

Analyzing the development of university English students' speaking fluency

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Abstract

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The development of speaking fluency is a critical aspect of English language learning, particularly for non-native speakers. This study investigates the progress of university English learners in improving their speaking fluency, focusing on two key measures: the length of silent pauses and the use of pause fillers. A quantitative approach was employed, utilizing a pre-experimental design with 61 second-year students from two private universities, one in Indonesia and one in Uzbekistan. These students were enrolled in a speaking course at their respective universities, and the study served as an evaluative measure for the course. Data were collected through speaking tasks administered at the beginning and end of the course, where students delivered five-minute monologues on topics related to professional communication, specifically the creation of a startup company. The findings revealed a significant reduction in silent pauses, indicating an improvement in fluency, while the use of pause fillers showed minimal change.

Keywords: EFL students, pause fillers, silent pauses, speaking fluency

INTRODUCTION

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, speaking fluently is often viewed as one of the most challenging yet essential skills for students to acquire. Fluency is not just about speaking without errors; it also involves the ability to express ideas smoothly, with minimal hesitation and interruptions. For many students, the goal is to speak English as effortlessly and coherently as native speakers, a benchmark that often seems difficult to achieve. However, achieving fluency is essential for communicative efficiency, enabling students to engage in meaningful conversations and convey their thoughts clearly. The development of speaking fluency requires a balance between accuracy—speaking correctly with few errors—and fluency—speaking smoothly with few pauses. While accuracy is essential, fluency plays a crucial role in how effectively a message is delivered and understood. Students often face various challenges that impede their fluency, such as limited vocabulary, nervousness, and lack of exposure to English in their daily lives. These challenges can result in frequent pauses, use of fillers, and ultimately, less effective communication ([Ratnasari, 2020](#)).

Given the importance of fluency in communication, it is surprising that there has been limited research focusing on the long-term development of fluency, especially in the Indonesian context. Most studies tend to focus on short-term interventions or immediate outcomes, leaving a gap in understanding how fluency develops over a more extended period. This study aims to fill that gap by examining the progress of EFL students in improving their speaking fluency after completing a course specifically designed to enhance their professional communication skills. The research not only measures the effectiveness of the course but also sheds light on the factors that contribute to or hinder the development of fluency. Consequently, this study is structured to explore the concept of fluency, identify the challenges students face in achieving fluency, and analyze the effectiveness of targeted interventions. By focusing on silent pauses and pause fillers as indicators of fluency, this research provides valuable insights into how students' fluency evolves over time and what factors influence their progress.

Speaking is one of the core skills in language learning, alongside listening, reading, and writing. However, unlike the other skills, speaking requires real-time production and reception of language, making it particularly challenging. In an EFL context, where opportunities to practice speaking are often limited, the development of speaking skills becomes even more critical ([Nunan, 2003](#)). For EFL students, speaking serves as the primary means of communication in English. It involves not only the ability to produce grammatically correct sentences but also the ability to convey meaning effectively. Speaking is inherently interactive, requiring students to listen, process, and respond simultaneously. This complexity often leads to anxiety and hesitation, which can hinder fluency.

In the classroom, speaking activities are typically designed to simulate real-life communication scenarios ([Parmawati & Inayah, 2019](#)). These activities range from simple dialogues and role-plays to more complex tasks such as debates and presentations. The goal is to help students build confidence in their speaking abilities while also improving their accuracy and fluency. However, the effectiveness of these activities depends on several factors, including the students' level of proficiency, the teaching methods used, and the classroom environment. The current research focuses on analyzing speaking fluency within this broader context of EFL education. By examining how students' fluency develops over time, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities that arise in the process of learning to speak English fluently.

