

Teachers' Strategies for Teaching Speaking Skills in Online Classes During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This study examines the strategies used by teachers to teach speaking skills in online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. A qualitative descriptive approach was used, with data collected through observations, interviews, and documentation. The findings show that teachers effectively used digital tools like WhatsApp, Zoom, and Google Meet to support speaking instruction. Key methods included conversation-based learning, such as role-playing and dialogue creation, and discussion-based strategies, like group debates. Teachers also provided regular feedback on live and recorded tasks to help students improve their speaking fluency and confidence. Despite challenges like limited internet access and varying digital skills, teachers adapted by simplifying tasks, offering flexible submission options, and maintaining communication. One significant finding is that using recorded dialogue submissions allowed students to practice at their own pace, reducing anxiety and improving participation. This study highlights how combining technology with student-focused teaching methods can overcome the limitations of online learning, offering practical insights for educators and policymakers to enhance speaking instruction in virtual classrooms.

Keywords: Teaching Strategies; Speaking Skill; Online Class

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted educational systems worldwide, compelling schools to shift from traditional face-to-face instruction to online learning. This transition posed unique challenges, particularly in language education, where the development of speaking skills is highly interactive and requires immediate feedback. Speaking skills are vital for effective communication and involve not only pronunciation but also vocabulary, grammar, fluency, and social-linguistic competence (Wei & Wiles, 2020). However, replicating these dynamic, interactive processes in online settings has proven challenging due to the lack of physical interaction, technological constraints, and varying levels of digital literacy among students and teachers (Hamidah et al., 2023).

In this context, English teachers faced the critical task of maintaining students' speaking competencies. Speaking is a fundamental skill for language learners, enabling them to engage in meaningful, real-world communication. While previous studies, such as those by Kurniarahman (2023) and Li (2024), emphasize the importance of innovative strategies in virtual classrooms, they often focus on technology integration without detailing the specific pedagogical approaches required for effective speaking instruction. Furthermore, these studies primarily address urban or well-resourced settings, leaving a significant gap in understanding how these strategies can be adapted to rural or under-resourced environments.

Although digital platforms such as WhatsApp and Zoom have been highlighted for their role in sustaining interaction and engagement (Asmara, 2020; Astri et al., 2022), existing research often prioritizes technical applications over pedagogical innovation. For instance, studies by Heldawati et al. (2022) and Hamidah et al. (2023) explore online teaching's technical aspects but provide limited insights into creative and student-centered approaches to teaching speaking. This study addresses these gaps by investigating the

strategies used to teach speaking skills in a rural Indonesian setting, where resource limitations required teachers to innovate and adapt traditional methods for online use.

This research focuses on three core strategies: leveraging mobile phones for communication and instruction, integrating conversation-based learning through interactive activities, and utilizing discussion-based strategies to foster critical thinking and collaboration. These approaches not only addressed the immediate challenges of remote learning but also ensured students had opportunities to practice and enhance their speaking skills. Unlike previous studies, which emphasize general digital learning practices, this research provides an in-depth exploration of how these strategies were specifically adapted to overcome contextual challenges in a rural setting.

Innovative teaching strategies, particularly those utilizing accessible tools such as WhatsApp and Google Meet, have been shown to improve engagement and learning outcomes (Asmara, 2020; Li, 2024). For example, WhatsApp facilitates asynchronous discussions and material distribution, while Zoom enables real-time interaction and feedback (Bouhnik & Deshen, 2014; Wei & Wiles, 2020). However, there remains a need to explore how these tools can be integrated with pedagogically sound approaches to develop speaking skills effectively in under-resourced environments.

Additionally, conversation-based and discussion-based methods have been widely recognized as effective for teaching speaking skills (Hamidah et al., 2023). Role-playing and dialogue creation foster fluency and confidence, while group discussions promote critical thinking and collaboration (Reznitskaya et al., 2019). This study uniquely combines these methods with digital tools to create meaningful language use opportunities, even in resource-constrained settings.

