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Exploring University EFL Students' Use of Communication Strategies in Impromptu Speaking

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A B S T R A C T

This study examines the role of impromptu speaking in enhancing spontaneous communication skills among university EFL students. The research aims to identify the primary challenges students encounter during impromptu speech and the strategies they utilize before, during, and after the activity. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations involving 44 sixth-semester English major students at Universitas Jambi. Instruments included interview guides and observation checklists. The findings indicate that the main difficulties experienced by students are limited vocabulary, anxiety, poor sentence organization, and unfamiliarity with topics. To address these challenges, students employed various communication strategies, such as simplifying vocabulary, using synonyms, managing anxiety through breathing techniques, and drawing on personal experiences. Post-speech strategies involved vocabulary expansion through reading, regular practice of spontaneous speaking, and seeking peer feedback. The study concludes that despite inherent challenges, impromptu speaking is an effective tool for promoting speaking fluency, confidence, and practical communicative competence. It is recommended that EFL instructors incorporate impromptu speaking activities into their curricula, providing on-going support and strategic guidance to foster students' competence and confidence in speaking.

Keywords: *Impromptu Speech, EFL Students, Communication Strategies*

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INTRODUCTION

In the context of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), speaking skill is one of the essential aspects in shaping students' communicative competence. In the university environment, students are required not only to use English structurally but also to communicate spontaneously in various authentic academic and social situations. One form of exercise considered effective for developing this skill is impromptu speech, a speaking activity without preparation of written text, encouraging students to think quickly and convey ideas in a structured manner within a limited time.

Impromptu speech supports the development of fluency, spontaneity, and critical thinking skills in real communication contexts. Students learn to express opinions, respond directly to specific topics, and logically structure oral discourse without extensive preparation. Spontaneous speaking practice is crucial in English language teaching because it brings students closer to real-world unexpected language use (Al-Tamimi, 2014). Moreover, spontaneous speaking enhances students' confidence in public speaking.

However, despite its great potential in improving communicative competence, the implementation of impromptu speech in classrooms often faces challenges. Students

commonly experience speaking anxiety, especially when performing without preparation. Limited vocabulary, difficulty organizing ideas quickly, and time pressure also pose significant obstacles. This aligns with previous research identifying inability to organize spontaneous ideas and fear of making mistakes in front of an audience as main barriers (Tuan & Mai, 2015).

Previous studies also reveal that success in impromptu speech depends not only on linguistic ability but also on the communication strategies students use to overcome obstacles. Communication strategies such as paraphrasing, repetition, or nonverbal cues help maintain fluency during spontaneous speech (Chen & Goh, 2015). Therefore, understanding the problems students face and the strategies they apply is essential.

However, there is a limited number of studies exploring students' specific problems and strategy use in impromptu speech activities within the TEFL classroom context. This gap needs to be addressed to optimize pedagogical approaches and tailor interventions that effectively support spontaneous speaking skill development. The problem formulations guiding this study are: What problems do students face during impromptu speech? What strategies do students use to overcome problems during impromptu speech? And What strategies do students apply to improve their impromptu speech performance?

Although previous studies have acknowledged the importance of impromptu speech in enhancing spontaneous speaking skills and communicative competence, there remains a lack of focused research on the specific challenges students face during impromptu speaking activities in the TEFL classroom, particularly in university contexts. Moreover, while communication strategies have been explored broadly in speaking skill development, limited attention has been given to how students actively employ these strategies specifically during impromptu speech to overcome anxiety, organize ideas, and maintain fluency.

This gap indicates a need for a deeper understanding of the real-time problems encountered by EFL learners and the coping mechanisms or strategies they use in impromptu speech tasks. Such insights will help inform teaching practices that can better scaffold and support students' spontaneous speaking development. Based on the identified research gap, this study aims to: identify the specific problems students encounter when performing impromptu speeches in a TEFL university setting, explore the communication strategies students use to overcome difficulties during impromptu speech delivery and investigate the strategies students apply to improve their performance in impromptu speaking activities. Further explanation of impromptu speech concepts and relevant previous findings will be discussed in the following literature review.

