletes with special needs matter and that language coaching program needs to be further organized to support athletes' language skills.

**Keywords:** Communication skills, disabled athlete, English-speaking proficiency, English learning.

### **Introduction**

Inclusion and diversity among athletes have advanced significantly in recent years. However, one crucial factor that sometimes goes unnoticed is the value of English language proficiency for athletes with disabilities. English is required for athletes to successfully convey their thoughts, ideas, and experiences in international sporting events, conferences, and meetings

(Ettl Rodríguez & Kandel-Cisco, 2020). Being proficient in speaking English as a second or foreign language is a significant objective for numerous learners (Timpe-Laughlin et al., 2020). Regrettably, acquiring the skill to converse effectively in a secondary or foreign language is commonly perceived as a challenging endeavor by many language learners. The problem becomes even more challenging when learners have limited opportunities to learn the language in school or everyday life (Bikowski & Casal, 2018; Hwang et al., 2016). Moreover, learning to speak a foreign language is frequently linked with anxiety (El Shazly, 2021; Yan & Horwitz, 2008), causing learners to avoid conversing.

Good English-speaking proficiency requires real conversations and real situations to practice (McDonough, 2004; Yang et al., 2020). However, in developing countries where English is spoken as a foreign language, learners primarily practice speaking only in school classrooms (Hsieh, 2016; Yang et al., 2020). This lack of real practice often makes it hard for learners because they have limited chances to listen and talk. Learners in some developing countries might experience many problems in learning to speak English. In Indonesia, for example, English learners need more vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, confidence, and English input outside the class (Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2020). Hence, there is a need for conducting out-class English teaching and learning activities where learners are facilitated and allowed to practice speaking English.

In Indonesia, the English-speaking skills of disabled athletes vary widely. While some athletes possess a reasonable level of proficiency, many encounter challenges in effectively communicating in English. Limited exposure to English-speaking environments and resources and inadequate access to specialized language training contribute to this disparity. As a result, many Indonesian disabled athletes struggle to convey their thoughts, experiences, and perspectives in English, particularly in international sporting events and interactions. Addressing this gap is essential to ensure that all disabled athletes can fully participate, engage, and represent themselves on the global sports stage. Thus, we conducted an intensive English-speaking coaching program for Indonesian disabled athletes to facilitate their English learning, mainly English-speaking skills. The present study, therefore, relied on the following research question:

How did the coaching program facilitate Indonesian disabled athletes' English-speaking learning?

### **Approaches to Teaching English-speaking Skills**

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, the mastery of speaking skills heavily relies on the methods used for teaching speaking in the classroom, which is the pivotal environment for students to learn and practice the language. Unfortunately, proficiency in speaking English is much more challenging among the four English skills (Saleem et al.,

2023). As a result, various teaching approaches for speaking have been implemented and documented. In a broader classification, Talley (2014) divided these approaches into two main categories: explicit and implicit. The explicit approach involves teachers concentrating on teaching commonly used expressions and requiring students to study and commit them to memory. This approach also involves instructing learners about appropriate and inappropriate language usage. In contrast, the implicit approach centers on creating opportunities for students to practice speaking in real-life situations. Essentially, there are two principal types of speaking instruction methods: direct and indirect.

The direct approach often called the controlled approach, emphasizes practicing and developing specific language structures in isolation (Goh & Burns, 2012). This practice entails repeating predetermined language patterns through drills, pattern exercises, and manipulating sentence structures. Conversely, the indirect approach to teaching speaking aims to establish an environment conducive to oral interaction, allowing learners to participate in communicative activities (Goh & Burns, 2012; Islam & Stapa, 2021; Richards, 2008). Within the indirect approach, the primary focus is on achieving fluency, and students are exposed to authentic and practical language usage. It involves engaging in real-world communicative tasks such as discussions, information sharing, role-playing, simulations, and more (Burns, 1998; Dignath & Veenman, 2021). This approach is also known as the transfer approach, as it assumes that skills developed through peer communication can later be applied in real-life situations.

