Utilizing fillers for addressing speaking challenges, improving self-confidence and motivation in EFL learning

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Abstract

This qualitative case study aimed to explore fillers usage to address speaking challenges related to the improvement of self-confidence and motivation in speaking practices done by two EFL learners of the English Department of one of the Islamic Universities in Malang, Indonesia. Data were collected through observations and in-depth interviews to two students employing filler strategies to address speaking challenges related to the improvement of self-confidence and motivation during their speaking exercises. The research revealed that both learners used fillers to address speaking challenges during the conversation due to their linguistic components shortage such as a limited mastery of vocabularies and having a little understanding on grammar. Fillers might bring them to have more self-confidence in speaking practices shown by not being afraid of making mistakes when they practice speaking with their speaking partners. Fillers might bring them to have more motivation in speaking shown by their enthusiasm to get involved in the discussion whether in group or class discussions. Thus fillers usage is prominence due to its potential to address speaking challenges, enhance self-confidence and motivation, eventually contributing to an overall improvement in language proficiency particularly in speaking skill.

Keywords: fillers, speaking challenges, self-confidence, motivation, language proficiency.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Proficiency in English speaking skills is highly crucial for effective global communication, as a substantial portion of people worldwide engage in interpersonal communication primarily through spoken English language [1]. Speaking is viewed as a difficult skill that demands significant effort while also being a source of enjoyment. A proficient English speaker is someone possessing fluency in speech, having a universal appeal, showing charm, demonstrating wisdom, enjoying certain privileges, and putting in diligent work[2]. Proficiency in speaking skills is of supreme importance as it empowers individuals to foster and uphold communal connections and serves transactional purposes by facilitating the information [3]–[5]. However, to achieve speaking proficiency need more struggles because some problems might hindrance learners to attain speaking mastery.

Learners' problems to achieve speaking mastery might be affected by the main characteristic of speaking activities itself which consists of phases: planning and execution. The process [6] of verbal communication can be divided into two sequential phases: the planning phase, when the speakers plan the content to say, and the execution phase, when the speaker articulate this plan into words, phrases, and sentences. The difference between these two phases might make it difficult for the learners to master speaking. To lessen these challenges, EFL learners need to understanding about communication strategies. Communication strategies refer to techniques students might employ to solve difficulties in speaking. By using these strategies, learners might effectively cope with speaking problems and achieve speaking objectives [7].

Learners' speaking problems might be concerning about pronunciation, fluency, grammar, and vocabulary [8]. Besides, English tenses pose challenges for the majority of EFL learners [5]. Students also experienced some other problems, such as a confidence deficiency, feeling shy when speaking, being afraid of doing errors, nervousness, then difficulty to get things to say [8]. It is common for learners to find difficulties in speaking, encompassing issues like limited vocabs, grammar and spelling errors, and the occasional use of their native language (mother tongue) [9]. Speaking problems might be further caused by (1) a lack of students' lexical knowledge, (2) a limited grammar understanding (3) afraid of unfavorable reactions from their peers, and (4) lack of self-confidence [10], [11].

The main problems frequently faced by the students might consist of both linguistic and non-linguistic problems [12]. These problems arise from several factors, including students' lack of motivation, ineffective teaching methods, and the influence of media. Additionally, students often have limited chances to practice speaking, leading to increased anxiety when they want to engage in oral communication [13]. Learners' struggles in mastering speaking skills might be done by simultaneously focusing on both the forms (grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation) and the functions (communicative aspects) of the language [14]. This underlines the significance of understanding components linguistics to improve proficiency in speaking [15], [13]. Instead of mastering linguistic elements, to handle speaking problems, learners need to know more about fillers.

Fillers [16] might assist students in enhancing their speaking abilities. This might increase their self-assurance, eagerness, and smoothness in the language by enabling them to share their feelings, thoughts, and understandings, ultimately enhancing their overall speaking proficiency. Repetitions of one's own speech as a compensatory strategy might significantly influence the preservation of effective communication [17]. Individuals might employ pause fillers like "um," "erm," and "er" to show to their speaking partners that they have not resolved their speech [18]. Fillers are verbal expressions or phrases employed during communication to bridge moments of silence and link thoughts or ideas together [19]. In solving speaking problems, it is imperative for English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners to have a wide-ranging understanding of communication strategies [7], [20].

