

التحديات التي يواجهها طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة المرقب أثناء التحدث

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ملخص:

هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف تحديات النطق التي يواجهها طلاب جامعات اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في ليبيا. ولتحقيق ذلك، تم استخدام طريقة نوعية لجمع البيانات. وعلى وجه الخصوص، تمت مقابلة 30 طالبًا (السنة الرابعة) من قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة المرقب وبعد إجراء التحليل اللغوي للبيانات، تبين أن الطلاب يواجهون صعوبات مختلفة أثناء التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية. وأشارت النتائج إلى أن غالبية المشاركين واجهوا تحديات في هذا الصدد. تشمل هذه التحديات محدودية المفردات والأخطاء النحوية والنطق غير الصحيح ونقص الطلاقة. وتشير الدراسة إلى أنه من الضروري تدريب المعلمين لضمان نجاح عملية التعلم. علاوة على ذلك، ينبغي تصميم مناهج اللغة الإنجليزية لتلبية احتياجات ومتطلبات التعلم للطلاب، مع التركيز بشكل كبير على دورات الاستماع والتحدث. وينبغي تنفيذ استراتيجيات التدريس والتعلم الفعالة لتعزيز الكفاءة اللغوية لدى الطلاب وينبغي التركيز على الأنشطة اللامنهجية مثل نوادي اللغة الإنجليزية. وتساعد هذه الأنشطة في التغلب على الحواجز النفسية مثل الخجل والتردد، مما يحفز الطلاب على تعلم اللغة واستخدامه الكلمات المفتاحية: إتقان التحدث، متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، بيئة اللغة المستهدفة، الطلاقة، الدقة

Abstract

This study aimed to explore the speech challenges faced by Libyan EFL college students. To achieve this, a qualitative method of data collection was utilized. In particular, 30 (fourth-year) students from the English Language Department at the University of ELMergib were interviewed.

After conducting a linguistic analysis of the data, it was found that students faced various difficulties while speaking English. The results indicated that the majority of the participants experienced challenges in this regard. These challenges include limited vocabulary, grammatical errors, incorrect pronunciation, and lack of fluency. The study suggests that it is crucial to train teachers to ensure a successful learning process. Furthermore, the English language curriculum should be tailored to meet the learning needs and requirements of students, with ample focus on listening and speaking courses. Effective teaching and learning strategies should be implemented to enhance students' language proficiency and extracurricular activities like English clubs should be given emphasis. These activities help to overcome psychological barriers like shyness and hesitation, motivating students to learn and use the language.

Keywords: proficiency in speaking, EFL learners, target language environment, fluency, accuracy

Introduction

Speaking involves the exchange of messages through verbal communication. However, non-verbal symbols like gestures are also considered part of communication. It is one of the four language skills that EFL students need to develop to effectively communicate in different language use contexts. Lazarton (2001) suggests that certain experts believe that the capacity to speak is tantamount to possessing knowledge of a language, as speech serves as the primary mode of human interaction. However, according to some experts in applied linguistics, speaking has proven to be a challenging skill for EFL learners. Lazarton (2001) argued that spoken English is difficult because it almost always involves interacting with at least one other person. Many linguists, such as Brown (2001), believe 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, and is also used to judge speakers during first impressions.

This study reveals that Libyan undergraduates studying English as a foreign language face multiple challenges when speaking the language. The study aims to address these difficulties by exploring the following research questions:

1 - What are the challenges faced by Libyan undergraduate students when it comes to speaking English?

2 - What are the challenges that Libyan EFL undergraduates encounter when speaking English?

Aspects of Speaking

Fluency and accuracy are the primary criteria for assessing foreign language proficiency. As a result, students and other language users must focus on developing these two aspects, along with grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, to ensure the development of communicative competence. Fluency is the skill of knowing how to put words, sentences, and ideas together in a suitable way. Some define it as the ability to connect units of speech smoothly and without hesitation.

Per Huges (2002), fluency is attained when learners can express themselves clearly and coherently without hesitation, ensuring their listeners remain engaged. Most EFL learners mistakenly believe that speaking fluently necessitates speaking rapidly without pauses. Thornbury (2005) acknowledged the significance of speech in fluency and the necessity of pauses for breath during speaking. When teaching speaking, teachers strive for the common goal of achieving oral fluency. Teachers focus more on accuracy in language teaching because learners prioritize fluency over accuracy. Without accuracy, speakers will produce incorrect utterances and, as a result, they will not be properly understood by their audience.

There are three types of accuracy: grammatical, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Grammatical accuracy refers to the ability to use appropriate grammatical structures in different situations, including controlling the length and complexity of utterances.

