

FROM MEMORIZATION TO MEANINGFUL PERFORMANCE: ENGLISH RECITATION COMPETITION IN INDONESIAN PRIMARY SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

English recitation competitions in primary schools are often viewed as memorization-driven activities with limited communicative value. Drawing on classroom and performance-based observations, this qualitative study reconceptualizes English recitation as a site of meaningful oral language use among Indonesian primary school learners. The study explores how recitation competitions function as contexts for oral performance, with particular attention to fluency, pronunciation, expressive delivery, confidence, and audience effects. Data were collected from video recordings of Grade 4–6 students' recitation performances during a multi-site competition conducted via Zoom, complemented by field notes and analysis of the official assessment rubric. Observations focused on emergent fluency patterns, pronunciation intelligibility, multimodal expression, and affective changes before and during performance. Findings indicate that fluency developed dynamically during performance rather than existing as a fixed ability, with students using pauses strategically to sustain speech. While segmental pronunciation errors were common, intelligibility was largely maintained through effective use of intonation, stress, and articulation strategies. Expressive resources - including gesture, facial expression, and role enactment - played a central role in transforming memorized texts into communicative acts. Notably, many students demonstrated increased confidence and engagement as performances progressed, suggesting that confidence was constructed through participation rather than preceding it. The study contributes to applied linguistics research by highlighting English recitation competitions as socially situated, affectively rich literacy events that support meaningful oral language development beyond accuracy-focused classroom practices.

Keywords: English recitation competition, oral language performance, fluency and intelligibility, young EFL learners, affective and multimodal expression.

1) INTRODUCTION

English recitation competitions are frequently perceived as memorization-based activities, particularly in primary school contexts where young learners are often evaluated on their ability to reproduce texts accurately. Within applied linguistics, memorization has long been associated with mechanical learning and surface-level language use, valued mainly for short-term retention of vocabulary or formulaic expressions but criticized for encouraging decontextualized knowledge and limiting communicative development. Such perspectives have tended to position memorization in opposition to meaning-focused language

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use. More recent scholarship, however, has advanced a more nuanced understanding of memorization, conceptualizing it as a context-sensitive strategy that can support oral performance when embedded in communicative activity. Studies adopting usage-based and cognitive-interactional perspectives suggest that memorized language can reduce processing demands during speech production, enabling learners to allocate attentional resources to fluency, pronunciation, and expressive delivery (Ellis, 2020).

This reconceptualization of memorization resonates with my experience as an English teacher observing students' participation in English recitation competitions. Initially, these events appeared to function as extensions of classroom rehearsal, oriented primarily toward accuracy and recall. This perception shifted when I observed students performing on stage texts that they had previously practiced in class. In classroom settings, recitations were often delivered cautiously, with limited prosodic variation and minimal expressivity. During competitions, however, the same texts were transformed into performances characterized by deliberate pauses, emphatic stress, varied intonation, and emotional engagement. These observations align with recent distinctions in the literature between rote memorization—repetition without communicative integration—and performative memorization, in which memorized texts are enacted, adapted, and oriented toward an audience within a socially meaningful context (Zhang & Luo, 2022).

In performative contexts such as recitation, storytelling, or poetry performance, memorized language is mobilized alongside prosodic, gestural, and interactional resources, enabling forms of meaning-making that extend beyond decontextualized repetition. Research on rehearsal, repetition, and task familiarity demonstrates that repeated practice can reduce cognitive load and increase control over speech production, thereby supporting more fluent and expressive oral delivery (Bygate & Samuda, 2021). From this perspective, memorization does not inhibit communication but instead functions as a resource that enables learners to engage more confidently and coherently in demanding speaking contexts.

Unlike everyday classroom memorization, English recitation competitions introduce elements of audience, risk, and authenticity that fundamentally reshape language use. Students are required to perform in front of unfamiliar listeners, under formal assessment conditions, and within restricted time frames. In such contexts, accuracy alone is insufficient. Learners must manage anxiety, maintain fluency, and communicate meaning effectively to audiences beyond their immediate classroom communities. Recent research on young learners' language use emphasizes

that children demonstrate more complex linguistic and interactional abilities when language is embedded in purposeful social activity (Cameron & Larsen-Freeman, 2020). The competition setting thus positions English not merely as an object of study, but as a performative tool used for real communication.

