Speaking Difficulties that Face Libyan EFL University Students

A Case study of first year students at Faculty of Arts and Science – Al Kufra

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ملخص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في الصعوبات التي تواجه طلبه السنة الأولي في قسم اللغة الانجليزية جامعة الكفرة في مهارة المحادثة. تهدف الدراسة إلي تحليل المشاكل التي يعاني منها الطلبة عند ممارسة مهارة المحادثة. تم تحديد أسباب هذه المشاكل من وجهه نضر المعلمين والطلبة.

استخدمت هذه الدراسة المنهج الوصفي التحليلي واستخدام الاستبيان لجمع البيانات التي تمثل مواقف الطلاب والمعلمين. بعد تحليل البيانات أظهرت النتائج تحليل الردود أن طلاب السنة الأولي في قسم اللغة الانجليزية جامعة الكفرة يواجهون العديد من المشاكل في ممارسة مهارة المحادثة باللغة الانجليزية لعدة أسباب منها عدم القدرة علي النطق والتواصل والطلاقة.

Abstract:

The study investigates "Speaking Difficulties that face Libyan EFL University Students." The problem of the study is represented in the difficulties that Libyan university students face during the spoken English course. The focus will be on the first year university students at the faculty of Arts and science,

English Language Department in Al Kufra. The study aims to investigate and analyze the speaking problems that Libyan university students face, and then identify the reasons for these problems from the perspective of teachers and students. The analytical descriptive method was used and the questionnaire was used to gather the data which represent both the students' and teachers' attitudes. The primary data was collected using questionnaire, and the analysis of the responses showed that first-year students face many problems in learning spoken English as a skill within their EFL degree programme at the faculty of Arts and Science – Al Kufra.

1. Introduction:

Speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving and processing information (Brown, 1994; Burns & Joyce, 1997). Its form and meaning are dependent on the context in which it occurs, including the participants themselves, their collective experiences, the physical environment, and the purposes for speaking. It is often spontaneous, open-ended, and evolving. However, speech is not always unpredictable.

Language functions (or patterns) that tend to recur in certain discourse situations (e.g., declining an invitation or requesting time off from work), can be identified and charted (Burns &Joyce, 1997). For example, when a salesperson asks "May I help you?" the expected discourse sequence includes a statement of need, response to the need, offer of appreciation, acknowledgement of the appreciation, and a leave-taking exchange. Speaking requires that learners not only know how to produce specific points of language such as grammar, pronunciation, or vocabulary *(linguistic competence)*, but also

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that they understand when, why, and in what ways to produce language *(sociolinguistic competence).*

Finally, speech has its own skills, structures, and conventions different from written language (Burns & Joyce, 1997; Carter & McCarthy, 1995; Cohen, 1996). A good speaker synthesizes this array of skills and knowledge to succeed in a given speech act.

The Statement of the Problem:

There are many reasons which can explain the speaking difficulties that face Libyan university students. Among these is the difficulty of mastering various abilities needed for developing speaking. This study investigates difficulties Libyan students face during the spoken English course at the AL kufra faculty of Arts and Science. It attempts to find out possible causes for the difficulties. The hope is that the findings made will fully give the researcher and English Department staff an in-depth understanding of speaking challenges out students face.

Research Questions:

In this research, the following questions will be addressed:

1- What are the speaking problems that face Libyan first year university students?

2- What are the causes of the Libyan students' speaking problems?

3- How can speaking skills be taught for Libyan university students?

Hypotheses of the study:

1- Speaking problems constrains learners to communicate with others when they are involved in real situation.

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2- Methods and techniques teachers used cause speaking problems

3- Speaking needs to be taught at the first time of learning a language.

Objectives of the Study:

This study aims to:

1- classify the students' speaking difficulties and their causes.

2- investigate and analyze the kinds of speaking problems that EFL students in Kufra university face.

3- identify the reasons for these problems from the perspective of teachers and students.

The Sample of the Study:

The participants of the study were four English language teachers (2 male – 2 female). Their experience is between 5-12 years and all completed four-year Bachelor program of English Language Teaching and master degree. Their age range was between 32 and 43.

The study also included 51 students enrolled at Faculty of Arts and Science. Their ages ranged between 17 and 22 years. There were sixty-three females and fifteen males in this study. Most of them are from the same study background, previous educational experience, and learning context.

Method of Data Collection:

A questionnaire was used to collect data; facts on speaking skills from students. Fifty-one students were served the questionnaire. (See appendix A). The objects on the administered questionnaire sort out answers to students' problems in the spoken English course. In effect, the purpose of the questionnaire was to:

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* find out the difficulties non-native (Libyan students) faced the prevented them from performing like native speakers; not at same proficiency level, though, .

* highlight / suggested activities for teaching speaking,

* recommend possible teaching and learning strategies that can be used to solve the identified problems.

