

Exploring students' challenges in impromptu speaking in intermediate class at the Choice English Course (CEC)

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates the challenges faced by intermediate-level students during impromptu speaking activities within a non-formal educational setting, specifically a one-month program at the Choice English Course (CEC). Although impromptu speaking is recognized as an effective technique for fostering fluency and spontaneity, prior research has predominantly focused on its implementation and effectiveness in formal academic contexts. To bridge this gap, the present study explores the students' experiences and difficulties through semi-structured interviews with ten participants selected via purposive sampling. Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed five main interconnected challenges: (1) vocabulary limitations, (2) difficulty in developing and organizing ideas spontaneously, (3) unfamiliar topics, (4) feelings of nervousness, panic, and lack of confidence, and (5) reactive pressure from the classroom environment. The findings confirmed that affective barriers like anxiety, consistent with prior research in formal settings, are significantly intensified by underlying cognitive-linguistic difficulties in vocabulary retrieval and on-the-spot idea formulation. Furthermore, the study highlights how contextual factors, such as unfamiliar topics and social dynamics, uniquely compound these challenges in a non-formal learning environment. The research concludes that the obstacles to effective impromptu speaking are multifaceted and interdependent. Consequently, pedagogical strategies in such contexts must adopt an integrated approach that simultaneously addresses linguistic competence, cognitive agility, affective management, and the cultivation of a supportive classroom climate to effectively harness impromptu speaking for communicative development.

Keywords: *impromptu speaking; speaking challenges; speaking skills*

INTRODUCTION

Speaking is a method of communication that is crucial for students to convey information and express ideas in the classroom. It plays an important role in helping students convey information clearly and participate actively in the learning process in the classroom, thereby making interactions between teachers and students more effective (Asmae et al., 2024). It is also one of the main elements for the development of students' English language skills, because through speaking activities, they learn to express ideas, opinions, and feelings appropriately (Wulansari et al., 2025). Aldi (2024) explains that the important skill requires active use of language, including the ability to understand various dialects and convey meaning through thought processes. However, it is important to acknowledge that the development of speaking skills may not progress at the same pace as other language skills due to the spontaneous nature of speaking and its reliance on instant recall of vocabulary and grammar. Mastery of these skills is essential for communicating effectively and understanding various situations, as well as playing a role in determining a person's level of education. Thus, speaking skills are essential because, through this ability, students can communicate effectively, express ideas clearly, and actively participate in the learning process that supports comprehensive English language proficiency.

Although speaking skills are very important, many students still find it difficult to express their ideas spontaneously and confidently in English due to grammatical factors, limited vocabulary, and anxiety about speaking in front of the class (Ayyubi et al., 2024). Research in vocational high school shows that the inability to master phonological aspects and limited routine oral practice are major obstacles to improving students' speaking skills. Students' difficulties speaking English in class are also greatly influenced by psychological elements, including shyness, a fear of making mistakes, and a lack of confidence (Pinilih et al., 2024). Speaking skills are a significant obstacle for many students, despite their importance, and they require the right learning techniques to overcome them.

Impromptu speaking is one technique that is thought to be successful in enhancing students' speaking abilities. By encouraging students to communicate without depending on memorization, this approach helps them become more confident, fluent, and spontaneous communicators (Mortaji, 2018). This approach trains students to think and react quickly in impromptu speaking situations, which helps them overcome speech hesitancy and fear (Handayani et al., 2025). Similarly, Arifin (2024) claimed that spontaneous speaking enhances students' capacity to arrange concepts logically under time constraints, mirroring the needs of authentic communication. Furthermore, Gumartifa (2022) highlighted that students progressively gain confidence and enhance their speaking abilities in a variety of settings through consistent spontaneous practice. Therefore, by encouraging fluency, confidence, and the capacity to talk spontaneously in everyday contexts, impromptu speaking is a thorough and successful method of enhancing students' speaking abilities. The application of the impromptu speaking approach in English language learning has been the subject of several earlier studies.

