Students' Self-Confidence and the Production of Fillers in Speaking English

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the relationship between students' self-confidence and the use of fillers in English speaking skills. Fillers such as "um", "uh", "like", and "you know" are linguistic elements that often appear in oral communication, especially when the speaker is hesitant or needs time to think. This study used a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data were collected through direct observation in class presentation activities and semi-structured interviews with ten students of the English Education Study Program at Kuningan University. The results showed that all participants used fillers in varying frequencies, with a tendency to increase when they felt insecure, nervous, or when experiencing a lack of ideas. Non-verbal indicators such as eye contact, intonation, and body language showed that students with lower self-confidence used fillers more often. Although most were aware of the presence of fillers in their speech, only a few had concrete strategies to reduce them. These findings indicate that low self-confidence is closely related to the increasing use of fillers. This study is expected to contribute to the development of English-speaking learning strategies that focus not only on linguistic aspects but also on students' psychological readiness.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In this globalization era English language skills are one of the most essential skills. Not only used as international language, but English also employed as a means of communication in various fields, for instance education, commerce, and technology. Speaking, writing, reading and listening are the four of English language skills. Speaking skill is the most important skill to acquire when learning foreign language. (Khanasah & Jaya, 2023). Speaking ability is one of the basic communication skills required for conveying feelings, thoughts, and ideas in different situations or settings, including academic ones. (Efrizah, Fadly, & Putri, 2024). On the other hand, speaking requires a lot of effort and is considered as a challenging skill. Most of the students face the speaking difficulties, especially in terms of fluency and confidence. Lack of self-confidence is one of significant barriers in English communication. Many students find it difficult to express their thoughts clearly when speaking English because they lack of confidence in speaking English, are afraid of making mistakes, or are afraid of being judged by others (Anggraini, 2024). Speaking problems might be further caused by (1) limited vocabulary; (2)

poor grammar proficiency; (3) fear of negative reactions given by others; and (4) a lack of confidence to communicate in English. (Rahayu et al., 2020)

Self-confidence is a psychological factor that highly affects students' speaking skills. Students with high self-confidence are more likely to be active and bold in communication, while those with low self-confidence often feel anxious and hesitant. Students' willingness to speak strongly influenced by their level of self-confidence. (Suwari, Joni, & Wirastuti, 2023). When giving speeches, students often feel anxious that can make them hesitant, confused, and even cause them to make some mistakes in their speeches. Pausing for too long, speaking too quickly or softly, and using fillers words such as "uh" or "um" are mistakes that often occurs. (Fajarwati, 2024). To address speaking issues, students need to gain a deeper understanding of filler words. (Syamsudin, Istiadah, Syafiyah, Cahyono, & Mulyono, 2024).

Sounds like "um," "uh," or "like," are fillers in spoken language which are used to fill pauses. (Sarira, Mahmud, Affandi, & Burhamzah, 2023). Filllers in speech are often seen as signs of uncertainty or lack of fluency, but they serve various functions in communication. According to recent research by (Syamsudin, Istiadah, Syafiyah, Cahyono, & Mulyono, 2024) shows that sentence fillers can boost the speaker's confidence and facilitate smoother conversation by providing cognitive processing time.

The influence of self-confidence on the use of filler words in English speech have studied by many previous researchers. One such study was conducted by (Mohammad, Napu, & Soleman, 2024). The study indicated that students' self-confidence significantly influenced the use of filler words; feelings of nervousness and forgetting what to say, which are associated with low self-confidence, led to a higher frequency of non-lexical filler word usage. Further research conducted by (Bhargava & Kuscenko, 2022) found no significant correlation between the frequency of filler word usage and students' self-confidence in their speeches. Additionally, self-confidence did not influence the type of filler words used, indicating that self-confidence does not significantly affect spoken English among adolescents. Another study conducted by (Gandeza, 2023) showed that filler words can enhance students' self-confidence, which may lead to enhance the fluency and a greater willingness to use various filler words in spoken English, thereby improving their overall communication skills and encouraging more expressive language use.

Multiple studies have researched the correlation between speaking ability and self-confidence. Mardiana et al. (2024) set that diction and self-confidence together explained 30.1% of variance for students' speaking skills. Destiawati et al. (2024) also confirmed that speaking ability was affected by self-confidence with a score of 13.7%. Eni et al. (2024) observed that higher self-confidence teens were more competent at public speaking due to lower fear and anxiety. Aulia and Apoko (2022) have determined a strong correlation (r = 0.548) between speaking proficiency and self-confidence in junior high school students, emphasizing the role of confidence in helping overcome fear and improve fluency. Permatasari et al. (2024) suggested that low self-confidence students employed more fillers and spoke more nervously. Similarly, Anggraeni et al. (2021) determined a very strong correlation (r = 0.952) between confidence and speaking performance. Jumarni et al. (2023) explained that English speech practice improved self-confidence and fluency. Ananda and Hastini (2023) found that low self-confidence leads to hesitation and inadequate speaking. Tayyab et al. (2023) listed self-confidence as among the psychological barriers to fluent English speech. Kuncoro et al. (2021) determined that confident students are better at fluency, vocabulary, and delivery.