Communication strategies are vital components of foreign language learning, as they help students in overcoming communication problems [21]–[23]. Moreover, students might frequently incorporated self-correction, filler expressions, and hesitation devices into their speech [24]. They typically turned to self-correction and filler expressions when they required time to formulate their thoughts [25]. Self-correction was also employed by students to rectify mistakes they identified, often resulting in repeated utterances. The linguistic constraints faced by students presented challenges during their speech [26].

Several recent studies have suggested the importance of fillers to handle problems in speaking. For instance, fillers [27] might help learners cope with speaking problems. Supporting that, there are [25] several types of communication strategies including filler that might be used to handle speaking problems. Then, there are [19] several types of fillers that might be used to

cope with speaking problems . In addition, fillers [28] were frequently used by students during communication. In line with that, fillers [29] have become the strategies used by students in speaking. Thus, the studies above show the significance of fillers to handle learners' speaking problems. However, the previous studies above focused on identifying the utilization of types and functions of fillers used by a group of learners, whereas this particular case study probes into the filler words employed by two EFL students to address speaking challenges related to the improvement of self-confidence and motivation to practice speaking in EFL learning. This research holds significance because fillers might effectively help learners address speaking challenges and improve learners' self-confidence and motivation to practice speaking.

2. METHODS

To carry out this research, a qualitative case study methodology was employed. Within this study, two primary subjects from the third semester were purposefully selected, both of whom were English as a Foreign Language learners. The first subject was identified as "S1," while the second subject was referred to as "S2." The two subjects were chosen due to their activeness in speaking classes and their proficiency in spoken communication. The study focused on the analysis of their fillers usage to address challenges in speaking, to improve self-confidence and motivation to practice speaking. In this study, the data comprised verbal expressions used by the learners. Verbal data were derived from the spoken statements made by the learners during their conversations and dialogues with their friends. These spoken languages were meticulously documented and subsequently transliterated to create written transcriptions.

Data collection in this study involved both observational methods and in-depth interviews. During the observational phase, we assumed the role of a non-participatory observer, closely monitoring the subjects as they engaged in conversations and discussions with their peers. To document their spoken utterances, we utilized a portable recording device and concurrently made notations regarding various expressions used during the conversations. Subsequently, we conducted in-depth interviews with the subjects to gain insights into the context, its influencing factors and the reasons behind their utilization of filler strategies in their conversational interactions. Following these data collection procedures, we transcribed the recorded information and engaged in discussions that connected the transcribed data to relevant previous studies and concepts on communication strategies and language proficiency.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section is arranged based on the following sequences: fillers used by Subject 1 and Subject 2 in the conversation and the reason why Subject 1 and Subject 2 used fillers related to the improvement of their self-confidence and motivation. The next, each subject is given codes of S1 and S2.

3.1 Fillers used by S1 and S2 in the conversation

Questions related to the fillers were asked to the subjects based on topics about family and organization and the translated transcribe of their answer are as follows:

"*ee //* well I often to stay *ee* to leave my father and mother or family…e*e* to study in High School… *my ee my* friends in school accompanied me *ee in stay ee* to *stay* in the school dormitory / …so, I should be far away from *ee* my parents for *what it is…* I should… *I //ee what is it….(*S1)

"…*ee this this the / the* main principal of our campus *ee* may be *ee //*our university wanna make someone who has *ee has ee* characteristic *like ulul albab // ee like ulul albab* so // I think this is ee really a good place to study / then it is really *ee more more //emm lucky / ee really lucky* for those *emm* who …I like ee I like to see or to see those who *emm //join…join*

some students' organization but as a student we should be able *to ee   better eee better* ...*"*(S2)

3.2   The reasons they use fillers related to the improvement of self-confidence and motivation

Questions related to the reasons why they used fillers related to the improvement of self-confidence and motivations were asked to the subjects and the translated transcribe of their answer are as follows:

> "I used some expressions like repetition, pauses, emm, etc. because I wanted to have other appropriate dictions…I was in the process of thinking at that time to get the right expressions…" .. :"…communication strategies have helped me a lot to solve my problems in speaking. …And communication strategies can improve my ability to speak because I have some strategies to get some ways to express my ideas…especially, *ya ya* fillers have helped me not to stop my conversation with my speaking partners…because we have more times *ee* to think…*emm* to feel relax too…I feel more confidence and not afraid to make mistakes and want to speak more.. " (S1).
>
> "…We use fillers *emm* when we fell doubt to say something or we feel confused about *emm* something that we want to say/ and when we we couldn't find the right vocabulary to express … then *ee* I stop speaking for a while to think to find the right expression…*eemm* or vocabularies… …Then we repeat our expressions to say / *ya* because we want to *emm* get *ee* also have *more more* time to think about some difficulties…ee in the conversation I become not easy to get nervous, and want to practice more speaking.. " (S2).

