

Investigating the Difficulties of Speaking Skills Encountered by Sudanese EFL Undergraduates

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Abstract

This paper aimed to investigate the speaking difficulties encountered by Sudanese EFL undergraduates. To do so, the qualitative approach to data collection was employed. Specifically, 60 (fourth year) students from the English Language Department at University of Bakht-er-Ruda were interviewed. The data was linguistically analyzed to identify the areas of difficulty faced by students in speaking English. After analyzing the data, the results proved that most of the participants are encountered by some difficulties in speaking. These difficulties are mainly represented in lack of vocabulary, lack of grammatical accuracy, improper pronunciation, lack of fluency, and others. Based on the study findings, it is recommended that training teachers is highly essential to achieving a successful learning process. Besides, English language syllabus should be developed in accordance with students' learning needs and requirements, sufficient listening and speaking courses should be provided, and effective teaching and learning strategies and activities that develop students' language proficiency should be adopted/adapted. In addition, out-class activities such as English clubs should be emphasized. As these activities break down the psychological barriers such as shyness, hesitation, etc. and consequently motivate the students to learn and use the language.

Keywords: speaking proficiency, EFL/ESL learners, target language environment, fluency, accuracy.

INTRODUCTION

Speaking could be defined as the process of sending and receiving messages by using verbal expressions. However, the use of non-verbal symbols like gestures is also considered as a part of speaking. Speaking is one of the four language skills that EFL/ESL students need to develop so that they could effectively communicate in different contexts of language use. According to Lazarton, (2001), some experts assume that the ability to communicate orally is equal to knowing the given language since speaking is the main means of human communication. However, as some experts in the field of applied linguistics maintain, speaking has proved to be a demanding skill for EFL/ESL learners. Lazarton, (2001) claimed that spoken English is difficult since it is almost always accomplished through interaction with at least one interlocutor. In this concern, many linguists as Brown (2001) believed that colloquial language, reduced forms, performance, variables, redundancy clusters, rate of delivery, stress, rhythm and intonation are among the characteristics of speaking that contribute to the difficulty of this skill. Speaking needs to be developed as it helps speakers express their thoughts and ideas as well as by which speakers are judged while first impressions are being made.

According to this study, Sudanese EFL undergraduates encounter various difficulties in speaking English language. To investigate this, the study specifically attempts to answer the following research questions:

- 1 - To what extent do Sudanese undergraduates encounter difficulties in speaking English language?
- 2 - In what ways do Sudanese EFL undergraduates face difficulties in speaking English language?

Aspects of Speaking

Fluency and accuracy are considered to be the two major criteria in the foreign language proficiency. Due to this fact, the students and other language users need to develop these two aspects. Besides, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation are also need to be developed to ensure developing the communicative competence. Fluency is defined as the ability to know how to put words, sentences and ideas together in an appropriate way. It is defined by some as the ability to link units of speech together with facility and without strain or undue hesitation.

According to Huges (2002), fluency is achieved when learners are able to express themselves in a clear and reasonable way in order to be understood without hesitation. Otherwise, the listeners will lose their interest. It is assumed by the majority of EFL learners that being fluent in speaking is that you need to speak quickly without pauses. However, Thornbury (2005) did not neglect the idea that speech is an important factor in fluency as well as he did not neglect pauses because speakers need to take breath while speaking. When teaching speaking, teachers share the same goal to achieve which is oral fluency. The reason teachers focus more on accuracy in language teaching is because learners focus on fluency rather than accuracy. Without accuracy incorrect utterances will be produced by speakers and consequently they will not be appropriately understood by their audience.

There are three types of accuracy; grammatical, vocabulary, and pronunciation accuracy. The ability to use the grammatical structure in appropriate ways and situations including the control of length and complexity of the utterances is the grammatical accuracy. (Huges, 2002 and Thornbury, 2005). Vocabulary accuracy can be achieved by choosing the necessary and appropriate vocabulary items while speaking. Students often find some difficulties while trying to convey messages and they misuse words synonyms that do not have the same meaning in all contexts. Harmer (2004) maintained that the knowledge of word class also allows speakers to perform well formed utterances. So students are able to use words and expressions accurately. Regarding pronunciation accuracy, it means to say words in ways that are generally accepted or understood. That is, if the pronunciation is incorrect, the speakers will not be understood and the message will not be conveyed in an appropriate way and therefore accuracy is not achieved. To be able to pronounce words accurately, learners should be aware of different sounds with their features, word stress and intonations and this helps them in developing their speaking skills. Redmond and Vrchota (2007) argued that it is imperative that you use the correct word in the correct instance and with the correct pronunciation. As communicative competence cannot be achieved without the above mentioned aspects, they should be emphasized by the learners as well as teachers so that a successful language learning specially speaking skills could be achieved.

