

The Effect of Speech Disfluency on English Speaking Performance of Third-Semester Students at Universitas Nias

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Abstract

This study investigates speech disfluency in English speaking performance among third-semester students of the English Education Study Program at Universitas Nias. From a psycholinguistic perspective, speech disfluency represents a natural manifestation of cognitive processing during second-language speech production. Employing a quantitative descriptive design, the study involved ten students selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through audio-recorded self-introduction tasks and analyzed by identifying and quantifying disfluency features, including fillers, repetitions, silent pauses, and self-repairs. The results showed that fillers were the most dominant type of disfluency (38%), followed by repetitions (27%), silent pauses (21%), and self-repairs (14%), indicating limitations in lexical retrieval and speech planning. These findings suggest that disfluency reflects ongoing language development rather than communicative failure and highlight its importance in evaluating English speaking performance in EFL contexts.

Keywords: EFL learners, psycholinguistics, speaking performance, speech disfluency

INTRODUCTION

Psycholinguistics examines the cognitive processes underlying language production and comprehension. In spoken language production, speakers must conceptualize ideas, formulate linguistic structures, and articulate sounds in real time. According to Levelt (1989; 2013), speech production involves complex stages including conceptualization, formulation, and articulation, which require efficient cognitive coordination. When these processes are disrupted, speech disfluencies such as pauses, repetitions, fillers, and self-corrections may occur.

In second language (L2) contexts, speech disfluency tends to appear more frequently due to increased cognitive demands. Learners must retrieve vocabulary, organize grammatical structures, and monitor pronunciation simultaneously. Limited automaticity in L2 processing often leads to hesitation phenomena, including filled pauses (e.g., "uh," "um"), repetitions, and reformulations. These disfluencies may indicate ongoing

cognitive processing rather than a lack of knowledge.

However, while disfluency is often considered a natural part of speech production, its impact on speaking performance remains debatable. Some researchers argue that disfluency negatively affects fluency, coherence, and listener perception, potentially lowering speaking performance scores. Others suggest that certain types of disfluency reflect strategic processing and self-monitoring, which are essential components of language development.

Despite extensive discussions on fluency and speaking assessment, limited studies specifically examine how speech disfluency influences speaking performance among Indonesian EFL university students, particularly at Universitas Nias. Most previous research focuses on general fluency rather than analyzing disfluency as a measurable variable affecting performance outcomes.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the effect of speech disfluency on English speaking performance among third-semester students at Universitas Nias. By examining the relationship between disfluency markers and speaking scores, this research seeks to clarify whether disfluency significantly influences students' performance in academic speaking contexts.

From a discourse perspective, Clark and Fox Tree (2002) argue that filled pauses such as "uh" and "um" function as signals of speech planning difficulty. Rather than being random errors, these markers indicate that speakers are actively organizing their thoughts and maintaining interaction with listeners. These pauses also serve communicative functions by signaling that the speaker intends to continue speaking. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), such features are common, particularly among learners who are still developing lexical access and syntactic control (Tavakoli & Skehan, 2017). As a result, disfluency becomes an important indicator of how learners manage cognitive load during speech production.

Speaking performance is often assessed based on fluency, accuracy, and comprehensibility. These components work together to determine how effectively a speaker communicates ideas. Brown and Abeywickrama (2019) state that fluency-related features, including smoothness and continuity of speech, are key indicators of oral proficiency. Consequently, examining speech disfluency provides valuable insight into learners' speaking performance and underlying cognitive processes because frequent hesitation may interrupt message delivery and influence listeners' perceptions of proficiency.

Despite extensive discussion of fluency in EFL research, studies focusing specifically on speech disfluency within a psycholinguistic framework, particularly in local Indonesian university contexts, remain limited. Most previous studies emphasize fluency measurement rather than explaining why disfluency occurs cognitively. Therefore, this study seeks to analyze the effect of speech disfluency on English speaking performance among third-semester students at Universitas Nias in order to contribute both theoretically and pedagogically to EFL speaking research.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a quantitative descriptive research design. Quantitative research is defined as a systematic investigation that

emphasizes numerical data and statistical analysis to describe or examine phenomena objectively. This approach allows researchers to observe patterns, tendencies, and relationships in a measurable way. Creswell and Creswell (2018) describe quantitative research as an approach used to test objective theories by examining relationships among variables that can be measured numerically.