Whereas fillers could play a more important role in predicting fluency and signaling hesitation, overuse would generally be linked to nervousness and uncertainty. Whereas past studies have carried out research on speech ability and self-confidence, scant literature discusses the connection between filler usage and self-confidence directly. The present study addresses this gap by examining the correlation between filler frequency and students' self-confidence and determining the strategies used by students to maximize speaking performance.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative method with case study design to explore the correlation between students' self-confidence and use of fillers in English speech. The design was employed in an attempt to attain greater understanding of students' psychological and linguistic responses to an actual speaking situation. (Lim, 2024). Ten university students from the English Education Program at Kuningan University were selected through purposive sampling. Each participant actively participated in speaking-focused academic activities, including presentations and discussions, and had an intermediate level of English proficiency. The sample included a balanced mix of genders and varied speaking confidence levels.

Data were collected through two methods: classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. The usage of filler words by students during speaking assignments, such as group discussions and presentations, was the main focus of the observations. Structured observation sheets were also used to record nonverbal cues of confidence, such as eye contact, posture, and voice quality. Students' subjective experiences of their confidence in speech, awareness of filler use, and the strategies they employed to reduce speech disfluency were all explored

through interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 15–30 minutes and was recorded with the participants' consent.

Thematic analysis was employed in ascertaining the filler use and patterns of self-confidence. Transcripts from interviews and observation notes were coded and categorized into themes. Triangulation of data, or the use of many ideas, information, methods, and witnesses to research one phenomenon, was employed in ensuring credibility and viable findings among interviews and observations. (Donkoh & Mensah, 2023).

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study identified three main concerns related to students' self-confidence in English speaking, namely factors that influence students' self-confidence, frequency and function of fillers, and strategies to increase self-confidence and reduce fillers.

3.1 Factors that Influence Participants' Confidence in Speaking English

Thematic analysis revealed three major factors related to factors that influence self-confidence in speaking English. These include understanding the topic, the number of audiences, and readiness. These are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 Factors that Influence Participants' Confidence in Speaking English

Theme	Description	Sample Quote
Understanding the topic	A good understanding of the topic being discussed has been proven to be one of the main factors that influence participants' confidence. Students felt much more confident when they had a thorough understanding of the material.	"... For example, when I really understand what I'm talking about." (P1, M).
Number of audiences	Most participants felt more nervous when they had to speak in front of a large audience. This condition creates quite high psychological pressure because of the fear of being judged or criticized by many people at once.	"Feeling confident when there are not too many people, feeling unconfident when there are too many people because they are the center of attention." (P3, F).
Readiness	Those who have done thorough preparation, such as preparing and memorizing scripts, practicing in front of a mirror, or trying presentation simulations beforehand, feel much more prepared and less anxious when performing.	"When I have prepared and when I have not prepared". (P8, F).

One of the factors mentioned as one of the factors that influences self-confidence when speaking English is understanding the topic. Several participants stated that they felt much more confident when they had a thorough understanding of the material. This allowed them to speak more fluently, avoid misinformation, and be more prepared to answer questions that might be asked by the audience. On the other hand, when they have not mastered the topic well, they tend to hesitate and speak with anxiety, even avoiding eye contact with the audience. Most participants also felt more nervous when they had to speak in front of a large audience. This condition creates quite high psychological pressure because of the fear of being judged or criticized by many people at once. On the other hand, in more relaxed situations, such as speaking in small groups or one-on-one conversations, they felt more relaxed and more able to express themselves freely. This shows that the atmosphere and scale of communication also affect the participants' oral performance. The level of readiness is also a crucial aspect in building participants' confidence. Those who have done thorough preparation, such as preparing and memorizing scripts, practicing in front of a mirror, or trying presentation simulations beforehand, feel much more prepared and less anxious when performing. This preparation process helps them reduce the possibility of forgetting or making mistakes when speaking, and gives them a sense of control over the situation. In contrast, participants who are less prepared tend to appear hesitant, often use fillers such as "umm" or "uh", and are more likely to panic when faced with minor distractions.

3.2. Frequency and Function of Fillers Used by Students

From the observation data, almost all participants used fillers with moderate frequency, except for participant P4 who showed non-verbal signs of insecurity such as lack of eye contact and defensive gestures, showing high frequency, and participant P7 who showed a higher level of self-confidence with low frequency. This indicates a strong correlation between self-confidence level and frequency of filler use. The most common fillers used by participants were "um" and "uh". These two types of fillers appear repeatedly in the context of oral

communication, especially when participants have to convey ideas in English spontaneously or in front of an audience.