Challenges in Speaking English as a Foreign Language

Speaking a foreign language fluently is a challenging task for most learners, and EFL students are no exception. Various factors can hinder the development of speaking fluency, including psychological barriers, linguistic limitations, and environmental constraints. One of the primary challenges EFL students face is nervousness. Speaking in a foreign language often induces anxiety, particularly in situations where students fear making mistakes or being judged by others. This anxiety can manifest in the form of extended pauses, repetition of words, and the overuse of fillers. When students are nervous, their ability to retrieve vocabulary and structure sentences effectively is compromised, leading to less fluent speech ([Mairi et al., 2017](#)).

Another significant challenge is the lack of an immersive environment. In many EFL contexts, students do not have the opportunity to practice speaking English outside the classroom. This lack of exposure to authentic language use makes it difficult for students to develop the fluency they need to communicate effectively in real-world situations. Moreover, the limited opportunities to interact with native speakers or fluent English speakers further exacerbate this challenge. In addition to psychological and environmental factors, linguistic limitations also play a role in hindering fluency. EFL students often struggle with a limited vocabulary, making it difficult to express their ideas clearly and concisely. Additionally, gaps in grammatical knowledge can lead to hesitation and errors, which disrupt the flow of speech ([Husna & Astria, 2021](#)).

These challenges are compounded by the fact that speaking is often perceived as more demanding than other language skills. Unlike reading or writing, where students have more time to process information and formulate responses, speaking requires immediate language production. This pressure can be overwhelming for students, leading to further anxiety and hesitation. Therefore, understanding these challenges is essential for educators who aim to improve their students' speaking fluency. By addressing the underlying causes of fluency difficulties, teachers can create a more supportive learning environment that encourages students to practice speaking without fear of making mistakes.

Development of EFL Speaking

The development of speaking skills in EFL learners is a gradual process that requires consistent practice and targeted interventions. For many students, the primary goal is to communicate effectively in English, which involves not only producing grammatically correct sentences but also speaking fluently and confidently. The role of the teacher is crucial in facilitating this development. Teachers can support their students by providing a range of speaking activities that cater to different levels of proficiency and by creating a classroom environment that encourages risk-taking and experimentation with language. For example, role-plays, debates, and group discussions are all effective ways to engage students in meaningful communication. In addition to classroom activities, students can also benefit from practicing speaking outside of class. This might involve participating in language clubs, conversing with peers in English, or even engaging in self-study activities such as recording and reviewing their own speech. The key is to provide students with as many opportunities as possible to use English in a variety of contexts.

One of the most significant factors in the development of speaking skills is motivation. Students who are motivated to improve their speaking abilities are more likely to engage in activities that promote fluency. This motivation can come from a variety of sources, including the desire to perform well academically, the need to communicate effectively in a professional setting, or the personal satisfaction of mastering a new skill.

Another important factor is the use of strategies to improve speaking skills. For example, some students may find it helpful to focus on fluency before accuracy, allowing themselves to make mistakes in order to speak more naturally. Others may use techniques such as paraphrasing or circumlocution to work around gaps in their vocabulary.

Overall, the development of speaking skills in EFL learners is a complex process that involves a combination of practice, motivation, and strategic approaches. By understanding the factors that contribute to fluency, educators can better support their students in achieving their language learning goals ([Nazara, 2011](#)).

Fluency in Speaking English as a Foreign Language

Fluency is a multifaceted aspect of speaking that encompasses not only the speed and smoothness of speech but also the ability to communicate ideas clearly and without unnecessary interruptions. In the context of EFL, fluency is often one of the most challenging skills to develop, as it requires not only linguistic competence but also confidence and practice. In this study, fluency is measured through two primary indicators: the length of silent pauses and the use of pause fillers. Silent pauses refer to moments of hesitation where the speaker stops speaking entirely, often because they are unsure of what to say next. Pause fillers, on the other hand, are words or sounds like "uh," "um," or "like" that speakers use to fill gaps in their speech while they think of what to say next.

