

Review

An Investigation of Speaking Challenges amongst EFL Fourth Year Students at King Khalid University

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This study aimed at investigating speaking difficulties experienced by EFL university students, the study took place at King Khalid University, College of Languages and Translation in the university academic year (2020-2021). The researcher has adopted the descriptive-analytical method and collected data using a questionnaire administered to (30) fourth-year students. To analyze the data the researcher has used the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). The findings of the study revealed that EFL King Khalid University students encounter serious speaking difficulties when they speak in English; they fail to convey their ideas because they think that they have not developed sufficient linguistic knowledge that will enable them to communicate effectively, they feel worried about making mistakes, moreover, speaking classes are often dominated by active students while others talk very little or never speak. In light of the study's findings, the researcher recommends that university textbooks give more attention to speaking skills. Teachers should use communication materials that suit the level and the needs of the students. Moreover, teachers need to raise the students' awareness about the importance of communication in the process of foreign language learning.

Key words: speaking skills, communication, foreign language learning.

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INTRODUCTION

The ultimate goal of EFL learning is to be able to communicate effectively by using a foreign language and this is mainly achieved through understanding and speaking. Alhosni (2014) pointed out that speaking is the active use of language to express meaning since it is the medium through which a new language is encountered, understood, practised and learnt; this suggests that speaking is the primary source of language learning hence to learn the language simply means to be able to speak it.

Speaking is an important productive skill that helps the teacher to evaluate the fluency and accuracy of the EFL learners, teaching speaking skills demands great efforts from EFL teachers and learners as well; teachers should raise their students' attention about the importance of speaking skills in the process of foreign language learning and students should be encouraged to be engaged in real- life like situations and they should be exposed to the target language to improve their speaking skills (Ziane, 2012).

EFL learners encounter some difficulties when they communicate in English, the present paper tries to investigate the causes of speaking challenges among EFL fourth-year students at King Khalid University and propose some suitable solutions to overcome such challenges.

Statement of the problem

During her experience in teaching English as a foreign language for several years, the researcher has noticed that many EFL learners face numerous serious deficiencies when they speak in English; they feel worried about making mistakes, when it comes to discussing topics in speaking classrooms they tend to use their mother-tongue instead of using English, furthermore, they fail to convey their ideas because they think that they have not developed sufficient linguistic knowledge that will enable them to communicate effectively, moreover, active students usually dominate the class while other students speak very little or say nothing.

So, the researcher finds it important to explore these speaking hurdles to suggest the appropriate rectifications.

Objectives of the Study

The study is carried out to achieve the following objectives:

1. To shed light on the causes of speaking challenges that face EFL university students.
2. To propose some suitable solutions to overcome these speaking problems.

Questions of the Study:

The following research questions form the basis of the study:

1. What causes of speaking challenges face EFL university students?
2. How can EFL teachers help students to overcome these speaking challenges?

Hypotheses of the Study:

The following hypotheses are postulated:

1. EFL learners' speaking difficulties are attributed to many factors.
2. Teachers can help students to overcome speaking problems by raising their awareness about the importance of speaking skills for learning in general and providing them with the techniques to be adopted to improve their speaking skills.

Significance of the Study:

This study is significant for several reasons:

It contributes to the existing literature in the field of teaching speaking skills.

Teachers will have a better understanding of their students speaking difficulties and examine their teaching methods and materials, accordingly.

EFL learners can identify their problems and be aware of the factors that contribute to their difficulties.

The study shall also form a point of departure for syllabus designers and educators in the field of communication skills.

Limits of the Study:

This study is limited to investigating the speaking challenges encountered by King Khalid University fourth-year students at the Faculty of Languages and Translation who study English as a foreign language and possess approximately the same English abilities during the academic year **(2020-2021)**.

Methodology of the Study:

As has been mentioned, the purpose of this research is to investigate speaking challenges among EFL university students, to achieve this goal and in an attempt to answer the research questions, data has been collected through using a questionnaire which was administered to (30) fourth-year students at King Khalid University. Then the data has been analyzed statistically by using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS).

Definition of Speaking:

There are different definitions for the word "speaking" provided by several scholars and researchers.

According to Howarth (2001), speaking is a two-way process including a true communication of opinions, information, or emotions.

Bygate (1987) defined speaking as "The production of auditory signals to the auditory signal to produce different verbal responses in listeners".

This suggests that speaking is a process through which one can express himself/herself and get a response from the listener who usually interacts with what is being uttered.

Characteristics of Speaking Skills:

Compared to the other language skills, speaking has characteristics that distinguish it from other language skills.

Mazouzi (2013) claimed that teachers need to design their students' speaking activities depending on the two characteristics of speaking: fluency and accuracy achievement.