According to Huges (2002) and Thornbury (2005), accuracy in vocabulary can be attained by selecting the appropriate and necessary words during speech. However, students may encounter challenges in conveying messages and may misuse words and synonyms that are not universally applicable. Harmer (2004) argued that understanding word class enables speakers to produce grammatically correct utterances, allowing students to use words and expressions accurately. Pronunciation accuracy refers to saying words in a manner that is widely accepted or understood, the pronunciation is incorrect, the message will not be conveyed appropriately and accuracy is not achieved. Learners should be aware of different sounds, word stress, and intonations to pronounce words accurately and develop their speaking skills. Redmond and Vrchota (2007) emphasized the importance of using the correct word, in the correct instance, and with the correct pronunciation. They highlighted that communicative competence cannot be achieved without these aspects, and therefore, learners and teachers should emphasize them to achieve successful language learning, especially in speaking skills.

Significance of Speaking Competency

Students who are proficient in speaking are often perceived as proficient in all other language abilities. Speaking helps speakers effectively communicate their thoughts and ideas. Ur (2000) argued that out of the four language skills, speaking appears to be the most crucial. Those who are proficient in a language are commonly called 'speakers' of that language, suggesting that speaking encompasses all other forms of language proficiency. Teachers expect students to use language correctly and confidently to attract and convey messages. Baker and Westrup (2003) emphasized the importance of speaking, stating that students who speak English well have a better chance of further education, employment, and promotion.

It highlights the significance of speaking not only within the confines of a classroom but also in real-world situations where corporations and institutions seek individuals proficient in a foreign language with strong oral communication skills. McKay (2006) argues that successful speaking requires specific linguistic competencies like vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar, as well as sociolinguistic competencies such as understanding the context and register of expressions. Speaking allows learners to confidently express themselves and develop skills to manage challenging situations. Fielding and Ruddock (2002) also stated that speaking opportunities contribute to a stronger sense of belonging, respect, self-worth, and learning management. Celce-Murcia (2001) emphasized the importance of authenticity in student speaking. The topics should be highly interesting to learners, focusing on meanings, values, collaboration, and social development, and providing a rich context.

In conclusion, regular practice in speaking makes individuals effective communicators and allows them to enjoy sharing ideas. Additionally, speaking helps speakers gain the attention of the audience and achieve career success. Furthermore, it enriches one's personal life by providing opportunities for travel, advancement, scholarships, attending conferences and international meetings, representing organizations at global events, and many other benefits. All these facts justify the need to develop students' speaking skills and to adopt effective teaching and learning strategies to ensure that.

Literature Review

This part examines the literature on the speaking challenges faced by EFL undergraduates. Given their relevance to the current study, the following previous studies are discussed. A study was conducted by E. Mohamed and N. Elhadi (2015) regarding the issues surrounding the teaching and learning of spoken English. The study's objective was to explore the challenges and obstacles encountered in teaching and learning English, as well as approaches to address them. A teacher questionnaire was used to collect data from 30 teachers at The African Council Basic and Secondary Schools in Khartoum North. After analyzing the data using the SPSS program, the study revealed significant issues that impede Sudanese students from speaking English. Among these are the low income of most learners, lack of exposure to the target language environment, under qualified teachers, inappropriate teaching materials, improper teaching methods, and psychological factors such as lack of motivation. To address these issues, the study recommended the development of materials for teachers and learners through steps taken by the educational authorities. The above study demonstrated that speaking English is a significant challenge for many EFL Sudanese learners. This difficulty is attributed to various factors. To address this issue, educational authorities should take practical steps such as teacher training, syllabus development, employing appropriate teaching methods, and creating conducive educational environment. In the Saudi context where English is considered a foreign language, Alzahrani, G. (2018) conducted a study on the reasons for the weakness in English speaking among English Department students at Najran University. The study aimed to investigate the causes of these weaknesses and the influence of gender on the perception of the study sample. Two research questions were formulated and discussed to achieve this. The study involved 59 students (30 males and 29 females) enrolled in the English Departments of Science and Arts at Najran University during the academic year 2017–2018. It was a quantitative study, and data was gathered using a questionnaire. The study uncovered that the deficiencies in the teaching and learning environment, as well as, the shortcomings of the students themselves, were the primary themes identified in the sample. The study also found that gender differences did not significantly impact the opinions regarding the reasons for the difficulty of speaking English among English Department students at Najran University. The above study demonstrated the international nature of the issue being investigated - not only Libyan EFL students struggle with speaking, but especially EFL students. The study revealed that students' decline in English speaking skills is primarily attributed to student weaknesses and the educational environment. It is assumed that various factors, including teacher training and syllabus development, are crucial for enhancing students' oral communication skills.