Significance of Speaking Competency

It is generally known that people who master speaking are considered as if they master all the other skills of the language. Speaking generally helps speakers communicate their thoughts and ideas. In this regard, Ur (2000) stated that among the four skills, speaking seems intuitively the most important and people who know a language are referred to as 'speakers' of that language, as if speaking includes all other kinds of language knowledge. Teachers expect from their students to use the language correctly and appropriately in order to speak confidently so as to attract the audience and convey their messages. Emphasizing the significance of speaking, Baker and Westrup (2003) claimed that students who can speak English well may have greater chance for further education, of finding employment and gaining promotion. This emphasizes the fact that speaking is important not just inside the classroom but also outside where most of the companies and organizations look for people who master a foreign language and have good speaking abilities. According to McKay (2006), appropriate and effective speaking cannot be achieved without being exposed to some specific linguistic competences such as vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar, as well as the sociolinguistic competences such as register of the expressions and the context of the language. Speaking enables learners to feel confident to express themselves when issues of interest occur and consequently develop a range of skills and strategies that assist them to manage the challengeable situations. Similarly, Fielding and Ruddock (2002) explained that speaking opportunities facilitate a stronger sense of membership, respect and self-worth, and learning management. Celce-Murcia's (2001) added that authenticity is very important when students ought to speak. The topics should be of great interests to the learners with focus on meanings, values, collaboration, social development and provision of a rich context.

To conclude, practicing speaking makes speakers effective communicators and consequently enjoy sharing ideas with one another. Besides, speaking helps the speakers to gain the attention of the audience plus achieving career success. In addition, it enhances one's personal life by giving opportunities for travel, promotion, scholarship, or to attend conferences, international meetings, represent organizations in international events and many other advantages. All these mentioned facts justify the demand for developing students'

speaking skills and the need for adopting effective teaching and learning strategies to ensure that.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews and discusses some local and international literature in the difficulties of speaking encountered by EFL/ESL undergraduates. In the light of their similarity/relevance to the current study, the following previous studies are reviewed. In Sudan for instance, E. Mohamed and N. Elhadi (2015) conducted a study on problems of teaching and learning spoken English in Sudan. The study aimed to investigate the problems and challenges of teaching and learning English and ways of tackling them. Teacher questionnaire was adopted as a tool of data collection which was administered to 30 teachers from The African Council Basic and Secondary Schools in Khartoum North. After statistically analyzing the data via the SPSS program, the study findings indicated that there are major problems that hinder Sudanese students from speaking English. Among these are; low income of most learners, lack of the target language environment, under qualified teachers, inappropriate teaching materials, improper teaching methods, and some psychological factors such as lack of motivation. To tackle these problems, the study recommended developing materials, teachers, and learners through steps taken by the educational authorities. The study reviewed above proved the fact that English language, particularly, speaking is an area of challenge to most EFL Sudanese learners. This difficulty is attributed to a number of factors as mentioned above. To solve this, there are certain practical steps should necessarily be taken by the educational authorities such as teachers' training, syllabus development, employing the appropriate teaching methods and techniques, making the educational environment conducive and so on. In the Saudi context where English is considered to be a foreign language, Alzahrani, G. (2018) carried out a study on the reasons behind the weakness of speaking English among English Departments' students at Najran University. The study intended to explore the reasons behind these weaknesses as well as the impact of gender on the perception of the study sample. To do so, two research questions were provided and discussed. The participants of the study were 59 (30 males and 29 females) students at the English Departments of Colleges of

Science and Arts at Najran University for the academic year 2017–2018. The study is a quantitative one and a questionnaire was used to collect data. The findings revealed that weakness of the teaching and learning environment plus the weakness of students themselves were the main themes discovered by the sample. It is also revealed that the gender difference did not play a significant impact on the opinions toward the reasons behind the weakness of speaking English among English Departments' students at Najran University. The study projected above proved the internationality of the problem under investigation - not only Sudanese EFL students struggle to master speaking - especially for EFL students. The study came to the fact that the weakness of students and the educational environment are the main reasons of students' deterioration in speaking English. The current study assumes that many factors should be considered in order to improve students' oral communication skills such as training teachers, developing syllabus, etc.

