

Investigation of Factors Influencing Speaking Performance of Saudi EFL Learners

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Abstract

Equal focus needs be placed on teaching all four basic skills of language learning: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. However, it is observed that due attention is not devoted to developing speaking skills in Saudi EFL learners; this task is especially challenging as English is not widely used or spoken in their day-to-day communication. The current study aims to investigate the psychological factors which affect learners' speaking performance by: (a) examining the strategies learners use for developing speaking skills, (b) identifying obstacles confronted by learners in developing speaking skills, and (c) suggesting ways to facilitate the acquisition of English speaking skills. The research seeks answers to these questions: (1) What are some psychological factors affecting speaking skills of students? (2) Why do learners find speaking in English so difficult? . I distributed a questionnaire among 200 female and male participants majoring in various fields at Majmaah university in Saudi Arabia. I employed SPSS to analyze the accumulated data and displayed the results in descriptive tables. The results reveal that affective factors impacting students' performance in speaking skills are shyness, peer pressure, anxiety, and fear of making mistakes. Other factors that hinder speaking performance are paucity of necessary vocabulary, lack of exposure to the target language, and scarce opportunities to practice speaking outside the classroom. The study contributes to the existing English language learning (ELL) literature through its focus on the affective factors impacting speaking performance in Arabic-speaking EFL learners.

Keywords: affective factors, language learners, motivation, speaking performance, teaching strategies

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Introduction

Teaching English as a spoken skill has always been, and remains, challenging for language instructors when it comes to their Arabic-speaking students because English is a foreign language to these learners. Instructors are faced with teaching this language to students for whom English is not used in day-to-day affairs (McArthur, 2005). To successfully teach speaking skills, teachers need to understand the factors that affect students' speaking skills. During the process of learning English, Arab students of English as a foreign language (EFL) encounter numerous challenges in this whole process; one of the significant problems they face is the non-availability of natural and interactive environments which could enable them to master the language easily (Rabab'ah, 2003). Several studies (Hamad, 2103; Al-Seghayer, 2014; Mahboob & Elyas, 2014; Alrabai, 2014; and Alrashidi & Phan, 2015) have found lack of motivation and scant skills to be major obstacles for Arab students in giving a good performance in the classroom. Indeed, Thirusanku and Yunus (2014) reported that Arab students studying in Kuala Lumpur, an international city where English is spoken widely and fluently, (~~Thirusanku & Yunus, 2014~~) acquired a higher level of proficiency as compared to their counterparts studying English in the Arab world (Thirusanku & Yunus, 2014). Thus, exposure to the target language is one of the main factors that hinder the progress in developing fluency in English language.

Research Objectives and Questions

This study examines psychological factors that affect learners' progress in developing their speaking skills. There are three main goals of this research:

- a. Scrutinize the strategies learners use for developing speaking skills.
- b. Identify obstacles confronted by learners in developing speaking skills.
- c. Suggest solutions for making it easier to acquire English speaking skills.

Thus, this research is intended to contribute to the existing literature on the subject by answering these two questions with regard to Arabic-speaking EFL learners:

1. What are some psychological factors affecting speaking skills of students?
2. Why do learners find speaking in English so difficult?

For the first research question, I hypothesized that fear of failure is one major factor. For the second research question, I expected that learners would cite the lack of opportunities to speak English in their daily life as a substantial hindrance.

Barriers to Progress in Developing Speaking Skills

Of the four foundational skills, speaking has gained much importance in language pedagogy. However, the activity of speaking is not as easy as it might seem. It needs a lot of effort. Learners encounter hindrances that are classified into five major categories, and which have internal and/or external sources : (1) insufficient exposure to the target language, (2) low motivation, (3) anxiety and lack of confidence, (4) inadequate language knowledge, and (5) ineffective teaching pedagogy. These five obstacles are discussed in turn, below.

Lack of Exposure to Language

The most significant role in language learning is often played by the learner's environment (an external factor). Once a language learner gets a comprehensive atmosphere with other speakers of the target language, they could begin to communicate more effectively in that language. Undeniably, the social milieu plays a vital part as it promotes L2 learners' enthusiasm and motivation, goals, and proficiency levels (Beebe, 1985; Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Moreover, Wong-Fillmore (1989) concluded through her research work that a conducive environment provides a learner with opportunities to learn a second language with ease. Similarly, those students who have ample chances to use the L2, especially in natural situations on a daily basis, could perform better. In contrast, in such countries where learners study English as a foreign language and do not get any chance outside of school to practice the language, face challenges in mastering and retaining the L2. It could be inferred that Arab students' minimal L2 exposure works as a barrier to language learning and makes it difficult for them to become proficient in the language (Khan, 2011; Alrashidi & Phan, 2015). This lack of competence is not limited to Arab students only, but is found in other parts of the world where students confront the same problems. According to Wang (2009), more exposure to written practice as compared to speaking practice of the L2 is a major obstacle to improving the speaking performance of Chinese students.