Relying exclusively on one teaching approach for speaking is not ideal, as both approaches have their limitations (Goh & Burns, 2012). For instance, Thornbury and Slade (2006) explained that the direct approach emphasizes language components, while the indirect approach focuses on usage context. Focusing solely on one aspect and neglecting the other can lead learners to excel in one area but struggle in the neglected one. The direct approach overlooks face-to-face communication, and the indirect approach does not emphasize accuracy. Consequently, the direct approach's emphasis on language elements and accuracy inhibits the development of practical speaking skills. Conversely, the indirect approach's focus on fluency can hinder accuracy.

A solution lies in combining aspects of both approaches. Thornbury (2006) introduced a comprehensive approach to teaching speaking with three stages: awareness-raising, appropriation, and autonomy. In the first stage, learners identify their gaps and become familiar with relevant knowledge. In the second stage, they integrate new knowledge into existing understanding, progressing from guided to self-regulated practices. The final stage, autonomy, involves using newly acquired knowledge in real-life situations. Another perspective from Richards (2008) suggested that speaking functions should dictate the teaching approach. Different speech activities require distinct approaches tailored to specific skills. For example, interactional speaking involves initiating and closing conversations, selecting topics, making casual conversations, storytelling, taking turns, responding, and using suitable speaking styles. Thus, in this study context, we combined both teaching

approaches to facilitate disabled athletes' English learning through a tailored speaking coaching program.

### **Language Learning for Disabled Athletes**

Language learning for disabled athletes involves acquiring a new language, in this case, English, by individuals with physical, sensory, cognitive, or intellectual disabilities that may impact their learning experience. The intersection of language learning and disability presents unique challenges and considerations that educators and researchers must address to ensure an inclusive and effective learning environment.

Several studies have highlighted the importance of tailored language learning approaches for disabled individuals. According to Smith et al. (2018), learners with disabilities often benefit from strategies emphasizing multisensory engagement, personalized instruction, and adaptive materials. These strategies accommodate diverse learning styles and create a supportive atmosphere that fosters language development. Moreover, the concept of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), as discussed by Rose and Meyer (2002), underscores the significance of designing curricula and instructional methods that cater to a wide range of learners, regardless of their disabilities. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) becomes particularly relevant in language education for disabled athletes. This approach suggests that instructional methods and materials should be flexible and customized.

CAST (2018a, 2018b) highlight the principles of UDL, advocating for multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression. Representation aligning with the recognition networks promotes the “what” of learning, such as perception, language and symbols, and comprehension. Expression aligning with the strategic networks promotes the “how” of learning, such as physical action, communication, and executive function. Engagement aligning with the affective networks promotes the “why” of learning, such as interest, effort and persistence, and self-regulation. When applied to language learning, this means offering various ways to understand and interact with the language and accommodating diverse methods of communication and expression. By embracing UDL, language educators can create a more inclusive and welcoming learning environment for disabled athletes. Creating an environment that encourages self-expression and participation is also essential. This can be achieved by adopting alternative assessment methods that accommodate the diverse ways disabled athletes communicate and demonstrate their language proficiency.

In the context of athletes with disabilities, language learning becomes even more significant. Athletes often require effective communication skills to participate in competitions and engage with international audiences, sponsors, and media (Shilbury et al., 2018). The study by Johnson and Williams (2019) found that disabled athletes with strong English language skills have more opportunities for international collaboration and representation.

### **Methodology**

### ***Research Design***

This study used a case study to explore the effectiveness of an English-language training program for disabled athletes in Indonesia, focusing on enhancing their speaking skills. The training included interactive sessions, role-play scenarios, and real-life communication simulations for six meetings lasting one and a half hours in each meeting. The primary aim of this case study was to assess the impact of an English-speaking training program on these athletes. Despite their diverse disabilities, the participants had relatively low English language skills. However, they could practice and improve their English-speaking abilities due to their absence of cognitive impairments. The objective of the training was to equip these athletes with the language skills necessary to effectively communicate in international sporting events and interactions with a broader audience. In this training, the participants were divided into 2 cohorts and each cohort was taught by one English tutor. The tutors specialize in teaching English as a second language (ESL) or in providing language support to individuals with disabilities and were responsible to give material and trained all of the participants to speak English better.

