Enhancing speaking skills amidst and beyond the Covid-19 pandemic: Innovative strategies from teachers' perspectives for high school EFL learners

Suryanto [a,1,*], Eko Purwanti [b,2], Felansonia Azhima Dewanti [c,3]

[a, b, c] Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, Jl. Brawijaya, Geblagan, Tamantirto, Kasihan, Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta 55183
[1] suryanto@umy.ac.id*; [2] ekopurwanti@umy.ac.id; [3] felansonia.a.fpb17@mail.umy.ac.id
* corresponding author

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ABSTRACT

The success of English language learners is determined by their capacity for effective English communication. The purposes of this study are firstly to examine what activities university teachers employ to enhance students' speaking skills during and post-COVID-19 pandemic and secondly investigate the differences in teaching speaking skills during and post-COVID pandemic. The researchers select seven English instructors as participants using a qualitative descriptive research design. All participants were English lecturers at a Yogyakarta private university. Participants include three female and four male teachers taken using purposive sampling method. Using an interview guide, the researchers conducted interviews with the participants to collect data. The findings show ten activities lecturers utilize to instruct speaking skills during and post-pandemic. The activities include giving speaking practices, making group work activities, retelling stories, or experiences, assigning role play and presentations, asking students to record activities, providing communicating exposures, practicing interviews, and producing a vlog. During and post the pandemic, the second set of findings highlights the differences in teaching speaking during and post pandemics, covering the nature of the activities in terms of flexibility, degree of control, and engagement.

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1. Introduction

The successful performance of English language learners is measured by their capacity to communicate effectively in English (Kurniawan, 2016; Richards, 2015). Effective English communication requires sufficient accuracy and fluency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing to convey and comprehend meaning in various contexts (Burns & Richards, 2018; Richards, 2015). To comprehend and respond appropriately, learners require listening that involves comprehending spoken English, including various accents, intonation patterns, and idiomatic expressions (Thir, 2023; Yu et al., 2021). Speaking involves expressing oneself plainly and effectively in English using the proper vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. It also requires the ability to engage in English conversations, discussions, and presentations, as well as to negotiate meaning and clarify misunderstandings (Sim & Post, 2022). Reading requires comprehension of written English, including various writing styles such as academic articles, news reports, and literary texts, to comprehend and derive meaning (Eriksson et al., 2023; Burns & Richards, 2018; Richards, 2015). It also requires recognizing and employing various reading strategies to enhance comprehension. Writing is using

English to express oneself effectively in written form, utilizing appropriate grammar, vocabulary, and organization (Paterson & Fisher, 2022). It also requires composing diverse texts for various purposes and audiences, such as emails, essays, and reports.

Among the four main language skills, speaking skills constitute vital language skills for students and teachers to master as such proficiency shows their language expertise (Koran, 2015). English students who mastered speaking skills performed better in school discussions and question-and-answer sessions. At such times, English learners can express their ideas clearly to understand the lesson better, thus leading to their success in learning. Fluency in spoken English is required for social, travel, business, and educational purposes (Duff et al., 2018). Moreover, the ability to perform spoken communication is valued most often, and by which they can use them or lose their chance at life (Namaziandost, et al., 2018). Considering these conditions, teachers should facilitate students maximally to master speaking skills. In the same direction, students should learn hard by understanding the theoretical knowledge and executing its practical matters to acquire English-speaking skills. However, the learning and its facilitation are subject to the contextual conditions of the teaching-learning process (Burns & Richards, 2018; Richards, 2015)

Contextual conditions in the English language are essential in language learning and offer new perspectives on negotiating cross-cultural encounters, changing learning affordances, and reconfigurations the nature of second language teaching (Burns & Richards, 2018). The context of English language learning can be in and beyond the classroom. Learning in the classroom requires balancing instruction with language use, as individual learners vary in their preferred learning styles, aptitude, attitudes, and motivations. Explicit classroom-based instruction can be used for strategy training, modeling expert language use, comparing pragmatic features of languages, translation activities, and activities involving implicit learning (East et al., 2018).