3.3   Summary of the findings

During a conversation centered on the topic of family, both Subject 1 (referred to as S1) and Subject 2 (S2) employed fillers while engaging with their respective speaking partners. This specific dialogue happened in the living room of the faculty. The data analysis show that S1 employed fillers when telling about their habits to their speaking partner. The fillers were used to gain the time to think, to help him find the right vocabulary within the topic of the conversation. Subject 1, S1, used fillers when finding moments that requisite additional time to think. This rehearsal was implemented to address communication challenges connected to find the most suitable vocabulary or words in the conversation. This was obvious when S1 applied expressions such as *ee, emm, what is it, ya* and combined silences, as well as repetitive terms such as *stay stay* and *my my*. Using fillers subject1 felt relax in the conversation bringing to him to have more confidence and not being afraid of making mistakes and wanting to speak more and more.

The subject 2, or S2, also made use of fillers in the course of a conversation when discussing the students' organization within the classroom with their speaking partner. The data from this conversation highlighted S2's employment of fillers. S2 engaged various terms such as *ee, emm,* repeating some words such as *this, ulul albab, more, lucky, really, like¸ better¸* and *some silences.* S2 employed fillers as a strategy during the conversation to provide himself with additional time to think, allowing him to recall and choose the appropriate words he wished to use in his expression. Thus, in the conversation S2 employed several fillers such as *emm, ee* and several repetitions suck as *better better, lucky lucky, more more this this* and *several silences.* Using fillers in the conversation S2 had more self-confidence so that he was not easy to get nervous during the conversation and wanted to have speaking practices. Thus, Fillers usage made S1 and S2 be able to address speaking challenges, improve self-confidence and motivation during speaking practices.

3.4 Discussion

First of all, our study indicated that that both EFL learners, S1 and S2, encountered challenges in their spoken communication. These problems [30] were predominantly stemmed from linguistic difficulties, which included a limited vocabulary and/or an incomplete grasp of grammar. This study aligns with the findings of Hervinna et al. [4] reporting that students' difficulties in speaking may have various origins, including psychological issues, a shortage of ideas, grammatical errors, and a limited vocabulary. To agree with that, Rahayu et. al. [10] have reported that students' difficulties in speaking may result from reasons like limited vocabulary, incomplete understanding of grammar, apprehension of negative responses from others, and low self-confidence in speaking English. In addition, another study reported that students often encounter prevalent challenges dealing with both non-linguistic and linguistic issues [12]. Thus, both S1 and S2 faced some speaking problem in the conversation due to their limited vocabs and grammar understanding.

Next, both learners used fillers in the conversation. Using fillers, they might solve their speaking problems. This agrees to study done by of Komariah et al. [22] and Widiastuti et al. [29] reporting that fillers as a part of Communication strategies play a crucial role in foreign language learning. They might help learners overcome communication barriers and challenges. These strategies enable learners to solve speaking problems, express themselves effectively, and improve their ability to communicate in a foreign language. By equipping students with the tools to address communication obstacles, language acquisition becomes more practical and functional, ultimately bringing to improved proficiency and fluency. Another study reported that fillers are expressions or phrases used in speaking to get moments of pauses and to connect ideas discussed [25]. Supporting that, previous studies [16], [31] have reported that fillers usage might improve students' speaking skills by increasing their confidence, enthusiasm, and fluency. Fillers usage allows learners to express their ideas and experiences bringing to the improvement of their speaking ability.

In addition, this study reported that by using fillers, a part of communication strategies, in speaking learners might effectively handle their speaking challenges. This is in line to Pratama and Zainil [32] reporting that pause fillers and hesitation devices were the most commonly used, while comprehension checks, non-linguistic strategies, and literal translation were the least frequently employed approaches. Next, another study reported that communication strategies usage might impact learners to attain speaking proficiency and speaking self-efficacy [33]. In the course of their conversational interactions, individuals employ a variety of strategic techniques to facilitate the effective progression of discourse [34]. Thus, the two subjects, S1 and S2 have used fillers as a part of communication strategies to handle their speaking problems. Communication strategy stands as one of the most pivotal components in foreign language learning, as it aids students in overcoming communication obstacles [22], [7].