Several previous studies investigate the use of the impromptu speaking method in English language learning. The first study, titled "The Implementation of Impromptu Speaking Method at Bilingual Boarding School" by Zahro et al. (2025), investigated the application of the spontaneous speaking technique in a multilingual boarding school environment. The evaluation process, the efficacy of the approach, and students' views on its implementation in a formal educational setting were all investigated in this study. In their study "Investigating EFL Students' Speaking Anxiety: A Case Study at the English Department of UINSU", Aini and Lubis (2023) examined the causes of speaking anxiety among undergraduate English education program students. The study identified psychological barriers that impede students' oral performance in classroom speaking tasks in a formal higher education setting. The third study, titled "How Undergraduate Students Capture English Impromptu Speech Challenge" by Gumartifa and Syahri (2022), examined the challenges college students face when practicing impromptu speaking in class. In the academic year, the fifth-semester English Education majors at the University of Muhammadiyah Palembang participated in this study. The study mainly emphasised the challenges students encountered when delivering spontaneous presentations in a formal academic setting.

Even though these studies have made major contributions, there is still a significant research gap. Prior research has mostly looked at the challenges, evaluation, and efficacy of spontaneous speaking in formal educational environments such as colleges and universities. Additionally, the majority of the research participants were from formal academic contexts or higher education. In order to bridge this gap, the current study focuses on the challenges that students, especially those at the intermediate level, have when practicing impromptu speaking in an informal learning setting. The goal of this study is to provide a more comprehensive and contextual understanding of the challenges encountered during spontaneous speaking activities in non-formal environments by concentrating on the problems of the students rather than instructional strategies.

Concept of impromptu speaking

Impromptu speaking is a spontaneous speaking ability that demands rapid cognition, logical concept organization, and message delivery without extensive planning. This activity reflects authentic communication skills because it mimics natural speaking situations where verbal responses must be produced quickly and accurately (Tetukobarruansyah, 2018). Spontaneous speaking activities, such as spontaneous speaking, enable students to enhance grammatical awareness and sentence structure precision through direct verbal practice devoid of written text (Sutakote et al., 2024). In addition, Impromptu speaking falls under the category of pushed output activity, which is a spontaneous language production activity that encourages learners to use their linguistic and communicative abilities simultaneously (Aslan et al., 2024). Therefore, impromptu speaking can be understood as a speaking activity that not only trains fluency and accuracy in language but also encourages students to think quickly and use their linguistic and communicative abilities simultaneously in authentic communication situations.

According to Paudel (2024), based on the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, impromptu speaking activities help students practice real-world communication spontaneously, naturally, and meaningfully. These activities allow learners to actively use the target language while freely expressing their ideas without prior preparation, thereby creating authentic communication experiences in the classroom. In line with this view, Qasserras (2023) states that CLT promotes communicative competence and learning independence by focusing on meaningful interaction and the use of language in real contexts. Similarly, Hakami (2025) showed that CLT-based activities can increase students' confidence, fluency, and motivation in using English in authentic communication contexts. Thus, conceptually, impromptu speaking can be defined as a speaking technique that promotes fluency, confidence, and rapid cognition in authentic communication settings.

Procedure of impromptu speaking

The impromptu speaking procedure is designed to train students' spontaneous speaking skills in English as a foreign language (EFL). According to Aslan (2024), this activity begins with the preparation of questions or subjects, in which open-ended inquiries are written down and shuffled into a box. Then, a student is randomly selected to take a prompt card from the box and is given a short time, typically 30 seconds, to think of ideas or opinions about the chosen topic. After that, the student delivers a spontaneous speech for at least one minute. This procedure is repeated for all participants, so that each student has the opportunity to practice spontaneous speaking within a limited time. This systematic procedure ensures that every student has repeated opportunities to practice and improve their spontaneous speaking skills in a controlled and supportive learning environment.