Observing students from Grades 4 to 6 deliver extended oral texts on stage made a particularly strong linguistic impression. In daily classroom practice, students' spoken English is often limited to brief responses, scripted dialogues, or highly scaffolded exchanges. Contemporary studies on young learners' oral language indicate that classroom interaction frequently constrains opportunities for sustained speech and extended discourse. In contrast, recitation competitions require learners to produce continuous oral texts over several minutes, managing pacing, coherence, and continuity of meaning. From a fluency perspective, such performances allow examination of key indicators identified in recent applied linguistics research, including pause placement, mean length of run, recovery from hesitation, and discourse flow. Importantly, for young learners, communicative fluency is increasingly defined not by native-like speed or accuracy, but by the ability to sustain meaning and support listener comprehension through strategic prosodic and discourse-level choices (Saito et al., 2022).

Pronunciation research further supports this perspective. Over the past decade, applied linguistics has consolidated a shift away from accent reduction toward intelligibility and comprehensibility as primary pedagogical goals. Large-scale reviews and empirical studies demonstrate that communicative success depends less on native-like phonetic accuracy than on listeners' ability to understand intended meaning. For young EFL learners, segmental deviations that do not impede comprehension are often tolerated, whereas suprasegmental features such as stress, rhythm, and intonation play a more central role in intelligibility. In public performance contexts such as recitation competitions, learners frequently exaggerate prosodic features - including volume, stress, and intonation - to ensure clarity for distant or unfamiliar audiences. Recent Indonesian studies similarly indicate that pedagogical attention to prosody and clarity yields greater communicative benefit than strict segmental drilling (Putra & Hamied, 2021).

Another salient dimension of recitation competitions concerns learner confidence. Prior to performing, many students display visible signs of nervousness, including reduced eye contact, rigid posture, and low vocal volume. The affective turn in second language acquisition has foregrounded emotions such as anxiety, enjoyment, and pride as dynamic influences on language

use. Recent performance-based studies suggest that while anxiety may be high before speaking, it can decrease during engaging communicative tasks, as enjoyment and confidence emerge through successful participation (Pinter, 2021). During recitation performances, noticeable transformations often occur once students begin speaking: fluency increases, voices stabilize, and expressive gestures emerge. These observations suggest that confidence in language use may not always precede performance, but can instead be constructed through the act of speaking itself, echoing recent developmental perspectives on young learners' affective engagement with language.

Embodied and multimodal resources further contribute to this transformation. Recent multimodal research highlights the role of gesture, facial expression, posture, and spatial positioning in oral meaning-making, particularly in performance-oriented tasks (García-Gómez & Roca de Larios, 2021). These embodied resources not only support listener comprehension but also scaffold speakers' cognitive processing and emotional regulation. In recitation competitions, gestures, facial expressivity, and costume function as semiotic resources that enable learners to inhabit roles and transform memorized texts into socially meaningful performances.

The presence of audiences from different schools, cities, and provinces further amplifies the communicative significance of these events. Students are no longer addressing familiar teachers or peers, but diverse listeners with varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In such contexts, English functions as a lingua franca, and performers often adapt by increasing articulation, broadening prosody, and deploying clearer paralinguistic cues. Although recent studies of school performances and competitive speaking events suggest that audience composition shapes speakers' stance and expressive strategies, public oral performance by young learners remains underexplored in the Indonesian primary school context, where research has predominantly focused on classroom-based speaking activities, literacy development, or test-oriented outcomes.

This gap raises an important pedagogical concern. While curricular demands often prioritise accuracy and written achievement, English recitation competitions reveal dimensions of language learning that are embodied, affective, and socially situated. Contemporary literature increasingly recognizes memorization as a context-dependent strategy that, when enacted performatively, can support fluency, intelligibility, and learner engagement. Nevertheless, there remains limited qualitative research examining how memorized texts are transformed into communicative acts in primary-school recitation competitions, particularly in multi-site or cross-regional events. This study responds to that gap by examining English recitation competitions as sites of meaningful

oral language performance, with particular attention to the interaction between fluency, pronunciation, expressive delivery, and learner confidence.

Aim of the Study

This study aims to explore how English recitation competitions function as contexts for meaningful oral language performance among Indonesian primary school students, with particular attention to fluency, pronunciation, and expressive delivery.