Hedge (2000) defined fluency as "The ability to answer coherently by connecting words and phrases, pronouncing sounds clearly, and using the suitable stress and intonation".

Thornbury (2005) stated two factors to be the most important parameters by which a person can be judged about his oral performance, the first factor is "the speed of speech"; fluent speakers need to stop from time to time to take a breath, he claimed that proficient speakers do not usually make frequent pauses because this can indicate that there is a problem with fluency.

The second factor he proposed is "the length of run" which indicates the long number of syllabuses between pauses; the more the person produce longer syllabuses, the more fluent he/she is hence fluent speakers fill the pauses with fillers such as oh, uh, um and vagueness expressions such as I mean, you know...etc.

The second characteristic of speaking skills is accuracy; Kouicem (2010) stated that accuracy refers to how well, correct and complete the target language is produced about its rule system.

Mazouzi (2013) asserted that learners should pay enough attention to the exactness and the completeness of language form when speaking such as focusing on grammatical structures, vocabulary and pronunciation.

All in all, fluency and accuracy are important for EFL learners as they help them to speak English easily and effectively.

The Importance of Speaking Skills:

Speaking is one of the most important skills that EFL learners need to develop and enhance to communicate effectively.

According to Ur (1996), speaking is the most important of all the four language skills because individuals who learn a language are referred to as the speakers of that language.

Efrizal (2012) pointed out that speaking is of great significance for people's interaction as they speak wherever and whenever since it is the method of expressing ideas orally.

Speaking is of vital significance as it involves the integration of the other language skills since it helps students to develop their vocabulary, grammar, reading, pronunciation and writing.

Mastering speaking skills help students to express their ideas and feelings, speaking also plays a crucial part outside the learning setting as it helps learners to communicate effectively which in turn helps them to get a better education, find better jobs and get a promotion (Baker and Wretsup,2003) as cited in Ahmadi and Leong(2017).

Kouicem(2010) supported this idea by saying that " A student who can speak English well may have a greater chance for further education of finding employment and gaining proportion".

Despite its importance in EFL classes, speaking has long been somewhat neglected in schools and universities since much attention is given to grammar, reading and vocabulary, what's more, is that universities do not test their students' speaking skills objectively (Clifford, 1987), besides that learners do not have enough opportunities to practice speaking in or outside the classroom setting and teachers do not consider speaking an important part of their course books and exams.

Factors Affecting Speaking Problems among EFL Learners:

Tuan and Mai (2015) stated that some factors affect speaking skills that teachers may encounter when teaching speaking in EFL classrooms; they are inhibition, lack of topical knowledge, low or uneven participation, mother tongue- use and poor listening practice.

Inhibition:

Inhibition occurs when students feel that they are unable to express their ideas in a foreign language due to their fear of making mistakes or shyness. Kouicem (2010) declared that "Learners are often inhibited about trying to say things in a foreign language in the classroom, worried about making mistakes, fearful of criticism or losing face, or simply shy of the attention that their speech attracts" (p.37).

Lack of Topical Knowledge:

Students usually tend to remain silent when teachers ask them to speak in a foreign language hence, they feel that they have very little or nothing to say, this may be attributed to the fact that these students are not motivated and confident enough to express themselves or they lack linguistic proficiency that would enable them to discuss a certain topic.

Bygate (1987) pointed out that " The teacher may have chosen a topic which is uncongenial to him, the learner, or about which he knows very little, and as a result, he has nothing to express, whether in the native language or the foreign language" (P.34).

This problem is the result of a lack of practising the target language as learners may have their ideas but they are unable to use vocabulary and grammatical structures appropriately.

Baker and Wertrup (2003) as quoted in Ahmadi (2017) claimed that it is very difficult for learners to answer when teachers ask them to tell things in a foreign language because they have little opinions about what to say, which vocabulary to apply, or how to use grammar accurately.

Low or Uneven Participation:

According to Kouicem (2010), participation in a foreign language depends on the learner's personality which should be known by the teacher.

Low or uneven participation is often due to the teachers' ignorance of motivational techniques, moreover,

speaking classes are usually dominated by active students while others talk very little or never speak.

Mother-tongue Use:

When learners possess the same mother-tongue, they use it when they are asked to discuss a topic as it is easier for them to express their ideas using their mother tongue.

According to Hammer (1991), there are some reasons why learners use mother-tongue in their speaking classes. The first reason is that when teachers ask their students to talk about a topic that they do not have enough knowledge about, they will try to use their language; the second reason is the application of mother-tongue is very natural for learners to use. If teachers do not urge their students to talk in English, students will automatically use their first language to explain something to their classmates.

Poor Listening Practice:

Boussida (2010) maintained that students who face problems in decoding messages in the target language believe that the main reason behind this inability is their weakness in vocabulary and inability to form well-structured sentences.