### ***Participants***

This study focused on individuals engaged in para-cycling, encompassing a para-cycling coach, para-cycling pilots, and para-cycling disabled athletes, totalling 15 participants. The participant breakdown consisted of one male coach, seven para-cycling pilots (comprising one female and six males), and seven disabled para-cycling athletes (including one female and six males). The age range of all participants was between 20 and 33 years, and they possessed fundamental English language skills, including knowledge of present and past tense formulas, along with basic vocabulary commonly used in daily activities such as going, reading, and drinking. In para-cycling competitions, a coach plays an essential role in preparing and assisting disabled athletes to perform at their best such as training plans and skill development. A pilot is an athlete who responsible for guiding and controlling the tandem bicycle, which is a specially designed bike for disabled athletes. Notably, the participants' disabilities exhibited a broad spectrum, ranging from blindness to limb impairments such as missing legs or hands and conditions like cerebral palsy. The pilots and coach were individuals without disabilities. These participants were specifically included in para-cycling competition, individuals who engage in cycling as a sport despite their physical limitations. They were selected to represent Indonesia in international disabled athlete competitions. Given the nature of these events, proficiency in the English language was crucial for effective communication, both on and off the field. Even though the athletes had physical disabilities, they had no cognitive or mental impairments. This distinction is significant because it allowed them to participate in English language training actively. Their cognitive abilities were intact, which enabled them to engage in language-learning activities despite their physical challenges.

### ***Data Collection and Data Analysis***

To capture the experiences and perspectives of participants, this research deployed various instruments such as in-depth interviews, and triangulated with observation notes and pictures. In-depth interviews were conducted during and after the program finished to capture a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences implementing the knowledge. Participant observation complemented the interviews by providing insights into the participants' interactions during the training sessions.

Thematic analysis was chosen as the method for analyzing the data in this research since it helps researchers uncover patterns, themes, and insights within the data. The steps of thematic analysis systematically examine data to identify recurring themes or patterns, providing insights into the experiences and perspectives of participants (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The step begins with familiarization with data, initial coding, generating initial themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, charting data, reviewing themes in context, refining and defining final themes, and writing the analysis, interpretation, and conclusion. In familiarization with data, the steps were begun with the initial step where the researcher becomes familiar with the dataset. It involved reading and re-reading the data from the transcripts of interviews and observation notes. After that, initial coding was implied. In this step, the researcher begins to extract meaningful units from the data. These units can be words, phrases, or sentences that capture key ideas or concepts such as “ *I was brave to speak*” to identify the improvement of confidence. Once the initial coding is done, the researcher starts to group related codes into preliminary themes. Then, researchers review the initial themes to ensure they accurately reflect the data. This involves going back to the data to validate that the themes align with the content and context. After reviewing, the researcher refines and defines the themes more precisely. In charting the data, it involved organizing the coded data into a coherent structure, often using tables or matrices, then researchers analysed how the themes fit within the broader context of the research. In refining and defining final themes, the researcher aims to arrive at a smaller set of final themes based on the combined theories. In the final step, researchers write up the analysis, interpretation, and conclusion based on the final themes.

## **Finding**

The results of this study revealed that the coaching program yielded support in the English-speaking learning process among Indonesian disabled athletes. Participants demonstrated notable advancements in English-speaking skills through targeted instructional strategies and personalized support. The program's immersive approach, involving intensive language practice within sports-centric contexts, proved particularly effective. Participants exhibited enhanced fluency and confidence in spoken English, evident through increased engagement in verbal interactions during coaching sessions. We further identified four themes in this study: increased confidence, enriched vocabularies, enhanced professional opportunity, and improved English proficiency.