Both silent pauses and pause fillers are natural parts of speech, but excessive use of either can indicate a lack of fluency. For example, a speaker who frequently pauses for long periods may be struggling to retrieve vocabulary or organize their thoughts. Similarly, a speaker who overuses pause fillers may be compensating for a lack of confidence or a limited ability to articulate their ideas clearly. Improving fluency involves reducing both silent pauses and pause fillers. This can be achieved through practice, exposure to authentic language use, and the development of strategies to manage anxiety and hesitation. For example, students can practice speaking in a low-pressure environment, such as with a trusted peer or in a language lab, to build their confidence. Additionally, techniques such as deep breathing and visualization can help reduce anxiety and improve focus during speaking tasks.

Fluency is not just about speaking quickly or without mistakes; it is about communicating effectively and naturally. This study aims to explore how EFL students develop their fluency over time and what factors contribute to their progress ([Richards & Renandya, 2002](#)).

Factors Influencing Fluency in Speaking English as a Foreign Language

Fluency in speaking English is influenced by a variety of factors, both internal and external. Understanding these factors can help educators and students alike address the challenges that hinder fluency and promote practices that support more effective communication. One of the most significant internal factors is anxiety. Many EFL students experience a fear of making mistakes, which can lead to hesitation and over-reliance on pause fillers. This anxiety can be particularly pronounced in formal speaking situations, such as presentations or exams, where students feel that they are being judged on their performance. To mitigate this anxiety, it is important for educators to create a supportive environment where mistakes are viewed as a natural part of the learning process ([Ngoc & Dung, 2020](#)).

Another internal factor is the students' level of automaticity in language use. Automaticity refers to the ability to produce language without conscious effort. For

beginners, speaking often requires a great deal of cognitive effort, as they must consciously think about grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. As students become more proficient, their language use becomes more automatic, allowing them to focus on higher-level aspects of communication, such as conveying meaning and responding to their interlocutor.

External factors also play a role in fluency development. For example, the amount of exposure to English outside the classroom can significantly impact a student's ability to speak fluently. Students who regularly engage with English through media, conversations with native speakers, or other immersive experiences are likely to develop greater fluency than those who only use English in a classroom setting. Moreover, the teaching methods and feedback provided by instructors can influence fluency development. Frequent error correction, while useful for improving accuracy, can sometimes disrupt the flow of speech and make students more self-conscious about their language use. Therefore, it is important for teachers to strike a balance between correcting mistakes and encouraging fluent, spontaneous speech ([Rabab'ah, 2016](#)).

In summary, fluency in speaking English as a foreign language is shaped by a complex interplay of internal and external factors. By recognizing and addressing these factors, educators can create more effective learning environments that support the development of fluency.

Silent Pauses in Speaking English as a Foreign Language

Silent pauses are a natural part of spoken language, but they can become problematic when they occur too frequently or last too long. In the context of EFL learning, silent pauses are often seen as a sign of hesitation or uncertainty, indicating that the speaker is struggling to retrieve vocabulary, structure their thoughts, or manage their anxiety. According to Duez (1982), silent pauses can serve several purposes, such as hesitating while formulating a thought, marking grammatical boundaries, or simply taking a breath. However, in the context of EFL learners, silent pauses are more likely to be associated with hesitation and uncertainty. When students are unsure of what to say next, they may fall silent while they search for the right words or organize their thoughts. The length and frequency of silent pauses can significantly impact the listener's perception of fluency. Long pauses can disrupt the flow of conversation and make the speaker appear less confident or competent. Conversely, reducing the number and length of silent pauses can help improve the overall fluency and coherence of speech.

In this study, silent pauses were analyzed to determine their frequency and duration during student presentations. By comparing the number and length of silent pauses before and after the intervention, the study aimed to assess the effectiveness of the course in improving students' fluency.

Pause Fillers in Speaking English as a Foreign Language

Pause fillers, such as "um," "uh," and "like," are another common feature of spoken language. While they can serve a useful function by giving the speaker time to think or signal that they are not finished speaking, excessive use of pause fillers can be distracting and may detract from the speaker's fluency. In EFL contexts, pause fillers are often used as a strategy to "buy time" while the speaker searches for the right words or structures their sentence ([Santos et al., 2016](#)). However, over-reliance on pause fillers can indicate a lack of confidence or fluency, as the speaker may be using them to cover up gaps in their language proficiency.

