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Speech Production in EFL Classrooms: A Psycholinguistic Study of Planning and Fluency

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Abstract: This study investigates speech production in EFL classrooms from a psycholinguistic perspective, with a focus on planning and fluency. Many EFL learners experience difficulty speaking fluently even when they possess adequate grammatical and lexical knowledge. This study aims to explain these difficulties by examining the cognitive processes involved in real-time speech production. A qualitative research design was employed involving undergraduate EFL students. Data were collected through classroom speaking tasks, audio recordings, semi-structured interviews, stimulated recall sessions, and field notes. The analysis focused on patterns of speech planning, lexical retrieval, monitoring behavior, and fluency disruption. The findings reveal that excessive planning, slow lexical access, strong focus on form, and low automaticity significantly reduce fluency. Learners often plan and monitor their speech simultaneously, which increases cognitive load and leads to frequent pauses, hesitation, and self-repair. The results indicate that fluency problems stem primarily from processing constraints rather than lack of language knowledge. This study highlights the importance of incorporating psycholinguistic principles into EFL speaking instruction. Teaching practices should address planning load, reduce over-monitoring, and support the development of automaticity to improve spoken fluency.

Keywords: psycholinguistics, speech production, EFL learners, planning, fluency

INTRODUCTION

Speech production is a central goal of English as a Foreign Language instruction (Lambert, et.al., 2021). Learners are expected to express ideas clearly, accurately, and fluently in classroom interaction. However, many EFL learners struggle to speak smoothly despite adequate knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. They hesitate, pause frequently, and reformulate utterances. These observable problems indicate deeper cognitive challenges that occur during speech production. Psycholinguistics provides a theoretical framework to explain how speech is produced in the human mind (Lukačević, 2023). Speech production involves several stages, including conceptualization, formulation, and articulation. During these stages, speakers plan what to say, select appropriate lexical items, organize grammatical structures, and produce spoken output. For EFL learners, these processes demand high cognitive effort. Limited automaticity and restricted exposure increase processing load during speaking tasks.

Planning plays a critical role in speech production. Planning refers to the mental preparation of ideas, words, and structures before and during speaking (Johnson & Abdi Tabari, 2022). In first language use, planning occurs rapidly and often unconsciously. In EFL contexts, planning becomes slower and more deliberate. Learners must allocate attention to both content and form. This dual focus often leads to disrupted fluency. Fluency is a key indicator of successful speech production. It reflects the ability to speak with appropriate speed, minimal hesitation, and coherent flow (Tavakoli & Wright, 2020). In EFL classrooms, fluency often develops more slowly than accuracy. Learners may produce grammatically correct sentences but fail to maintain smooth speech. This gap suggests that fluency depends not only on linguistic knowledge but also on processing efficiency.

Dayat (2017) argued many EFL studies examine speaking performance through scores, task outcomes, or error analysis. These approaches focus on what learners produce rather than how they produce it. As a result, the cognitive mechanisms underlying speech breakdown remain underexplored. Psycholinguistic research shifts attention to internal processes such as planning load, retrieval speed, and monitoring. This perspective offers deeper explanations for fluency problems (Yu, 2022). Speech planning directly affects

fluency during classroom interaction. When learners plan extensively before speaking, they may delay output and reduce speech rate. When they plan minimally, they risk producing errors or incomplete utterances. Balancing planning and execution is challenging for EFL learners. This challenge becomes more visible during spontaneous speaking activities such as discussions or role plays.

EFL classrooms create unique conditions for speech production. Learners speak under time pressure, social evaluation, and limited linguistic resources (Hanifa, 2018). These conditions intensify cognitive demands during planning. Learners must decide what to say while monitoring accuracy and appropriateness. This multitasking often leads to pauses, self-corrections, and breakdowns in fluency. Previous research suggests that excessive planning can hinder fluency. Learners who focus too much on grammatical correctness tend to speak slowly. Conversely, limited planning may increase fluency but reduce accuracy (Alvarez et.al., 2024). This trade-off highlights the need to understand planning processes in speech production. A psycholinguistic approach allows researchers to examine this balance systematically.