Research Questions

- a. How do primary school students demonstrate fluency, pronunciation, and expression during English recitation performances?
- b. What changes in confidence and oral delivery are observable before and during students' stage performances?
- c. How does the presence of a diverse, public audience shape the communicative nature of students' English recitation performances?

2) METHODS

Research Design and Researcher Position

This study employed a qualitative observational design to examine students' oral language performance during an English recitation competition. I was involved in the event as a teacher and observer, accompanying students throughout the preparation and performance stages without serving as a formal judge. This position allowed me to observe performances closely while maintaining an analytical distance from scoring decisions.

Research Site and Participants

The research site was an English recitation competition conducted during the 2022/2023 academic year for primary school students in Grades 4 to 6. The event involved participants from Sekolah Lentera Indonesia, Sekolah Lentera Kasih Bali, and Sekolah Lentera Kasih Makassar. Due to geographical distance, the competition was conducted through a Zoom connection, linking performances across schools in real time. This virtual yet public setting created a shared performance space with a diverse audience across cities and regions, positioning English as a tool for authentic communication.

Data Sources

Data were collected from three main sources: (1) video recordings of students' recitation performances obtained through the Zoom sessions, (2) the official competition rubric outlining assessment criteria, and (3) field notes written during and immediately after performances. These sources enabled both real-time observation and repeated analysis of students' oral delivery.

Observation Focus and Procedures

Observations focused on students' oral language performance during live recitations. I attended to indicators of fluency (e.g., continuity of speech, pauses, and self-repair), pronunciation (e.g., clarity, stress, and intonation), and expression (e.g., gesture, facial expression, eye contact, and vocal emphasis). Brief notes were taken during performances and expanded into reflective field notes shortly afterward. Video recordings were reviewed multiple times to support systematic documentation and pattern identification.

Researcher Reflexivity and Ethics

My professional experience as an English teacher informed my ability to interpret students' performances within a developmental and pedagogical context. To maintain ethical standards, all data were used solely for research purposes, and students' identities and school-specific identifiers were anonymized in reporting. Observations were conducted with institutional permission, and care was taken to represent students' performances respectfully and non-judgmentally.

3) RESULTS

(What Happened on Stage)

Fluency

Across performances, the most recurring fluency pattern observed was one of gradual stabilization. Many students began their recitations with a slower tempo, hesitant voice, or uneven pacing, particularly in the opening lines where performance anxiety appeared most salient. During these initial moments, speech was often marked by longer pauses, reduced volume, or cautious articulation. As the performance progressed, however, speech flow frequently became more stable and continuous. This suggests that fluency, in this context, was not an immediate or fixed

condition but a quality that emerged through the act of speaking and sustained engagement with the performance.

Pauses played an important and multifaceted role in maintaining speech continuity. Rather than consistently signaling breakdowns or loss of control, many pauses functioned as strategic resources. Students used pauses to take breath, mark transitions between ideas, or emphasize key points in the text. In some cases, pauses also appeared to support cognitive processing, allowing students to regain composure and reorient to the memorized sequence. Students who demonstrated stronger fluency tended to use shorter, more controlled pauses, enabling them to sustain speech flow even when momentary hesitation occurred.

Differences in fluency were observable across grade levels, though these differences were gradual rather than categorical. Grade 4 students generally exhibited more frequent pauses and fluctuating tempo, reflecting developing control over extended speech. Despite this, most were able to complete their recitations without major interruption. Grade 5 students showed improved pacing and greater consistency in pause placement, suggesting increased familiarity with sustained oral production. Grade 6 students typically demonstrated the most stable fluency, characterised by smoother transitions between phrases and a more regular rhythmic pattern. Nevertheless, individual variation within each grade was often more pronounced than differences between grades, indicating that factors such as confidence, familiarity with the text, and performance experience also played a significant role.

Memorization played a dual role in shaping fluency. On the one hand, memorized texts provided a structural scaffold that allowed students to continue speaking without the need for spontaneous language formulation, thereby supporting continuity of speech. On the other hand, when memorization faltered, some students experienced momentary disruptions in fluency, such as elongated pauses or reduced volume. Importantly, students who appeared to understand the content of the text were generally better able to recover from these moments. They adjusted tempo, reformulated phrases, or resumed speaking with minimal disruption, suggesting that comprehension supported flexible management of fluency during performance.

