

An Analysis of Speaking fluency Factor in Learning English in English Department of Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidenreng Rappang

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the speaking fluency levels and the contributing factors influencing English-speaking performance among second-semester students of the English Education Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidenreng Rappang. Employing a qualitative research approach, data were collected through speaking fluency tests and semi-structured interviews. The fluency test evaluated students' speech performance based on words per minute, frequency of pauses, and disfluency indicators. The results revealed that most students demonstrated a "good" level of fluency, characterized by coherent speech, appropriate word choice, and controlled pauses. However, some students exhibited "fair" to "poor" fluency levels, struggling with spontaneous verbal expression and experiencing high rates of disfluency.

Interview findings highlighted three primary factors contributing to reduced speaking fluency: limited vocabulary, anxiety when speaking in public, and low self-confidence. These interrelated psychological and linguistic barriers significantly hinder students' ability to speak fluently in academic contexts. The study concludes that enhancing students' speaking fluency requires not only linguistic instruction but also emotional and motivational support within a conducive learning environment. This research provides insights for educators and curriculum designers to develop more holistic strategies for improving speaking proficiency among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners.

INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, English has become the dominant international language across various fields such as education, economics, technology, and diplomacy. As the most widely learned second language, it functions as a global *lingua franca*, allowing people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds to communicate and collaborate. Consequently, English proficiency is increasingly seen as a crucial skill for academic and professional success. In many developing countries, including Indonesia, mastery of English is not only an academic requirement but also a key determinant of future opportunities.

Among the four main language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—speaking is often considered the most complex and essential for real-life communication. Speaking ability encompasses not only grammatical accuracy and vocabulary range but also fluency, coherence, pronunciation, and the ability to respond in real time. For students in English language programs, the development of speaking fluency is particularly critical as it directly reflects their practical communication competence.

Fluency in speaking involves the ability to express thoughts smoothly and effortlessly, with minimal hesitation and pauses. It is not merely about speaking quickly, but about maintaining a natural rhythm, coherence, and clarity in speech. For second-language learners, fluency is often the most challenging skill to acquire due to cognitive, affective, and linguistic factors. Unlike reading or writing, speaking requires real-time processing, which puts pressure on the learner's mental and emotional capacities. Despite its importance, many EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners struggle with speaking fluency due to limited vocabulary, fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, and anxiety when speaking in front of others. These barriers can create a cycle of disfluency, where learners avoid speaking, thus limiting their practice and reinforcement. This highlights the need to identify not only the level of fluency among students but also the underlying factors that influence their speaking performance.

This study is conducted among second-semester students in the English Education Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidenreng Rappang. These students have already received foundational instruction in English and are expected to begin developing communicative competence. However, preliminary classroom observations suggest that speaking fluency remains a significant challenge for some of them. Understanding their fluency levels and the factors that contribute to their success or struggle is essential for improving teaching strategies and learning outcomes. The rationale for focusing on second-semester students lies in their transitional stage between basic exposure and more active language production. At this level, students typically begin engaging in more interactive and performance-based tasks such as presentations and discussions. Therefore, this is a critical point at which fluency should be monitored and supported. Analyzing their speaking fluency provides a foundation for implementing targeted pedagogical interventions. To explore this issue, this research uses a qualitative design that incorporates a speaking fluency test and semi-structured interviews. The fluency test evaluates students based on objective criteria such as words per minute, disfluency rate, and pause control. Interviews are conducted with students who demonstrate low fluency in order to explore psychological and cognitive barriers. Through this mixed-method approach, the study aims to provide both quantitative indicators of fluency and qualitative insights into students' experiences and perceptions. Ultimately, this study seeks to contribute to the body of knowledge on speaking fluency in EFL contexts by identifying the specific challenges faced by learners and proposing solutions to address them. The findings are expected to benefit educators, curriculum developers, and students by informing instructional practices that promote not only linguistic competence but also confidence and communicative

comfort. In doing so, the study aspires to help shape more effective and empathetic language learning environments.

