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EXPLORING TEACHERS' CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING INTERACTIVE SPEAKING STRATEGIES FOR LOW-PROFICIENCY EFL LEARNERS: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the challenges faced by teachers in implementing interactive speaking strategies for low-level students in the Speaking for Teens classes at Britania School of English (BSE). A qualitative case study design was employed to examine teachers' experiences in real classroom contexts. The participants consisted of three English teachers, supported by nine students from three classes. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentation, and analyzed using data condensation, data display, conclusion drawing, and thematic analysis. The findings revealed that teachers encountered several challenges during interactive speaking activities, including noise distractions caused by classroom arrangements, student fatigue during after-school sessions, difficulties in understanding instructions, classroom management issues during games and group work, and the need to adjust activities to match students' low English proficiency. These challenges were influenced by environmental, affective, linguistic, and pedagogical factors. The study concludes that difficulties in implementing interactive speaking strategies stem largely from contextual and learner-related factors rather than weaknesses in the strategies themselves; therefore, teachers need to carefully plan, adapt, and manage interactive activities by considering students' proficiency levels, classroom conditions, and emotional readiness to support effective speaking instruction.

Keywords: Interactive Speaking Strategies; Low-Proficiency EFL Learners; Qualitative Case Study; Speaking Instruction; Teacher Challenges

INTRODUCTION

Speaking is one of the most important productive skills in learning English, as it enables students to express their ideas and interact with others (Leong & Masoumeh, 2017). However, teaching speaking to students with low English proficiency presents significant challenges. Many students in Indonesia face difficulties in speaking due to shyness, lack of confidence, and limited vocabulary (Suharsono, 2022; Kurniawati, 2023). At Britania School of English, teachers have observed that students in the Speaking for Teens class have low English proficiency, struggle with basic vocabulary, and sometimes attend classes due to parental pressure, which affects their motivation.

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Interactive strategies are widely recommended to enhance student engagement and communicative competence (Kenjabaev, 2024; Zaynitdinov, 2024). Teachers can apply various strategies such as role-play, simulations, interviews, storytelling, picture description, card games, information gap activities, and brainstorming (Harmer, 2001; Thornbury, 2002; Brandon, 2012). These activities encourage students to practice speaking in more meaningful contexts, promote collaboration, and build confidence. For example, in role-play and simulations, students can use the target language with less anxiety. Picture-based activities help students understand vocabulary more easily, while information gap and card game activities promote active interaction. Therefore, interactive strategies can create a more participatory and supportive learning environment, especially for students with low English proficiency (Kayi, 2006; Zaynitdinov, 2024).

Previous studies have examined various teaching strategies in English language courses. Malik et al. (2020) found that games and discussions can increase students' participation and confidence in using vocabulary. Bray and Kwo (2014) also showed that private English tutoring can improve students' pronunciation and confidence, although the quality of instruction may vary. In addition, KRNOVSKÁ (2013) emphasized that a supportive learning environment with interactive activities helps students develop their speaking skills. However, most of these studies involve students who already have basic English proficiency and are able to participate actively, which may not fully represent the situation of students with low proficiency.

Students with low English proficiency have specific characteristics in speaking. They often have limited vocabulary, make frequent grammatical errors, have unclear pronunciation, and show low fluency (Brown, 2001). They also tend to speak slowly, pause frequently, and have difficulty understanding spoken input (Nation & Newton, 2009), as well as experience pronunciation problems due to first language interference (Derwing & Munro, 2009). Recent studies further indicate that these difficulties are often influenced by limited prior learning and insufficient instructional support (Luo et al., 2026).

In addition to linguistic challenges, affective factors also influence students' speaking performance. Students with low English proficiency often experience anxiety and lack confidence, which reduces their participation in classroom activities (Goh & Burns, 2021). Although anxiety may increase motivation in some cases, it does not necessarily lead to better learning outcomes (Luo, 2025). Therefore, meaningful interaction, supportive feedback, and the use of scaffolding strategies are important to help students gradually improve their speaking skills (Sato & Loewen, 2019; Kenol & Hashim, 2022).