First, the teaching of speaking skills in TEFL includes a variety of approaches that aim to improve language fluency and accuracy. Speaking skills in a second language involve the active and spontaneous use of language, thus demanding a contextual and communicative teaching approach (Richards, 2008). Several methods that can be used for public speaking, such as during presentations or speeches (Leon, 2023). These methods include impromptu speaking, extemporaneous speaking, scripted speaking, and rote speaking each offering different techniques and advantages.

Impromptu speaking refers to the delivery of a short speech with little or no preparation. This method is typically used by individuals who already have prior knowledge or experience relating to the topic. Extemporaneous speech, on the other hand, is a blend of impromptu and scripted methods. This method allows the speaker to prepare in advance by outlining key points, which serve as a guide during the speech. However, unlike scripted speaking, the speech is not written word for word; instead, the speaker outlines the prepared points spontaneously.

Manuscript speaking involves reading from a fully written and prepared speech script. The speaker's focus is primarily on the text, with only occasional glances at visual aids if used. Lastly, in rote speech, the speech is entirely done by memory and spoken without the use of notes or a script. This method requires the speaker to remember and deliver the speech exactly as it is written. Among the four methods, this study specifically focuses on the impromptu speaking method.
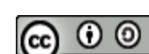
Second, in the context of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL), impromptu speech is a powerful method to improve students' speaking ability. It refers to a spontaneous speaking activity performed with little or no prior preparation, and is very useful for encouraging students to think quickly, articulate ideas logically, and develop confidence in public speaking situations. Although impromptu speech lacks extensive preparation, it follows a basic yet coherent structure and offers substantial pedagogical value in language education.

Impromptu speech is one method that provides an opportunity for students to practice quick and natural language responses. This activity reflects the use of language in real-world situations, which is very important in task-based learning. Spontaneous speaking practice can strengthen students' communication reflexes, improve responsiveness, and help them develop compensatory strategies when facing linguistic barriers (Brown, 2000).

Impromptu speech as spontaneous verbal communication delivered without the benefit of prior rehearsal or extensive planning (Gregory, 2016). Impromptu speaking naturally occurs in everyday situations, such as introducing oneself, responding to open-ended questions in classroom discussions, or expressing opinions informally (Leon, 2023). These spontaneous interactions reflect the real-life communicative demands that learners frequently encounter. In educational contexts, the impromptu speech method fosters critical thinking and the ability to respond swiftly without relying on written scripts (Celce-Murcia, 2001). This aligns with the pedagogical shift towards communicative competence, where fluency and adaptability are prioritized alongside accuracy.

Furthermore, impromptu speech is authentic and situationally grounded, making it relevant for high-stakes assessments like the IELTS speaking test, which requires test-takers to deliver a structured response to a topic after a brief preparation time (Lumettu & Runtuwene, 2018). This natural alignment with real-world scenarios makes impromptu speech an essential component of speaking instruction.

Despite its spontaneous nature, impromptu speech adheres to a clear rhetorical structure that guides speakers through their delivery. Sedniev and Andri propose a tripartite framework comprising an introduction, body, and conclusion (Masfufah, 2020). The introduction captures the audience's attention and presents the central topic, the body elaborates on two to three key points with relevant examples or reasoning, and the conclusion summarizes the main ideas while reinforcing the speaker's message. This structure helps ensure that spontaneity does not compromise coherence or clarity.

The pedagogical objectives of implementing impromptu speech in EFL classrooms are multifaceted. This method offers a stimulating yet challenging experience that develops students' analytical thinking, logical organization, and oral argumentation skills under pressure (Munawarah, 2012). Moreover, it cultivates learners' confidence to speak in front of others and strengthens their communicative competence for both academic and non-academic settings. By simulating real-life communication, impromptu speech prepares students for spontaneous interactions in diverse social contexts, including the workplace.

