Speaking Competence of Iraqi EFL Undergraduates of Garmiyan University

"Yuen Chee Keong[1], Amanj Ihsan Ali [2], Farhad Waleed Hameed[3]"
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia"
"yuenck@ukm.edu.my [1], amangeahsanali @ymail.com[2],sadpoet42@yahoo.com[3]"

Abstract

The increasing use of English as a language of communication in various fields highlights the importance in developing the speaking skills of Iraqi EFL university undergraduates. Despite years of studying the language in school and at the university, they still cannot use it proficiently. The study, therefore, aimed to investigate the difficulties Iraqi EFL undergraduates faced when communicating in English. A questionnaire distributed to 36 students and a series of interviews with 8 of the 36 students of Garmiyan University were used to collect the data which were analyzed according to three main issues; (1) the difficulties Iraqi EFL undergraduate students faced when speaking English, (2) the reasons that caused the difficulties and (3) the level of difference in ability among the students. The findings revealed that Iraqi EFL students' poor command of their ability to speak English was the main reason for their numerous linguistic difficulties and both first and fourth year students at the university had these difficulties but it was higher amongst the first years.

Keywords: speaking competence, linguistic difficulties; oral communication, Iraqi EFL undergraduates

1.0 Introduction

The growing importance of English internationally in the various sectors such as trade, business, technology, economic, academic and education makes the effective use of this language a great necessity to everyone. It is even more pressing with the globalization of English where people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds are encouraged and in dire situations compelled to communicate with each other. Interestingly, the majority of these English users are non-natives who used English as either as a second or a foreign language in different countries of the world. However, out of the four language skills of writing, reading, listening and speaking in intra-communication and intercommunication, speaking appears to be the most difficult for English as foreign language (EFL) speakers as it is considered to be a highly complex skill which is of great demand since speakers use it in their interpersonal communication (Basim, 2007).

When EFL students cannot communicate in English well, they become frustrated because learning how to speak in the language gives one a sense of superiority over one who learns to read and to write (Ya-ni, 2007). Their frustration is most probably caused by neglect in the development of their oral communication skill as the years they spend in learning English are focused entirely on

the acquisition of vocabulary and grammar. In general, some of the difficulties EFL students experienced in speaking English are: use of the mother tongue (L1) instead of English in speaking between the students in the classroom, a lack of knowledge of the vocabulary in the target language (L2) (Al-Jamal and Al-Jamal, 2013 & Al Hosni, 2014), anxiety and fear of committing mistakes while speaking English (Dil, 2009 & Al Hosni, 2014), improper listening strategies, inadequate training, limited available resources in the classrooms, large classes, and a lack of time (Basim, 2007; Ahmed, 2012 & Jamal and Al-Jamal, 2013).

1.1 Problem statement

Specifically, the majority of Iraqi EFL students lack the opportunity to use the language especially with native speakers in real life communication. English in Iraq is taught as a foreign language in schools and at the universities. In the Department of English, Faculty of Human Sciences and Sport, Garmiyan University, development of oral communication skill is widely neglected. In spite of the lengthy exposure to the teachers' pronunciation and explanation Iraqi EFL students still have difficulty in comprehending spoken English (Basim, 2007).

The teachers who taught these students in schools rarely pay attention to helping them develop their speaking ability in English as the textbooks do not have many activities promoting speaking skills among students. In addition, the textbook content is so voluminous that teachers are pressured to complete it within the school year. This daunting situation exacerbates Iraqi EFL undergraduate students' inability to speaking English. Therefore, the case of investigating the speaking skills of these students in university is all the more apparent.

1.2 Research Objectives and Questions

This study attempts to investigate the main difficulties Iraqi EFL undergraduate students faced in speaking English. In addition, it aims to reveal the reasons for the students' speaking difficulties and which group of students, year one or year four, has a better proficiency in speaking the language. Therefore, the following questions are devised;

1. What are the main difficulties Iraqi EFL undergraduate students faced when speaking in English?

2. What are the reasons for these speaking difficulties?

3. What is the level of difference in the speaking ability of the students?

2.0 Literature Review

The review examines two main areas of the field; the concept of communication and the empirical studies on speaking difficulties of EFL users in the Arab world.