Despite the growing number of studies on interactive speaking strategies, most previous research has primarily focused on their effectiveness in improving students' speaking skills. However, limited attention has been given to the challenges teachers face when implementing these strategies, particularly in classes with students who have low English proficiency.

In practice, teaching students with low proficiency is not only about applying appropriate strategies, but also about dealing with various difficulties, such as students' limited linguistic ability and low participation. However, these classroom realities are rarely explored in depth in previous studies.

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Therefore, there is a need for research that specifically examines teachers' challenges in implementing interactive speaking strategies for low-proficiency EFL learners in real classroom contexts.

METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore the challenges encountered by teachers in implementing interactive speaking strategies for low-proficiency learners in the *Speaking for Teens* classes at Britania School of English (BSE). A case study approach was selected as the research aims to investigate how these challenges are experienced and addressed within a real-life classroom context, emphasizing depth, contextualization, and meaning-making (Yin, 2014; Stake, 1995; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The three observed classes were treated as a single bounded case, as they shared similar characteristics in terms of student proficiency level, instructional context, and institutional setting.

The participants consisted of three English teachers and nine students (three students from each class), selected through purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of information-rich individuals with direct experience in interactive speaking activities (Patton, 2015; Malterud et al., 2016). The sample size was deemed appropriate for qualitative case study research, which prioritizes depth of understanding over generalizability. Previous methodological studies indicate that small, focused samples are sufficient to achieve data saturation and generate meaningful insights in context-specific qualitative inquiries (Creswell, 2013; Guest et al., 2006; Fusch & Ness, 2015).

Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Observations were conducted to capture natural classroom interactions and teaching practices, while interviews provided in-depth insights into participants' experiences and perceptions. Supporting documents, such as classroom photographs and interview recordings, were also used to enrich the data (Bowen, 2009; Ary et al., 2010). Data collection continued until saturation was reached, indicated by the recurrence of similar patterns and no emergence of new themes.

The data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles et al. (2014), which includes data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. In addition, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed to systematically identify, analyze, and report patterns across the dataset.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were applied. Triangulation of data sources and methods was used to enhance credibility, while dependability and confirmability were addressed through systematic data analysis procedures and transparent documentation of the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These measures contributed to the overall rigor and validity of the study.

RESULTS

This section presents the challenges faced by teachers in implementing interactive teaching strategies in the Speaking for Teens classes at Britania School of English (BSE). The findings are based on classroom observations and supported by interview data. Each

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subsection describes the observed challenge, followed by relevant interview extracts and a brief explanation.

Classroom Management

The findings under classroom management show that managing the classroom posed a notable challenge during interactive activities, especially those involving games or group tasks. Classroom observations revealed that the shift from a quiet, teacher-led explanation to a more dynamic game format often led to an immediate increase in noise and movement. Students frequently became excited, talked over one another, and moved around the room instead of staying in their assigned groups.

Teacher C reported that managing this energy during games required constant intervention:

> "The most challenging is that they are too noisy. If I play some games, some of them still want to be in the same group with their best friends." (Teacher C)

In the classroom, this tendency was visible when students formed or re-formed groups based on friendship rather than on ability, which led to uneven participation and some students being left out or not challenged enough. The teacher therefore had to rearrange groups manually, encourage students to move, and sometimes physically intervene to maintain order and ensure that every student was participating in the intended way. One teacher described a recurring pattern:

> "At the beginning of the game they are excited, but then some students start chatting in their native language, and others stop paying attention. I have to repeat the rules and redirect them several times during one activity." (Teacher A)

These statements show that classroom management was particularly demanding during interactive speaking activities, requiring frequent monitoring and guidance to maintain structure and participation.