The questionnaire was administrated on the fifth of May 2010 to the fifty-one students at English Department. Questions on the instrument was designed bearing in mind the research questions mentioned above.

Review of Related Literature:

Definition of Speaking:

Speaking is a primordial productive skill, which many language experts would agree posts as a yard stick for determining how one's competent is in English. In this respect, instructors of this skill - at higher education especially, were galvanize, dispense, and deploy their academic and professional work to ensure that, Libyan students reach the best possible level in speaking ability. In effect, the researcher not only spots existing difficulties, but also goes further to highlight possible reasons for these difficulties as well as suggests some practical solutions to students' problems. The study uses a student-centered teaching strategies, which should serve as motivational techniques to clear students' speaking huddles.

Speaking is defined by David P. Harries (1969-18) as a complex skill requiring the simultaneous use of a number of different abilities which often developed out of different rules. Most university students have problems of expressing their ideas in English accurately. With the advancement of Communicative Language Teaching in foreign language teaching the significance of speaking has been emphasized in ELT where the goal of teaching is defined as developing communicative competence of

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learners by acquiring the linguistic means to accomplish the language through several functions. The target language is taught to help learners achieve a particular purpose in daily life. The speaking ability of learners should be promoted within this view of language. However, to accomplish this aim some fundamental elements of speaking should be closely considered. By doing so, teachers enrich their students' communicative competencies in the target language.

The Speaking reasons and strategies:

A few of the infinite number possible to mankind, speaking, too is associated, one of the most common and significant people use speech for various reasons to do things with people and sometimes to people,

An employer may use it to "pat" a deserving worker on the back ; a parent through speech may "spank a naughty child, legislator may "spur" a senate to vote for a tax bill. One can list thousands of examples to prove that oral action does affect others. The proud statement of threatened child. "*Sticks and stems will break my bones, but words will never hurt me*" reflects more bravado than real assurance of safety for words can hurt. Consider the unhappy wife's plaint to her erring husband, she is not wholly accurate, for "saying" is " doing" – blow of one child against another. "*Speaking is doing*"

The method the teacher chose to teach speaking is the audio lingual methods. As a method of a foreign language teaching which is based on the oral. Oral approach this approach is based on the following assumptions.

1- Speaking and listening are the most basic language skills.
2- Each language has its own unique structure and rule system.
3- A language is learned through forming habits.

So to improve your learners speaking habits, for example give your pupils a picture … then take it over.

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What things are wrong with the discussion picture above ?

In what ways could it be improved ?

How good a discussion is depends upon … how well each person taking a part in discussions.

* Do your share of talking but not more than their share.

* Be thankful of others.

* Do not interrupt a speaker.

* If you disagree with something that has been said do so politely and give your reason.

Speaking Skills:

A- Salient Speaking Skills

When we talk of speaking skills, the following are the most salient we should thing of, teach, or learn:

- Pronunciation
- Fluency
- Liaison
- Linking

Before one addresses the problems of speaking, it is necessary to consider the general situations students' difficulties. Suspected causes of problems are many:

1) lack of an English-friendly Environment,
2) lack of motivational attitudes on the part of society toward English language learning,
3) learners' low vocabulary count and non-use of fixed expressions idiomatic expressions, proverbs, etc,
4) timidity (shyness)in using language; lack of spontaneity, and
5) little enthusiasm for traditional and technological self-study attitudes

B- Speaking Difficulties and Causes

- Grammar
- Pronunciation
- Vocabulary

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- Fluency
- Comprehensibility

C- Some Characteristics of Speech Perception:

For the average adult, there is little mystery in speech perception. It is just a matter of hearing the words in the order in which they are spoken. Aside from the times in which interfering noises are present, the whole process of speech perception seems rather effortless. One simply hears the sounds and grasps the meanings that they stand for.

The transition from sound to meaning is so seamless that we commonly hear right through the sounds directly to their meanings. The whole process is so fluid that, other than learning which sound patterns go with which meanings, it is hard to believe that learning plays much of a role in speech perception. Yet, this process of going from sound patterns to meanings, which is so easily accomplished by humans, still has not been successfully implemented on machines (Marcus 1984; Reddy 1976; Waibel 1986).

Among the impediments to successful machine recognition of speech, boundaries between successive words are not clearly marked in the speech stream (Cole and Jakimik 1980, 78), and the acoustic shapes of words are frequently affected by the nature of the words in the surrounding context.

There are moments when we do appreciate some of the complexities in speech perception that we overcame when learning to speak and understand a language. For instance, when we are with people speaking an unfamiliar language, we often realize that comprehension is difficult not only because we do not know what the words actually mean but also because it is difficult to determine what the words are. We find it hard to tell when one word begins and another one ends. Native English

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speakers typically have the impression that speakers of foreign languages talk faster than we do in English.