Literature Review

Speaking is widely recognized as one of the most complex and essential skills in second language acquisition. According to Nunan (1991), speaking is a productive oral skill that involves not only the articulation of sounds but also the ability to construct meaningful utterances under time pressure. Unlike other language skills, speaking requires simultaneous attention to vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and pragmatic competence. This complexity makes it a crucial area of focus for English language learners, especially in academic settings. Fluency, as a key component of speaking, is defined as the ability to produce speech smoothly, without undue hesitation or unnatural pauses (Byrne, 1986; Lennon, 1990). Lennon distinguishes between broad and narrow definitions of fluency. In the broad sense, fluency refers to overall oral proficiency, while in the narrow sense, it focuses on speech rate, continuity, and the absence of disfluencies such as fillers or repetition. These operational definitions form the foundation for measuring speaking performance in this study.

According to Hedge (2000), fluency in speaking also involves the ability to maintain coherent speech flow, use appropriate linking devices, and adjust speech according to context. Similarly, Luoma (2004) emphasizes five essential aspects of speaking: range, accuracy, fluency, interaction, and coherence. Among these, fluency plays a central role in enabling learners to engage in real-time communication without significant cognitive overload or frequent breakdowns. The development of speaking fluency is influenced by several linguistic, cognitive, and affective factors. From a cognitive perspective, Levelt's (1989) model describes speech production as a multi-stage process involving conceptualization, formulation, and articulation. Learners who struggle at any stage—such as choosing appropriate vocabulary or constructing grammatical structures—may experience speech disfluencies. These cognitive demands are often intensified in classroom settings where learners are under observation.

Linguistic factors such as limited vocabulary, inaccurate grammar, and poor pronunciation also hinder fluent speech (Saunders & O'Brien, 2006). Harmer (2002) argues that successful speaking involves not just the knowledge of correct language forms but also the ability to apply them spontaneously. Learners with insufficient linguistic resources often rely on simple constructions, hesitate frequently, or revert to their first language, resulting in disrupted speech patterns.

Affective variables play a significant role in speaking fluency. Horwitz et al. (1986) introduced the concept of foreign language anxiety, which affects learners' willingness and ability to speak. High levels of anxiety can lead to mental blocks, fear of negative evaluation, and withdrawal from speaking tasks. Similarly, Dörnyei (1998) emphasizes that motivation and self-confidence are central to language learning success, particularly in oral communication.

Several empirical studies support the connection between affective barriers and disfluency. For instance, Ningsih (2017) found that Indonesian students who experienced high speaking anxiety often avoided speaking tasks, resulting in lower oral performance. More recently, Teimouri et al. (2023) confirmed through meta-analysis that speaking anxiety is significantly correlated with reduced fluency in EFL contexts. These findings suggest that interventions must address both linguistic and psychological dimensions. Speaking fluency is a multifaceted construct influenced by a dynamic interplay of cognitive, linguistic, and affective factors. Understanding these influences is crucial for diagnosing speaking difficulties and designing appropriate instructional strategies. This study draws upon theoretical frameworks from Lennon (1990), Levelt (1989), and Horwitz et al. (1986) to assess fluency among second-

semester English learners, with the goal of identifying not only performance levels but also the underlying factors that affect oral fluency in academic English learning.

Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design aimed at analyzing the speaking fluency levels and identifying the factors that influence English-speaking performance among second-semester students of the English Education Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidenreng Rappang. Qualitative research is appropriate for this study because it allows for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, behaviors, and perceptions, particularly those that cannot be captured through quantitative means. The researcher focuses on describing fluency levels and uncovering the psychological and linguistic challenges that students face. The research was conducted in the English Department of Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidenreng Rappang, specifically targeting students in their second semester. This group was selected because they have completed foundational English courses and are transitioning to more active speaking tasks, such as presentations and class discussions. At this stage, the development of speaking fluency becomes more visible and critical. The classroom setting provided a natural environment for observing students' real-time speaking abilities.