Communication is defined as a social systematic process of creating symbolic meaning and responding between communicators, constructed in a specific context (Adler & Rodman, 2003). Social systematic process indicates three dimensions in a natural interaction which are communicators, meaning and context. The communicators are divided into speakers and listeners who both must be equipped with past and present stimuli that support them with information about

the worlds in order to generate meaning and turns responding to others in the communication process that occurs in various changeable contexts (Tubbs & Moss, 1994: 8).

In communication, the message intended by the speaker must be accurately received and interpreted by the listener. The sender and receiver are responsible for successful communication (Ogili, 2005) which is dependent on three main factors. Firstly, it is the characteristics of the communicator which include one's attitude towards language learning, the perception of self and of others and the level of self-expectation in language use. Secondly, it is the process of generating meaning and responding which comprised of the purpose of the interaction and the linguistic components. Thirdly, it is the context in which the interaction occurs. (Figure 1 illustrates the communication model of speakers.) The integration and interrelation among these three communication components will result in successful communication.

On empirical studies regarding English speaking skill difficulties, Basim (2007) investigated the obstacles encountered by advanced Iraqi EFL learners. The results indicate that the obstacles encountered are mainly associated with aspects of connected speech, improper listening strategies used and inadequate training. Unfortunately, this study does not provide any activity to enhance the speaking skills of the participants.

Al Mudhaffar (2012), on the other hand, conducted a situational analysis of the language needs of Iraqi employers in three oil companies in Iraq which are South Oil Company (SOC), British Petroleum (BP) and China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC). The findings revealed that there is a critical need for conversational skills among all the Iraqi employers who needed them to gain self confidence in order to be engaged in formal and informal discussions.

Meanwhile, Al-Jamal and Al-Jamal (2013) explored the EFL undergraduate students' difficulties in speaking English in Jordan. Survey questionnaires as well as semi-structured interviews were constructed. 64 students were interviewed out of 566 students who responded to a survey questionnaire. The findings of the study indicated that there is a perceived failure of EFL students' speaking skill in English. The reasons behind this failure are communication in L1, large classes, and a lack of time.

In another study, Al Hosni (2014) investigated the problems encountered by fifth grade students regarding oral skills in Oman. The findings show that the main problems are linguistic difficulties, mother tongue use and inhibition. The reasons which caused these problems are related to teachers, teaching strategies, curriculum, extracurricular activities, and assessment regulation. These findings are consistence with those of Al-Abri (2008) who also discovers that the textbooks have limited oral activities

From the above studies, it can be concluded that there is no progress in the EFL students as well as adults' ability to speak English whether in school, university or at the workplace in the Arab world.

3.0 Methodology

The data of this study were collected through both quantitative and qualitative methods. For the quantitative data, a questionnaire was designed. The items 1 to 9 of the questionnaire which

were related to speaking difficulties inside the classroom were adopted from Dina A. Al-Jamall and Ghadeer A. Al-Jamal (2013); items 10 to 11 which were about speaking difficulties and self-confidence were adopted from Gökhan Öztürk &Nurdan Gürbüz (2014), and items 12 to 18 which concern speaking difficulties and instructors were adopted from Müfit Şenel (2012). The justification of using a questionnaire to identify the main speaking difficulties among students is that it is considered the best tool to collect huge data from the students in a limited time that cannot be managed by interviews or speaking drills as the source of difficulties vary according to students, classrooms and instructors. (For the complete questionnaire, see Appendix A).

For the qualitative data, interviews were conducted. The responses, frequencies and means were analyzed to understand the respondents' opinions. The researcher considered the responses and their means as indicators of the total respondents' opinions.

Eight students were interviewed one to one; four from the first year and four from the fourth year. All the interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed. The interviews were assigned a number from 1 to 4 for the first year and 5 to 8 for the fourth year.

The responses on the interview were triangulated with the quantitative findings. Table 2 summarizes the number of respondents for the questionnaire and the interview.

Table 2: Summary of respondents on the questionnaire and the interview

Questionnaire		Interview	
First year	Fourth year	First year	Fourth year
18	18	4	4

3.1 Data Sample

The population in this study consisted of all Iraqi EFL undergraduate students in their first and fourth year of study at the Department of English, Faculty of Human Sciences and Sport at Garmiyan University. The total number of students was 18 from the first year and all 18 students in the fourth year. The sample of the study was chosen randomly in the first year as they were selected out of 32 and purposefully in the fourth year as all the 18 students were selected in order to ensure that the sample was representative. The total number of students was 36 with a percentage of 72%. Table 1 illustrates the distribution of the population sample.