The use of fillers expressed by participants has specific functions. Fillers are often used as a thinking pause makers to fill in the gaps while the brain is searching for or processing the next word to be spoken. This is the most common function of fillers among college students. In informal contexts, some students mentioned that they used fillers consciously to make the conversation sound more "flowy" and less stiff. Most participants mentioned that their use of fillers increased when they were nervous or insecure. In this case, fillers become emotional indicators and reflections of students' psychological conditions when speaking.

3.3. Students' Strategies to Improve Confidence and Reduce Fillers

The interview results showed that participants had various approaches to overcome nervousness and reduce the use of fillers when speaking English. In its completion, participants apply and create several strategies independently, which are generally personal and adjusted to the needs and comfort of each individual. Consistent practice and thorough preparation before speaking are considered key to building confidence. By feeling prepared for the material, participants tend to be calmer and reduce the pauses in thinking that are usually filled with fillers. Practicing speaking in front of a mirror helps participants assess their own facial expressions, intonation, and body language. It also increases awareness of speech patterns and the use of fillers. Several participants said that they felt more confident when they had memorized the script or key points of what they were going to say. This strategy gave structure to the conversation and reduced the need to fill in the gaps with fillers. Taking a deep breath is a simple yet effective way to calm yourself before speaking. This strategy was also referred to by some participants as a form of mental "reset" to reduce nervousness and maintain the tempo of speech. Speaking slowly is a reliable strategy to give the brain time to process words. In this way, participants avoid the pressure to continuously speak quickly which often leads to fillers.

3.4. Discussion

This study reveals a clear relationship between students' self-confidence and the use of fillers in spoken English. Observational and interview data show that students with higher self-confidence use fewer fillers, while those with lower confidence rely more on expressions like "um" and "uh." This supports Suwari, Joni, and Wirastuti (2023), who noted that self-confidence enhances fluency and reduces hesitation. Fillers serve not only as linguistic placeholders but also as cognitive and emotional signals. Participants commonly used fillers when uncertain, searching for words, or feeling nervous, aligning with Nugroho and Rasmodjo's (2020) view of fillers as hesitating and editing devices. Some students also perceived fillers as tools to make speech sound more natural in informal contexts.

External factors, such as audience size, context formality, and preparation level, strongly influenced filler usage. Students reported using more fillers when unprepared or speaking in formal settings, consistent with Fajarwati (2024) and Eni et al. (2024), who found that anxiety and lack of readiness lead to disfluencies. Importantly, students adopted various strategies to improve confidence and reduce filler usage, including regular practice, content preparation, mirror rehearsal, slow speaking, and deep breathing. These align with Syamsudin et al. (2024), who emphasized self-regulated learning and anxiety management as keys to fluency.

This study supports findings from Mohammad et al. (2024) and Permatasari et al. (2024), though it contrasts with Bhargava and Kuscenko (2022), whose quantitative study found no significant link, possibly due to age or methodological differences. Pedagogically, recognizing the psychological causes of fillers enables teachers to design supportive environments and speaking activities that foster confidence. By helping learners become aware of their speaking patterns and offering encouragement, educators can reduce filler reliance and improve fluency.

Self-confidence strongly influences filler use. Confident students speak more fluently, while anxious ones use more fillers. Yet, through conscious strategies, students can improve. These findings offer valuable insight into the emotional aspects of second language learning and inform more effective speaking instruction.

4.   CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of observational and interview data, it can be concluded that students' self-confidence has a significant impact on the use of fillers in their English speaking performance. Students with a high level of self-confidence tend to speak more fluently and use fillers moderately or functionally, often as a natural part of speech to maintain flow. In contrast, students with low self-confidence are more likely to overuse fillers, especially in formal speaking contexts where they feel nervous, uncertain, or unprepared. The use of fillers such as "um" and "uh" is not solely a linguistic phenomenon, but also a reflection of the speaker's emotional and psychological state. Students under pressure, such as when speaking in front of large audiences or when lacking sufficient preparation, tend to rely on fillers as a coping mechanism to manage anxiety and hesitation. In such

cases, fillers become emotional indicators of mental blocks, fear of making mistakes, or insecurity in language proficiency.

The study also found that many students are aware of their filler usage and have developed various strategies to improve their confidence and reduce fillers. These include regular speaking practice, thorough preparation, rehearsing in front of a mirror, taking deep breaths before speaking, and speaking more slowly. These strategies have proven to help students manage nervousness, organize their thoughts, and deliver more fluent and confident speech. Overall, this research confirms that building students' self-confidence is a key factor in minimizing filler usage and enhancing speaking fluency in English. Therefore, English language learning should not only focus on developing linguistic competence, but also give attention to the psychological aspects of learning, particularly in helping students feel confident and comfortable when speaking.

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