The participants were selected using purposive sampling, a technique commonly used in qualitative research to select individuals who are most relevant to the research objectives. Ten students were chosen based on their academic level and prior exposure to English instruction. From these ten participants, those categorized as having low fluency—based on initial fluency test results—were further selected for in-depth semi-structured interviews to explore underlying fluency challenges. This approach ensured a focused yet comprehensive understanding of the research topic. Three main instruments were used in data collection: (1) a speaking fluency test, (2) semi-structured interviews, and (3) documentation. The speaking fluency test required students to deliver short individual presentations on predetermined topics. Each student was given five minutes to prepare and then perform, while the researcher recorded the speech for further analysis. Fluency was assessed based on measurable criteria such as words per minute (WPM), number of filled pauses, and disfluency rates.

The second instrument was the semi-structured interview, conducted with participants who demonstrated low fluency. This method enabled the researcher to gain rich, qualitative insights into students' perceptions, feelings, and personal barriers related to speaking in English. The interviews were conducted using a flexible guide, allowing follow-up questions to explore individual responses more deeply. Questions focused on factors such as vocabulary limitations, anxiety, confidence, and speaking habits. Documentation was also collected in the form of audio recordings and field notes. These records supported the validity of the findings and served as a secondary reference during data analysis. By integrating speaking performance and interview transcripts with observational data, the researcher ensured triangulation, enhancing the credibility and depth of the analysis.

Data analysis in this study followed the interactive model by Miles and Huberman (1994), which consists of three steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data reduction involved selecting and coding relevant data from fluency test results and interviews. The reduced data were then displayed in the form of tables and narrative summaries to identify patterns. Finally, the researcher drew conclusions by interpreting the displayed data in light of relevant theories and cross-validated findings through comparison with earlier literature. The use of both objective fluency metrics and subjective interview responses allowed

the researcher to uncover both surface-level speaking patterns and deeper psychological or cognitive influences. This methodical and triangulated approach enabled a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted nature of speaking fluency, laying a strong foundation for making practical suggestions for language instruction, particularly in the context of second-language learners at the university level.

Results and Discussion

This study involved ten second-semester students from the English Education Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidenreng Rappang, who were assessed using a speaking fluency test. Each participant delivered an individual presentation, which was recorded and analyzed based on three main indicators: words per minute (WPM), percentage of disfluency (unfluent words), and number of pauses. These indicators reflect the students' speaking fluency performance.

The speaking fluency test results varied across participants. The students were categorized into four levels based on their exclusive speaking rate (WPM): Very Good (≥ 130 WPM), Good (91–129 WPM), Fair (51–90 WPM), and Poor (≤ 50 WPM). Most students fell into the "Good" category, indicating that they had a relatively smooth flow of speech with minimal hesitation. Students such as Salwa, Hikma, and Atifa performed notably well. They achieved high exclusive WPM scores (above 90), had fewer disfluencies, and demonstrated better pause control. Their speech was fluent and continuous, with minimal interruptions, which reflected both lexical readiness and psychological comfort during the task.

Conversely, participants like Rusdi and Dandi showed significantly lower scores in all fluency aspects. They had excessive pauses, high disfluency rates (over 90%), and very low WPM. Their speech was marked by frequent hesitations and incomplete expressions, reflecting severe fluency challenges. The analysis of fluent speaking time (FST) also confirmed these differences. High-performing students maintained longer fluent segments in their speech, while low-performing students struggled to sustain coherent utterances. These patterns suggested differences not only in language mastery but also in psychological readiness and confidence.

In total, 6 students were classified as "Good," 2 as "Very Good," 1 as "Fair," and 1 as "Poor." These distributions indicated that while most students were progressing well, a small number still required targeted support to improve their speaking performance. To further explore the reasons behind low fluency, two participants from the "Fair" and "Poor" categories were selected for semi-structured interviews. The interviews explored internal challenges such as vocabulary limitations, speaking anxiety, and lack of self-confidence. The interview results revealed consistent themes. Both participants admitted to struggling with vocabulary retrieval, experiencing anxiety in public speaking situations, and lacking confidence due to comparison with peers. These affective and cognitive factors were found to significantly disrupt their fluency during oral tasks.