Supporting this view, Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun (2019) argue that quantitative descriptive designs are appropriate when researchers aim to portray characteristics of a population or phenomenon without manipulating variables. Such designs focus on describing what exists rather than testing cause-effect relationships. Ary et al. (2014) further note that descriptive quantitative research allows researchers to summarize data meaningfully through frequencies and percentages, making the results easier to interpret and compare.

Based on these perspectives, a quantitative descriptive design is considered suitable for this study because it enables the researcher to quantify speech disfluency features and describe their occurrence in students' English speaking performance objectively. By using numerical representation, the study can present clear patterns of how often certain types of disfluency appear and how they relate to students' speaking performance.

The population of this study includes all third-semester students of the English Education Study Program at Universitas Nias, representing the broader group to which the findings are intended to apply (Creswell, 2018). This population was chosen because students at this level have already received basic speaking instruction but still experience challenges in oral production. From this population, a sample of ten students was selected based on specific criteria related to their English speaking ability and course enrollment. Sampling a smaller, focused group allows for a more in-depth examination of speech disfluency phenomena, ensuring that the participants provide data relevant to the research objectives (Fraenkel et al., 2019; Dörnyei, 2007).

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who are actively involved in English speaking activities. This non-probability sampling technique relies on the researcher's judgment to identify cases that are rich in information and relevant to the study's aims (Palinkas et al., 2015; Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016).

The participants were chosen because they regularly practice speaking in class and are able to produce sufficient spoken data for analysis.

In language research, purposive sampling is often used to focus on learners with particular proficiency levels or experiences, ensuring that the data collected effectively reflects the targeted phenomena (Dörnyei, 2007). Therefore, this technique supports the objective of capturing authentic disfluency patterns in EFL speaking contexts.

The main instrument for data collection was audio recordings of students performing English self-introductions, which were then transcribed for analysis. Each participant was asked to speak freely about personal information such as name, background, and study interests within a limited time. Performance-based recordings capture spontaneous speech, revealing natural occurrences of disfluency such as pauses, fillers, repetitions, and self-repairs (Levelt, 2013; Clark & Fox Tree, 2002; Skehan,

2018). Recording the speech ensured that the data could be reviewed repeatedly for accurate transcription and coding.

After recording, the data were transcribed verbatim. The transcription process aimed to preserve all hesitation phenomena, including silent pauses, fillers, repetitions, and corrections. For analysis, the transcribed data were coded and examined using descriptive statistics to calculate the frequency of each disfluency type, allowing systematic interpretation of the observed speech patterns (Creswell, 2018; Ary et al., 2014; Dörnyei, 2017; Ellis, 2015). Frequencies and percentages were used to show which disfluency types appeared most dominantly in students' speaking performances.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

FINDINGS

The analysis of students' speaking recordings revealed several types of speech disfluency. The quantitative results showed that fillers occurred 45 times (38%), repetitions 32 times (27%), silent pauses 25 times (21%), and self-repairs 16 times (14%). These findings indicate that fillers were the most dominant disfluency feature in students' speaking performance, followed by repetitions, silent pauses, and self-repairs.

Table 1. Frequency of Speech Disfluency Types

Type	Frequency	Percentage
Fillers	45	38%
Repetitions	32	27%
Silent pauses	25	21%
Self-repairs	16	14%
Total	118	100%

The dominance of fillers suggests that students frequently experienced hesitation while organizing linguistic forms during spontaneous speech. Repetitions and silent pauses also appeared in considerable numbers, indicating difficulties in maintaining fluency and lexical retrieval. Meanwhile, the lower occurrence of self-repairs shows that students tended to continue speaking despite errors rather than correcting their utterances. Overall, the distribution of disfluency types reflects limited automaticity in second-language speech production.

Furthermore, the presence of long pauses and repetitions suggests limited automaticity in students' English speaking. According to Segalowitz (2020), fluency development depends on the automatization of linguistic knowledge, and learners who have not yet achieved this level tend to pause more frequently while organizing their ideas.

