

Speaking Challenges of Saudi EFL Learners



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ABSTRACT: This study aimed at exploring the possible underlying reasons for low speaking proficiency of EFL learners through adopting a qualitative methodology. To approach its goal, this study used a semi-structured interview to collect in-depth details from three EFL learners and one university professor. The internal construction of the interview was associated with the following four items; student, teacher, English materials or textbooks, and the assessment practices used inside classrooms. The findings of this study shed some light on multiple components related to teaching methods, teachers centered approach, students' motivation, unauthentic English materials. This study recommended further investigation using quasi-experiments to explore more what causes this low speaking performance as well as to propose some valid suggestions and recommendations to develop EFL speaking.

KEY WORDS: EFL, Speaking, Low performance, Second language acquisition, Saudi EFL, English learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning English is important in most of the countries. It is more likely that most of the educational systems around the world included English in their educational systems. Saudi Arabia is one of those countries that ensured that learning English as a second language is important for the Saudi learners to cope and effectively communicate with the rest of the world. Despite the increasing number of governmental support given to teaching English in Saudi Arabia, the second language learning is still far beyond the expectation (Akhter, 2020; Alqahtani, 2016; Alrasheedi, 2020; Younes & Albalawi, 2016). It is elicited that Saudi English learners when they assigned to take English language proficiency exams such as the one operated the ETC educational company TOEFL, or the British version IELTS, Saudi EFL learners perform poorly. More specifically, when we generally speak about English language skill, we can point out to underachieving Saudi performance in all of the four language skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing (Abker, 2020; Alshammari, 2020; Alshammari, 2021). Digging deep into the more important skills need an urgent improvement, we can shed the light on speaking. Yet, Saudi EFL learners experience increased number of speaking challenges such as those related the first language interference as well as those of difficult initial consonant clusters that were more marked universally as in the combination of lateral with voiceless bilabial stop /lp/ (Almaqrn & Alshabeb, 2017; Alrasheedi, 2020; Younes & Albalawi, 2016).

2. BACKGROUND

This section scrutinizes the studies investigated the topic of second language speaking issues, and specially those studies who aimed at exploring Saudi EFL speaking ones. This study (Alrasheedi, 2020) discussed all four core abilities of language learning must be taught with equal emphasis: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. However, it has been found that the development of speaking abilities among Saudi EFL students receives insufficient emphasis. This effort is made more difficult by the fact that English is not frequently used or spoken in their daily communications. The purpose of (Alrasheedi, 2020) study is to look at the psychological elements that influence learners' speaking abilities by: a) evaluating the tactics students use to improve their speaking abilities, b) identifying challenges students have in improving their speaking skills, and c) recommending solutions to make the learning of English speaking skills easier. The study is looking for responses to the following questions: (1) What psychological factors influence students' speaking abilities? (2) Why do students find it so difficult to communicate in English? At Majmaah University in Saudi Arabia, this study delivered a questionnaire to 200 female and male volunteers majoring in various subjects. This study (Alrasheedi, 2020) used SPSS to analyze the gathered data and present the findings in descriptive tables. Shyness, peer pressure, anxiety, and fear of making mistakes are found to be affective factors influencing students' performance in speaking skills. Other obstacles to speaking performance include a lack of sufficient vocabulary, lack of exposure to the target language, and limited opportunity to practice speaking outside of the classroom. The study adds to the body of knowledge in the field of English language learning (ELL) by focusing on the affective aspects that influence speaking performance among Arabic-speaking EFL students.

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Also, there is another study investigated speaking challenges of Saudi EFL learners, (Ali et al., 2019) examines students' perceptions of English-speaking skills in intensive programs and underlines the urgent need to improve them at all levels of higher education. A questionnaire was given to 100 students (50 males and 50 females) in the intense program from Saudi Arabia's universities of Arts, Business, and Community. The statistical software SPSS was used to do a quantitative analysis of the data. The study's findings revealed that male and female students have similar attitudes toward studying English, and that they are becoming more aware of the growing necessity of learning English. Lack of surroundings, interest, and motivation are also proven to be the most essential elements affecting pupils' speaking abilities. Furthermore, female students have a more favorable attitude toward English learning. The findings also show that the learners are unanimous in their belief that English will play a significant role in Saudi Arabia. Finally, some consequences for teachers who want to help students improve their speaking skills were discussed.