### ***Increased confidence***

The analysis of the observational data revealed a significant improvement in disabled athletes' speaking confidence. Throughout the observation period, participants showed increased self-assuredness in various contexts. This was evident in their body language and communication during the program activities. Participants appeared more willing to take on challenges, engage in discussions, and actively participate in training sessions and team activities (see Figure 1). As the participants said in the interview:

Participating in the coaching program helped me improve my English speaking confidence, though my English sentences were not grammatically or structurally correct. What matters is I was brave to speak English in front of many people..." (Athlete 3)

...it was my first experience participating in an English-speaking coaching program. I was excited that I had the opportunity to practice speaking English. (Athlete 6)



*Figure 1. The coaching activities*

The excerpts above indicated that disabled athletes engaged in the coaching program still had limited knowledge of speaking English correctly. However, their confidence stimulated their willingness to speak and communicate in English. Such improved confidence might positively influence their willingness to communicate in English, particularly when participating in an international sports competition abroad.



*Figure 2. One of the disabled athlete's interviews with a foreign reporter*

Moreover, one of the disabled athletes experienced the first time being interviewed by a foreign reporter before starting the competition (see Figure 2). He expressed happiness that he was brave enough to be interviewed in the competition arena. He mentioned that his bravery resulted from participating in the English-speaking coaching program. He said:

...I was happy that I could be confident when being interviewed. Though my vocabulary mastery was limited, I could speak English and answer the reporter's questions. (Athlete 1)

### ***Enriched vocabularies***

Besides athletes' improved confidence, the results of this study also indicated the enrichment of disabled athletes' English vocabularies. This finding held particular significance as it underlined the coaching program's broader cognitive and educational benefits. The demonstrated expansion of vocabulary proficiency suggested a potential avenue through which sports can contribute to the holistic development of disabled athletes, extending beyond physical and psychological well-being. Such vocabulary enrichment was expressed by one of the disabled athletes. He said:

I felt enrichment in my English vocabulary, though it was not significant. For example, I eventually knew how to express sorry or gratitude in English, as exemplified in the coaching module. I can use this vocabulary later when interacting with friends, others, or foreigners. (Athlete 5)

The above statement further emphasized the practical outcomes of this vocabulary enrichment. The ability to express emotions such as gratitude or apology in English implied the program's effectiveness in imparting vocabulary and language's cultural and social nuances. This demonstrated a level of linguistic competence that extended beyond mere vocabulary memorization. The athletes were not just accumulating words but also acquiring the tools to navigate meaningful interactions and effectively convey complex emotions. Furthermore, acknowledging the increment as insignificant pointed out that the number of new words learned did not solely quantify the value of this linguistic growth. Instead, it considered the qualitative transformation in the linguistic abilities and perception of self-improvement. This aligned with the broader concept of athlete development, which encompasses personal growth, skill acquisition, and self-actualization.

### ***The Impact of English-Speaking Program on Para-Cycling Athletes on Their Professional Opportunities***

This part elucidates the information showing participants' improvement as professional athletes while engaging in international competitions as Indonesian representatives. The interview data was garnered from the para-cycling coach, para-cycling pilots, and disabled. Each participant brought their distinctive viewpoints about the impact of learning English speaking on their professionalism as athletes. This influence becomes particularly evident through heightened confidence, and facilitating participants' ease during interactions with foreign journalists on the international stage. The participant mentioned that

...Before the training, I always felt hesitant about speaking English. I knew it was important, especially when we were representing our country internationally. I remember during an international interview with one of the television stations, I had a conversation with the reporter. I was surprised at how well I could answer the question.... (disabled athlete 1)

....As a pilot, I have always wanted to support my athletes in the best way possible. I only smile when other country athletes try to communicate with me and my athlete, but after this program, we could communicate more smoothly, not only smiling or shaking heads... (pilot 1)