Language learning beyond the classroom is a lifelong project, with diversity and versatility being two main characteristics (Chik, 2018). Diversity is one of the key features of language learning beyond the classroom. Learners can encounter various forms of language input, including perusing books, viewing films, listening to music, and conversing with native speakers. This variety of language input can assist students in expanding their vocabulary and gaining a deeper understanding of cultural nuances and idiomatic expressions. Versatility is another characteristic to characterize language learning outside the classroom. Students can engage in language learning activities and resources that correspond with their interests and learning preferences, such as language exchange programs, online language courses, and language learning applications. This adaptability enables language learners to modify their learning experience to their specific requirements and objectives.

A theoretical model defines the scope of learning language in five dimensions. They are location, formality, pedagogy, locus of control, and trajectory (Chik, 2018). The location dimension refers to the location where language learning occurs. It can include formal settings such as classrooms and language institutions and informal settings such as immersion experiences in the target language country, language exchanges with English native speakers, and self-study using online resources. The formality signifies the level of formality in language learning. It may vary from highly organized and official classroom environments to informal and relaxed environments such as language cafés or conversation communities. The pedagogy dimension refers to the techniques and strategies implemented for teaching language. It may incorporate traditional approaches like a grammatical translation as well as communicative and task-based methods that prioritize real-world language usage and interaction.

Meanwhile, the locus of control refers to how much control learners possess over their learning process. It may include teacher-centred approaches in which the teacher determines the content and pacing of learning and learner-centred approaches that enable students to establish their objectives, choose their materials, and manage their learning. The trajectory dimension describes the path or development of language learning over time. It can include short-term objectives like completing a language exam or acquiring specific vocabulary and long-term objectives like attaining fluency or acquiring the language for professional purposes.

As reported by The United Nations Science, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) on Thursday (4/3/2020), the pandemic of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) had an impact on the education sector (UNESCO, 2020). About 300 million students worldwide were disrupted in their learning practices and challenged in their future educational rights (Handoyo, 2020). Countries worldwide

closed schools in every effort to avoid the spreading virus that had already affected more than 233 million students around the world (UNESCO, 2020). The government closed schools and universities. All educational activities were transferred into online modes. In Yogyakarta, Indonesia, the context where this study was performed, all educational learning processes were changed in the mode of an online system. The impacts of COVID-19 were also felt in teaching and learning English. Students also suffered from the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the development of language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

The Indonesian government officially revoked the Imposition of Restricting Community Activities (PPKM) policy related to the COVID-19 pandemic on Friday, December 30, 2022, after President Joko Widodo announced it at a press conference at the State Palace in Jakarta (Ramadhan, 2022). This policy brings about the absence of previous restrictions in every aspect of state lives, including educational fields, to be more specific in the domain of English language teaching and learning. The change in teaching and learning English contextual conditions from the restricted condition due to COVID-19 to the restriction's eradication motivated the researchers to administer research with the following questions.

1. What activities did teachers employ to teach speaking skills during and after the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. What differences exist in teaching speaking skills during and after the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. Method

This investigation is qualitative and descriptive in nature. Choosing an appropriate method to address research concerns is a crucial step in the research procedure. Frequently, qualitative descriptive research is used to offer clear explanations of the participants' experiences and perceptions (Doyle et al., 2020). Qualitative descriptive research develops data that subjectively describe the "who, what, and where" of events or experiences. It corresponds most closely to constructionism and critical theories employing interpretive and naturalistic methodologies. It is also consistent with pragmatism, in which decisions about how research should be conducted are made based on the study's goals or objectives and context (Doyle et al., 2020).