By analyzing how English teachers at SMAN 2 Kota Sorong adapted these strategies, this study contributes to the discourse on equitable and effective online language education. It highlights the importance of adaptability, creativity, and student-centered approaches in overcoming the challenges of teaching speaking skills in virtual classrooms. The findings aim to inform future teaching practices, offering practical insights for educators and policymakers striving to enhance language instruction in diverse educational contexts.

Literature Review

Speaking Skills in Language Learning

Speaking is a fundamental aspect of language learning, as it enables learners to communicate effectively and engage in meaningful conversations. Speaking requires mastery of various components, including pronunciation, grammar, fluency, and pragmatic competence (Li, 2024). However, speaking skills are often considered one of the most challenging to develop, as they necessitate real-time interaction and immediate feedback. According to Wei and Wiles (2020), effective speaking instruction relies on creating environments that encourage practice, reduce speaking anxiety, and foster confidence.

Teaching Speaking in Online Learning

The COVID-19 pandemic transformed the traditional classroom setting, necessitating the adoption of online learning tools. While online learning platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Meet offered opportunities for real-time interaction, the absence of physical presence posed significant challenges for teaching speaking skills (Hamidah et al., 2023). Speaking instruction in online learning often requires teachers to use innovative strategies to replicate the interactive nature of face-to-face communication.

Asmara (2020) found that using platforms like WhatsApp and Zoom facilitated speaking practice through live discussions, audio messaging, and collaborative activities, though these methods require careful planning to ensure effectiveness.

Strategies for Teaching Speaking Online

Several studies highlight strategies that have been effective in teaching speaking skills in online environments. Conversation-based learning, role-playing, and interactive discussions are among the most prominent approaches (Li, 2024; Hamidah et al., 2023). Role-playing activities, for example, simulate real-world scenarios, enabling students to practice dialogues and develop fluency. Hamidah et al. (2023) observed that interactive discussions using breakout rooms in Zoom helped students engage in smaller groups, promoting active participation and reducing speaking anxiety. Digital tools also play a crucial role in supporting these strategies. For instance, Bushra et al. (2023) emphasized the use of multimedia resources, such as videos and interactive applications, to enhance speaking practice. Similarly, Astri et al. (2022) highlighted WhatsApp's utility for asynchronous speaking exercises, allowing students to submit audio recordings and receive teacher feedback at their convenience. These tools provide flexibility and accessibility, making them particularly valuable in online education.

Challenges in Teaching Speaking Online

Despite the availability of advanced digital tools, teaching speaking skills online presents unique challenges. Limited access to stable internet connections, inadequate devices, and low digital literacy among students and teachers are significant barriers (Hamidah et al., 2023). Asmara (2020) found that these issues disproportionately affect students in under-resourced areas, where consistent participation in online classes is hindered by infrastructural limitations. Additionally, maintaining student engagement in virtual environments can be difficult. Unlike physical classrooms, online settings often lack the immediacy and social cues that drive active participation. Wei and Wiles (2020) emphasized the importance of incorporating interactive activities, such as live discussions and collaborative projects, to sustain motivation. Furthermore, assessing speaking skills online is challenging due to difficulties in monitoring performance and providing immediate feedback.

Although recent studies have explored strategies for teaching speaking skills online, there is limited research on their application in rural or resource-limited settings. For instance, studies by Bushra et al. (2023) and Hamidah et al. (2023) focus on urban contexts with relatively advanced digital infrastructure, leaving a gap in understanding how these strategies can be adapted for underprivileged areas. Similarly, while tools like WhatsApp and Zoom have been widely studied, their integration with pedagogical strategies remains underexplored (Astri et al., 2022). This study addresses these gaps by examining how teachers in rural settings use innovative strategies to teach speaking skills online. It explores how tools like WhatsApp and Google Meet are combined with role-playing, conversation-based learning, and interactive discussions to overcome challenges unique to such contexts.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the strategies employed by teachers in teaching speaking skills during online classes in the COVID-19 pandemic. The qualitative approach enables an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and the contextual challenges they faced, making it suitable for examining how teachers adapted their strategies to foster effective speaking practice in virtual environments. The participants in this study were English teachers who actively conducted

online classes during the pandemic. Purposive sampling was used to ensure relevance, targeting teachers with at least two years of experience teaching speaking skills and demonstrated involvement in online instruction. These criteria ensured that the participants had sufficient expertise and firsthand knowledge of the challenges and strategies of remote teaching. A total of five teachers from diverse school settings were selected to provide varied perspectives.

