

Facing Some Language Impediments in Oral Expression and Comprehension Settings: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT: *In today's tech-driven globe, the role of communication and speech production has witnessed an upsurge. Teaching the language as a means of communication has become the norm in English as a foreign language (EFL) settings. The major problem underlying this endeavour lies with first-year students' inability to maintain spontaneous talk either in the classroom or in any context. This research aims at investigating some language obstacles that EFL students face and could be a serious handicap to the improvement of their speaking skills. The data was gathered through two questionnaires administered to both first-year EFL students and the teachers covering oral expression and comprehension courses. The findings revealed that learners experienced various barriers that hinder their performance and interaction such as self-confidence, anxiety, lack of appropriate vocabulary, and obsessive fear of making mistakes and imperfections. Based on the results, some helpful recommendations were suggested to enhance the students' speaking proficiency.*

KEYWORDS: EFL students; language as a means of communication; language obstacles; oral expression; speaking skills.

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1. Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that the speaking skill among other macro language skills (listening, reading, and writing) seems to be the most demanded one by the great majority of people; being able to speak English implies having a good control of the language. The principal goal of teaching the language as a means of communication to EFL students is to help them communicate the language accurately, fluently, appropriately, and proficiently in distinct situations. When communication is successful, it can strengthen one's personal or professional life; in other words, it is the essence of the human survival and critical to their success. The present paper aims to explore the different factors that hamper having a good interaction and oral production, and gives a portrayal of the role of teaching oral expression in building up the learners' communicative capabilities. In order to probe into this study, the following research question was raised:

- What could be the major barriers that are encountered by EFL learners in their oral expression classes?

It is hypothesised that first-year EFL students seem to come across some hindrances related to language and affect. This research was carried out with the intent to let both teachers and learners profit from the teaching/learning experience.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Meaning of Speaking

As the world is becoming a global place in which the density of interconnection between people from diverse countries and cultural backgrounds is eminently increasing, there is a pressing need for learning English. This foreign language is critical to communicate, to connect businesses worldwide, to understand alien persons, and to boost one's personal and professional life. In parallel, a classroom is a learning space in which both teachers and learners share several aspects. Learning emerges as an interactive process where participants interact by means of conversations, discussions, presentations, and constant exchange of information. For successful and complete communication, it is required to develop the speaker's four macro skills; the learner's ability in speaking is crucial as it raises self-confidence and enthusiasm. Akhter, Haidov, Rana, and Qureshi (2020) note that "To become successful in the desired fields, all people need to get proficiency overall skills of language. Among these skills, speaking occupies the core position. Without this skill, the purpose of communication cannot be performed effectively" (p. 6019). Being a productive skill, speaking is seen as challenging since it demands interactive relations between a transmitter and a recipient that also involves enormous capacity for understanding.

2.2. Teaching Oral Expression

Oral expression is one of the varied subjects taught at university with the aim of giving the learners the opportunity to achieve their desires, know their strengths and weaknesses, and offer their reflections. In oral expression courses, teachers use a combination of teaching the two necessary skills: the receptive skill 'listening' and the productive skill 'speaking'. These two language skills will lead the way for the betterment of the student's reading and writing capacities, and the foundation of promising citizens. The basic objective towards learning English is mainly to gain mastery of communicative competence. This concept lays emphasis on the use of language to learn it that is to acquire the language via the understanding of the content. The challenge today is not only to learn to use the speech but also to use the speech to learn (Daniel & Roger, 2021). Consequently, this takes a lot of practice and training of the target language. It also requires several components to fulfill the desired goals. This can be realized with the help of the teacher (as a major agent), the learner (as the core of the learning process), the pedagogical tools and methods (as ease of the teaching process), and a variety of activities/tasks (as conducive ways to enhance the students' communicative proficiency).