Table 1: Population sample

Sample	
First year	Fourth year
18	18
36 72%	

3.2 Data Analysis

The reliability of the questionnaire was analyzed to measure the consistency of the response. Then the demographic data was analyzed to ensure the usability of the study sample. Next, the descriptive analysis (means and frequencies) was calculated to identify the main speaking difficulties and their probable reasons causing these difficulties faced by EFL Iraqi undergraduate students. Further, an ANOVA measurement was conducted to determine the significant differences between the first and fourth year students. This was followed by a content analysis on the interviews to categorize the main difficulties and their probable reasons to triangulate the quantitative analysis.

3.3 Questionnaire Reliability

Questionnaire reliability is the measurement of responses consistency (Waters, 2002) since respondents may fill random or repeated responses of questionnaire items. Thus, the questionnaire data may be considered as unreliable. Cronbach's Alpha measurement is one of the most known tests of questionnaire reliability. The coefficient alpha should be more than 0.7 to prove the reliability of the questionnaire. Table 3 shows the coefficient alpha of the questionnaire of this study to be 0.762. Therefore, the questionnaire data is considered reliable.

Table 3: Questionnaire Reliability

Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items	Number of Respondents
0.762	18	36

4.0 Findings

This section will provide the findings of the study based on two instruments; the questionnaire and interview.

Table 4 reveals that 67% of the students agreed with item number 2 (An absence of speaking courses), 70% with item number 11 (Afraid of making mistakes in English classes), 78% with item number 15 (Did not participate in any speaking and listening activities in high school and this has a negative impact in using the target language), and 72% with item number 18 (Their vocabulary knowledge is inadequate to express ideas and to argue any topic).

On the other hand, the students disagreed with items number 3 (Classes are so large that speaking cannot be demonstrated) with a percentage of 72%, item number 4 (Classes do not regularly focus on speaking) with a percentage of 63%, item number 9 (There is always a time constraint in English lessons) with a percentage of 63% and item number 12 (Our instructors do not frequently use the target language in the courses, so we prefer using our native language) with a percentage of 67%.

Meanwhile, the students were neutral with items number 1 (I am never quite sure of myself when I am speaking in English) with a mean of 2.72, item number 5 (Students are de-motivated towards speaking) with a mean of 3, item number 6 (Limited exposure to English spoken in class)

with a mean of 3, item number 7 (Using Arabic in class is excessive) with a mean of 2.52, item number 8 (Efforts repeatedly employed by EFL lecturers to teach lessening are minimal) with a mean of 3.47 , item number 10 (I am never quite sure of myself when I am speaking in English) with a mean of 2.55, item number 13 (instructors are non-native speakers, so this does not force us to speak in the target language) with a mean of 2.94, item number 14 (It is easier to express our ideas and thoughts in our native language) with a mean of 2.58, item number 16 (Course program used by ELT departments do not give us a chance to use target language) with a mean of 3.11, and item number 17 (Some courses because of their contents and the attitudes of our instructors make us not use target language orally) with a mean of 3.27.

Table 4: Descriptive Analysis

Item Number	Item	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean
1	My English conversation skill tends to be poor.	5	9	15	5	2	2.72
2	Speaking courses tend to be missing.	6	18	8	4	0	2.27
3	Classes are so large that speaking cannot be demonstrated.	3	4	3	20	6	3.61
4	Classes do not regularly focus on speaking.	4	4	5	15	8	3.52
5	Students are de-motivated towards speaking.	6	10	4	10	6	3.00
6	Limited exposure to English spoken in class.	2	14	5	12	3	3.00
7	Using Arabic in class is excessive.	5	11	17	2	1	2.52
8	Efforts repeatedly employed by EFL lecturers to teach lessons are minimal.	0	7	12	10	7	3.47
9	There is always a time constraint in English lessons.	1	6	6	19	4	3.52
10	I am never quite sure of myself when I am speaking in English.	7	11	12	3	3	2.55
11	I am afraid of making mistakes in English classes.	13	12	4	7	0	2.13
12	Our instructors do not frequently use the target language in the courses, so we prefer using our native language.	3	5	4	19	5	3.50
13	Many of our instructors are non-native speakers, so this does not force us to speak in the target language	5	8	8	14	1	2.94
14	It is easier to express our ideas and thoughts in our native language	6	15	6	6	3	2.58

15	During high school years, we could not participate in any speaking and listening activities, so this affects us in a negative way in using the target language.	9	19	7	1	0	2.00
16	Course program used by ELT departments do not give us a chance to use target language orally	6	3	10	15	2	3.11
17	Some courses because of their contents and the attitudes of our instructors make us not use the target language	1	10	8	12	5	3.27
18	Our vocabulary knowledge is not sufficient enough to express our ideas and to argue any topic	8	18	2	5	3	2.36

In terms of level of difficulty, Table 5 shows the means square of the first and fourth year students. The means of first year students was 1.8 while the means of the fourth year students was 2.45 which simply means that all students faced speaking difficulties but it was slightly higher among first year students.