Despite its importance, planning in EFL speech production remains underinvestigated, especially in classroom settings. Many studies rely on experimental tasks that do not reflect real instructional contexts. Classroom-based research can capture authentic speaking behavior. It can reveal how learners manage planning and fluency during actual learning activities (Alshahrani & Saud, 2024). This context-sensitive approach addresses a significant research gap.

This study responds to that gap by examining speech production in EFL classrooms from a psycholinguistic perspective. It focuses on planning and fluency as interconnected processes. The study explores how learners plan their speech and how this planning influences fluency during speaking tasks. By analyzing learners' spoken output and reflections, the study seeks to explain common fluency problems.

The theoretical foundation of this study draws on psycholinguistic models of speech production. These models describe speech as a staged and resource-limited process. They emphasize the role of planning, monitoring, and automaticity. According to these theories, fluency emerges when processing becomes efficient and less attention is required for form. This framework guides the analysis of EFL learners' speech.

From a pedagogical perspective, understanding speech production has direct instructional value. Teachers often encourage students to speak more without addressing processing constraints. If learners struggle due to planning overload, increased speaking time alone may not improve fluency. Instruction must consider how learners plan and execute speech. Psycholinguistic insights can inform task design and feedback strategies.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative research design to examine speech production in EFL classrooms, with specific attention to planning and fluency. A qualitative approach suited the research aims because the study sought to explore cognitive processes that underlie spoken performance. Speech planning and fluency involve internal decision making, monitoring, and resource allocation. These processes cannot be fully explained through numerical measures alone. Qualitative inquiry allows detailed observation of how learners plan utterances and manage fluency during real classroom tasks.

The study focused on authentic classroom speaking activities. It emphasized process over product. The design enabled close analysis of learner behavior, verbalized thoughts, and spoken output. This approach aligned with psycholinguistic perspectives that view speech production as a dynamic and resource-limited activity.

Data Collection

Data collection involved multiple qualitative instruments to capture planning behavior and fluency features during speech production. The participants were undergraduate EFL students enrolled in an English Education program. They regularly engaged in speaking tasks such as discussions, role plays, and short presentations. These tasks created natural conditions for observing speech planning and fluency.

The primary data source was classroom-based speaking tasks. Participants completed two types of tasks. The first type involved prepared speaking, where students received a topic and limited planning time before speaking. The second type involved spontaneous speaking, where students responded immediately to prompts. This contrast allowed observation of different planning demands.

All speaking performances were audio-recorded. Recordings captured pauses, repetitions, repairs, and speech rate. These features served as indicators of fluency and planning load. The researcher observed each session and took detailed field notes. The notes documented visible hesitation, self-correction, and task engagement.

Following the speaking tasks, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews. The interviews explored how participants planned their speech, what they focused on during speaking, and what caused

hesitation or breakdown. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to reflect on their cognitive processes. This step provided insight into internal planning that could not be observed directly.

In addition, stimulated recall sessions were conducted with selected participants. During these sessions, participants listened to excerpts of their own recordings and explained what they were thinking at specific moments. This method helped link observable fluency features with planning decisions. All interviews and recall sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data collection occurred over five weeks. This duration ensured repeated observation and reduced task familiarity effects. The use of multiple instruments supported data triangulation and strengthened credibility.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic qualitative procedure grounded in psycholinguistic theory. The analysis aimed to identify patterns related to speech planning and fluency. It focused on how planning behavior influenced speech flow during classroom tasks.

The first step involved data familiarization. The researcher repeatedly listened to recordings and read transcripts. Attention focused on pauses, fillers, repetitions, reformulations, and speech rate changes. Interview transcripts were read alongside performance data to connect behavior with reported planning strategies.

The second step involved coding. The researcher assigned initial codes to segments of data that reflected planning and fluency processes. Examples of codes included pre-speech planning, online planning, form-focused monitoring, hesitation due to lexical search, and self-repair. These codes captured both observable speech features and reported cognitive activity.