This research was conducted in the Department of English Education at a private university in Yogyakarta. The first reason is that the university also teaches speaking courses, which require special activities to train students to improve their speaking skills. Second, the lecturers' experience teaching speaking skills during and post-COVID-19 pandemic, so they are suitable to participate in this study. The participants of this study were seven lecturers consisting of 3 females and four males. The writer used pseudonyms for the data analysis needs. Participant 1 is Miss Intan, participant 2 is Miss Reyna, participant 3 is Mr. Zaki, Participant 4 is Miss Ifah, participant 5 is Mr. Taka, participant 6 is Mr. Ono, and Participant 7 is Mr. Rian.

All these participants were interviewed after being contacted and ready to participate in this study voluntarily. The researchers used the Indonesian language to avoid misunderstanding, as all participants were Indonesian native speakers. However, the researchers made interviewed piloting to two persons to assess whether the researchers were capable of running the smooth interview processes and asked understandable questions based on the interview guide that had been prepared in advance (Saddour, 2020). After piloting the interview guideline, the researchers interviewed the participants one by one based on the time convenient for them using a recorder.

The interview results were transcribed verbatim. Prior to the data analyses, the interview transcripts were given to the research participants for member checking to confirm trustworthiness related to the originality and credibility of the information given in the interviews (Cervini & Zingaro, 2021; Stahl & King, 2020). By then, the data analyses were administered using thematic analysis (Williams & Moser, 2019) by making coding. Coding is an almost standard qualitative research method; it is a fundamental part of the analytical process and how researchers break down their data to produce something fresh. "Coding is the process of processing qualitative text data by extracting them from each other to see what they yield before reassembling the data meaningfully" (Creswell, 2015). In other words, coding is where the researchers put together and group the results of interviews that have been conducted. There are also four coding types: open coding, analytical coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Williams & Moser, 2019).

3. Findings

The findings were classified based on the research questions. First, the researcher reported the result of activities used by the teachers to teach students to improve their speaking skills during and after COVID-19 pandemic. Second, the researcher presented the results of media used by teachers to teach students their speaking skills during post-COVID-19 pandemic times.

The thematic analyses revealed that the activities implemented by teachers to teach speaking skills during and after COVID-19 pandemic could be categorized into two big categories: the same and different activities. The interview results indicated that most activities conducted during and post the COVID-19 pandemic are the same. They cover ten themes, including giving speaking practices, making group work activities, retelling stories or experiences, assigning role play and presentations, asking students to record activities, providing speaking exposures, practicing interviews, and producing a vlog.

3.1. The same activities to practice English speaking skills during and after COVID-19 pandemic

They cover ten themes, including giving speaking practices, making group work activities, retelling stories or experiences, assigning role play and presentations, asking students to record activities, providing speaking exposures, practicing interviews, and producing a vlog.

1) Giving practice

All participants mentioned that both during and post-COVID-19 pandemic provided activities for students to practice speaking skills. Based on the interview result of Participant 1, Miss Intan said, "… during COVID-19 pandemic, online students should have the opportunity to chat to practice their speaking skills. Similarly, I assign the same in the after pandemic" (P1.1). Then Participant 2, Miss Reyna, "Give much practice and then give an input session first, give an input session like video or audio recording according to the theme or topic and then I give a case" (P2.2). Participant 7, Rian, stated, '…speaking is a skill, to master skills, students require to practice and practice; this is the same, I did during COVID-19 pandemic and afterward. …" All teachers seem in agreement to encourage students to have activities to practice and practice their speaking skills regardless of whether the class was imposed during or after COVID-19 pandemic. Practicing is one of the key elements to teaching English speaking skills (Richards, 2015)

2) Making a group activity

This study revealed that in speaking class, all teachers made group activities for students to train their English-speaking skills. One of the participants said, "So the moment we did was to make small groups, we have four credits for the course, so the time is more than 3 hours, yes, 3 hours 20 minutes now what we do is the students are grouped into small groups" (P1.2). In group activities, the lecturers commonly divide several students into groups. Then the students did a speaking activity in the group. The groups of students exchanged information with one another on different topics. In the discussion, each group is given 20 minutes to do the speaking activity (Duff & Surtees, 2018).