Table 5: Year of Study

	Mean Square	F	Sig
First year	1.8	13.427	001
Fourth year	2.45		

After transcribing all the eight interviews, all the speaking difficulties and their reasons were written down. All the repeated answers were omitted then all the difficulties and their reasons were classified and categorized as in Table 7.

Table 7: Interview Findings (speaking difficulties and their promoting reasons)

Year	Difficulties	Reasons	Percentages
First	Self confidence	Feeling shy	40%
	Anxiety	Fear of speaking with/to the teacher	45%
	Linguistic difficulties	Lack of vocabulary Pronunciation is not correct	75%
		Difficulty in using grammar during speaking	50%
	Lack of exposure to foreign language	Teacher use mother tongue during class not practising speaking English	50%
Fourth	High anxiety	Speaking with/to lecturer	40%
	Linguistic difficulties	Lack of vocabulary Grammar problem	25%
	Lack of exposure to foreign language	Not practising speaking in daily live activities There is no speaking activity in course program	40%

The results in Table 7 revealed that the first year students faced the following speaking difficulties: lacking self-confidence because they were shy to speak, developing speaking anxiety when speaking to lecturers, lacking exposure to target language due to the use of mother tongue by teachers and lacking practice in speaking English. They also felt that vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar were the most challenging aspects for them to overcome. 75% of them thought that their speaking ability was hampered by a lack of vocabulary and pronunciation while 50% of them identified grammar to be the main reason for their linguistic problems.

However, the fourth year students faced these speaking difficulties: fear of speaking to lecturers, lack exposure to target language, not practicing speaking English on a daily basis and limited speaking activities in the textbooks. With regard to linguistic problems, 25 % of them expressed that

a lack of vocabulary and grammar problem were the main causes that lead to their speaking difficulties.

5. Discussion of Findings

According to the data analysis, the speaking difficulties are experienced at both stages; first and fourth academic years but slightly higher in the first. There are many reasons for the speaking difficulties among students ; they are (1) the students were afraid of making mistakes in English classes which curbed the students' motivation in developing their speaking skills, (2) the students missed taking speaking courses due to their weak awareness of the importance of speaking in learning activities, (3) the speaking and listening activities were insufficient to develop efficient speaking skills, (4) the provided vocabulary knowledge in English courses was inadequate for them to express their ideas and argue about any topics, and (5) in the English course, the instructors mixed English and mother tongue which minimized the strength of speaking skills. The above findings are consistent with those of Edan and Munji (2014) and Basim (2007) which indicated that speaking anxiety, low linguistic competence level, lack of speaking activities and mixing L1 with L2 in English classes are the key reasons leading to students speaking difficulties.

The findings of the interview revealed that despite the difference between the first year and fourth year students in terms of linguistic competency. While 75% of the first year students in the interview faced difficulty in vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation, only 25% of the fourth year students had difficulty in vocabulary and grammar without any difficulty in pronunciation. Although there is progress in their linguistic ability they still have difficulty in speaking because they do not practise speaking English in their daily activity and there is no speaking activity in the course program. These results do not agree with the findings of Ahmed (2012) and Al-Jamal and Al-Jamal (2013)who found that the key reason for speaking difficulty is linguistic incompetency. On the other hand, our finding shows that lack of communication between teachers and students inside the English classrooms increases the difficulty in developing the English speaking skills efficiently. This is consistent with Al Hosni's (2014) and Dil's (2009) studies who found that the poor communication between teachers and students inside English classroom reduces the learning motivation which prevents students from improving their speaking skills through interactive learning environments.

Similarly, Basim (2007) found that the training practices inside the classrooms are insufficient to motivate the students to develop their speaking skills effectively. Consequently, the students do not communicate with their teachers due to poor communication skills.