The third step involved categorization. Related codes were grouped into broader categories. These categories included planning orientation, planning load, fluency disruption, and fluency maintenance strategies. The categories reflected key constructs in psycholinguistic models of speech production.

The fourth step involved theme development. The researcher identified themes that explained the relationship between planning and fluency. Themes addressed how excessive planning reduced speech flow, how limited planning increased speed but caused instability, and how learners balanced planning and execution. The analysis emphasized interaction between cognitive effort and spoken output.

To ensure trustworthiness, the researcher applied triangulation across speaking data, interviews, recall sessions, and field notes. Member checking was conducted by sharing summary interpretations with several participants. Peer review with a fellow researcher helped refine coding decisions.

Overall, the qualitative method enabled an in-depth examination of speech production in EFL classrooms. The analysis revealed how planning demands shape fluency during real instructional activities. This approach provided empirically grounded insights into the cognitive mechanisms behind EFL learners' spoken performance.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the findings of the study on speech production in EFL classrooms, with a focus on planning and fluency. The discussion integrates qualitative evidence from classroom speaking tasks, interviews, stimulated recall sessions, and field notes with psycholinguistic theory. The findings reveal consistent patterns that explain why many EFL learners struggle to speak fluently despite sufficient linguistic knowledge. Planning emerged as a central factor that shaped learners' fluency in both prepared and spontaneous speaking tasks. The discussion interprets these findings through established models of speech production and highlights their pedagogical implications.

One major finding concerns the heavy cognitive load during speech planning. Most participants reported that they actively planned vocabulary and sentence structure before speaking. During prepared tasks, learners used the available planning time to mentally rehearse sentences. However, this preparation did not always result in fluent delivery. Many learners forgot parts of their plan or hesitated when actual production began. This finding suggests that pre-task planning alone does not guarantee fluency when processing resources remain limited.

The data show that online planning created significant disruption to fluency. Think-aloud reflections and stimulated recall data revealed that learners continued planning while speaking. They searched for words, adjusted grammar, and monitored accuracy simultaneously. This multitasking caused frequent pauses and fillers such as "uh" and "um." Psycholinguistic theory explains this pattern as a consequence of limited attentional capacity. When learners plan and produce speech at the same time, cognitive overload becomes unavoidable.

Another key finding relates to lexical retrieval during speech production. Many fluency breakdowns occurred because learners could not retrieve words quickly enough. Participants often paused mid-utterance to search for vocabulary they already knew. These pauses disrupted speech rhythm and reduced listener

comprehension. Interviews confirmed that learners experienced frustration during lexical search. This result supports psycholinguistic claims that slow lexical access directly undermines fluency.

The study also found that form-focused monitoring negatively affected fluency. Learners paid excessive attention to grammatical correctness while speaking. They often stopped to repair minor errors, even when meaning was clear. These self-repairs increased hesitation and interrupted speech flow. This finding aligns with speech production models that identify monitoring as a resource-demanding process. When learners over-monitor form, fluency suffers.

Differences between prepared and spontaneous speaking tasks further clarified the role of planning. In prepared tasks, learners spoke more confidently at the beginning but became less fluent as speech progressed. This decline occurred because prepared plans could not cover all aspects of extended speech. In spontaneous tasks, learners showed higher hesitation from the start. However, some learners gradually gained fluency as they focused more on meaning than form. This contrast indicates that planning type influences fluency patterns differently.

A recurring finding involves limited automaticity in speech production. Learners required conscious effort to formulate even simple sentences. They frequently paused between clauses and struggled to maintain speech continuity. Automaticity, which allows rapid and effortless processing, was largely absent. According to psycholinguistic theory, fluency emerges when formulation and articulation processes become automated. The lack of automaticity explains persistent fluency problems in EFL classrooms.

The data also revealed anxiety-related planning behavior. Many learners planned extensively because they feared making mistakes. This fear increased cognitive pressure during speaking tasks. Learners preferred silence over risking incorrect speech. Interviews showed that anxiety pushed learners to over-plan and over-monitor. This emotional factor interacted with cognitive load and further reduced fluency.