Limited Facilities

The findings under limited facilities show that the physical conditions of the classrooms at Britania School of English affected the implementation of interactive speaking strategies. Classroom observations revealed that Class C was physically separated from nearby classes only by a curtain, not a solid wall. This allowed overlapping sounds from other classes, such as voices, movement, and activities, to be clearly heard inside the classroom. As a result, students were often distracted and sometimes turned their heads toward the curtain or the neighbouring classroom door during the lesson. In contrast, Classes A and B were located in rooms with full walls and minimal connection to other classes, which created a relatively quieter environment and made it easier for students to hear the teacher's instructions clearly.

Teacher interview data supported these observations. Teachers reported that the lack of proper partitions and limited classroom availability increased noise and distractions, especially when the timetable changed. One teacher stated:

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"My class is only separated by a curtain, not a real wall, so the sounds from other classes often mix together." (Teacher C)

Another teacher added:

"When classes are rescheduled, I sometimes teach in a classroom that is only separated by curtains, not walls. When two classes speak at the same time, it becomes very noisy." (Teacher A)

One teacher also mentioned that the level of noise varied depending on the schedule:

"Some days it is quiet, but on other days I feel like I am competing with the class next to mine to capture students' attention." (Teacher C)

These statements show that limited facilities, particularly the lack of solid walls between classrooms and limited space availability, were associated with higher noise levels and frequent distractions during speaking activities.

Student motivation and attention

The findings under student motivation and attention show that students' level of engagement in interactive speaking activities was often influenced by their physical and mental fatigue. Classroom observations revealed that several students in the Speaking for Teens classes appeared tired, especially during evening sessions that took place after their regular school hours and other extracurricular activities. Visible signs of fatigue included frequent yawning, blinking lazily, resting their heads on desks, and responding slowly to the teacher's prompts. During interactive activities such as describing pictures, interviews, and role-plays, these students were often less active and showed lower participation compared to other times.

Interview data from students supported these observations and highlighted the reasons for their tiredness. The following translated extracts indicate how students' academic workload and external activities contributed to their fatigue during class:

"Sometimes I feel enthusiastic, but sometimes I do not. Usually, it is because I have school assignments and still have to attend the course, so I keep thinking about those things and become less focused in class." (Student A)

"Yes, because I felt sleepy, Miss. I was tired from school, had many assignments, and also had extracurricular activities until the afternoon." (Student B)

"Yes, Miss, sometimes because I'm tired after school. I have many activities, especially because I play football, and in the evening, I have to attend the course." (Student C)

One teacher also commented on students' behaviour during these times:

"When they are very tired, they do not want to speak much. They prefer to listen or just nod, even if I give easy questions." (Teacher B)

These statements show that student motivation and attention were closely related to students' academic workload and external commitments.

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Difficulty Applying Strategies

The findings under difficulty applying strategies show that teachers encountered challenges in implementing interactive speaking activities for low-level learners. These challenges appeared in two main forms: difficulty understanding instructions and difficulty adjusting activities to match students' proficiency level.

Difficulty Understanding Instructions

The findings show that teachers often had difficulty delivering clear and comprehensible instructions during interactive speaking activities. An interview with Teacher A revealed that low-level students frequently struggled to understand instructions, particularly when the teacher used English that was too fast, too abstract, or contained unfamiliar vocabulary. This difficulty sometimes led to confusion about the purpose of the activity, the expected roles, or the steps that students needed to follow. As a result, the teacher reported that she needed to repeat, slow down, or translate her instructions into Indonesian, sometimes several times, to ensure that students could follow the task. Even after such clarification, some students continued to perform the activity incorrectly, indicating that the meaning of the instructions had not been fully understood.

The challenge was highlighted in the following interview extract:

> "Sometimes, for the students who have the lowest level in the teens class, they don't understand when I speak English too fast. So I need to repeat and translate what I am saying… Even after I explain, the way they do it is not the same as what I explained." (Teacher A)

Another teacher added that managing instructions for a mixed-level group was particularly demanding:

> "Some students understand quickly, but others look completely confused. I have to find a balance between speaking only in English and using the mother tongue to make sure everyone understands." (Teacher C)

These statements indicate that difficulties in understanding instructions were frequently associated with students' low English proficiency and the need for teachers to adjust their language and delivery to maintain task clarity.