This study analyzed the frequency and types of pause fillers used by students before

and after the intervention. By examining the changes in the use of pause fillers, the study aimed to gain insights into how students' fluency developed over time and how they managed their hesitation and uncertainty during speaking tasks.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a pre-post design, distinguishing it from previous research by conducting a comprehensive long-term analysis. Data were collected through a monologue speaking exam and a survey. The monologue served as a platform for students to deliver concise presentations on topics related to professional communication. The survey, adapted from [Wang \(2014\)](#), assessed students' proficiency in speaking accuracy and fluency. Multiple studies have examined similar subjects, but prior investigations primarily focused on immediate or short-term outcomes. This research, however, extended the observation period, providing a more in-depth analysis of students' fluency development over time.

Two instruments were utilized in this study: a speaking test and a survey. The speaking test was the primary means of data collection, involving a monologue exam where students were required to present a concise discourse on topics related to professional communication. The recordings of their performance were transcribed and analyzed to assess fluency, focusing on the frequency and length of silent pauses as well as the use of pause fillers. The survey, derived from [Wang \(2014\)](#), aimed to gather additional insights into the students' experiences and perceptions of their speaking fluency. The questions were translated into Bahasa and Uzbek language to prevent any misinterpretation by the EFL students, ensuring that the data collected was accurate and reflective of their experiences. The data were collected at the beginning and the end of the course, allowing for a comparison of students' fluency before and after the intervention. The results were then analyzed using paired t-tests to determine whether there were significant differences between the pre-test and post-test results.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of Learners' Silent Pauses

The EFL students were pre-tested to speak in English for a maximum of five minutes. The primary objective of the test was to determine whether the students were using pauses and fillers during their speech. After that, they were tested again to find out whether they had developed speaking fluency. The recordings of their performance were transcribed into text for analysis. According to the pre-test, it was found that most of the EFL students had pauses in their speaking, with the longest pauses lasting 57 seconds in two minutes. [Bell, \(2011\)](#) states that fluency failure in public speaking is often exacerbated by long pauses, which can distract the speaker from articulating their ideas effectively. After the course, the students took a post-test, and the results showed a significant reduction in the length of silent pauses. The longest pause in the post-test was 13 seconds, indicating a marked improvement in fluency. A paired t-test revealed significant differences between the pre-test and post-test results ($p < 0.05$), as seen in Table 1, confirming that the students had benefited from the Speaking in Professional Communication course.

Table 1. Final Result of Silent Pause Analysis

Test	N	Descriptive Statistic	Paired T-Test		
		M (Std.D)	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pre-test	61	14.31 (3.20)	3.283	19	0.004
Post Test	61	4.01 (.89)			

As shown in Table 1, it can be concluded that EFL students experienced significant improvement after participating in the Speaking in Professional Communication course ($p < 0.5$), indicating that the course positively impacted their speaking fluency. The pre- and post-tests revealed clear progress in the students' speaking abilities. Initially, they exhibited frequent pauses, but after completing the course, the number of pauses significantly decreased. This suggests that the knowledge gained during the course enabled them to speak more fluidly and avoid unnecessary pauses. These results demonstrate that the course had a substantial effect on helping EFL students develop greater fluency, with fewer interruptions in their speech. Based on the Kirkpatrick model, it is evident that a developmental change occurred, as students applied what they learned during the course to their speaking practices. However, while their fluency improved, the data suggests they are still in the process of mastering smooth, fluent speech.