It is worth noting that communication skills are pivotal to a student's academic achievements and future career. Effective oral communication occurs when the communicator is active and possesses an

attitude of efficient and productive discussions in all spheres of life. It serves as a solid foundation for reading comprehension and for writing. Through oral language, learners can practise critical reflection and become more autonomous.

3. Methodology

The backbone of any research is the tool that is used to obtain information. The present work was resulted through the utilization of a quantitative approach whereby the researcher gathered and analysed the data quantitatively. To assemble data, test the suggested hypothesis, answer the aforementioned research question, and increase the reliability and validity of this work, two questionnaires were administered to both learners and teachers. The questionnaires allow for a trustworthy analysis as confidentiality is highly being respected.

Taherdoost (2021) believes that a questionnaire is “one of the common devices for collecting information and a form or instrument including a set of questions and secure answers that respondents (from a specific population) fill to give the researcher information needed for the study” (p. 14). The questionnaire can thus be described as the medium of conversation between two people, albeit that they are remote from each other and never communicate directly (Brace, 2018).

3.1. Participants and Procedure

This study took place at the University of Oran 2 in the department of English. It put into investigation two samples, the first sample comprised 50 first-year EFL students who were chosen randomly, from which, the choice of first-year level returns to the reason that the learners are given more opportunities to practise the oral language since they were introduced to oral expression courses for the first time at tertiary education. A questionnaire constituted of 08 questions and divided into three sections was administered to examine the students' speaking skills and their attitudes towards oral expression. Each section aims to amass specific information from the students. The first section is entitled “General Information” and contains two questions. These questions seek to collect background information about the informants such as their gender and language level. The second section is called “Students' Speaking Skills” and includes four questions that have the purpose of investigating students' speaking aptitudes, the frequency of their participation, and their preferred classroom speaking activities. The last and most pivotal section is named “Obstacles Faced during Interaction” and unveils two questions that attempt to explore students' attitudes towards their involvement, the difficulties faced when communicating or performing a task, and time allotted to their oral expression courses.

The second sample contained 5 teachers covering the module of oral expression and comprehension within the same institution. This population was targeted in order to get the instructors' perceptions of the learners' attitudes towards their oral expression classes as well as the difficulties faced in their courses. A questionnaire composed of 08 questions was designed to ascertain the teachers' views on their students' speaking abilities and performances. The queries vary between yes/no questions, multiple-choice questions, and open questions. It is split up into four sections, each of which serves to assemble specific data. The first section of the questionnaire is entitled “General Information” and comprises three questions that serve to gather information on teachers' academic degrees, their oral expression teaching experiences, and their attitudes towards teaching oral expression. The second section is termed “Students' Speaking Skills” and includes two questions that intend to identify teachers' attitudes towards their students' communicative skills and readiness for language production. The third section is called “Oral Expression Activities” and is related to the types of activities the teachers give to their students. The closing section is dubbed “Students' Barriers to Effective Teaching/Learning Experience” and covers two questions that aid in exploring the students' involvement, the common problems the teachers notice in their students' speech, and total time allocation for oral expression sessions.

4. Results

4.1. Analysis of the Learners' Questionnaire

The obtained results indicated that the entire learners (100%) have a positive attitude towards English and are acutely aware of its extreme importance in all the domains. According to them, their language level is acceptable and can enable them to achieve many purposes. The great majority of the learners (94%) pointed out that misunderstanding of some words, inability of finding out appropriate terms, and failure to organize ideas were among the main challenges they face when trying to tackle a topic in English. The other students (6%) responded that the constant use of translation and interference are real hurdles for them. Many students (90%) believe that their grammar and vocabulary are poor. They also revealed that they expressed feelings of anxiety, confusion, and low self-confidence. Almost all the informants (98%) mentioned that possessing strong speaking abilities can better the academic and social aspects of their life in myriad ways, because they will be capable of strengthening their grammar, hardening their listening and communication skills, and dealing successfully with various situations.