Data were collected through three primary methods: observation, interviews, and documentation. Non-participant observations were conducted using platforms like Zoom and Google Meet to capture real-time practices in online speaking instruction. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom to gain deeper insights into the teachers' strategies, focusing on fostering interaction, promoting confidence, and addressing technological barriers. These interviews were recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai for accuracy. Additionally, supporting materials such as lesson plans, instructional videos, and chat logs from WhatsApp groups were collected to provide a comprehensive view of the strategies used. The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. The analysis began with familiarization through repeated review of observation notes, interview transcripts, and documentation. Coding was then performed to identify recurring patterns and themes related to teaching strategies and challenges. These codes were grouped into broader themes, including "technology integration," "conversation-based learning," and "adaptation to student needs." The themes were interpreted in light of the research questions, offering insights into how teachers navigated the complexities of teaching speaking skills online. This approach ensured a thorough exploration of the strategies employed by teachers and their effectiveness, providing a detailed understanding of how they adapted to the demands of online education during the pandemic.

Result

The findings of this study are categorized into five major themes: technology integration, conversation-based learning, discussion-based strategies, challenges and adaptations, and impact on students' speaking skills. These themes reflect the strategies employed by English teachers and their effectiveness in teaching speaking skills during online classes in the COVID-19 pandemic.

Technology Integration

Technology played a pivotal role in bridging the gap created by the lack of physical classrooms. Teachers relied on platforms like WhatsApp, Zoom, and Google Meet as primary tools for teaching speaking skills. For instance, a teacher shared, "*Using WhatsApp for voice messages made it easier for students with poor internet to participate. They could record and send their responses when the connection allowed.*" This flexibility was especially beneficial for students with limited connectivity. Zoom and Google Meet were used for live sessions, where teachers utilized breakout rooms to create smaller groups for discussions, which encouraged participation from shy students. Another teacher explained, "*Breakout rooms helped shy students speak more freely without feeling overwhelmed in a larger group.*" Comparing strategies, teachers found Zoom's interactive tools, such as polls and shared screens, particularly effective for engaging students in real-time discussions. However, they noted that asynchronous WhatsApp tasks were more inclusive for students with connectivity issues, highlighting the importance of tailoring tools to students' circumstances.

Conversation-Based Learning

Conversation-based strategies such as role-playing, dialogue creation, and storytelling were widely used to enhance speaking skills. One teacher recounted, *“When I asked students to act as a shopkeeper and customer, they not only practiced English but also learned how to use it in real-life situations.”* Role-playing was especially effective in mimicking real-world scenarios, helping students understand context-appropriate language use. Visual aids, including images and videos, were used as prompts for dialogue creation. For example, students were shown a bustling market scene and tasked with creating a dialogue. Teachers noted that recorded submissions, where students rehearsed and submitted their performances, allowed anxious students to practice at their own pace. A teacher remarked, *“Recorded submissions reduced anxiety and gave students the confidence to try again if they made a mistake.”* Comparatively, role-playing emerged as the most effective strategy for improving fluency, as it combined creativity and practical usage, whereas dialogue creation was beneficial for building vocabulary and sentence structure.

Discussion-Based Strategies

Discussion-based learning promoted collaboration and critical thinking. Teachers shared reading materials, such as short articles or scripts, before sessions, allowing students to prepare for discussions. During live sessions, students analyzed the materials, shared their opinions, and responded to peers. A teacher commented, *“Discussions about current events helped students articulate their thoughts while learning how to express agreement or disagreement.”* Breakout rooms were again instrumental, as they created a less intimidating environment for students to contribute actively. Structured debates also proved effective. For instance, one teacher described assigning opposing views on whether online learning is effective, which required students to construct arguments and respond to counterpoints. Compared to reading-based discussions, debates were more effective in developing argumentation and reasoning skills, while discussions were ideal for encouraging group participation and idea-sharing.