Activities such as peer or group work enhance the speaking abilities of the learners, allowing them to convey their opinions in a sympathetic context. Teachers of English must consider the requirements and interests of their pupils when selecting topics for these exercises. At this juncture, it is judicious to cite Rao S. P. (2018), who asserts, "While selecting the topics, teachers must consider the learners' needs and interests so that students will work more enthusiastically on assigned topics." Therefore, teachers must have a more optimistic outlook on learner-centered methods to engage students by emphasizing speaking skills-related activities. When students work in partners or small groups, they develop their independence and strive to communicate more and generate more sentences. Working in a group will significantly assist English language learners in boosting their confidence and encouraging them to exercise their speaking skills whenever they have the opportunity. Therefore, teachers must provide more opportunities for students to actively partake in pairings or groups to improve their speaking abilities (Singh, 2020).

3) Retelling activity

One of the participants shared their point about teaching using retelling activity. Miss Intan said, "So the student tells the story later, and the other students have to retell what he told" (P1.14). The rest of the participants mentioned applying retelling stories or experiences as teaching activities during and after COVID-19 pandemic. Taking examples, participant 2, Miss Reyna, and Participant 3, Mr.

Zaki, stated similarly that retelling stories or experiences is implemented frequently in their speaking class. They argued that retelling story or experience had given opportunities to have an input session first before having their speaking retrieval (Richards, 2015)

Retelling has a positive effect on language acquisition because it improves students' ability to reorganize information from previously read texts (Ghiabi, 2014; Richards, 2015). Retelling enables the teacher to determine how well a student comprehends the story as a whole and reorganize the story with their own words. Students' speaking skills can be improved by having them relate anecdotes in their own terms.

4) Using video learning

Based on the interview asked by the researchers, participant 1, Miss Intan, explained, "Then they have to watch the video, so after watching it, there will be much learning in the video" (P1.19). Then Participant 2, Mr. Zaki, also explained, "If they want to can review a product, they have to watch many product reviews on youtube" (P3.26). Both participants used the activity by watching a video to improve their speaking skills. Miss Ifah, Mr. Taka, Mr. Ono, and Mr. Rian shared the idea of using video learning. They argued that video learning could significantly assist the students in having clear input sessions. They clarify that video learning increases students' interest and willingness to learn. Video can maintain interconnection and engagement during study and engagement leads students to practice the material learned (Lowenthal et al., 2020). Moreover, video can contribute positive effects in learning speaking in terms of increasing motivation to learn, and nurturing skills to think critically and lowering the anxiety in English learning (Chien et al., 2020).

5) Giving assessment

All participants said that they did assessment activities to improve their speaking skills. The first participant, Miss Intan, explained, "We also made an assessment that was theirs, whose assessment could make them practice their speaking skills. Then, participant 2, Miss Reyna, said, "Practice using synchronous meetings for the assignment or the assessment." The two participants not only gave the students practice but also gave them an assessment for their improving speaking skills (Burns & Richards, 2018). All participants agree to give assessments. Some experts say that the selection of the online assessment concept is seen as one of the learning concepts that provide an opportunity for students to perform critical thinking processes (Chien et al., 2020). Providing student assessments can provide opportunities for students to carry out critical thinking processes so that students can also speak well.

6) Assigning role play and presentation

One participant, Miss Intan, said, "To practice the daily conversation, students should perform interviews. I usually ask the students to do presentations followed by a role play". At this point, role play and presentation become activities in the speaking class. The other participants stated that they use presentation and role play in the context of the pandemic and post-pandemic. Mr. Taka and Mr. Ono said, "We implemented role play and presentation online during the COVID-19 pandemic. At post COVID-19 pandemics, we can again make the real performance of role play and presentation in front of the class". The statements of Mr. Taka and Mr. Ono signify that even though the class meetings were online, the role-play activities and presentations could still run synchronously online. Indeed, many studies prove that role plays are valuable teaching tools (Rashid & Qaisar, 2017; Stevens, 2015). Likewise, presentation activities improve students' capacity to interact with others if they learn how to make a successful presentation (King, 2012). In short, the findings show that role-play and presentation are instrumental activities for speaking class.