The responses demonstrated that all of the participants (100%) consider that the current time allotted to oral expression classes is scarce and has to be reinforced by other sessions. When asked about the classroom tasks they prefer to perform, 82% of the learners who participate in this study selected reading aloud, dialogues, hot debates, and storytelling; whereas, 18% of them chose conversations about real-life situations. The entire informants (100%) agreed upon the importance of taking immediate measurements to improve the situation of teaching and learning the subject of oral expression and comprehension at the University of Oran 2 Mohamed Ben Ahmed.

4.2. Analysis of the Teachers' Questionnaire

The analysis of the teachers' questionnaire shows that all of them (100%) consider speaking as a skill that allows learners to produce language, express their ideas, and communicate with people from diverse backgrounds and cultures. When asked about the importance of improving the learners' communicative skills many informants (60%) declared that it will help them become active participants in their own learning process, while the rest of them (40%) stated that being able to produce good English can help learners earn many benefits such as self-confidence, critical thinking, and speaking performance.

Regarding the type of obstacles and issues faced by the learners, almost all the teachers (80%) reported that the majority of students seem to have reached a learning plateau in vocabulary, and that this can be viewed in their use of lower-level words and expressions. The whole informants (100%) rehearsed that the uttermost number of first year students has distinct lacks in pronunciation, and grammar. The other difficulties encountered by the learners are of an affective nature as the teachers said that anxiety, fear and lack of confidence were among the noticed characteristics observed among the learners when asked to perform a task orally. All the teachers (100%) see that decision-makers, curriculum developers, and language teachers are all urged to heighten the learners' awareness about the value of oral skills and to assist them in strengthening their language capabilities.

5. Discussion of the Findings

5.1. Interpretation of the Learners' Questionnaire

The obtained data indicated that nearly the totality of the informants declared that they encounter some difficulties when trying to perform oral tasks. A considerable number of the respondents disclosed that they struggle with the pronunciation which appears to affect their confidence in practising the language. It can also be deduced that many learners fear making mistakes, and this prevents them from participating in discussions, and expressing themselves in English. It seems that the lack of vocabulary constitutes a genuine hamper that hinders them from achieving success in the English speaking classes.

The findings portrayed that the learners are not conscious of their unsatisfactory English. Their answers reflected that they are fully aware of the paramount importance of English proficiency in all the realms

generally, and their field specifically. It should be noted that the limited lexis, powerless grammar, poor pronunciation, lack of self-confidence and psychological issues are among the major difficulties confronted by first year students. The results showed that the use of the mother tongue is sometimes useful, yet its overuse is not tolerated.

From the data analysis, it can be inferred that the learners are conscious that extending conversations and practicing reading are good strategies that can help them promote their speaking, enlarge their vocabulary, and build their grammatical norms. These graduates appear to be willing to upgrade their four language skills in general and their communicative capacities in particular. They also desire to be supported psychologically to overcome their stress and nervousness when talking in English.

It is worth mentioning that the different factors cited by the students led to some reluctance and restricted opportunities for speaking. They expressed their strong need to be aided by their teachers to help them clear up the uncertainties they are experiencing when communicating in English.

5.2. Interpretation of the Teachers' Questionnaire

The teachers recognize that dealing with English effectively can offer a person the edge he/she requires to beat out the competition for promotion or an opportunity to gain a great job position. All the teachers argued that grammar is a foundational building block of a language and that they are bound to give due consideration to it in their syllabi, teaching methods and assessments. From the results, it is also clarified that there are multiple language problems faced by the learners which include the areas of phonetics, semantics, lexis, etc.

The participants disclosed that their students follow a wrong methodology of learning and that they are influenced by movies and songs which lead them to utilize a language full of mistakes in spoken and written forms. Teachers believe that learners have to be taught to take part in various forms of spoken and written discourse. It is deduced that the encountered obstacles related to language can prevent the students from comprehension and increase their confusion. They also raised the importance of considering the affective side of the learner and offering a supportive classroom climate to all EFL learners, and this confirms our hypothesis.