Moreover, this study (Shousha, 2021) was aimed at exploring the linguistic issues that English diploma students have and offer suggestions to help them overcome them. The information gathered through a questionnaire given to 39 female students was compared in percentages for closed-ended questions and thematically for open-ended questions. The results revealed that diploma students struggled with higher cognitive skills such as predicting meaning from context and reading between the lines when listening, speaking, and reading. Furthermore, (Shousha, 2021) indicated that the most challenging grammatical elements for them were tenses, question structures, and reported speech. These difficulties were linked to institutional, dispositional, situational, academic, and pedagogical impediments that students faced as adult learners, stemming mostly from study gaps and a lack of exposure to the English language. More varied exercises and current, fascinating reading passages, more listening and speaking practice both inside and outside the classroom, and a placement test before enrolling in the diploma program were some of the solutions.

(Khan et al., 2018) highlighted that speaking in a foreign language is regarded as a difficult part of language acquisition that necessitates competence and mastery in any foreign language. Vocabulary acquisition has been shown to play a significant influence in oral communication. However, research in which both English as a foreign language (EFL) students and teachers' perspectives are obtained to provide analyses of instances in which learners are not achieving expected results in speaking are lacking in the literature. This (Khan et al., 2018) study looks into the challenges that Saudi EFL students have when it comes to a lack of vocabulary, with a particular focus on their speaking abilities. Its goal is to get feedback from EFL teachers on the impact of a lack of vocabulary on EFL students' performance in listening and conversation classes, as well as in expressing their thoughts and feelings, and especially in speaking ability.

A questionnaire was utilized to collect responses from students, and an interview was conducted with teachers to learn about their perspectives of vocabulary as a barrier to speaking abilities. This study included 20 EFL instructors and teachers from a public university's Preparatory Year Program (PYP) division, as well as 110 EFL students. The data analysis revealed that a lack of vocabulary is one of the key problems in pupils' failure to speak English, according to both teachers and learners. The addition of mobile assisted language learning in the current study, among many other suggestions, is suggested as a good means of expanding vocabulary for Saudi EFL learners' spoken ability.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology through collecting interviews and classrooms' observations.

3.2. This research has two questions; one is primary PRQ and one is secondary research question SRQ as follow:

PRQ: What are the possible reasons that cause Saudi EFL learners to have low speaking skills

SRQ: What recommendations can be given to help improving the speaking skills of Saudi EFL learners?

3.3. Participants

There will be 10 participants recruited to collect data for this research. 4 English language teachers, 6 Saudi EFL learners

3.4. Instrument

There are two instruments; 1) interviews, and 2) classroom observations. To demonstrate the internal construction of the interviews, look at the following table:

Number of Questions	
1. Students' related issues	3
2. Teachers' related issues	2
3. Curricula related issues	2
4. Assessment related issues	2

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- 1) Do you revise your language classroom lesson in home? if yes choose (1-2-3-4-more) hours per day.
- 2) Do you like learning English?
- 3) Do you think speaking English is important?
- 4) Do you think English teachers are responsible for the poor speaking language skills of the Saudi EFL learners? How?
- 5) Do you think teacher can help improving the speaking language skills of Saudi EFL learners? Explain?
- 6) Do you think the current English curricula is difficult for students to understand? How?
- 7) Do you think we could improve speaking English curricula? How?
- 8) Do you think the current assessment practices in English classroom are valid?
- 9) How could we improve the assessment practices in order to help improving the speaking skills the Saudi EFL learners?

4. RESULTS

Interview Question No 1-) Do you revise your language classroom lesson in home? if yes choose (1-2-3-4-more) hours per day	
Participant 1	No
Participant 2	No I don't
Participant 3	NO I am not
Participant 4 (Professor)	No Absolutely not
Theme	According to responses the students none of them who revises at home and the others no while Professor said absolutely no

Interview Question No 2) Do you like learning English?	
Participant 1	Yes
Participant 2	Yes
Participant 3	Yes Absolutely
Participant 4 (Professor)	Yes. learning English is very important
Theme	All of students said yes while one of them said when I speak the English language makes me happy. The professor said learning English is very important at this time. You cannot get a job without English as well in your daily life

Interview Question No 3) Do you think speaking English is important?	
Participant 1	Yes
Participant 2	Yes
Participant 3	Yes
Participant 4 (Professor)	Yes
Theme	All the participants agreed that speaking English is very important to have get a successful future, and the professor said, the English language is almost now the mother tongue for some countries at this time.