7) Asking students to produce a recording

Based on the results of interviews conducted by the researchers, participant 2, Miss Reyna, said, "They record their voice individually, so audio recording is not just video recording. At this point, students make audio recordings to practice speaking skills. Then Participant 3, Mr. Zaki, explained that "students are supposed to make a podcast and publish it, …later, after they got the interview results with the professionals, they published it… they had practiced using English" (P3.15). This excerpt signifies that students are asked to make a podcast which will later be uploaded to one of the social media. Using this podcast has an impact on students' skills (Indahsari, 2020) that is beneficial both during and after a pandemic. Participant 7, Rian, stated, "…. I train students in my speaking class by asking them to record their speaking and listen to the recording to check. They can use any kind of media…". Self-recording technique provides solutions to other related problems that teachers face,

such as students not feeling responsible for their learning, not putting forth sufficient effort, not speaking English in class, or speaking in their native language. (Encalada & Sarmiento, 2019)

8) Giving Exposure

Based on the interview results, participant 2, Miss Reyna, said, "Earlier, you gave much practice and gave the students much exposure first, and then the exposure is in the form of examples." Then participant 3, Mr. Zaki, also said, "In my opinion, speaking skills should start with a lot of input or exposure." Participant 4, Miss Ifah, mentioned, "…I give a lot of exposures both online and offline. The exposures can be given both during and after pandemic…" works. In line with Miss Ifah, participant 5, Mr. Taka, said, "… whether teaching online or offline, during or post-pandemic, giving exposure for students to practice speaking skills is a must". The excerpts proved that providing students exposure to practice English skills have been practiced by the lecturers both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, the extent of different degrees of formality, locus of control, and pedagogy (Chik, 2018; Dayagbil et al., 2021).

9) Making a vlog

Creating activity is also applied by Participant 3; he is one, Mr. Zaki. He said, "Well, in this product review, I made the assignment to make a vlog. "So coincidentally, in one of the courses taught by Mr. Zaki, one of the goals is that students can review a product. In the activity of making a vlog, students review a product. What will be explained in this product review, students review the product, providing information about the advantages and disadvantages. The uniqueness of the product, then they will reset about the product. The person who speaks in the video is referred to as a vlogger. Vlog is one of the most recent media innovations that has opened up new communication channels through user-generated content. Short segments of video blogs are more effective in the teaching-learning process since the teacher can choose any section of a specific language that the students will study and practice.

3.2. The reasons of having same activities to practice English speaking skills during and after COVID-19 pandemic

When asked why the participants expressed almost the same activities when they taught English speaking skills during and after COVID-19 pandemic, they expressed the following themes: LMS (learning management system) available far before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Grants for Online platform establishment, and the offline activities transferable to online activities.

1) LMS was established far before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic

All participants said they had engaged in online learning before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. All participants stated similarly, "….. our university has established LMS since 2018…". Participant 7, Mr. Rian, even said, "… our university is among the pioneer universities that established LMS for online learning in 2017 and 2018….". As COVID-19 outbreak was in March 2020, the teachers were prepared to face the abrupt change of the online learning mode due to the availability of LSM. LMS has achieved significant usability during COVID-19 pandemic (Saputra & Kusuma, 2022).

2) Grants for Online platform establishment

All participants had obtained grants to construct online class platforms for all subjects. For instance, participant 6, Mr. Ono, said, "…the university provides grants for us around 10 million Indonesian rupiahs for each subject we teach every semester.". All participants confirmed the availability of the grant granted every semester. Mr. Taka verifies this fact by saying, … up to the present, we are granted on the eleventh batch, meaning we have been establishing a learning management system online for five and a half years". Obtaining grants warrants all lecturers constructing the online platform appropriately because the grant scheme must provide a control mechanism for the success of online learning platform creation (Tavares & Amaral, 2006). Besides, the grant awards proved that the university had improved the capacity of the lecturers for running online classes and signifies that the university has upgraded the required infrastructures for such needs (Dayagbil et al., 2021).