A major reason it is difficult to perceive boundaries between words in a foreign language has to do with the way words are typically produced, that is, with the nature of the acoustic signal that must be decoded.

D- Speaking in a foreign language:

The versatility of the term speaking in ELT2 is astounding. Since the early 1950s when the written medium lost its supremacy in the profession and speaking gained prominence (Brown and Yule 1983:2),

the notion of spoken English seems to have lost itself amidst a sea of marginally related concepts. That includes, for example, audio lingualism, whose now largely discredited Behaviourist theory of learning advocated the extensive use of techniques primarily concerned

with the teaching of oral language. That is perhaps a classic example of how "different pedagogical goals may be subsumed under the general rubric of teaching the spoken language" (Tarone1986:15). Therefore, it

should come as no surprise that developing motor perceptive skills (Bygate 1987:5) by engaging learners in repetition and pattern practice.

With the dawning of the almighty communicative era came the

recognition that there is more to teaching speaking than simply encouraging learners to produce correct grammatical forms in spoken

language. Grammatical competence had lost intellectual momentum and the early 1980s witnessed the emergence of a

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new model which acknowledged the primacy of "sociolinguistic competence" and "strategic

competence" (Canale and Swain 1980) as further subsets of the wider notion of "communicative competence", which seems to be current orthodoxy in ELT. Needless to say, for classroom activity to merit the

label "communicative", learners should be provided with opportunities to "produce extended spoken discourse" (Tarone 1986:24), thereby creating a "reasonable facsimile of communicative behaviour" in the classroom.

There are grounds for arguing, however, that creating a facsimile of communicative behaviour in class is one thing, enabling students to

produce extended spoken discourse quite another. Communicative behaviour is by no means synonymous with speaking. In real life people

communicate through a host of different channels and there is no compelling reason to dismiss writing in the language classroom, for example, as "non-communicative". Admittedly, there are certain skills

that seem to be unique to oral communication, such as turn taking, agenda management and facilitation/compensation strategies. Nevertheless, enabling learners to draw on those skills and strategies is not synonymous with teaching spoken English.

Data Analysis and Discussion:

According to the responses, 41.6% of the students face difficulty when speaking English in the classroom, whereas 11.6 % of them did not have this problem. Only 5 % percent of the respondents believed that there were no speaking problems, with 12.4% remaining undecided on the matter. One of the respondents who has a speaking problem said: "I am facing a

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problem while speaking English. Actually, I would like to speak, but after trying a few times and within a short time I resort to my first language". Ellis (2012 - 171) explains that L1 can be a tool for managing instructional tasks and learning. It also enables students to socialize with each other.

Thirty-seven (37%) of the students responded that, they were afraid of making mistakes when speaking English. It was interesting that 20.8% of the students believed that they were afraid of making mistakes when speaking English and 20.8% of them did not have any idea whether they were afraid or not. According to the discussion, the students commonly believed that they could not speak English fluently.

The students' responses gave us some reasons to think that, the students were aware of the problem. The majority of them thought that the main problem of their inability to speak English was because of their fear of a limited vocabulary in which students could not describe the expression they would like, and they gave up speaking. This was more clear with one of the students' statement: "I really want to talk with native speakers in English but when expressing my ideas I cannot find the correct word at this time – so I prefer not to talk".

The study also revealed a very surprising result: Thirty-one (31%) of the students believed their speaking problem was not related to poor pronunciation even though it was seen through the observations most of the students had trouble with pronouncing some vowels, consonants and intonation. Nearly twenty-five per cent of the students did not have any idea about whether the classroom environment was appropriate to speak the language.

Based on the findings: Forty-nine (49%) of the students claimed that their teacher did not motivate them to speak in English, whereas many educators advise teachers to encourage

learners to use the target language to interact with the students. However, the findings showed that they disagree with these results, based on their experiences with EFL learners' speaking problems. The main issue was lessons basically relied on grammar and vocabulary knowledge.

The data obtained through observation sessions provided different evidence. The teachers were not aware of this problem as the teacher asked a student to read the text; the other students were distracted with unknown words and structures of the language in the classroom. 4.2. Speaking problems of the students from teachers' perspectives Most of the teachers said that their students could not speak English fluently and they got excited while speaking. Two teachers explained that their students did not want to use the language because they were not interested in the 1878 Fatma Tokoz-Goktepe / Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 116 (2014) 1875 – 1879 topics. These students however, did not have appropriate content knowledge. Seventy-five (75%) of teacher participants also stated that most of the students were silent in the classroom because they had a lack of confidence. They were feared being embarrassment when they made mistakes.