METHOD

A qualitative approach was used in this study to get a deeper understanding of the participants' perspectives and experiences related to the phenomenon under study. This approach was chosen because it allowed the researchers to get rich, meaningful data through direct interaction between the researchers and participants (Creswell, 2014). The qualitative method was used in this study, which allowed researchers to see how students view and feel about impromptu speaking activities that occur in the Intermediate Choice English Course (CEC) classroom. By using this method, researchers can understand how students view and feel about impromptu speaking activities during their English learning process.

Respondents

This study involved 10 people, five males and five females, with ages ranging from 18 to 24 years old, all of whom were learning English at an intermediate level and taking a one-month program at the Choice English course. Specifically, five participants were current students (attending either high school or university), while the remaining five were university graduates. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, which means they were deliberately chosen because they already had experience using the impromptu method employed by tutors in speaking classes. The impromptu speaking activity was conducted by the tutor at the beginning of each lesson by providing random topics. Each student was given approximately two minutes to speak in front of the class, with different topics assigned to each student. The topics were either given directly by the tutor or selected randomly by students from prepared question cards.

Instruments

The researchers adapted the semi-structured interview guide instrument and voice recorder (Nurul et al., 2023). The Interview instrument was validated by using expert judgment. The expert was the teacher in the course and the supervisor. The interview guide consisted of six open-ended questions focusing on students' challenges of impromptu speaking and students' experiences during impromptu speaking activities in class. Meanwhile, a voice recorder was used to ensure that the interview data was documented completely and accurately.

Procedures

This study used semi-structured interviews with students. Prior to conducting the interviews, the researchers prepared a list of questions, systematically arranged, and prepared recording equipment to document the interview process. The interviews were conducted individually, where each student was asked the same questions but was allowed to answer freely according to their experiences and views. During the interview process, the researchers also added follow-up questions to deepen the information obtained. To maintain data accuracy, the entire interview process was recorded. After the interviews were completed, the recordings were transcribed in full. The transcribed data were evaluated and analyzed descriptively.

Data analysis

Qualitative data from semi-structured interviews were transcribed in full and analyzed using thematic analysis. The researchers reviewed the complete transcript multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the interview content. Subsequently, researchers conducted coding, which involves identifying and categorizing statements, words, or phrases pertinent to the research objectives. The obtained codes were subsequently examined to discern the primary themes. The researchers examined the coding and themes to verify consistency and clarity. These themes were subsequently detailed descriptively within the research report, supplemented by participant quotations to accurately illustrate their experiences and perspectives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Exploring students' challenges in impromptu speaking in an intermediate class

This section presents the research findings based on a thematic analysis of semi-structured interview data with ten intermediate-level students at the Choice English Course (CEC). The analysis process was carried out through the stages of coding, grouping codes, and determining themes based on patterns in the participants' responses. The results of the analysis identified five main themes that represented the challenges experienced by students during impromptu speaking activities.

Vocabulary limitations

Participants cited limited access to immediate language resources as a key challenge. Students generally had clear ideas but struggled under pressure to recall the precise English terms needed to express them.

- S1 (F) : “I do not have a lot of vocabulary and I do not have enough time to prepare about the topic”
S2 (F) : “I have an idea in my head, but I cannot speak because I do not know how to say it in English”
S5 (F) : “I do not have a lot of vocabulary, so I cannot deliver the exact words”
S3 (F) : “Because of vocabulary problem I cannot deliver my idea well”
S4 (M) : “I feel confused... because I do not have many vocabularies”

This gap between students’ ideas and their available language suggests that the rapid pace of spontaneous speech prevents them from accessing the vocabulary they already know. As a result, participants reported that their inability to produce the exact words they wanted often caused their message to become unclear.

Difficulty developing and organizing ideas

Building on these vocabulary challenges, many respondents also reported difficulty organizing a logical flow of ideas in the moment. Without additional preparation time, the mental effort needed to generate content became a major obstacle.