Interview Question No 4) Do you think English teachers are responsible for the poor speaking language skills of the Saudi EFL learners? How?	
Participant 1	No
Participant 2	Yes
Participant 3	Yes
Participant 4 (Professor)	Yes
Theme	According to the responses gathered from the learners, two said no and one said yes they said that some teachers are satisfied with what they have and don't want to improve or develop their language or even the way they explain to

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	students, so we see that most is Saudi EFL students don't speak the language fluently.
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Interview Question No 5) Do you think teacher can help improving the speaking language skills of Saudi EFL learners? Explain?	
Participant 1	Yes
Participant 2	Yes
Participant 3	Yes
Participant 4 (Professor)	Surely
Theme	All the participants agreed that the teacher plays an important and big role in speaking skills while as the teacher plays an important role in guiding students in the correct pronunciation

Interview Question No 6) Do you think the current English curricula is difficult for students to understand? How?	
Participant 1	No
Participant 2	No
Participant 3	No
Participant 4 (Professor)	No
Theme	According to responses the students it's not difficult They focus on the grammar. But the focus must include listening and speaking in order to develop Saudi EFL learners

Interview Question No 7) do you think we could improve speaking English curricula? How?	
Participant 1	Yes
Participant 2	Yes
Participant 3	Yes
Participant 4 (Professor)	Surely
Theme	As we look at the responses gathered from this question, 6 the students are dissatisfied with the English language curricula, so all of them answered yes, it is possible to improve and develop the curricula. The professor said that improvement must be made, especially in listening and speaking through an increase in the materials or courses for students

Interview Question No 8) Do you think the current assessment practices in English classroom are valid?	
Participant 1	No
Participant 2	No
Participant 3	Yes
Participant 4 (Professor)	Yes
Theme	According to the responses of the students, two said no and the other said yes

Interview Question No 9) How could we improve the assessment practices in order to help improving the speaking skills the Saudi EFL learners?	
Participant 1	Yes
Participant 2	Yes

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Participant 3	Yes
Participant 4 (Professor)	Yes
Theme	Most of them said it is not right that teachers focus on the final exam and it takes up the largest space with 60 marks, and they said it is better to 40 marks for the final exam and 60 divided by attendance and participation and a mid-term exam

5. DISCUSSION

This section discusses the results retrieved from the three Saudi EFL participants as well as the one university professor. For the purpose of clarity, we divided the discussion interpretations into four primary sections based on the internal construction of the instrument used to collect data as follows: 1) discussing questions related to Students (Questions numbers 1,2,3), b) discussing questions related to language teachers (Questions numbers 4,5), c) discussing questions related to curricula (Questions numbers 6, 7), and d) 1) discussing questions related to assessment (Questions numbers 8, 9).

It is clearly, the responses gathered in answer to questions about the students highlighted some interesting points. Saudi EFL learners are less likely to review or learn English at home, preferring to focus on English subjects in class. Because they are limited to little chunks of the linguistic subject without any additional training or practice, this can suggest low educational performance. Finally, this could relate to one of the main reasons why EFL learners struggle with the English language. Even a university professor can recognize the importance of regular exposure to learn English in and out of the classroom in order to improve their language skills. This could indicate that learners who do not practice English at home are missing out on a valuable language tool that needs to be improved.

Through looking at questions two, we can find out that 75% of the participants had a positive responses regarding that they like learning English, and with a percentage of 100% regarding their perceptions toward the importance of learning English as a second language. More interestingly, the participants insured that learning English is important but they still lack the basic English language performance. This can be interpreted into two main categories: a) Saudi EFL learners prevented forcefully from improving their English performance due to some un-controllable factors. Those un-controllable factors can be associated to the socio-economic, cultural, religious, etc. along with internal factors as it is proposed by (Alkhaleefah, 2017; Elsayed & Puteh-Behak, 2017; Khan et al., 2020). All of the rest questions follow almost similar distribution of the former ones

6. CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this study, was shedding the light on the underlying reasons for low speaking performance in EFL. Those reasons were related to the learners own internal motivation. Intrinsic motivation has also been claimed in a growing body of literature to effectively expedite the process of second language learning. As a result, this study sheds some light on learners' individual abilities while also looking at a lot of external factors such as the short duration of speaking in the classroom. However, learners of EFL in Saudi Arabia may be less motivated due to a lack of time to practice speaking English in or even outside the classroom. The following are the study's recommendations; 1) increasing students' exposure time to speaking original English language materials into or out of the classroom, 2) increasing the level of actual English practice by focusing on speaking knowledge and skills, 3) enriching students' knowledge of how to master speaking strategies by the use of available technology and online sources, and 4) increasing learning a collaborative language to improve speaking skills.

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