Afshar, H. and Asakereh, A. (2016) conducted a study in Iran titled "Speaking Skills Problems Encountered by Iranian EFL Freshmen and seniors from Their Own and Their English Instructors' Perspectives." The study involved 238 Iranian EFL students (138 freshmen and 100 seniors) and 30 English instructors from different universities. They participated by filling out a validated questionnaire on speaking skills problems. To triangulate the data, a group of 30 EFL students, consisting of 15 freshmen and 15 seniors, along with 10 English instructors were chosen from the study participants. They were then asked to participate in semi-structured interviews. The study results demonstrated that certain social and instructor-related issues, as well as the lack of teaching facilities and the country's education system curriculum, were significant factors contributing to the speaking skills challenges faced by freshmen and seniors. Additionally, the t-test results indicated that there is no significant difference between the freshmen and seniors' perceptions of their speaking issues. The Chi-square analyses of the questionnaire items

also revealed no significant difference between the two groups, except for item 1 (I am afraid of making mistakes). Additionally, the one-way ANOVA results indicated that there was no significant difference in the perception of speaking skills problems among freshmen, seniors, and instructors. The study above confirmed that Iranian EFL students struggle to improve their speaking skills, showing that it's not just EFL learners with Arabic language backgrounds who have difficulty mastering oral communication, but also those from non-Arabic backgrounds. In addition to the social and instructor-related factors mentioned, environment and syllabus-related factors also impact students' proficiency in spoken English.

Al-Jamal, D., and Al-Jamal, G. (2014) conducted a study titled "Investigating Difficulties Faced by EFL Undergraduates in Speaking Skills" in Jordan. The study aimed to describe the challenges that may arise in an EFL environment. The sample was randomly drawn from six public universities in Jordan using stratified sampling. Survey questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Out of 566 students, 64 responded to the survey questionnaire. The study found that EFL students' speaking skills in English were perceived to be inadequate, and reasons were provided to explain this perceived difficulty. The findings revealed a low level of speaking proficiency among EFL undergraduates, coupled with minimal emphasis on teaching speaking skills at the university course level. This study also underscored challenges such as communicating in L1, large class sizes, and time constraints. In contrast to the aforementioned studies, this study concludes that speaking difficulties among students are caused by communicating in L1, large class sizes, and time constraints. Using L1 as a means of communication impedes the improvement of speaking skills by reducing opportunities to practice the target language (English). Therefore the more practice students have using the target language, the greater their chances of developing proficiency.

Methodology

This study is descriptive and analytical and uses a qualitative approach to collect data, specifically through student interviews. The study involved 30 Libyan EFL undergraduates enrolled in the English department at the Faculty of Arts and Science in Messellata. The participants were selected based on their willingness to take part in the study. Regarding data collection methods, student interviews were utilized to gather the subjects' perspectives on various topics. Following the interviews, the data was transcribed, coded into themes, and then linguistically analyzed by the researcher, resulting in the following findings.

Results

The interview aimed to explore the perspectives of EFL university students on the following aspects:

Self-introduction.

Attitudes and motivations for learning the English language.

Challenges in learning English in Libya.

Ways to make learning English more engaging.

Positive attributes of teachers.

The primary goal of the interview was to assess the students' speaking proficiency. This evaluation was based on the following criteria:

Vocabulary accuracy

Pronunciation accuracy

Grammar accuracy

Fluency

Respondents' Vocabulary Accuracy

Regarding vocabulary accuracy, six of the interviewees demonstrated a strong command of vocabulary, while another six displayed good knowledge of vocabulary. In contrast, eight interviewees have adequate vocabulary proficiency, while another ten have inadequate vocabulary skills. This indicates that the vocabulary proficiency of the ten interviewees is lacking, potentially impacting their speaking ability.

Respondents' Pronunciation Accuracy

Regarding the interviewees' pronunciation accuracy, it is evident that only four respondents have shown very good pronunciation, while five respondents have also shown good pronunciation. However, the results showed that the pronunciation of eight respondents is acceptable, while thirteen others have unacceptable pronunciation. This suggests that students struggle with speaking due to imperfect pronunciation.

Respondents' Grammatical Accuracy

Based on the interview results, it was found that ten respondents possess the ability to construct accurate English sentences, indicating their grammatical proficiency to be within the range of good to very good. Interestingly, the findings revealed that only 10 out of 30 participants demonstrated acceptable grammar, indicating that the majority of respondents lack a strong grasp of grammar. This deficiency adversely affects their speech.