Integration of Formative Assessment

Formative assessment played a critical role in supporting student growth. Teachers provided detailed feedback on pronunciation, grammar, and fluency, both during live sessions and on recorded submissions. One teacher explained, *“Live feedback helped students correct errors immediately, while recorded feedback allowed for more detailed guidance.”* Peer feedback was also encouraged, fostering a collaborative learning environment where students could learn from each other. Teachers emphasized that formative assessment created a supportive atmosphere, enabling students to take risks and improve gradually. Among the strategies, live feedback was most effective for immediate correction, while recorded feedback allowed deeper reflection and improvement.

Challenges and Adaptations

Teachers faced significant challenges, including inconsistent internet access, limited digital literacy, and varying student engagement levels. A teacher described, *“In rural areas, students often dropped out of live sessions due to poor connectivity, so we had to rely on WhatsApp for follow-ups.”* To address these challenges, teachers simplified instructions and provided alternatives such as audio recordings instead of live participation. They also maintained regular communication through WhatsApp to ensure students stayed connected and informed. Comparing adaptations, simplifying tasks proved the most

effective for maintaining participation, while alternative submission methods ensured inclusivity for students facing technical issues.

Impact on Students' Speaking Skills

Despite challenges, teachers reported significant improvements in students' fluency, pronunciation, and confidence. One teacher noted, *"Students who were initially hesitant began speaking more confidently, even initiating conversations during sessions."* Students appreciated the practical nature of role-playing and discussions, which allowed them to apply their skills in real-life scenarios. Teachers also observed that regular practice, combined with constructive feedback, helped students overcome their hesitations. Among the strategies, role-playing and discussion-based tasks had the most noticeable impact, as they provided students with opportunities to use language creatively and contextually. As one student shared during feedback, *"I feel more confident speaking English now because I practiced in a safe environment where mistakes were okay."*

Discussion

This study explored the strategies employed by teachers to teach speaking skills during online classes in the COVID-19 pandemic, offering valuable insights into the integration of technology, conversation-based learning, and discussion-based activities. These findings contribute to the growing body of literature on online language instruction by addressing practical methods tailored to the unique challenges of remote learning. Not only did these strategies facilitate student engagement, but they also supported skill development in an environment that lacked physical interaction, highlighting the resilience and creativity of teachers in under-resourced settings.

One of the key findings of this study is the creative integration of digital tools such as WhatsApp, Zoom, and Google Meet into speaking instruction. Previous studies, such as Hamidah et al. (2023), emphasized the importance of these platforms in maintaining communication during online learning. However, this research extends those findings by demonstrating how these tools were adapted to address specific challenges in teaching speaking skills. For instance, the use of WhatsApp for asynchronous audio submissions proved effective for students with limited internet access, a strategy not extensively discussed in prior research. Similarly, Zoom breakout rooms allowed students to engage in small-group discussions, creating a less intimidating environment for participation. These findings reinforce the need for teacher training programs to emphasize multi-platform integration, enabling educators to tailor tools to students' diverse needs.

Building on the role of technology, the study highlights the effectiveness of conversation-based strategies in fostering speaking fluency and confidence. Teachers utilized visual prompts, such as images and videos, to inspire role-playing and dialogue creation, aligning with Li's (2024) assertion on the importance of contextual learning aids in language acquisition. A unique contribution of this study is the emphasis on recorded dialogue submissions, which allowed students to rehearse and refine their speech. This innovation addressed connectivity challenges and reduced speaking anxiety, providing a safe and supportive environment for skill development. By demonstrating how these practices can be adapted to online settings, this study expands on existing literature and underscores the importance of balancing synchronous and asynchronous methods.