From a discussion perspective, these findings confirm that fluency is primarily a processing issue, not a knowledge deficit. Learners possessed sufficient grammar and vocabulary to complete tasks. However, they could not access and organize this knowledge efficiently during real-time speech. This supports psycholinguistic models that emphasize processing speed and resource allocation over static competence.

The interaction between planning and fluency reflects a trade-off well documented in psycholinguistic research. Extensive planning improves accuracy but slows speech. Minimal planning increases speed but raises error rates. The learners in this study struggled to balance these demands. Their speech production remained unstable because they lacked strategies to manage planning efficiently. This imbalance explains why fluency development often lags behind other speaking skills.

The findings also highlight the role of working memory in speech production. Learners struggled to hold ideas, lexical items, and grammatical structures simultaneously. When working memory capacity was exceeded, speech broke down. This outcome supports capacity-based theories of speech production. These theories argue that limited memory resources constrain fluency, especially in second language use.

In classroom contexts, these cognitive constraints become more pronounced. EFL learners speak under observation and evaluation. This context increases monitoring and planning demands. The study shows that classroom interaction intensifies processing difficulty. As a result, fluency problems become more visible during instructional tasks than in private rehearsal.

Pedagogically, the findings suggest that fluency cannot be improved through practice alone. Repeated speaking tasks without addressing planning load may reinforce hesitation patterns. Teachers need to design activities that reduce cognitive burden. Tasks should gradually shift learners' attention from form to meaning. This shift can promote more natural speech flow.

The findings also support the use of task repetition. Repeated tasks reduce planning demands because content becomes familiar. With lower planning load, learners can allocate more resources to fluency. Psycholinguistic research shows that repetition supports automatization. The data from this study indicate that learners spoke more smoothly during repeated tasks.

Another implication concerns feedback timing. Immediate correction during speech increases monitoring and disrupts fluency. Delayed feedback allows learners to focus on meaning during production. The findings suggest that fluency-oriented tasks should prioritize communication over accuracy. This approach aligns with psycholinguistic principles of processing efficiency.

The study also contributes theoretically by providing qualitative evidence of speech production processes. Most previous studies rely on quantitative fluency measures such as speech rate or pause length. This study adds depth by revealing learners' internal planning decisions. The combination of spoken data and learner reflections strengthens the explanatory power of the findings.

However, the study has limitations. The participant group was limited to one academic context. The findings may not represent all EFL learners. Future research should include diverse proficiency levels and instructional settings. Experimental studies can complement qualitative insights by measuring processing changes over time.

CONCLUSION

This study explored speech production in EFL classrooms by focusing on planning and fluency from a psycholinguistic perspective. The findings show that speaking difficulties among EFL learners are mainly caused by cognitive processing constraints rather than limited grammar or vocabulary knowledge. Learners experience problems because they must plan, monitor, and produce speech at the same time, which places a heavy load on their cognitive resources.

The study found that excessive planning often disrupted fluency. Learners spent too much time preparing sentences and monitoring accuracy, which resulted in frequent pauses, hesitation, and self-correction. Although planning helped reduce grammatical errors, it slowed speech and interrupted the flow of communication. This confirms that planning and fluency compete for limited attention during real-time speech production.

Lexical retrieval also played a major role in fluency breakdown. Learners struggled to access known words quickly, causing delays and incomplete utterances. These delays reduced speech continuity and increased learner frustration. The findings suggest that fluency depends more on retrieval speed than on vocabulary size.

Another important finding relates to low automaticity. Learners relied on conscious effort to produce speech, even for simple sentences. This lack of automatic processing made speaking mentally demanding and reduced fluency. Strong focus on grammatical correctness further increased monitoring and limited smooth speech.

Overall, the study highlights the importance of addressing cognitive processes in EFL speaking instruction. Teaching practices should help learners manage planning load, reduce over-monitoring, and develop automaticity. By focusing on how learners process speech, teachers can better support fluency development in EFL classrooms.

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