Pronunciation

The most common pronunciation issues observed involved vowel length, the production of final consonants, and specific English sounds such as *th* and *r*. These patterns were consistent with

well-documented features of young EFL learners whose pronunciation is shaped by first-language phonological systems. Such difficulties were particularly noticeable in isolated words or during moments of heightened performance pressure, when students appeared to revert to more familiar phonetic patterns.

Importantly, not all pronunciation deviations affected comprehensibility. Many segmental errors did not interfere with audience understanding, especially when utterances were supported by clear intonation, appropriate stress placement, and contextual cues within the performance. Pronunciation became problematic primarily when errors occurred in key lexical items or when misarticulation disrupted meaning in critical parts of the text. Overall, despite persistent non-native pronunciation features, intelligibility was largely maintained, allowing audiences to follow the narrative without significant difficulty.

Intonation emerged as a crucial resource for meaning-making throughout the performances. Students who employed variation in pitch, stress, and rhythm produced recitations that were noticeably easier to follow, even when articulation was imperfect. Intonational patterns helped signal emotional shifts, narrative progression, and points of emphasis, effectively guiding the audience through the structure of the text. In contrast, performances with limited intonational variation tended to sound monotonous and required greater listener effort to interpret meaning.

Several students demonstrated conscious efforts to enhance articulation in response to the public performance context. These efforts included slowing speech rate, increasing vocal volume, exaggerating mouth movements, and placing greater emphasis on stressed syllables. Such strategies suggest an emerging awareness of audience needs and a developing ability to adjust speech for clarity. These adaptive behaviours indicate that public recitation contexts may encourage young learners to experiment with pronunciation strategies that support intelligibility, even in the absence of fully target-like phonetic accuracy.

Expression and Performance

Students expressed emotion and character through noticeable shifts in voice quality, pacing, and body movement. Variations in volume, intonation, and speech rhythm were frequently used to convey emphasis, mood, or changes in narrative perspective. Notably, even learners who were typically reserved or minimally verbal in classroom interactions displayed a wider expressive range on stage. As performances progressed, expression often intensified, with students becoming more

vocally assured and physically animated. This pattern suggests that sustained engagement with the audience and the unfolding performance itself contributed to growing confidence and communicative involvement.

Gestures and facial expressions played a supportive role in both audience comprehension and speaker confidence. Simple hand movements, facial cues, and deliberate eye contact helped animate the text and clarify meaning, particularly during emotionally charged or narratively significant moments. These embodied actions appeared to function as cognitive supports, assisting students in recalling content, sequencing ideas, and maintaining the flow of speech. In instances where minor hesitations occurred, gestures and facial expressions often compensated for verbal disruption, enabling students to sustain communication without noticeable breakdown.

Costumes and props, though generally simple and symbolic, played a meaningful role in shaping performance. By facilitating role-taking, they appeared to help students distance themselves from self-consciousness and assume a performative identity. Students wearing costumes commonly adopted more open posture, broader gestures, and stronger vocal projection, suggesting that these visual elements contributed to increased expressiveness and reduced performance anxiety. The presence of even minimal props seemed to anchor the narrative context and support embodied engagement with the text.

One particularly memorable moment involved a visibly anxious student who began the recitation with hesitation, marked by reduced volume and limited eye contact. As the performance unfolded, however, the student gradually increased vocal strength, incorporated expressive gestures, and completed the recitation with clear emotional emphasis. The positive audience response that followed appeared to reinforce this transformation, highlighting the performative potential of public oral language use to foster confidence, expressive competence, and a sense of achievement among young learners.

Affective Observations

Audience response had a noticeable and immediate impact on students' performances. Visible forms of engagement - such as attentive silence, sustained eye contact, smiles, nodding, or spontaneous applause - often coincided with observable improvements in vocal strength, clearer articulation, and more expansive expressive gestures. As performances progressed, students appeared to adjust their delivery in response to these cues, increasing volume, exaggerating

intonation, or extending pauses at key moments. These audience reactions seemed to function as real-time feedback, reinforcing students' communicative intent and encouraging greater confidence in language use.

While on stage, many students appeared to undergo a temporary shift in identity. They were no longer positioned solely as language learners reproducing memorized texts, but as performers using English to communicate meaning to a public audience. This shift was reflected in changes to physical stance and vocal presence, including more upright posture, broader gestures, and increased projection. The manner in which performances were concluded further illustrated this transformation: rather than stopping abruptly once the text ended, some students paused deliberately, made eye contact with the audience, or acknowledged applause, suggesting an emerging awareness of performance conventions and audience-oriented communication.