- S3 (M) : “Build an idea and vocabulary are my challenging. It is difficult to deliver about the topic”
S4 (F) : “I cannot speak directly in front of people without preparing the idea first”
S4 (F) : “Sometimes I feel difficult to build an idea”
S5 (F) : “I have to find the idea immediately”
S4 (M) : “I have to build an idea and start talking... it is a little bit difficult”

These accounts highlight that direct speaking demands a level of cognitive multitasking that many intermediate students find challenging. The need to “finding the idea immediately” often makes it difficult for them to even begin speaking.

Unfamilliar topics

The data further showed that speaking performance is influenced by the given topic, with participants struggling more when dealing with uncommon or abstract subjects outside their everyday conversations.

- S1 (M) : “If the topic is unfamiliar, like politics, I do not know about it”
S2 (M) : “Usually the topic is uncommon, very hard to explain”
S4 (F) : “When the topic is very difficult like environmental or government, it’s very difficult to explain”
S1 (M) : “I never talk about that one before”

As these excerpts showed, when students lacked a personal or academic connection to a topic such as politics or government they felt they had “nothing to say” in any language. This lack of background knowledge effectively silenced them, regardless of their overall English proficiency.

Feelings of nervousness, panic, and lack of confidence

The sudden nature of impromptu tasks also triggered negative emotional reactions. Participants often described feeling “shocked” when their names were called, which immediately disrupted their ability to concentrate on the linguistic task.

- S1 (F) : “I feel shocked and nervous at first, because suddenly my teacher calls my name”
S1 (M) : “I get panic when the topic suddenly comes”
S3 (F) : “I feel nervous because I’m not a confident person”
S5 (F) : “Sometimes I feel nervous to speak in front of people because I do not feel confident”

For these students, the panic of the moment serves as an immediate barrier to performance. The data suggest that for those with low self-confidence, the unexpected nature of the activity is not merely a challenge but an emotional stressor that arises even before they begin speaking.

Reactions and pressure from the classroom environment

Finally, the findings showed that classroom social dynamics played a role in shaping students’ experiences of impromptu speaking, with perceived judgment from both teachers and peers creating substantial external pressure.

- S1 (F) : “If my teacher looks at me from beginning until the end, I get nervous”
S2 (F) : “When I speak, they just look at me and give their full attention”
S3 (F) : “Sometimes my friends laugh at me”
S2 (M) : “When I make a mistake, my friends laugh at me but sometimes they also give applause”
S4 (F) : “It is challenging when I look at my friend who doesn’t give me support”

The gaze of others whether the teacher’s scrutiny or classmates’ laughter made participants feel acutely vulnerable. Although some mentioned positive reactions such as applause, the prevailing feeling was social anxiety, as the fear of making a mistake in front of an audience made the speaking task particularly challenging.

The thematic analysis of interviews with ten participants revealed five challenges in impromptu speaking activities in the CEC intermediate class. Limited vocabulary hindered participants from expressing ideas even though they already had them in mind. Difficulties in developing and organizing a spontaneous train of thought required preparation time before speaking. Unfamiliar topics such as politics and the environment were considered difficult because they had rarely been discussed before. Feelings of nervousness, panic, and lack of self-confidence arose when they were called on suddenly. Classroom environmental pressures in the form of the teacher’s prolonged gaze, classmates’ attention, and laughter at mistakes also affected their speaking comfort.

Discussion

This research uncovered five main obstacles in spontaneous speaking activities in intermediate class at a non-formal program. These results were analyzed by connecting them to pertinent theories and recent studies, to offer a thorough insight into the basic issues encountered by students.