...Seeing my athletes with disabilities progress in their English-speaking abilities has been incredible. Their ability to engage with international audiences through media interviews and promotional events has significantly improved, elevating their professional profiles and making them more appealing ambassadors for the sport on a global scale...(Coach 1)

The provided data excerpts showcase the impact of the English-speaking program on disabled athletes, pilots, and coach. The data illustrates how improved English language skills have enhanced professional opportunities for these individuals within their careers. Before the training, the athlete felt hesitant about speaking English despite knowing its importance for international representation. After the training, their confidence increased. The athlete

recalled a specific instance where they engaged in a successful conversation with an international television reporter during an international conversation and other countries' athletes. This positive interaction opened doors for potential collaborations indicating that improved language skills led to enhanced professional connections.

### ***The Impact of English-Speaking Program on Para-Cycling Athletes on Their English Proficiency***

This part elucidates the information showing the improvement of English proficiency of the participants. Some of them mention that

...Before the program, English was like a hurdle for me. I could not express myself the way I wanted to. But the training changed that. Now, I can have conversations and find the right words to express my feelings... (disabled athlete 3)

...language differences caused misunderstandings between us and the juries. But with the training, things improved. Little by little I remember a meeting where I contributed without hesitation.... (disabled athlete 4)

The provided data excerpts convey the significance of the English-speaking program in enhancing the English proficiency of disabled athletes. Before the training, English posed a challenge for the athlete, hindering their ability to communicate as desired. However, the program brought about a positive transformation. The athlete now feels more capable of engaging in conversations without struggling for words. This proficiency extends beyond sports, enabling the athlete to connect on a broader level.

### **Discussion**

This study explored an intensive English-speaking coaching program to facilitate disabled athletes' English-speaking proficiency. The study findings presented in this study maintained a significant impact of the coaching program on disabled athletes' confidence and communication skills. The observed improvements in self-assuredness across various contexts and the willingness to take on challenges, engage in discussions, and actively participate in training sessions and team activities reflect a positive outcome of the coaching intervention. The participants' testimonies and experiences provide valuable insights into how the program facilitated their enhanced confidence and communication skills.

While participants acknowledged their limited grammatical and structural proficiency in English, their increased confidence catalyzed their willingness to communicate. Despite grammatical inaccuracies, the participants' bravery in speaking English highlighted the program's role in cultivating a sense of self-assuredness that transcends linguistic barriers. The finding showed the program's success in teaching language skills and instilling a mindset shift that values effective communication over linguistic perfection. When people learn a new language, they often feel unsure and unconfident (Lou & Noels, 2016). This makes them

avoid getting helpful advice about language use (Papi et al., 2019, 2020; Waller & Papi, 2017). They may also avoid situations that challenge them and think that any mistakes they make mean they are not good at it, making them more sensitive to feeling rejected when they talk to native speakers (Lou & Noels, 2019). The findings of this study, however, showed differences. The participants of this study showed particular confidence when interacting with native speakers as a result of engaging in the English-speaking coaching program.

The participants' excitement about practicing English also reflected the motivational aspect of the coaching program. The novelty of engaging in an English-speaking coaching program and the opportunity to practice in a supportive environment has fuelled their enthusiasm. This enthusiasm likely contributed to a positive cycle, wherein increased willingness to engage in English led to enhanced confidence, further motivating their communication efforts. Furthermore, one of the athletes' experiences with a foreign reporter illustrated the practical implications of the coaching program's impact. Despite limited vocabulary mastery, the athlete's newfound confidence in the face of a foreign interview highlighted the program's real-world applicability. Even with limited language proficiency, communicating effectively can be crucial, particularly in international sports where interaction with foreign media and competitors is typical. This finding agreed with the previous study revealing that role-play activities during language learning positively impacted their motivation to speak English (Wongsa & Son, 2020)

Moreover, the finding also identified vocabulary enrichment among disabled athletes who were participating in the coaching program. This enhancement had the potential to empower their improved linguistic competence. As participants actively engaged in the coaching program, they were exposed to various English words and expressions. This exposure occurred in a supportive and dynamic learning environment, where vocabulary-building exercises were seamlessly integrated into the coaching sessions. Combining physical activity and linguistic engagement (e.g., conversation activities, role play, discussion) facilitated memorization and fostered a deeper understanding of language in context.