Afshar, H. and Asakereh, A. (2016) did a study in Iran entitled; speaking skills problems encountered by Iranian EFL freshmen and seniors from their own and their English instructors' perspectives. The subjects were 238 Iranian EFL students (138 freshmen and 100 seniors) and 30 English instructors from various universities participated in the study by completing a validated speaking skills problems questionnaire. To triangulate the data, 30 EFL students (15 freshmen and 15 seniors) and ten English instructors were selected from among the study participants. They also responded to semi-structured interview. The study results proved that some socially-related and instructor-related problems, the lack of teaching facilities, and the curricula of the education system of the country were among the major problem-creating factors for the freshmen's and seniors' speaking skills. In addition, the t-test results showed that there is no significant difference between the freshmen's and seniors' perceptions of their own speaking problems. The results of Chi-square analyses of the individual items of the questionnaire indicated that there was no significant difference between the freshmen's and seniors' perceptions except for item 1 (I am afraid of making mistakes). Furthermore, the results of one-way ANOVA showed that overall there was no significant difference among the freshmen's, the seniors' and the instructors' perception of speaking skills problems. The above study confirmed that Iranian EFL students find it difficult to properly improve their

speaking skills. This proves that not only EFL learners with Arabic language background struggle to master their oral communication skills but also those of None-Arabic background. Besides the socially-related and instructor-related factors as mentioned above, environment-related and syllabus-related factors also affect the students' proficiency in spoken English.

Another study was conducted by Al-Jamal, D. and Al-Jamal, G. (2014) under the title; an investigation of the difficulties faced by EFL undergraduates in speaking skills. The study was conducted in Jordan. It aimed at describing the difficulties that may be encountered at an EFL setting. The sample was stratified random as drawn from six Jordanian public universities. Survey questionnaires as well as semi-structured interviews were constructed. 64 students out of 566 students responded to a survey questionnaire. The findings of the study showed a perceived failure of EFL students' speaking skills in English was reported together with reasons that explain such perceived difficulty. The results proved a low speaking proficiency level among EFL undergraduates a long with negligible instruction of the speaking skills at university courses' level. More highlighted difficulties by this study were as these of; communicating in L1, large classes, and lack of time. Unlike the studies reviewed above, the current one came to the fact that communicating in L1, large classes and lack of time are considered to be the reasons behind students' difficulties in speaking skills. As confirmed, communicating in L1 makes it difficult for students to improve their speaking skills as it reduces the chance of using the target language (English) to communicate. So the more practice of the target language the better chance of developing that language.

METHODOLOGY

This study is descriptive and analytic that adopts the qualitative approach to data collection. Particularly, student interview. Subjects of the study were 60 Sudanese EFL undergraduates. These participants study English language at the University of Bakht-er-Ruda. They were chosen according to their willingness to participate in the study. Concerning the tools of data collection, student interview was used to obtain the subjects' views in different topics. With regard to the analysis of data, after conducting the interview, the data was

transcribed, coded into themes, and then linguistically analyzed by the researcher and the following results are obtained.

RESULTS

The interview was conducted to investigate the EFL university students' views in the following variables:

- Self-introduction.
- Attitudes and reasons for learning English language.
- Difficulties in learning English language in Sudan.
- The possibility of making learning English more attractive.
- Good qualities of teachers.

The main objective of the interview was to assess and evaluate the students' speaking proficiency. Thus, this evaluation was measured in accordance with the following criterion:

- Vocabulary accuracy
- Pronunciation accuracy
- Grammar accuracy
- Fluency

Respondents' Vocabulary Accuracy

With regard to vocabulary accuracy, six of the interviewees appeared to have a very good command of vocabulary, another more six have a good vocabulary knowledge. In contrast, 24 interviewees have acceptable vocabulary proficiency and another 24 have unacceptable vocabulary proficiency. This result signals that the vocabulary proficiency of 24 interviewees is poor. So their speaking ability would be more uncertain or weak.

Respondents' Pronunciation Accuracy

Concerning the interviewees' pronunciation accuracy, it is quite evident that only four respondents have demonstrated a very good pronunciation and 16 respondents have also demonstrated a good pronunciation. However, the results indicated that the pronunciation of 18 respondents is acceptable and that of the remaining 22 is unacceptable. So it could be inferred that the students suffer a lot when speaking since their pronunciation is not quite perfect.

Respondents' Grammatical Accuracy

As far as the grammatical accuracy is concerned, the results of the interview indicated that 20 respondents are able to form correct English sentences. That is, their grammatical competence is ranging between very good and good. Surprisingly, the results proved that the grammatical competence of 30 participants is unacceptable with exception to 10 who produced acceptable grammar. Thus, this result indicates that the vast majority of the respondents do not know grammar well a matter which negatively impacts the way they speak.

Respondents' Fluency

With regard to fluency, 40 respondents are not fluent in their speaking - with exception to 10 respondents whose fluency is ranging between very good and good. It is worth mentioning that the remaining 10 subjects were acceptable. So what can be notified here is that fluency correlates negatively or positively with other language features such as grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. That is, if learners are aware of these language features, they can speak fluently and the vice versa.