Difficulty adjusting activities for low-level students

The findings also show that adjusting interactive activities to suit low-level students' proficiency was a central challenge. Teachers reported that standard games or competitive tasks often required a vocabulary, grammar, or fluency level that exceeded many students' current abilities. As a result, students sometimes appeared lost, hesitated to participate, or performed the task incorrectly.

One teacher explained:

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> "The challenge is that the games or competitions provided must match the students' level, because their English ability is still very basic. Therefore, as teachers, we really need to provide materials that suit the needs of low-level students." (Teacher B)

In practice, this meant modifying rules, simplifying language, shortening tasks, and sometimes restarting the activity with clearer models. For example, instead of a long role-play, the teacher might reduce the number of lines, allow students to hold cue cards, or give them a script they could read instead of memorizing. Another teacher described the process:

> "Sometimes I have to stop a game halfway and say, 'OK, let's do it more simply.' I change the instructions, give them shorter sentences, and then try again. It takes time, but if I don't adjust, many students just stay silent." (Teacher A)

These statements indicate that teachers frequently had to modify both the design of interactive activities and the level of difficulty to match the proficiency of low-level students.

DISCUSSION

This study identified key indicators of challenges in implementing interactive speaking strategies for low-proficiency students in Britania's Speaking for Teens class, drawn from classroom observations and interviews: classroom management, limited facilities, student motivation and attention, and difficulty applying strategies (subdivided into instruction comprehension and proficiency adjustment). These indicators reveal contextual barriers in real EFL teen settings, extending prior research by linking teacher- and student-reported issues to observable disruptions in after-school classes.

Classroom Management

Classroom management refers to the strategies teachers use to maintain an organized and productive learning environment (Piyal & Hasan, 2025). In this study, it emerged as a key challenge during interactive speaking activities. Teachers reported difficulties controlling noise levels, student movement, and off-task behavior when lessons shifted to student-centered activities. This aligns with Chan and Lo (2024) and Muluk et al. (2021), who found that communicative activities increase student enthusiasm while simultaneously creating management challenges. These difficulties were likely amplified by the informal after-school setting, where students' adherence to classroom rules tends to be lower.

A further challenge involved students' preference for working with close friends rather than teacher-assigned groups, which disrupted planned arrangements and led to unequal participation. As Dayanan et al. (2025) noted, collaborative speaking tasks are most effective when group interaction is deliberately structured. Bui and Nguyen (2024) similarly found that mismatches in group formation preferences are a common source of difficulty in EFL classrooms, particularly in Asian contexts.

Students also frequently engaged in off-task behavior, including L1 use and loss of focus. This likely reflects the difficulty low-proficiency learners face when task demands exceed their linguistic competence. Xu and Fan (2022) found that low-proficiency pairs produced significantly more L1 use during task-based interaction, suggesting it functions as

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a coping strategy rather than deliberate avoidance. This implies that managing off-task behavior requires not only behavioral intervention but also careful task design and adequate language support.

These findings highlight that without clear behavioral expectations, structured grouping, and active monitoring, interactive activities may fail to generate meaningful speaking practice despite their engagement potential (Hui & Yunus, 2023).

Limited Facilities

Limited facilities emerged as another challenge in implementing interactive speaking strategies. In this study, classrooms divided only by curtains generated excessive noise and distraction, making it difficult for students to focus and hear instructions clearly. This aligns with Barrett et al. (2015), who emphasize that physical learning environment factors such as acoustics significantly influence students' concentration and learning performance. Unlike purpose-built language classrooms, the informal after-school setting in this study lacked adequate sound insulation, making noise management particularly difficult.

Dockrell and Shield (2006) found that poor acoustic conditions negatively affect students' listening comprehension and classroom participation, especially during verbal interaction tasks. Similarly, Mealings and Buchholz (2024) found that noise exposure consistently impairs students' listening and learning, with effects being especially pronounced during verbal communication tasks. In this study, overlapping sounds from adjacent classrooms appeared to reduce the overall effectiveness of interactive speaking activities.