A clear distinction emerged between students who performed "live" and those who appeared to be "merely reciting." Lively performances were characterised by expressive variation, rhythmic pacing, and responsiveness to audience cues. These students demonstrated flexibility in delivery, recovering smoothly from minor hesitations or slips by adjusting intonation, reformulating phrases, or using gesture to maintain communicative flow. In contrast, performances that relied heavily on memorization tended to be rigid and monotonic, with limited prosodic variation and minimal engagement with the audience. When memory lapses occurred, such performances were more vulnerable to breakdown, often resulting in prolonged pauses, lowered volume, or visible signs of anxiety.

Overall, these observations suggest that audience presence and response play a critical role in transforming memorized texts into communicative acts. Performances that were oriented toward audience engagement appeared to support fluency, expressive delivery, and speaker confidence, whereas performances grounded primarily in recall without interactional orientation were less resilient under performance pressure. This contrast highlights the importance of viewing English recitation not simply as a test of memorization, but as a situated communicative event in which language, embodiment, and audience interaction jointly shape oral performance.

4) DISCUSSION

This study set out to examine how English recitation competitions function as sites of meaningful oral language performance for Indonesian primary school students, with particular

attention to fluency, pronunciation, expression, and the role of audience context. The findings directly address the research questions and align with recent literature on memorization, oral fluency, intelligibility, and affect in young learners.

Linking Findings to Research Question 1

How do primary school students perform English recitations in terms of fluency, pronunciation, and expressive delivery in a public competition context?

The findings indicate that fluency in recitation performances should be understood as an emergent phenomenon rather than a fixed competence that learners bring to the task. This supports contemporary perspectives on fluency development, which argue that fluency arises through real-time language use and interaction rather than functioning solely as a prerequisite for successful performance (Jong, 2018). In this view, fluency is dynamically constructed as learners engage with linguistic material, audiences, and performance contexts. The recitation task itself becomes a site where fluency is enacted, negotiated, and refined, highlighting the importance of performance-based activities in language learning.

Students' strategic use of pauses further reinforces this emergent understanding of fluency. Rather than signaling breakdowns or deficiencies, pauses often functioned as resources that enabled learners to maintain coherence, manage cognitive load, and recover from momentary difficulties. This aligns with research emphasizing pause management, repair strategies, and temporal control as key contributors to listeners' perceptions of fluency (Kahng, 2018). In the performances observed, pauses were frequently purposeful, marking transitions between ideas or enhancing dramatic effect, suggesting that learners were not merely coping with linguistic limitations but actively shaping their delivery.

The role of memorization in these performances also merits attention, as it challenges traditional assumptions that memorization constrains communicative ability. Instead, the findings suggest that memorization can function as a scaffold that supports fluent and expressive performance, particularly when learners engage meaningfully with the content. When memorization is meaning-oriented rather than mechanical, it appears to free cognitive resources that can be redirected toward pronunciation, expression, and audience engagement. In this sense, memorized texts provide a stable linguistic framework that enables learners to focus on communicative delivery during performance (Jong, 2018).

Pronunciation outcomes in the study resonate strongly with intelligibility-focused scholarship, which prioritizes comprehensibility over native-like accuracy (Derwing & Munro, 2015). Although segmental errors were present, they rarely interfered with overall understanding, particularly when students effectively employed suprasegmental features such as intonation, rhythm, and stress. These features played a crucial role in signaling meaning, emotion, and discourse structure, thereby sustaining listener comprehension. The findings underscore the pedagogical value of emphasizing intelligibility and prosody, especially in performance-oriented tasks.

Moreover, students' conscious articulation strategies suggest a heightened awareness of audience and communicative purpose. Rather than mechanically reproducing memorized text, learners adjusted volume, clarity, and pacing in response to the performance context. This indicates that pronunciation choices were guided by communicative intent and sensitivity to listener needs, reinforcing the view that young learners are capable of making sophisticated performance-oriented decisions when given appropriate opportunities.