Nevertheless, impromptu speaking also presents certain instructional challenges. This method significantly enhances fluency, real-time speaking abilities, and classroom participation. It trains students to adapt their speech to different audiences and maintain coherence under time constraints. However, it can also trigger anxiety, hesitation, or a temporary loss of focus, particularly among less confident speakers. Common difficulties include awkward silences, stage fright, and disorganized content delivery (Masfufah, 2020).

Therefore, educators must thoughtfully design impromptu speech activities and provide adequate scaffolding, such as topic prompts, visual cues, or peer feedback, to support learners and mitigate potential barriers. In summary, impromptu speech holds significant value in EFL speaking instruction, not only as a tool for improving linguistic performance but also as a means of enhancing students' spontaneity, confidence, and real-world communication readiness. Its integration into classroom practice provides learners with authentic opportunities to develop both cognitive and interpersonal skills, making it an effective strategy in communicative language teaching.

Third, Impromptu speech is an effective teaching method to develop spontaneous and responsive speaking skills in the classroom. This method requires students to deliver speeches with little or no preparation, thereby training quick thinking and confidence in speaking on the spot. Several activities support the implementation of impromptu speech in speaking classes, including discussions, storytelling, interviews, reporting, picture description, and role-playing (Kayi, 2006). Class discussions provide students with opportunities to share ideas and opinions directly, while deepening their understanding of the material. The teacher's role is crucial in guiding the discussion to remain focused and relevant. Storytelling activities foster creativity and narrative skills as students practice organizing stories with a clear beginning, development, and conclusion.

Interviews simulate real-life communication where students take turns as interviewer and interviewee, enhancing social interaction and oral communication skills. Reporting activities require students to process and orally present information based on observations or media content, which improves their summarizing and effective communication abilities. Picture description, done individually or in groups, develops students' imagination and structured, expressive speaking skills.

Meanwhile, role-playing allows students to practice language use in various social contexts by assuming different roles, boosting fluency and speaking confidence. In addition to these methods, debates offer another effective way to strengthen students' speaking skills. In debates, students articulate and defend their opinions and arguments critically in a structured and competitive setting (Tianame et al., 2019). By combining these activities, speaking instruction becomes dynamic and comprehensive, providing rich practical experiences that effectively enhance students' oral communication competencies.

Fourth, in the context of impromptu speech, the main challenge faced by speakers is the ability to think and speak spontaneously without prior preparation. This demands mastery of effective communication strategies to maintain the fluency and clarity of the message delivered. One relevant theory is Dornyei's communication strategy framework, which classifies strategies into two main categories: avoidance strategies and compensatory strategies. Avoidance strategies include topic avoidance and message abandonment, while compensatory strategies encompass paraphrasing, circumlocution, use of general words, coinage, non-linguistic signals, literal translation, foreign language use, code switching, asking for help, and time-gaining strategies.

Recent studies indicate that time-gaining strategies are among the most frequently used by university students, especially when they need extra time to organize their spontaneous ideas (Wirajaya, 2020). Additionally, Brown and Yule's model of speaking skills highlights that speaking involves three key competencies: idea processing, linguistic formulation, and message delivery. In impromptu speech, speakers must perform these three skills simultaneously and efficiently, which often presents a significant challenge. Idea processing entails critical and quick thinking; linguistic formulation involves mastery of appropriate language structures; and message delivery requires the ability to speak clearly and persuasively.

To overcome these challenges, it is essential for educators to introduce and train students in employing various effective communication strategies. With a thorough understanding and practical application of these strategies, students can improve their speaking abilities not only in impromptu speech situations but also in oral communication more broadly. Several studies have explored challenges in speaking, particularly those related to anxiety, limited vocabulary, and a lack of effective strategies for organizing spontaneous arguments. For instance, a research identified spontaneous sentence formation as a common obstacle faced by students in speaking classes (Tuan & Mai, 2015). Similarly, A research demonstrated that employing strategies such as 'thinking time,' paraphrasing, and anxiety management can significantly improve students' performance in spontaneous speaking tasks (Chen & Goh, 2015).

METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach that aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the challenges faced by students when performing impromptu speeches and the communication strategies they use to overcome these difficulties. The subjects in this study were all students of batch 2022 semester 6 of the Jambi University English Study Program, consisting of 44 students from two classes who had taken Speaking courses and carried out impromptu speech exercises as part of the learning process.

Data collection was conducted through several techniques, namely semi-structured interviews to explore students' experiences, difficulties, and strategies used in impromptu speeches; participatory observation during the learning process to record students' behavior and responses. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis techniques, which included data collection, coding, grouping themes, and drawing conclusions in accordance with the research focus. To maintain data validity, this study applied triangulation of sources and data collection techniques. In addition, member checking was conducted with several interview participants to ensure the accuracy and credibility of the information obtained.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Findings

The Main Problems Faced by EFL Students in Performing Impromptu Speech

The most dominant problem faced by students during impromptu speaking activities in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context was related to vocabulary limitations. This includes insufficient vocabulary, difficulties in selecting appropriate diction, and lack of access to synonyms when needed. A large number of students—such as Tirta, Najwa, Alfan, Regita, and others—reported struggling to find the right words to express their ideas, which hindered fluency and confidence. This aligns with Fitria (2023), who emphasized that limited vocabulary is one of the key obstacles in EFL learners' speaking proficiency, especially in spontaneous contexts.

Another major issue was anxiety and nervousness, which manifested as physical symptoms like shaky hands, unstable breathing, and panic. Students such as Regita, Zidan, and Cempaka experienced heightened anxiety that disrupted their ability to think clearly and retrieve vocabulary or organize ideas effectively. This finding supports, who found that anxiety significantly influences EFL learners' oral performance, particularly in high-pressure speaking situations like impromptu tasks (Zhang & Lu, 2021).

A third prevalent problem involved lack of coherence and poor sentence organization, as shared by students like Raudatul, Nur Mashita, and Rastra. They noted difficulties in arranging their ideas sequentially, resulting in fragmented or disorganized messages. The ability to maintain coherence and structure in speech is a major challenge in impromptu speaking because it requires not only language skills but also cognitive processing under time pressure (Yu & Lee, 2022).

Other less frequent but still significant challenges included: Grammar pressure; Students like Indana expressed becoming overwhelmed by grammatical concerns, leading to blank moments or hesitation. Grammar anxiety has been well-documented as a barrier in speaking fluency. Limited content knowledge; Students such as Alfan and Indah struggled with topic familiarity, which led to difficulty in developing relevant content. This supports the findings of (Tuan & Mai, 2015), who stated that lack of background knowledge reduces students' confidence and speaking content depth. Speaking fluency issues; some students mentioned excessive pauses or the frequent use of fillers, often triggered by panic. This reflects (Thornbury, 2005) idea that fluency requires both language mastery and psychological readiness.

Strategies Used by Students during Impromptu Speech

When facing these challenges during impromptu speech, students employed a variety of strategies to manage the task in real-time. One of the most common strategies was simplifying language use, such as replacing forgotten words with simpler alternatives or

synonyms. Students like Pricylia and Olivia reported trying to "find the simple word" or "think of similar vocabulary" to avoid silence or confusion. This aligns with (Ellis, 2016), who suggested that lexical substitution is a strategic competence EFL learners develop to maintain fluency.

Another strategy was self-regulation to control panic and anxiety, with students like Anisya, Amelia, and Silvia emphasizing the use of deep-breathing techniques, slowing down speech, and focusing on the topic to maintain calmness. These self-regulatory behaviors are consistent with (Bandura, 1997) theory of self-efficacy, where individuals actively manage their emotional states to enhance performance.