The results also show that speech disfluency has an impact on the overall quality of speaking performance, especially when it comes to delivery smoothness and fluency. According to Tavakoli, Campbell, and McCormack (2020), because disfluency features break the flow of speech, they affect listeners' perceptions of oral proficiency.

Consequently, the findings show that students' speech disfluency is a reflection of ongoing cognitive processing and language development in EFL speaking performance rather than a random error.

DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study reveal that fillers were the most dominant type of speech disfluency, accounting for 38% of the total occurrences. This dominance indicates that students frequently experienced hesitation while planning linguistic structures during spontaneous speech production. Such hesitation reflects limited automaticity in second-language processing, where learners require additional time to retrieve vocabulary and organize grammatical forms before articulation.

In addition to fillers, repetitions (27%) and silent pauses (21%) also appeared in considerable proportions, suggesting ongoing difficulties in maintaining fluency and continuity of speech. These patterns demonstrate that students' speaking performance was still influenced by cognitive processing constraints, particularly in lexical retrieval and sentence formulation. Meanwhile, the relatively lower occurrence of self-repairs (14%) indicates that students tended to continue speaking despite errors rather than interrupting their speech to make corrections.

Furthermore, the findings are consistent with Segalowitz's (2020) cognitive fluency framework, which holds that reduced automaticity in L2 processing results in repetition, slower speech, and frequent pauses. Students need to be aware of how they produce their speech because their disfluency patterns show that their linguistic knowledge has not yet been fully proceduralized.

Furthermore, Skehan (2021) contends that speaking performance requires striking a balance between complexity, accuracy, and fluency. Fluency may decline and become disfluency when students place a lot of emphasis on form or vocabulary retrieval. The students' performances showed this condition, as they hesitated when trying to produce proper English structures. It's important to remember that speech disfluency is not just a sign of poor communication. According to Tavakoli and Uchihara (2020), disfluency frequently indicates strategic planning behavior as opposed to incapacity. Learners utilize pauses and fillers to give themselves time to arrange their thoughts and prevent interaction breakdowns.

According to these findings, instructors should create speaking exercises that encourage the development of fluency in addition to correcting grammatical errors. Derwing and Munro (2021) point out that interactional activities, task repetition, and repeated speaking practice all contribute to a gradual improvement in fluency and a reduction in cognitive load.

Therefore, in this study, speech disfluency serves as a gauge of students' English speaking development. Instruction should focus on helping students effectively manage disfluency while boosting automaticity and confidence in oral communication, rather than totally eradicating it.

Overall, the distribution of disfluency types confirms that students' speaking fluency remains at a developing stage and requires pedagogical support focused on increasing automaticity, confidence, and real-time language processing. These findings highlight the importance of fluency-oriented speaking practice in English language classrooms to reduce hesitation phenomena and support smoother oral communication.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that speech disfluency is a common feature in the English-speaking performance of third-semester students at Universitas Nias. The findings revealed that fillers were the most dominant type of disfluency (38%), followed by repetitions (27%), silent pauses (21%), and self-repairs (14%), indicating moments of cognitive load during speech planning and lexical retrieval.

Rather than representing communication failure, these disfluencies reflect ongoing language development and the natural challenges of producing speech in a second language. The results highlight the importance of viewing disfluency as an informative dimension of speaking performance in EFL contexts. Pedagogically, the findings suggest that English instruction should emphasize fluency-oriented practice, increased speaking opportunities, and supportive classroom interaction to help learners reduce hesitation and develop more automatic speech production.

SUGGESTION

Based on the findings of this study, it is suggested that English lecturers at Universitas Nias pay closer attention to the occurrence of speech disfluency in students' speaking performance and integrate more structured fluency-oriented activities into classroom practice. Activities such as guided speaking drills, repeated oral practice, role plays, and spontaneous speaking tasks may help students reduce hesitation phenomena such as pauses, fillers, repetitions, and self-corrections. In addition, lecturers are encouraged to provide constructive feedback specifically targeting fluency development rather than focusing solely on grammatical accuracy. For students, continuous exposure to authentic speaking practice and self-recording strategies are recommended to increase awareness of their own disfluency patterns. Future researchers are also advised to explore speech disfluency in different academic levels or investigate the relationship between speech anxiety, vocabulary mastery, and speaking fluency to provide a broader understanding of factors influencing English speaking performance.

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