Finally, expression emerged as a central dimension of recitation performance, reinforcing literature on the performative and embodied nature of language learning (Pinter, 2021). Gesture, facial expression, posture, and role enactment transformed memorized texts into meaningful communicative acts. These embodied resources allowed learners to convey emotion and narrative intent, demonstrating how linguistic and non-linguistic modes work together in public speech. From a multimodal perspective, effective communication extends beyond verbal accuracy to include embodied and visual resources that operate alongside spoken language (Kress, 2018).

Linking Findings to Research Question 2

How does the public and diverse audience context shape students' confidence and oral language performance?

The affective findings of the study support dynamic models of emotion in second language acquisition, which conceptualize emotions such as anxiety, confidence, and enjoyment as fluid, situational, and context-dependent rather than stable learner traits (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016). During recitation performances, students' emotional states were observed to fluctuate noticeably across different moments of the task. Initial nervousness was common, particularly at the outset of performances, yet this anxiety often diminished as students became immersed in the act of

speaking. These shifts illustrate how affective variables are co-constructed with performance conditions and evolve in real time as learners engage in language use, consistent with dynamic systems perspectives on L2 emotion (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012).

Importantly, anxiety did not uniformly function as an inhibiting force. In many cases, public performance appeared to facilitate heightened engagement and more expressive delivery as students progressed through their recitations. Rather than withdrawing or minimizing speech, learners often responded to the performance context by increasing vocal energy, physical expressiveness, and emotional commitment to their roles. This finding resonates with research suggesting that certain forms of language anxiety can be facilitative, supporting attentional focus and task involvement rather than undermining communicative performance (Horwitz, 2001).

The presence of a diverse audience played a significant role in shaping students' affective and linguistic responses. The audience, mediated through Zoom and composed of participants from multiple schools, introduced an element of novelty and authenticity to the performance context. This public and unfamiliar audience appeared to encourage clearer articulation, increased vocal projection, and heightened expressiveness. Students seemed aware that they were addressing listeners beyond their immediate classroom community, prompting adjustments aimed at ensuring intelligibility and communicative impact an effect often associated with authentic communicative conditions (Ushioda, 2011).

These observations are consistent with studies indicating that unfamiliar or public audiences can positively influence learners' speech production by increasing attention to clarity and communicative effectiveness. When speakers perceive a genuine communicative purpose, they are more likely to mobilize linguistic, paralinguistic, and affective resources strategically. In this study, the virtual yet socially expansive performance space functioned as a meaningful communicative arena, demonstrating that digitally mediated contexts can still generate authentic engagement and emotionally invested language use.

Perhaps most striking was the observed shift in students' identities from "learners" to "English speakers" during performance. From a sociocultural perspective, language learning is inseparable from identity construction, and identities are enacted through participation in socially meaningful practices (Norton, 2013). As students performed publicly, they were no longer positioned solely as learners rehearsing English, but as legitimate users of the language

communicating with an audience. This temporary re-positioning had visible effects on confidence, stance, and expressive commitment.

This finding extends existing research by showing that even young learners can momentarily inhabit empowered linguistic identities through public performance. The recitation event created a space in which students could experience themselves as capable English speakers, potentially reshaping self-perceptions and future engagement with the language. Such experiences highlight the pedagogical value of performance-based tasks, suggesting that they contribute not only to linguistic development but also to positive affective trajectories and identity formation in early SLA contexts.

Linking Findings to Research Question 3

How does the presence of a diverse, public audience shape the communicative nature of students' English recitation performances?

The findings indicate that the presence of a diverse, public audience substantially transformed students' English recitation performances from rehearsed classroom routines into genuinely communicative acts. When students performed before audiences composed of unfamiliar listeners from different schools, cities, and provinces, their orientation toward language use shifted noticeably from textual accuracy to meaning delivery and audience engagement (Sato & Loewen, 2020; Tai & Chen, 2022).

One salient effect of the public audience was students' increased attention to intelligibility. Rather than simply reproducing memorized lines, students adapted their delivery to ensure that their message could be understood by listeners who did not share their classroom context. This was evident in clearer articulation, slower and more deliberate pacing, and the use of exaggerated stress and intonation patterns. These adjustments align with research emphasizing intelligibility over native-like pronunciation, particularly in lingua franca communication, where speakers prioritize clarity and listener comprehension (Levis, 2020; O'Neal, 2021). The audience's diversity thus encouraged students to treat English as a communicative resource rather than a rehearsed text.