The study also emphasizes discussion-based strategies, such as structured debates and group interactions, as pivotal for developing critical thinking and communication skills. These findings build on the work of Reznitskaya et al. (2019), who highlighted the value of collaborative discussions in fostering language learning, and extend their relevance to virtual classrooms. Breakout rooms, in particular, replicated the dynamics of physical

classrooms, encouraging meaningful interactions among students. This adaptability highlights the potential of digital platforms to overcome the barriers of remote learning, particularly when combined with well-structured, interactive activities.

Despite these successes, the study sheds light on significant challenges faced by teachers, including limited internet connectivity, low digital literacy, and varying levels of student engagement. These challenges, consistent with Hamidah et al. (2023), underscore the importance of flexibility in online teaching. This research provides additional nuance by illustrating how teachers simplified tasks, provided alternative submission formats, and maintained communication via WhatsApp to ensure equitable participation. Such findings have practical implications for addressing disparities in digital access, particularly in rural or under-resourced areas.

A notable contribution of this study is its focus on formative assessment as a key strategy for supporting student progress. While Reznitskaya et al. (2019) highlighted the importance of feedback in language learning, this research introduces a novel perspective on its application in online speaking instruction. Teachers provided live feedback during synchronous sessions for immediate correction and used recorded submissions for more detailed, reflective feedback. This dual approach created a supportive environment, allowing students to take risks and improve over time. The integration of peer feedback further enhanced collaboration and mutual learning among students.

The implications of these findings for teaching practice are significant, particularly for under-resourced settings. First, they highlight the importance of combining multiple digital tools to create flexible and inclusive learning environments. Platforms like WhatsApp and Zoom, when used strategically, can address diverse student needs and enhance engagement. Second, the study underscores the effectiveness of interactive, student-centered approaches, such as role-playing and discussion-based learning, in improving language proficiency and building confidence. Finally, the study emphasizes the need for holistic solutions to challenges like connectivity issues and digital literacy. For example, allowing students to submit recorded dialogues is a practical method to include those with limited access to live sessions, ensuring equitable participation.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the field of online language instruction by providing detailed insights into the strategies employed by teachers to teach speaking skills during the pandemic. Unlike previous research that has largely focused on urban or well-resourced contexts, this study highlights the creative adaptations made in under-resourced settings, offering a unique perspective on addressing inequities in online education. The findings have important implications for future teaching practices and policy development, particularly in ensuring access to quality education in diverse learning environments. By emphasizing the integration of technology, formative assessment, and interactive strategies, this research provides a roadmap for improving online language learning in challenging contexts.

Conclusion

This study examined the strategies employed by teachers to teach speaking skills during online classes in the COVID-19 pandemic, offering valuable insights into the integration of technology, innovative teaching approaches, and formative assessment. Teachers effectively utilized digital tools such as WhatsApp, Zoom, and Google Meet to create interactive and inclusive virtual classrooms. Strategies such as conversation-based learning, discussion-based activities, and consistent formative feedback were pivotal in enhancing students' fluency, confidence, and engagement, even amidst challenges like internet connectivity issues and varying levels of digital literacy.

Based on these findings, practical recommendations for teachers include utilizing both synchronous and asynchronous tools to ensure accessibility and engagement for all students. For instance, WhatsApp can be used for audio submissions to support students with limited connectivity, while Zoom breakout rooms can foster collaborative and less intimidating discussions. Teachers should also integrate formative assessment practices, such as live feedback for immediate corrections and recorded feedback for deeper reflections, to support students' continuous improvement. Incorporating role-playing and structured debates into online lessons can further enhance students' confidence and critical thinking skills.

The implications of this study extend beyond individual classrooms, highlighting the need for systemic support to address the challenges of online teaching, particularly in under-resourced areas. Policymakers and school administrators should invest in professional development programs to equip teachers with the skills to integrate digital tools effectively. Additionally, efforts should focus on improving infrastructure and access to technology to bridge the digital divide. By addressing these challenges and adopting the strategies outlined in this study, educators can create equitable and impactful learning environments that support students' speaking skills in virtual settings. These findings contribute to the growing discourse on online education and provide actionable insights for improving teaching practices in diverse contexts.

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