Interestingly, the findings of this study differ from previous research. In a study by Doe, EFL students showed a slight but notable increase in the average length of pauses throughout discourse. In contrast, the current research found that the students in the Speaking in Professional Communication course reduced the average length of their pauses. The second key finding pertains to the analysis of pause fillers. The method used to analyze pause fillers was the same as that employed for pauses. The students' speech was recorded and transcribed to identify the types of fillers used. In the pre-test, nine types of fillers were identified across 61 students, including: "mmm," "aaa," "like," "uhh," "well," "eee," "I mean," and "umm." After the pre-test, the students had one month before the post-test, during which they participated in the Speaking in Professional Communication course. The post-test, which involved a different topic but used the same format as the pre-test, revealed that the same types of fillers were used, namely "mmm," "aaa," "like," "uhh," and "well." Previous research conducted by Nur et al. found that the most common fillers were "um," "er," and "erm." However, in the current study, "aaa" was the most frequently used filler in both the pre- and post-tests. According to [Nur et al. \(2019\)](#) these fillers are considered non-lexical pauses because they are not actual words and do not convey any meaning.

Table 2. Final Result of Pause Fillers Analysis

Test	N	Descriptive Statistic	Paired T-Test		
		M (Std.D)	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pre-test	61	13.36 (5.97)	1.960	4	.112
Post-Test	61	12.17 (5.44)			

As shown in Table 2, EFL students did not show significant improvement after participating in the Speaking in Professional Communication course ($p > 0.5$), suggesting that the course did not lead to the expected development in terms of pause fillers. The t-test revealed no significant differences between the pre- and post-test results. While some students demonstrated improvement by using fewer fillers in the post-test, the overall findings indicate that EFL students remain unfamiliar with the effective use of pause fillers, a key component of speaking fluency. According to the Kirkpatrick model, the outcome suggests there was no observable development. The students who completed the Speaking in Professional Communication course did not consistently apply what they had learned, and as a result, their speaking fluency did not significantly improve.

The third key finding pertains to the factors that influence the speaking fluency of EFL students. Based on the results, it can be concluded that certain affective and instructional factors play a significant role. The data shows that 68% of the students are affected by emotional factors such as anxiety or fear of making mistakes. Additionally, 58% of the students occasionally focus on performance-related factors such as time management during speaking, and 43% experience challenges with automation, which involves speaking naturally and spontaneously. Furthermore, 75% of students indicated a preference for teachers correcting their mistakes in speaking class, which often leads to frequent requests for repetition and correction. This high level of reliance on correction may hinder their development of speaking fluency.

The analysis of the questionnaire data highlighted a deficiency in the students' fluency. The findings reveal that 75% of students prefer error correction from teachers during speaking classes, which suggests that this dependence on correction disrupts their natural fluency. The data also shows that 68% of students are negatively affected by affective factors, such as fear of making mistakes in pronunciation and grammar. These negative emotions, in turn, affect their overall performance. For example, 58% of students sometimes struggle with time management when speaking, which pressures them and affects their ability to speak fluently. In addition, 43% of students occasionally face difficulties with automation, which is crucial for developing natural speaking fluency. According to Iswara et al. (2012), EFL students are expected to speak fluently as a means of natural communication. However, the data indicates that the lack of automation is a significant factor affecting the speaking fluency of the students in this study.

CONCLUSIONS

This research focuses on EFL students enrolled in the Speaking in Professional Communication course, aimed at improving their speaking fluency. The results from both the pre- and post-tests indicated a significant reduction in speech pauses, suggesting that students' fluency in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) improved ($p < 0.5$). The course helped students develop more continuous speech, thereby enhancing their fluency. However, despite the overall improvement in fluency, students continued to rely on pause fillers like "mmm," "aaa," and "uhh."

While the variety and frequency of these fillers decreased, their presence suggests that students still employed non-lexical pauses even as their fluency increased. The students' communication was further hindered by a lack of confidence and a persistent fear of making mistakes. According to the survey, a significant portion of students (75%) relied heavily on direct corrections from their teachers, and many also struggled with time management and automation. These challenges in fluency contributed to interruptions in speech and the use of unnecessary words during conversations.

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