DISCUSSION

This paper aimed to appraise the difficulties of speaking skills encountered by Sudanese EFL undergraduates. The results of the study proved that most of the students are encountered by some difficulties in speaking. These difficulties are mainly represented in lack of vocabulary, incorrect pronunciation, lack of grammatical accuracy, and lack of fluency. As the study results proved, the participants showed very poor speaking proficiency represented in vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and fluency. Regarding vocabulary accuracy, the results signaled that the vocabulary command of students is poor. So their speaking ability would be more uncertain or weak. The use of inappropriate teaching materials, lack of competent and well-trained teachers, and improper teaching methods are considered to be the main factors behind this weakness. Similarly, Eltayeb, et al. (2015) stated that the students' proficiency level continues to be low and the teachers are not trained well enough to adapt the materials to the appropriate level and try to make real conversations from the textbooks. Competent enough and well-trained teachers who can tailor the available materials, adopt/adapt effective

vocabulary teaching strategies and create conducive classroom atmosphere could be the solution.

Concerning pronunciation, as the interview results proved, it is one of the speaking difficulties. This claim is supported by the fact that most of the participants demonstrated poor pronunciation. The main reasons behind this deterioration could be lack of the target language environment, under-qualified teachers, improper teaching methods, inappropriate teaching and learning environment, etc. In this context, Afshar, et al. (2016) maintained that language laboratories should provide the opportunity for EFL students to improve their speaking skills. That is, an ideal language laboratory should have sufficient and efficient audio-visual equipment such as video projectors and computers, as well as language software such as pronunciation checkers and also provide EFL students with Internet access so that they can have access to authentic materials and be exposed to real-life situations. The above mentioned facts should be considered by educational policy makers and those involved in the teaching and learning processes, otherwise, pronunciation will become an obstacle to achieving speaking competence.

With regard to grammatical accuracy, all the respondents showed some difficulties in speaking. This result could be attributed to the fact that not only grammar but all the other language skills and areas were not properly developed at the basic and secondary schools due to many factors such as lack of the target language environment, under-qualified teachers and so on. So the problem should be eradicated from the roots. That is to say, from the primary school or even the KG. In this line, Eltayeb, et al. (2015) maintained that the low income of students' families is one of the factors negatively affecting students' speaking skills. This fact impacts all aspects of life including education as students struggle to gain living at the price of attending classes which negatively affects their proficiency in English in general and in spoken English in particular. On the other hand, the results showed that the vast majority of students are not fluent. One major justification for this is that fluency requires a good command of vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. It should be noted that fluency correlates negatively or positively with the other language features including vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. That is to say, developing these features leads to achieving fluency and the vice versa. In addition to the above mentioned factors, communicating in

L1, mother tongue interference, large language classes, and the low salary of English language teachers are considered to be some of the obstacles that obstruct EFL learners from reaching higher level of speaking proficiency in particular and English language proficiency in general. Furthermore, some psychological factors such as being afraid of making mistakes, hesitation, etc. may be a barrier to developing speaking skills in English language.

Based on the study findings, the following is recommended:

- School and university teachers should be qualified and well-trained.
- English language syllabus should be developed in accordance with students' learning needs and requirements.
- Sufficient listening and speaking courses should be provided, especially for the bachelor program.
- Effective teaching and learning strategies/activities that develop students' language proficiency, particularly speaking, should be adopted/adapted.
- Students should be encouraged to use the language inside the classroom as well as outside so that they can compensate the lack of the target language environment and consequently develop their speaking skills.
- English language classes should be as smaller as possible so that greater chances of participation inside the classroom will be ensured.
- Out-class activities should be there such as English clubs so that students can practice speaking the language and break down the psychological barriers such as shyness, hesitation, etc. and get motivated to learn and use the language.

CONCLUSION

This paper mainly aimed to investigate the difficulties of speaking encountered by Sudanese undergraduates. To do so, the following research questions have been raised:

- To what extent do Sudanese undergraduates encounter difficulties in speaking English language?
- In what ways do Sudanese EFL undergraduates face difficulties in speaking English language?

The qualitative approach is employed. Specifically, student interview. The population targeted by the study was fourth year students of English at the University of Bakht-er-Ruda. The paper findings showed that the main speaking difficulties detected among the students are: insufficient vocabulary, pronunciation and grammatical accuracy, and lack of fluency. It is clear as discussed above that the deterioration of students' levels not only in speaking but in all the other language skills are ascribed to teacher-related, syllabus-related, student-related, and environment-related factors. Based on the findings, it is recommended that the English language teachers should be well trained and the syllabus should be developed in accordance with students' needs and requirements. Besides, effective teaching strategies/methods that improve the students' level and motivate them to learn and use the language should be adopted/adapted. In addition, using the language outside the classroom should be encouraged so that students will be able to use the language in different contexts/situations of language use.

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