This issue is particularly problematic for low-proficiency learners, who require clearer auditory input to process language effectively. As Fujita (2022) found, background noise disproportionately disrupts low-proficiency EFL learners during speaking tasks, as they have fewer linguistic resources to compensate for degraded auditory input.

These findings suggest that successful implementation of interactive speaking strategies depends not only on teaching methods but also on a supportive physical environment. Where facility improvements are not feasible, teachers may consider practical strategies such as using visual cues alongside verbal instructions, positioning students away from noise sources, and segmenting activities into shorter focused tasks.

Student motivation and attention

Student motivation and attention emerged as another challenge in implementing interactive speaking strategies. In this study, students' participation declined when they experienced physical and mental fatigue resulting from accumulated school assignments, extracurricular commitments, and evening class schedules. Unlike studies conducted during regular morning hours, this study involved an after-school evening course where students arrived already cognitively depleted, making motivational challenges particularly pronounced.

This finding is consistent with Harun et al. (2026), who found that fatigue in evening English classes reduces students' concentration and classroom participation. Zhang et al. (2024) similarly reported that academic overload negatively affects EFL learners'

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engagement, while Fu (2024) found that learners experiencing high academic demands were significantly more susceptible to burnout, reducing their active classroom participation. Together, these studies suggest that cumulative academic pressure can substantially undermine students' readiness for interactive speaking tasks.

Fatigue may be especially disruptive to speaking activities, as such tasks require immediate cognitive processing, verbal production, and active interaction. When tired, students tend toward passive participation to reduce cognitive effort. As Li (2022) found, classroom enjoyment is inversely related to EFL learners' disengagement, suggesting that fatigued learners are likely to withdraw from communicative tasks. This highlights how situational fatigue can function as a dynamic, context-specific barrier to participation, even among otherwise willing communicators.

These findings suggest that teachers in after-school EFL settings should account for students' physical and mental readiness when implementing speaking activities. Adjusting task intensity, incorporating energizing warm-ups, and building flexibility into lesson planning to accommodate students' observable energy levels may help sustain meaningful participation.

Difficulty applying strategies

Difficulty in applying interactive speaking strategies emerged as another challenge in teaching low-level learners. In this study, teachers experienced difficulties both in delivering comprehensible instructions and in adjusting activities to match students' proficiency levels. Unlike studies with intermediate or advanced learners where standard communicative tasks require minimal modification, working with low-proficiency learners demands substantially higher instructional flexibility and ongoing scaffolding.

Teachers reported that students frequently struggled to understand instructions delivered too quickly, entirely in English, or containing unfamiliar vocabulary. This is consistent with Usman and Mahmud (2024), who note that low-proficiency learners struggle when classroom input exceeds their comprehension level. Pishadast (2022) similarly emphasizes that instructional scaffolding is essential for helping low-level learners participate in speaking tasks. Ardiningtyas et al. (2024) further found that teacher-guided scaffolding involves multiple adaptive roles — modeling, prompting, and motivating — that must be adjusted according to individual proficiency levels, suggesting that scaffolding in low-level classrooms requires ongoing responsive adaptation rather than a fixed approach.

Additionally, many interactive activities required modification as standard tasks frequently exceeded students' vocabulary, grammar, or fluency level. Teachers responded by simplifying instructions, reducing task complexity, and providing cue cards or structured scripts. This aligns with Hui and Yunus (2023), who argue that communicative activities must be adapted to learners' proficiency levels for meaningful participation, and Sarmiento-Campos et al. (2022), who found that scaffolding and task simplification significantly improve speaking performance in low-level learners.

Taken together, the four challenges identified classroom management, limited facilities, student motivation and attention, and difficulty applying strategies reveal that implementing interactive speaking strategies in low-level EFL classrooms involves a

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complex set of interconnected contextual factors. These challenges do not operate in isolation; they interact and compound one another in ways that can undermine communicative activities. Effective implementation therefore requires a holistic approach in which teachers not only adapt activities but also actively manage the physical, social, and motivational conditions of the learning environment. For practitioners in similar informal EFL contexts, these findings highlight the need for context-sensitive teaching practices responsive to learners' physical readiness, linguistic limitations, and environmental constraints.