3) Offline activities are transferable to online activities

The interview results show that all the participants agree that offline activities are transferable to online activities. Participant 2, Miss Reyna, argued, "…online platforms provide spaces to transfer offline activities, offline meetings with online synchronous online meetings, a presentation can be

done online and offline, offline group work with group work in online breakout meeting, etc...……". Similarly, other participants possess similar ideas. This finding implies that what is commonly conducted offline activities can be replaced with online undertakings. In this respect, the same activities to practice English speaking skills during and after pandemic have substantial grounds since the spirit to have offline meetings post-pandemic can be equally undertaken in online meetings during pandemics. However, the findings also highlight the slight difference in teaching during from post pandemics.

3.3. The differences in teaching English speaking skills during and after COVID-19 pandemic

Most participants agree they had the same activities during and after pandemic. Nevertheless, the thematic analyses of the interview data of this study reveal slight differences in teaching during and after COVID-19 pandemic. The differences are in the nature of activities, including flexibility, degree of control, and engagement.

1) Flexibility

Most study participants mentioned being more flexible when teaching during a pandemic. Participant 1, Miss Intan, said, "…. teaching online during COVID-19 pandemic offers flexibility for students using a range of activities, methods, and times to learn in ways that suit them best…". The difference emerges from post-pandemics in which the tendency of teaching is offline with face-to-face meetings. Participant 4, Miss Ifah, said, "…offline classroom meetings are rigid in terms of the meeting time, physical classroom arrangements, and others, ….". The findings picture the degree of flexibility of teaching online during COVID-19 and the rigidity of offline classes post-pandemics (Turan et al., 2022).

2) Degree of control

The findings of this study show that the degrees of control toward teaching and learning speaking skills are varied. The students control their time and mode of learning more than the teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participant 3, Mr. Zaki, said, "During online classes in pandemic times, students can join the speaking class at home freely, decide the time to do exercises and assignments in the time frame in their freedom." Differently, Participant 4, Miss Ifah, mentioned, "… post-pandemic, I teach students offline, even though I run blended learning. I can control students whether they practice the assigned exercise or not directly……". These sample data illustrate different control of teachers and students during online learning during the pandemic from the control post-pandemic learning (Dayagbil et al., 2021).

3) Engagement

The interview data denoted that students engage differently in the same activities during and after pandemics in teaching speaking skills. Participant 5, Mr. Taka, stated, 'I experienced that teaching face to face in a synchronous online meeting and offline class are not the same. The engagement of meeting face to face offline class is better than online one". This statement contradicts the work of Kristianto and Gandajaya (2023), who argue that engagement during the pandemic using online and post-pandemic using offline mode have no significant difference. The different engagement might happen when common issues with internet connection and compatibility of the gadget and in online learning occur (Basar et al., 2021; Hanafiah & Aziz, 2022). Besides the different natures of the activities in teaching English, the study also presents the media used to teach English speaking skills during COVID-19 and after COVID-19 pandemics.

4. Conclusion

This study explores the university teachers' perception of students' activities in improving their speaking skills during COVID-19. The study employed a qualitative approach and descriptive qualitative as the research designs. The participants were seven university teachers at a private university in Yogyakarta. The findings were classified based on the research questions. The interview data showed that ten activities were used by university teachers to teach English during and after pandemic time, covering giving speaking practices, making group work activities, retelling stories, or experiences, assigning role play and presentations, asking students to record activities, providing speaking exposures, practicing interview, and producing a vlog. The interview data also indicated that although the activities are mostly the same during and after pandemic times, differences are still found in the nature of the activities, including flexibility, degree of control, and students' engagement.

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Declarations

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