Subsequently, the two subjects approved fillers as a part of communication strategies had potency to assist them in surmounting their communication problem and achieving their communication goals. They routinely employed communication strategies, which encompassed the utilization of filler expressions. This perspective is in line with Dornyei [7] stating that communication strategies as techniques students use to address their speaking difficulties. When learners endeavor to communicate but they find they are lacking the requisite linguistic elements, they can resort to communication strategies to attain the objective of their speaking. The utilization of communication strategies, a pivotal element in inter-language, allows students to compensate for limitations in inter-language knowledge [26], [35]. Additionally, fillers serve several functions, including providing speakers with a moment to collect their thoughts, restating or rectifying prior statements, initiating a conversation, confirming agreement with the listener, and emphasizing the central point of the topic [36]. Next, there are causal factors that differed between females and males in their use of fillers. These reasons encompassed the

management of nervousness, the thought process, moments of hesitation, and divided attention. Then, students employed fillers at the outset of class and when elaborating on the subject matter, primarily due to their limited comprehension of the material, grammar, and speaking skills [37], [38].

Afterward, related to the improvement of self-confidence and motivation to practice speaking, both learners acknowledged that fillers usage has improved their self-confidence and motivation to speak. It is shown by not being afraid of making mistakes during speaking practices and wanting to practice speaking more and more. Dealing with the fillers usage to improve self-confidence and motivation to practice speaking, our study is in line to the study done by Essien et al. [39] stating that applying fillers students might incrementally improve their linguistic proficiency and strengthen their confidence in utilizing the language. Further, Gandeza [16] has reported that fillers utilization might potentially develop students' speaking proficiency asserted that it might bolster their confidence, enthusiasm, and fluency in the language. This is achieved by affording them the opportunity to express their thoughts, ideas, and experiences, so contributing to the improvement of their overall speaking ability. The difference is while this study has involved eighteen participants of students from the College of Teacher Education, Major in Filipino/English, our study has involved two EFL learners. It might be concluded that by using fillers, students might effectively resolve their speaking challenges, further; the use of fillers might enhance their self-confidence and motivation to engage in more speaking practices to improve their speaking skill.

Finally, the study has revealed the relation between the use of fillers and language proficiency. Both subjects used fillers effectively in the conversation showing their language development. This is in line to the study done by Widyaningrum et.al. [15] EFL learners tend to employ fillers more effectively in line with their proficiency progress. Learners might be categorized as proficient learners due to the effective usage of communication strategies. The two learners used fillers effectively and they seem to enjoy and relax in the conversation. They used filler when they need it. Learners might be categorized as proficient learners due to the effective usage of fillers as a part of communication strategies [40]. This shows about their progress in speaking [41], [42]. Fillers as a part of communication strategies are very essential to give good impacts [43] to learners in communication [44]. Their primary function is to handle linguistic insufficiencies or breakdowns in communication and assist learners in conveying their intended messages effectively [44]. This emphasizes the significance of fillers as a part of communication strategies in facilitating effective and efficient communication in various contexts, particularly in language learning and cross-cultural communication [45]. To understand fillers comprehensively is fundamental for learners [46], [47] due to their function to address speaking challenges, develop self-confidence and motivation to achieve proficiency in speaking.

4. CONCLUSION

Both EFL learners faced some speaking challenges during the conversation. These challenges in speaking might be produced by their linguistic components shortage, such as a limited mastery of vocabularies and having a little understanding on grammar. To address these speaking challenges, they have employed fillers strategies. Through the use of fillers, they might address their speaking challenges. In addition, fillers might bring them to have more self-confidence in speaking practices and it is shown by not being afraid of making mistakes when they practice speaking with their speaking partners. Further, fillers might bring them to have more motivation in speaking. It is shown by their enthusiasm to get involved in the discussion whether in group or class discussions. Thus fillers usage is prominence due to its potential to address speaking challenges, enhance self-confidence and motivation/enthusiasm, eventually contributing to an overall improvement in language proficiency particularly in speaking skill.

Our study is not without limitation, it is due to a small sample size, limiting the broad

applicability of findings. Future researchers might address the limitations of our study by conducting replications using larger and more diverse samples to augment the generalizability of findings. Furthermore, exploring various backgrounds and people might offer a broader understanding of the topic. In addition, implementing a mixed methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, is recommended for a thorough analysis, enabling deeper insights of employing fillers in addressing speaking challenges.

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