Respondents' Fluency

Out of thirty respondents, twenty are not fluent in their speaking, except five whose fluency ranges from very good to good. It is worth noting that the remaining five participants were deemed acceptable. What can be observed is that fluency is correlated either positively or negatively with other language aspects like grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. In other words, if learners are aware of these language features, they can speak fluently and vice versa.

Discussion

This study aimed to assess the speaking skill challenges faced by Libyan EFL undergraduates. The study's findings showed that the majority of students experience difficulties in speaking, including a lack of vocabulary, incorrect pronunciation, lack of grammatical accuracy, and lack of fluency. The study results indicated that the participants demonstrated a low level of speaking proficiency, particularly in vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and fluency. In terms of vocabulary accuracy, the findings suggested that the students have a poor command of vocabulary, which may contribute to their uncertain or weak speaking ability. The use of inadequate teaching materials, lack of skilled and well-trained teachers and improper teaching methods are considered the main factors behind this weakness. Similarly, Eltayeb, et al. (2015) stated that the student's proficiency level remains low and the teachers are not adequately trained to adapt the materials to the appropriate level and facilitate conversations from the textbooks. Skilled and well-trained teachers, who can customize the existing materials, effectively implement vocabulary teaching strategies, and establish a positive classroom environment may be the answer.

Regarding pronunciation, the interview results indicated that it is a common speaking difficulty. This is evidenced by the majority of participants showing inadequate pronunciation. Possible reasons for this may include a lack of exposure to the target language environment, unqualified teachers, ineffective teaching methods, and unsuitable learning environments. Afshar, et al. (2016) argued that language labs should offer EFL students the chance to enhance their speaking abilities. This means a good language lab should have quality audio-visual equipment like video projectors and computers, along with language software such as pronunciation checkers. It should also give EFL students Internet access to authentic materials and exposure to real-life situations. Educational policymakers and those involved in teaching and learning processes should consider the above-mentioned facts, or else pronunciation will hinder the achievement of speaking competence.

All respondents exhibited difficulties in speaking with grammatical accuracy. This outcome may be linked to the underdevelopment of not only grammar but also other language skills and areas during basic and secondary education, attributed to factors such as lack of exposure to the target language environment and under-qualified teachers. Therefore, the issue should be addressed at its core. From primary school or even kindergarten, Eltayeb et al. (2015) argue that students' speaking skills are negatively impacted by the low income of their families. This affects all aspects of their lives, including their education, as they struggle to balance attending classes with making a living. As a result, their proficiency in English, especially spoken English, is negatively affected. However, the findings indicate that most students lack fluency. This can be attributed to the fact that fluency necessitates a strong grasp of vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. It is worth mentioning that fluency is either positively or negatively associated with other language aspects, such as vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. Developing these features enhances fluency and vice versa. In addition to the factors mentioned above, communicating in L1, mother tongue interference, large language classes, and the low salary of English language teachers are obstacles that obstruct EFL learners from reaching higher levels of speaking proficiency, and English language

proficiency in general. Furthermore, psychological factors such as fear of making mistakes and hesitation may be barriers to developing speaking skills in English.

Recommendations based on the study include the need for qualified and well-trained teachers in schools and universities. English language syllabi should be tailored to students' learning needs and requirements, with an emphasis on sufficient listening and speaking courses, particularly for bachelor programs. Effective teaching and learning strategies that enhance language proficiency, particularly in speaking, should be implemented. Students should also be encouraged to use the language both inside and outside the classroom to compensate for the lack of a target language environment and develop their speaking skills. English classes should be kept small to encourage greater participation. Extracurricular activities like English clubs can help students practice speaking, break down psychological barriers like shyness and hesitation, and motivate them to learn and use the language.

Conclusion

The objective of this study is to examine the challenges faced by Libyan college students when it comes to speaking. The study utilized a qualitative approach, specifically conducting student interviews. The study focused on fourth-year English students at ELMergib University. The study found that students face several speaking challenges, including limited vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar accuracy, and lack of fluency. As previously discussed, it is evident that the decline in students' proficiency, not only in speaking but also in other language skills, can be attributed to factors related to teachers, syllabus, students, and the environment. The results suggest that English language teachers should receive thorough training and that the syllabus should be tailored to meet the needs and requirements of students. Additionally, effective teaching strategies and methods should be implemented to enhance students' proficiency and foster their enthusiasm for learning and utilizing the language. Encouraging the use of language outside the classroom will help students apply it in various contexts and situations.

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