CONCLUSION

This study explored challenges teachers face when using interactive speaking strategies with low-proficiency teens at Britania School of English. Through classroom observations and interviews, it identified four key issues: classroom management, limited facilities, student motivation and attention, and difficulty applying strategies. These reveal that success depends not just on activity choice, but also on classroom conditions, learner motivation, and teacher adaptations for low-proficiency students.

Classroom management issues arose as games and group tasks caused noise, off-task behavior, and cliques that disrupted lessons. Limited facilities, like curtain-separated rooms, created overlapping noise that hindered low-proficiency learners' focus and comprehension. Student motivation and attention suffered from fatigue due to heavy workloads and evening schedules, reducing participation. Applying strategies was tough, as these learners needed heavy simplification, scaffolding, and support to engage.

These findings have several practical implications for teachers and English course providers working with low-proficiency learners in similar contexts.

For teachers, this study highlights the importance of setting clear behavioral expectations and structured grouping arrangements before starting interactive activities. Teachers should not assume that students will manage themselves once a task begins. When students use their first language during activities, teachers are encouraged to treat this not as a disciplinary problem but as a sign that the task may be too linguistically demanding. In such cases, providing additional language support rather than simply correcting behavior is likely to be more effective. In terms of task design, teachers should consider including a preparation phase before interactive activities begin. For example, pre-teaching key vocabulary, modeling the task clearly, or providing sentence starters can help students enter the activity with enough language support to participate meaningfully.

For English course providers and school administrators, this study draws attention to the important role of the physical learning environment. Classrooms separated only by curtains or temporary partitions are not suitable for speaking instruction, particularly for low-proficiency learners who are more easily affected by noise and distraction. Where structural changes are not immediately possible, course providers should consider practical alternatives. These include arranging class schedules to avoid overlapping class times, and providing teachers with tools such as visual instruction cards or written task sheets that reduce dependence on verbal delivery alone. Additionally, since many students in after-school English courses arrive tired from a full day of school and other activities, course

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providers should allow teachers greater flexibility in their lesson plans. This would enable teachers to make responsive adjustments based on students' energy levels at the start of each session, rather than following a fixed activity sequence regardless of the classroom conditions.

While this study contributes useful insights into the contextual challenges of implementing interactive speaking strategies for low-level EFL learners, several directions for future research are worth exploring.

First, future studies could use a longitudinal design to examine how these challenges change over time. Such research could also explore whether sustained professional development or institutional support can help reduce their impact on classroom practice. Second, since this study relied on observations and interviews, future research could include learner performance data to establish clearer connections between contextual challenges and actual speaking outcomes. Third, this study was conducted in a single private after-school English course in Indonesia, which limits how widely the findings can be applied. Future studies should replicate this investigation in different institutional types, geographic settings, and age groups to determine whether the challenges identified here reflect broader patterns in low-proficiency EFL instruction. Fourth, future research could test the effectiveness of specific scaffolding strategies such as task preparation phases, visual instruction aids, or structured role assignments in addressing the challenges documented in this study. This would help build a more practical evidence base for teachers working in similar settings. Finally, future studies should pay greater attention to institutional factors such as class scheduling, teacher workload, and resource availability, as these structural conditions play an important role in shaping teachers' capacity to implement interactive strategies effectively yet they are rarely examined in classroom-focused research.

In conclusion, this study confirms that teaching speaking to low-proficiency EFL learners through interactive strategies is a genuinely complex and context-dependent process. The challenges identified here are not only pedagogical but are also shaped by the physical, institutional, and motivational conditions of the learning environment. Addressing these challenges requires both well-prepared and adaptive teachers and a genuine institutional commitment to creating learning conditions that support meaningful communicative practice. It is hoped that the findings of this study will contribute to more informed and context-sensitive approaches to speaking instruction in low-proficiency EFL settings, both in Indonesia and in similar contexts internationally.

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