The primary source of this problem is the teacher as teachers teach each skill independently; they do not tell the students that listening skill plays an important role in enhancing speaking skills.

In addition to the above factors, Rababa'h (2005) declared that other factors can cause speaking difficulties for EFL learners, some of them are related to the learners themselves, the teaching strategies, the curriculum and the teaching and learning environment.

Review of Related Studies:

The following are some important studies that have investigated the speaking difficulties among EFL learners.

Abdellah (2002) made a study under the title "Sudanese EFL Learner's Oral Communication Problems" to investigate the problems that face Sudanese EFL learners when they communicate orally in English and the causes of such problems. The data has been collected through two tools: the interview and class observation. The study findings have shown that the main problems that face Sudanese EFL learners in oral communication are problems of pronunciation, weakness of speaking skills, difficulty in communication and lack of fluency, these problems were attributed to different factors such as shyness of the students to speak in English, the influence of mother-tongue interference, lack of practice speaking in English, the negative effect of the Arabic environment, the shortage of native English language teachers in Sudan and poor teaching methods and strategies.

Zakari (2015) conducted a study entitled "Communication Problems among Sudanese EFL University Learners", he employed the analytic descriptive approach and collected data by using a questionnaire and an audio-recorder interview with the students, the results of the study showed that the students could understand the message addressed to them but they experienced difficulties responding properly, the students faced difficulties in speaking because of their limited knowledge about the target language, lack of confidence besides that the environment in which the students learn and practice English did not encourage them to develop their communicative abilities.

Dil (2009) examined Turkish EFL learners' communication obstacles in English language classrooms, and found out that anxiety and unwillingness during the English speaking process are considered two of the biggest obstacles for EFL learners, the study also showed that students who perceive their English as "poor" feel more anxious and more unwilling to communicate in English classes than the other students perceiving their English level as "very good, good and ok."

Data Analysis and Discussion:

The questionnaire aims to elicit the causes and propose some suitable solutions to overcome speaking problems.

Nom.	Statement	mean	SD	Chi-square	p-value
1	I feel worried about making mistakes when I speak in English	3.6	80	29	0.023
2	I often feel unwilling and anxious to communicate in English-speaking classes	2.4	50	28	0.010
3	Lack of exposure to English makes it difficult for me to speak in English.	3.3	70	23	0.006
4	Teachers do not motivate and train us to speak in English in the classroom setting; students tend to use their mother tongue when they are asked to discuss a topic.	2.5	3.8	15	0.046
5	I think that speaking skills should be taught in small classes.	3.4	2.5	22	0.000
6	Most of the time I think that I haven't developed sufficient linguistic domain (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation) that enables me to communicate in English effectively.	2.8	1.7	12	0.000
7	Universities do not pay much attention to teaching speaking skills.	2.9	4.8	34	0.000
8	Teachers do not raise the students' attention to the importance of speaking in language development.	2.7	50	22	0.000
9	Lack of practise speaking in English is one of the factors that influence students' speaking difficulties.	2.9	70	24	0.023
10	University textbooks need to include listening activities that satisfy our communicative needs.	2.6	50	22	0.036
11	Teachers should encourage us to communicate in English and only in English.	3.6	80	22	0.023
12	Teachers should encourage us to participate and express our ideas in English rather than insist on accuracy.	3.4	50	28	0.010

From the above table, it is obvious that the calculated value of chi-square for the significance of the differences for the respondents' answers in the 12 statements is greater than the tabulated value of chi-

square at the degree of freedom (4) and the significant value level (5%) which indicates that, there are statistically significant differences at the level (5%) among the answers of the respondents, so we can conclude that the two hypotheses of the study are verified.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

According to the findings of the questionnaire above which conveys the views of EFL students about the problem of the study, EFL university students face serious problems in speaking skills due to many causes such as the following:

- Universities do not pay much attention to teaching speaking skills as they do for reading, vocabulary and grammar.
- Learners are often inhibited about trying to say things in a foreign language in the classroom and worried about making mistakes.
- Students fail to convey their ideas in English because they think that they have not developed sufficient linguistic knowledge that will enable them to communicate effectively.
- Strong students usually dominate the class while other students speak very little or say nothing.
- Teachers do not raise the students' attention to the importance of speaking in language development.
- Lack of exposure and lack of practice influence students' speaking difficulties.

Based on the above findings, the researcher recommends the following points:

- University textbooks need to include listening activities that satisfy the students' communicative needs.
- Teachers should encourage students to participate and express their ideas in English rather than to insist on accuracy.
- Teachers should motivate and train the students to speak in English in the classroom setting rather than using their mother tongue.
- Teachers should raise the students' attention to the importance of speaking in language development.
- Speaking skills should be taught in small classes where every student should be given a chance to speak the foreign language.

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