The tailored English-speaking program for para-cycling athletes has proven to be a pivotal step in advancing para-cycling professional opportunities. As the statement highlights in our finding, the improvement in the athletes' English speaking language skills has yielded significant benefits. The benefit was regarding the professional opportunity that the participant got when they could express their thoughts in English. This phenomenon aligns with findings in sports management literature that emphasize the importance of effective communication in attracting sponsors and building fruitful partnerships (Shilbury et al., 2018). Additionally, the newfound ability to engage in communicating effectively with international media has elevated the athletes' professional profiles. These outcomes not only empower para-cycling athletes to navigate the international cycling community more adeptly but also create pathways for career advancement that were once impeded by language barriers. This case underscores the value of tailored language programs in enabling athletes to thrive in the global sports landscape as highlighted by Johnson and Williams (2019).

Another benefit the participants expressed in the finding also offer compelling evidence of the positive impact of the English-speaking program on enhancing the English proficiency of disabled athletes. The statements underscore the initial hurdles faced by the athletes in effectively communicating in English. These challenges not only affected their ability to express themselves but also led to misunderstandings with juries during competitions, potentially impacting their performance and the outcomes. The training program, however, emerges as a transformative force in addressing these linguistic barriers. As evident from the athletes' accounts, the program enabled them to overcome these challenges gradually. They describe how they now feel more empowered to express their thoughts and emotions accurately, signifying an increased command of the language. This English speaking proficiency is not confined to their athletic pursuits but extends to their broader ability to engage in meaningful conversations, contribute effectively, and potentially seize new professional opportunities beyond the realm of sports. These narratives resonate with research on language acquisition and its role in fostering effective communication and empowerment (McLaughlin, 2018), affirming the value of tailored language programs in enhancing the linguistic capabilities and overall prospects of disabled athletes.

Overall, the study's findings emphasize the multifaceted benefits of tailored language speaking programs for disabled athletes, ranging from improved linguistic skills to increased confidence, motivation, and practical applicability in real-world situations. The study's findings emphasize the multifaceted benefits of tailored speaking language programs for disabled athletes, ranging from improved linguistic skills to increased confidence, motivation, and practical applicability in real-world situations. These outcomes align with the broader sports management literature, emphasizing the significance of effective communication in building partnerships (Shilbury et al., 2018). This research underscores the transformative potential of language programs in enhancing the prospects and professional opportunities of disabled athletes (Johnson & Williams, 2019).

## **Conclusion**

This study sheds light on the significance of tailored English-speaking coaching programs for disabled athletes in Indonesia aimed at enhancing their speaking skills. Through the implementation of this program, it became evident that addressing the specific needs and challenges faced by these athletes can positively impact their ability to communicate effectively in English. The findings underscore the potential of such initiatives to improve linguistic competence and boost the athletes' self-confidence and overall sense of empowerment. By designing coaching approaches that consider the unique requirements of disabled athletes, educators, and coaches can create a supportive and inclusive learning environment. The reported progress in speaking skills among the participants reflects the efficacy of this approach. However, it is essential to recognize that a one-size-fits-all approach is inadequate when working with diverse groups of disabled athletes, as individual needs and preferences vary.

Future research could delve further into refining coaching methodologies, incorporating technology for personalized learning experiences, and exploring the broader

impact of improved English-speaking skills on athletes' participation in international events and their social integration. The success of this study's English-speaking coaching program offers a promising model for similar interventions, highlighting the potential to empower disabled athletes in Indonesia and other contexts worldwide. Ultimately, such initiatives contribute to breaking down communication barriers and fostering a more inclusive and interconnected global community.

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