The result of the study showed that half of the teachers were not sure about the amount of L1 use in the classroom. It has been suggested that there should be a balance in the use of L1 in the classroom but how should the teachers decide on this balance? Harmer (2007 - 133) advised EFL teachers that a balanced use the first language really depends upon some factors such as age, background of the students, context, and level of the learners. Consequently, all participant teachers seemed to share a common view that their students could not speak English and these problems were derived from limited vocabulary, anxiety, poor pronunciation, insufficient knowledge about the topic, peer

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pressure, uninteresting topics, and lack of motivation. 4.3. Possible reasons for the students' problems from perspectives of the students.

A high percentage of students (28%) claimed that the main reason of their speaking problems were that they mainly relied on their mother tongue (Turkish). They believed that they are learning English mostly with the help of Turkish and their teacher rarely speaks in English. According to their statements they would like to be fluent in the language and learn English for their daily life, whereas they were learning English in an isolated classroom environment. When looking into the course-book and syllabus of various classes, speaking has been emphasized but not sufficiently covered in the lessons. It was observed that speaking practice was done through drills and repetition of new language items in either dialogue or role play in the classroom. The interview question - 'What kind of speaking activities and exercises you have in the classroom?' proves this result clearer:

A high percentage of students (86%) replied on role play activities from the course-book. That is, they first listened to a conversation on a cassette twice, and then wrote the scripted dialogue on a paper. Next, the teacher gave them time to memorize it and finally they acted it out in front of their friends. 4.4. Possible reasons for students' problems from perspectives of the teachers. Half of the teachers thought that the students were studying English as a compulsory course which encouraged a negative attitude in learning a foreign language. The students primary and evidently only concern is getting a good mark. To illustrate, one teacher clearly indicated that the students were only interested in marks. They could not be motivated to use English because of the absence of any opportunities to practise it outside the classroom.

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According to the teachers there are some other reasons that influence students' poor oral performance in English. They believed that there are explanations concerning inadequate linguistic competency. One teacher believed that the reasons of his students' speaking problems are based on insufficient amounts of reading material in the first and second language. This led to poor speaking performance. In addition, most of the teachers (75%) stated that their students get overly excited while speaking English and fear of being laughed at in front of their friends because of mistakes in pronunciation. 4.5. Comparison of the students' and teachers' responses on possible speaking problems.

40% of students thought that having insufficient vocabulary was problematic. Their teachers agreed with them. Another agreement between students and teachers is very evident: anxiety. The students struggled with speaking English because of having a high anxiety level causes unintended problems: simple fear of using English, not being understood by their classmates and inferiority issues. This is consistently an issue with adolescents, regardless of language acquisition.

According to the teachers, the students have many opportunities to practise English in situations such as a library or on the internet but the students have mentioned that they do not have enough opportunity. The teachers participated in this study believed that the biggest problem of students was a lack of motivation and the teachers were at an impasse as to how they could resolve this basic problem. They also added other reasons for this problem; not having enough confidence, learning English as a compulsory course, and peer pressure.

sixty-five per cent of the students believed that the course-books used in the classroom had insufficient speaking activities but fifty per cent of the teachers thought there were

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enough activities. Through the observations, even was not stated by the participants was, the classroom size and teaching guides. These problems were a hindrance in speaking activities. The classes were made up of more than 35 students. This might hinder teachers to conduct group-work activities and similarly prevented them from giving feedback to each student in a brief 45-minute lesson. **Results:**

1- Speaking problems stem from inadequate vocabulary, anxiety, uninteresting topics, reliance on first language, lack of motivation, course-books and other learning materials used in the classroom.

2- There was a noticeable discrepancy between students' and teachers' perspectives on speaking English**.**

3- The speaking problem comes as a result of having low language knowledge and the methods and materials of the classroom.

4- The course-books used in the classroom at primary and secondary schools include insufficient speaking activities.

5- Libyan EFL university students were studying English as a compulsory course which encouraged a negative attitude in learning a foreign language.

Conclusion:

This study was carried out to examine speaking problems of the students that they experienced and the reasons of these problems from the perspectives of teachers and students. As a result, it has been revealed that the students had a problem with speaking English and the reasons for these problems were somewhat the same with some variation among teachers and students. Most of the students complained that, their language was limited to mechanic vocabulary and grammar structures. To summarize, speaking is the most undeveloped part of the

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language leaning. It is surely one of the important elements of communication that needs to be taken into a careful consideration by EFL teachers.

Recommendations:

1- Teachers should build a supportive climate by considering the factors stated in the finding to encourage learners to participate in classroom activities.

2- Teachers should overcome speaking problems with strategies that place students in small groups to maximize the amount of their involvement in the classroom.

3- Teaching essential vocabulary should be taken before starting the activity to help learners to produce different talks.

4- Students' real needs should be framed in the context and materials to improve their instruction.

5- Libyan EFL university students should be given as many speaking opportunities as possible to improve their speaking abilities.

6- They should be provided with a rich environment that would help them overcome their problems and improve their speaking skills.

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