Table 4.1: Summary of Students' Speaking Fluency Test Results

Name	Words	Time (s)	Exclusive WPM	Pauses	Disfluency %	Fluency Category
Salwa	87	63	123	6	18%	Very Good
Hikma	78	61	116	5	13%	Very Good
Atifa	73	60	109	8	16%	Good
Ica	68	62	97	10	19%	Good
Fauziyyah	70	66	95	11	21%	Good
Andi	65	63	92	12	24%	Good
Rini	60	65	88	13	28%	Fair
Dandi	23	30	45	15	96%	Poor

Name	Words	Time (s)	Exclusive WPM	Pauses	Disfluency %	Fluency Category
Rusdi	20	29	41	16	140%	Poor
Sari	72	62	98	9	20%	Good

DISCUSSION

The findings of the speaking fluency test demonstrate a variation in performance among second-semester students. A majority of the participants showed “Good” fluency levels, which indicates that their classroom exposure and speaking opportunities are starting to yield positive outcomes in terms of oral communication skills. High-performing students tended to have better control over their speech timing, fewer pauses, and lower disfluency percentages. This suggests that they possessed stronger lexical access and greater familiarity with speaking tasks, enabling them to deliver ideas with minimal hesitation.

The successful performance of students like Salwa and Hikma can be attributed to both linguistic and affective factors. Their ability to recall vocabulary quickly and use it in coherent structures shows a combination of preparation and confidence—two essential ingredients for fluency. On the other hand, low-performing students like Dandi and Rusdi demonstrated classic symptoms of disfluency: high anxiety, low vocabulary recall, and excessive pauses. Their interviews revealed a strong fear of making mistakes and being judged by peers, which negatively impacted their speaking fluency.

This aligns with Horwitz et al. (1986), who suggest that language anxiety can inhibit learners' ability to perform in real-time communication. Students with high anxiety often withdraw from speaking activities or speak minimally, which reinforces their lack of confidence. The factor of limited vocabulary was also prominent. Both interviewees reported difficulty in retrieving appropriate English words during spontaneous speech. This confirms the theory of cognitive overload described by Levelt (1989), where insufficient vocabulary impairs the formulation and articulation stages of speaking. These findings emphasize the importance of integrating both linguistic and psychological support in language instruction. Teachers should not only teach vocabulary and grammar but also foster a safe and encouraging speaking environment where mistakes are seen as part of learning. Speaking fluency in EFL learners is shaped by a combination of measurable performance (e.g., WPM, pauses) and internal factors (e.g., anxiety, confidence, vocabulary access). Addressing both aspects in instruction will help students move toward more fluent and confident English communication.

Conclusion

This study investigated the speaking fluency of second-semester students in the English Education Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidenreng Rappang and explored the underlying factors that influence their fluency levels. Based on the speaking fluency test, it was found that the majority of students achieved a “Good” category, indicating they were able to speak with relatively smooth flow, controlled pauses, and appropriate word usage. However, a small number of students fell into the “Fair” and “Poor” categories, showing significant difficulties in sustaining fluent speech, which warranted deeper investigation.

The semi-structured interviews with low-performing students revealed three dominant and interrelated factors that negatively affect speaking fluency: limited vocabulary, high speaking anxiety, and low self-confidence. These internal barriers caused hesitation, frequent pauses, and fragmented speech. The findings confirmed that speaking fluency is not solely a linguistic issue but is deeply influenced by cognitive and emotional readiness. Students who lacked vocabulary also tended to experience anxiety, which in turn weakened their confidence and further disrupted their fluency. Speaking fluency among EFL students is a complex phenomenon shaped

by both measurable linguistic performance and intangible affective elements. Addressing only grammatical and lexical components is not sufficient. Effective instruction should also consider students' psychological well-being, motivation, and confidence. Therefore, teachers and institutions must adopt a more holistic approach—one that balances language input with supportive learning environments—to help all students develop not only fluency but also the courage and comfort to speak confidently in English.

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