The public audience also influenced students' prosodic and expressive choices. Performances addressed to unfamiliar listeners were marked by wider pitch range, stronger emphasis on key words, and more deliberate pausing. Pauses were not only signs of hesitation but

functioned as rhetorical devices, allowing students to structure meaning and signal transitions within the text. This suggests that students were engaging in audience-oriented fluency management, consistent with studies showing that perceived fluency is strongly shaped by pause placement, phrasing, and recovery rather than speed alone (Suzuki & Kormos, 2020).

In addition, the presence of a public audience heightened students' expressive and embodied performance. Gestures, facial expressions, posture, and eye contact became more pronounced when students addressed distant or unfamiliar listeners. These multimodal resources helped bridge potential communicative gaps caused by linguistic limitations and supported meaning-making beyond verbal language. The audience thus acted as a catalyst for embodied communication, enabling students to transform memorized texts into socially meaningful performances (Gómez & Larios, 2021).

Affective changes were also closely tied to audience presence. While students initially displayed anxiety before performing, many showed increased confidence once they began engaging with the audience. The visible shift from nervousness to steadier voice, improved fluency, and more expressive delivery suggests that the public audience did not merely increase pressure but also generated a sense of purpose and authenticity. Performing for real listeners appeared to validate students' language use, allowing confidence to emerge through interaction rather than prior mastery. This supports affective research in SLA that conceptualizes confidence, enjoyment, and anxiety as dynamic and performance-dependent rather than fixed learner traits (Baldwin & Fryer, 2020; Teimouri et al., 2022).

Finally, the diverse audience positioned English as a lingua franca rather than a school subject. Students were not speaking to teachers who already knew the text, but to listeners who relied on the performance to access meaning. This communicative reality reshaped the function of memorization itself: memorized texts became tools for public meaning-making rather than endpoints of learning. In this way, the audience fundamentally altered the nature of the recitation event, transforming it into an authentic communicative encounter with real social consequences (O'Neal, 2021; Tai & Chen, 2022).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that a diverse, public audience plays a crucial role in shaping English recitation performances as communicative acts. By prompting adjustments in intelligibility, fluency, expression, embodiment, and affect, the audience moves recitation beyond rote reproduction and into the domain of meaningful oral language use (Sato & Loewen, 2020).

5) CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine English recitation competitions as contexts for meaningful oral language performance among Indonesian primary school students, with particular attention to fluency, pronunciation, expressive delivery, and the role of audience. Moving beyond the common perception of recitation as a memorization-driven activity, the findings demonstrate that such competitions function as socially situated, affectively rich performance events in which memorized texts are transformed into communicative acts.

The analysis shows that students' fluency during recitation was not a fixed or pre-existing ability but developed dynamically through performance. Learners managed pauses, pacing, and recovery from hesitation in ways that supported message continuity and listener comprehension. Although segmental pronunciation inaccuracies were present, intelligibility was largely maintained through effective use of suprasegmental features such as stress, intonation, and volume. These findings support contemporary views of fluency and pronunciation that prioritize communicative effectiveness over native-like accuracy, particularly for young EFL learners.

Expression and embodiment emerged as central components of meaning-making. Gesture, facial expression, posture, and voice modulation played a crucial role in sustaining engagement and conveying emotion, enabling students to compensate for linguistic limitations and enrich their performances. Importantly, affective changes were observed across performances: while many students began with visible anxiety, confidence and expressive control often increased once the performance was underway. This suggests that confidence in language use can be constructed through participation in meaningful communicative activity rather than serving as a prerequisite for it.

The presence of a diverse, public audience further reshaped the communicative nature of recitation. Addressing unfamiliar listeners from different schools and regions prompted students to orient their language use toward intelligibility and audience engagement, positioning English as a lingua franca rather than a classroom subject. In this context, memorization functioned not as rote reproduction but as a scaffold that enabled extended oral production, expressive delivery, and authentic communication.

Overall, the study contributes to applied linguistics and primary EFL research by foregrounding English recitation competitions as legitimate sites of oral language development. It highlights the pedagogical value of performance-based, minimally interrupted speaking events that

integrate memorization, embodiment, affect, and audience awareness. These findings invite educators and curriculum designers to reconsider the role of public performance in young learners' language education and to recognize recitation not merely as an assessment of recall, but as a powerful opportunity for meaningful oral language use.

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