To conclude, the findings indicated that Iraqi undergraduate students benefit more by practising speaking during their daily activity rather than studying it as a course subject at the university as the university environment does not encourage students to communicate with each other or with their lecturers as no attention is paid to oral skill from the lecturers. The majority of students graduate lacking the ability to speak English fluently and accurately and they realize this problem when they attend job interviews in a company or when pursuing their higher education in a foreign country such as Iraqi postgraduate students in Malaysian universities who experienced speaking difficulty in English especially when communicating with their instructors because they are constantly anxious. This speaking anxiety resulted from a lack of self-confidence in practicing speaking English. Therefore, the best way to improve EFL undergraduates' speaking skill is by speaking English with their friends, speaking with native speakers or listening to English songs or watching English movies.

6. Conclusion

It appears that the majority of Iraqi EFL learners lack the opportunity for real life communication in English language especially with native speakers. Undergraduates and teachers of English indicate that they still find difficulty in comprehending the spoken English. There are many difficulties facing EFL Iraqi undergraduate students speaking skill as the first year students face slightly more speaking difficulty than the fourth year students. The students linguistic incompetence experience during school and first year at university is considered a reason leading to speaking difficulties among undergraduate students (Al Hosni, 2014 and Basim, 2007). The main reason for speaking difficulty is that English speaking classes in Iraq are not efficient enough to develop the English speaking skills of students (Basim, 2007; AlMudhaffar, 2012). The students' motivation is an important factor to develop the students' skills inside the classroom. There are many learning styles and strategies which can be adapted to encourage the students to communicate with the teacher efficiently (Ellis, 2002).

Acknowledgement

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Appendix A: Questionnaire

Dear participants,

   I would to seek your cooperation in completing this questionnaire for my Master thesis. My study is aimed to determine the main difficulties facing EFL Iraqi undergraduate students speaking skill. In addition, the study aims to investigate if the EFL Iraqi undergraduate students speaking skill differs according to year of study (first and fourth) and gender (male and female   in Iraq. This questionnaire gives you an opportunity to tell us your reactions about your speaking difficulties in English language. I assure you that these answers collected from this survey will be kept confidential for academic purposes only. If you need any further explanation or if you have any suggestions, please feel free to contact me at the contact details listed below.

Thank you for your co-operation and willingness to participate in completing this survey.

Personal contacts:-
Amang hassan/email: amangeahsanali@yahoo.com
My Supervisor Mr.CK /email: yuenck@ukm.my

Please, tick (X) inside the appropriate answer box.

(l=strongly agree; 2=agree; 3=neutral; 4= disagree; 5=strongly disagree)

Part one: Demographical data

1- Gender   Male   Female

2- Semester   First   Fourth

Part Two: The questionnaire

NO.	Sentences	Strongly agree	Agree	neutral	disagree	Strongly disagree
1.	My English conversation skill tends to be poor.	1	2	3	4	5
2.	Speaking courses tend to be missing.	1	2	3	4	5
3.	Classes are so large that speaking cannot be demonstrated.	1	2	3	4	5
4.	Classes don not regularly focus on speaking.	1	2	3	4	5
5.	Students are de-motivated towards speaking.	1	2	3	4	5
6.	Limited exposure to English spoken in class.	1	2	3	4	5
7.	Using Arabic in class is excessive.	1	2	3	4	5
8.	Efforts repeatedly employed by EFL lecturers to teach lessening are minimal.	1	2	3	4	5
9.	There is always a time constraint in English lessons.	1	2	3	4	5
10.	I am never quite sure of myself when I am speaking in English.	1	2	3	4	5
11	I am afraid of making mistakes in English classes. 1 2 3 4 5	1	2	3	4	5
12	Our instructors do not frequently use the target language in the courses, so we prefer using our native language.	1	2	3	4	5
13	Plenty of our instructors are non-native speakers, so this does not force us to speak in the target language	1	2	3	4	5
14	It is easier to express our ideas and thoughts in our native language	1	2	3	4	5
15	During high school years, we could not make any speaking and listening activities, so this affects us in a negative way in using the target language.	1	2	3	4	5
16	Course program used by ELT Departments do not give us a chance to use oral target language mostly	1	2	3	4	5
17	Some courses because of their contents and the attitudes of our instructors make us not to use oral target language	1	2	3	4	5
18	Our vocabulary knowledge is not sufficient enough to express our ideas and argue about any topics	1	2	3	4	5