Overall, the results related to emotional and communal factors correspond to earlier research performed in structured classroom environments. The main challenges recognized in this research, such as anxiety, fear, and a deficiency in self-confidence voiced by interviewees (e.g., S1-F, S3-F, S5-F), correspond with the major concerns emphasized in previous studies. One research focused on spontaneous speaking at the university level found that anxiety and a lack of self-confidence were the main obstacles, with students expressing feelings of nervousness, panic, and insecurity when required to speak unprepared (Gumartifa & Syahri, 2022). This supports the results of Aini and Lubis (2023), showed that anxiety related to speaking in a foreign language is widespread, often caused by elements such as challenging tasks and concerns about negative appraisal, as reflected in students’ accounts of feeling “shocked” when unexpectedly asked to speak or fearing the reactions of the audience. Additionally, the findings of this study regarding classroom pressures such as a teacher’s piercing stare (S1-F) or the giggling of peers (S3-F) reinforce the established evidence that the social dynamics inside the classroom has the ability to amplify or mitigate student

anxiety (Aini & Lubis, 2023; Gumartifa & Syahri, 2022). Consequently, the psychological and performance-related pressures associated with impromptu speaking appear to be universal, transcending the boundaries between formal and informal learning environments.

Nonetheless, while previous research on speaking anxiety has identified broad factors such as "limited English proficiency" (Aini & Lubis, 2023), this study emphasizes more specific and measurable functional difficulties: vocabulary limitations and obstacles in spontaneously structuring ideas. Comments from participants, such as "I have an idea in my head, but I cannot speak because I do not know how to say it in English" (S2-F) or "Build an idea and vocabulary are my challenging. It is difficult to deliver about the topic" (S3-M), reveal more than mere emotional distress. They indicate a primary cognitive challenge, marked by issues in retrieving words and immediate conceptual understanding. This corresponds with Levelt's (1989) speech production model, which indicates that speaking involves conceptualizing thoughts and transforming them into language, processes that can be compromised when vocabulary access is restricted. This analytical distinction offers valuable perspective, shifting scholarly focus from depicting manifestations of anxiety to recognizing its fundamental cognitive processes, an aspect that has received less scrutiny in prior studies that emphasized emotional and social elements. When analyzed alongside studies demonstrating methodological effectiveness, such as "The Implementation of Extemporaneous Speaking Method at Bilingual Boarding School" by Zahro et al. (2025), which revealed positive outcomes like significant improvements in speaking scores, this research highlights the difficulties and routes taken to achieve those results. In other words, identifying these five barriers explains why spontaneous speaking practice appears so difficult and what elements require support to reach the improvements highlighted in effectiveness studies.

This research provides an overview of the difficulties associated with spontaneous speaking in a non-formal educational context. This map not only substantiates recognized psychosocial issues but, more significantly, emphasizes and elaborates on the cognitive-linguistic and situational obstacles typical of challenges in spontaneous speech. The educational implications are evident: successful training methods in non-formal education need to be diverse. They must collaboratively develop linguistic ability (vocabulary), strengthen cognitive skills (swift idea organization), prepare participants contextually (topic familiarization), regulate emotional factors (anxiety), and, most importantly, establish secure, helpful educational environments to alleviate social tensions. As a result, this study not only addresses the research questions but also establishes a solid empirical foundation for developing more empathetic, context-sensitive, and effective language instruction methods.

CONCLUSION

This study identifies five primary obstacles encountered by intermediate-level students at Choice English Course (CEC) when participating in impromptu speaking activities: vocabulary limitations, difficulty developing and organizing ideas, unfamiliar topics, feelings of nervousness, panic, and lack of confidence, reactions and pressure from the classroom environment. By emphasizing comparable dynamics in non-formal environments, our findings supplement earlier studies conducted in formal settings.

Although this study offers a nuanced insight into the intermediate learner's experience, it is limited by a modest sample size of ten students and a cross-sectional approach that reflects only a single point in time, potentially restricting the applicability of the results to wider contexts. To tackle these limits, upcoming studies should utilize longitudinal approaches in various settings to examine how these communication obstacles develop over an extended period. In practical terms, to maximize the advantages of spontaneous speaking for students' communicative development, educators are encouraged to adopt an integrated approach that addresses these issues by enhancing linguistic competence, cognitive agility, affective management, and a supportive classroom environment.

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