Several students like Anggun and Manisha tried to structure their thoughts in real time by identifying the main idea and telling the topic slowly while thinking of what to say next. This strategy reflects metacognitive planning, where speakers anticipate and organize their speech mentally before articulating it, as explained by (Yu & Lee, 2022). Furthermore, students with limited content knowledge attempted to relate the topic to their personal experiences or recall any knowledge associated with the theme. This included strategies like "telling my opinion", "using my own experience", and "expanding a single idea" as reported by Alfan and M. Ananda. Strategies help bridge the gap between cognitive limitation and communication needs in speaking tasks (Rahayu & Putri, 2020). Also, students such as Indana and Nurul Azi emphasized the need to ignore fear of grammatical mistakes and just keep talking, highlighting the importance of risk-taking in language learning. These findings are consistent with a research, who found that risk-taking tendencies improve oral fluency among anxious learners (Zhang & Lu, 2021).

Strategies Used by Students after Impromptu Speech to Improve Their Skills

Post-performance strategies focused on self-reflection and skill improvement to enhance future impromptu speaking. The most dominant post-task strategy was increasing vocabulary exposure through extensive reading, topic exploration, and deliberate vocabulary study. Students such as Firadao, Anggun, and Devina stated that they routinely read English materials, explore new words, and review vocabulary to enrich their lexical resources. These practices support a research by (Fitria, 2023; Kim, H., Choi & Lee, 2023), who emphasize the importance of input exposure in developing lexical competence for speaking.

Many students also highlighted the value of consistent practice, especially through daily spontaneous speaking on random topics, either in front of a mirror, with friends, or self-recorded. Students like Amelia and Dea noted how this helped them get used to formulating ideas quickly, which is vital in impromptu speech. This is strongly supported by (Thornbury, 2005), who noted that fluency is largely a product of repeated, meaningful practice under time constraints.

Students who had struggled with content generation mentioned strategies like reading more to gain general knowledge, as seen in comments by Indah and Pricylia. These students recognized that broadening their knowledge base would help them handle unexpected topics more effectively, as supported by (Yu & Lee, 2022) who argued that topic familiarity significantly affects speaking performance.

Additionally, peer support emerged as a minor yet significant strategy, especially in grammar or structure-related concerns. Students like Nurhameiza mentioned asking friends for input or feedback on sentence structure, which aligns with social learning theory as posited by (Bandura, 1997). Students also mentioned a commitment to building confidence gradually, overcoming stage fright, and being more relaxed in future performances. They acknowledged that confidence is not immediate but grows with experience, feedback, and self-reflection, which is a core idea in affective filter hypothesis by Krashen.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight key linguistic, psychological, and cognitive challenges encountered by EFL students during impromptu speech. Vocabulary limitation, anxiety, and lack of coherence emerged as the most dominant barriers, confirming previous

research (Fitria, 2023; Yu & Lee, 2022; Zhang & Lu, 2021) and emphasizing the complexity of speaking spontaneously in a foreign language. Despite these challenges, students demonstrated a range of effective strategies such as simplifying language, self-regulation, and metacognitive planning, which align with established theories in second language acquisition and learner psychology (Bandura, 1997; Ellis, 2016).

These findings offer valuable implications for EFL educators. Impromptu speaking can be optimized by integrating vocabulary-building activities, anxiety-reducing techniques, and opportunities for reflective learning. Teachers should also create a supportive environment that encourages risk-taking and gradual confidence-building. Ultimately, helping students develop both language proficiency and emotional resilience is essential for improving their impromptu speaking performance in academic and real-world settings.

CONCLUSIONS

This study revealed that impromptu speech significantly supports EFL students' development, particularly in enhancing their fluency, confidence, and spontaneous communication skills. Despite encountering challenges such as limited vocabulary, performance anxiety, and difficulties in organizing ideas, students adopted various strategies both during and after the task. These strategies included simplifying language, emotion regulation techniques, and regular self-practice. Based on these findings, it is recommended that English instructors incorporate impromptu speaking activities more regularly, alongside providing structured guidance and emotional support to help students manage pressure and develop coherent speech. Students are encouraged to continue practicing independently and reflecting on their performance for continuous improvement. Further research involving diverse EFL contexts and employing mixed-method approaches is recommended to explore the broader impact and long-term benefits of impromptu speaking in language learning.

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