Instructors who took part in this research reveal that they are supportive of the changes made by their colleagues to promote the development of oral skills and are open to providing assistance to their learners. They also proclaim the necessity of involving actively all the students in the learning process and not focusing only on specific ones. Almost all teachers stated that coordination between instructors of reading comprehension and oral expression would be of great importance and will certainly provide ample support and practice opportunities for first year students. According to the informants, EFL students at the university of Oran 2 need to be monitored by their teachers who have to address their potential requirements.

6. Recommendations

Strengthening EFL learners' communicative skills seems to be taxing for both teachers and learners as it is a crucial target to meet. The following are some suggestions for successful teaching/learning experience and oral language development:

• For teachers:

- Upping teachers' awareness about the utility of developing the learners' oral skills.
- Offering a relaxed classroom climate to help students get more involved in the learning process.
- Providing students with extensive and relevant activities.
- Encouraging learners to work collaboratively.
- Increasing students' motivation by rewarding them.
- Being equipped with a sound knowledge in educational psychology to deal efficiently with the learners.

- **For students:**

- Practising English orally inside and outside the classroom.
- Developing the speaking skills through listening.
- Trying to be autonomous learners.
- Reading a lot to expand the linguistic repertoire.
- Giving more importance to phonetics to improve pronunciation.
- Focusing on the progress of the four language capacities to gain adequate language proficiency.

7. Conclusion and Future Considerations

As concluding reflections, it is important for the teachers of oral comprehension and expression to raise their learners' awareness towards the importance of capturing the lexical meaning and connotations of words as claimed by Gairns and Redman (1986; cited in Moras, 2007) who argued that understanding a word goes far beyond knowing its meaning and explained that lexical competence comprises the following constituents:

. Boundaries between conceptual meanings: knowing not only what lexis refers to, but also where the boundaries are that separate it from words of related meaning (e.g., cup, mug, bowl).

. Polysemy: distinguishing between the various meanings of a single word form with several but closely related meanings (head: of a person, of a pin, of an organization).

. Homonymy: distinguishing between the various meanings of a single word form, which has several meanings that are NOT closely related (e.g., a file: used to put papers in or a tool).

. Homophony: understanding words that have the same pronunciation but different spellings and meanings (e.g., flour, flower).

. Synonymy: distinguishing between the different shades of meaning that synonymous words have (e.g., extend, increase, expand).

. Affective meaning: distinguishing between the attitudinal and emotional factors (denotation and connotation), which depend on the speakers' attitudes or the situation. Socio-cultural associations of lexical items are another important factor.

. Style, register, dialect: being able to distinguish between different levels of formality, the effect of different contexts and topics, as well as differences in geographical variation.

. Translation: awareness of certain differences and similarities between the native and the foreign language (e.g., false cognates).

. Chunks of language: multi-word verbs, idioms, collocations, and lexical phrases.

. Grammar of vocabulary: learning the rules that enable students to build up different forms of the word or even different words from that word (e.g., sleep, slept, sleeping; able, unable, disability).

. Pronunciation: ability to recognize and reproduce items in speech.

Further, the focus should not be put only on developing the speaking capacities but on the three language skills namely listening, reading and writing to help learners enrich their linguistic repertoire, improve their productive and receptive abilities, and therefore reach advanced levels of language competence. We also recommend students to use dictionaries all the time, and to read continuously to secure well in English.

It is important to note that a bad manipulation of English is a real hint between a person and his/her educational and professional growth. Thus, faculty members, policy makers and officials have to try to boost the advancement of teaching English for university students in general and EFL learners in particular, and they are also advised to give serious consideration to the psychological side of the learners.

Consequently, equipping our students with strong language skills can drive them to success, creation and effectiveness. To this end, a further research must be carried out to explore the extent to which teachers spark sweeping changes in their teaching practices and set up a culture of ongoing self-reflection to enhance student outcomes.

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