Lack of Motivation

Motivation is an essential factor to achieve proficiency in a second language (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). Ausubel's (1968) cognitive theory of learning posited a circular relationship between learning and motivation: "motivation can promote learning and learning can produce motivation again" (Hong & Ganapathy, 2017, p. 17). Gardner and Lambert (1972) identified two types of motivation when it comes to language learning: instrumental and integrative. Instrumental motivation is the drive to learn the L2 for some sort of material gain or advantage, such as improving one's job opportunities or an increase in salary or income; integrative motivation is when people want to learn the L2 with a view to "participating in the culture of its people" (Mahadi & Jafari, 2012, p. 232). Thus, motivation derives from both external and internal sources.

When it comes to learning another language, motivation of either type includes two important ingredients: first is the need on the part of learners to communicate and second is the way they perceive the target language (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Ideally, a learner should attempt to speak the L2 at every occasion and in every situation. This would result in the learner's appreciation for the spoken language, and thus their motivation would be increased and enhanced. Another factor is that if the learner has a positive attitude toward the target language and its speakers' culture and traditions, then a desire to learn and communicate would develop in that learner. Recent relevant studies (Ahmed 2015a, 2015b; Al Asmari, 2013; Alkaff, 2013; Al Noursi, 2013; Al samadani & Ibnian, 2015; Khan, 2011; Tanni, 2015) give credence to the concept that motivation is irreplaceably crucial if one is to master a foreign language.

Students' Anxiety and Lack of Confidence

Anxiety and (lack of) confidence are internally produced, but can be exacerbated or mitigated by external factors. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) identified "foreign language anxiety" (p. 125) as a particular form of anxiety experienced by learners. Speaking performance in the target language is affected by the student's anxiety level. Goh and Burns (2012) observed that anxiety affects learners adversely and leaves them stressful. This type of experience creates

hurdles for learners and compels them to step back from participating in speaking activities. Speakers also fear that they might be ridiculed by listeners (Horwitz et al., 1986). Therefore, they remain unprepared to take risks and thus put themselves into a troubling situation. Alhmadi (2014) likewise noted that anxiety occurs naturally when one learns speaking skills, and Asif (2017) has found that Saudi EFL learners become fearful when they speak the language. Conversely, self-esteem and self-efficacy (cognitively construed forms of self-confidence) have been shown to positively impact motivation and language skills in learners (Piran, 2014), as has attitude on the part of the learner (Ahmed, 2015a, 2015b; Al Asmari, 2013; Alkaff, 2013; Al Noursi, 2013; Al samadani & Ibnian, 2015; Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Soomro & Farooq, 2018; Tanni, 2015).

Inadequate Familiarity With English

One cannot speak articulately unless one possesses adequate knowledge of the target language, and this is an external factor. Students need a firm understanding of sound production, including phonemes and their combinations, in order to utter them correctly (Canale & Swain, 1980). Interference from L1 creates difficulties for learners to pronounce certain words. They have to learn stress, rhythm and intonation. Goh and Burns (2012) found that scant vocabulary and no grip on grammar prevent learners from expressing their thoughts accurately. To sum up, learners must put in utmost efforts to enhance vocabulary, improve phonological knowledge, and rectify their grammatical errors. Similarly, teachers need to use effectual techniques to enhance their students' language competency.

Ineffective Teaching Methodology

The teaching method is an external factor that influences learners' attitudes and motivation. If it is engaging and student-centered, it is more likely to reduce anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986), increase self-efficacy (Piran, 2014), and thus motivate students. The teacher's lesson plan and guidelines should be designed to enhance students' communication competency. This could be achieved through Communicative Language Teaching (CLT; Littlewood & William, 1981), which helps students to develop their spoken skills. In CLT, the role of the student is not only as receiver but they are active and participate energetically. The teacher has various roles to play: not only to impart knowledge, but also to help and guide students in the right direction. Unfortunately, research has shown that in Arab countries most classes continue to be teacher-centered and utilize rote learning rather than learner-centered and skills-based learning (Alhaisoni & Rahman, 2013, p. 115). It is the reason learners are not given due opportunity to practice and thus are lacking in spoken competency. Gubaily (2012), and Alhaisoni and Rahman (2013) observed that such methods employed by teachers in the Arabian peninsula were ineffective and did not foster motivation; these researchers have suggested to put into practice student-centered methods of instruction. Similarly, Fareh (2010) highlighted that a significant challenge was inadequate teaching training of EFL instructors in Arab countries. Alhaisoni and Rahman (2013) echoed this concern; they also mentioned the need to equip students with sufficient knowledge of basic skills and recommended that English teachers in the Kingdom must abandon obsolete methods of teaching such as "the lecture mode of instruction and the dictation of notes" (p. 117).

Research Methodology and Design

The method applied in this study is quantitative in nature; the survey questionnaire was distributed among 100 female and 100 male undergraduate students from various disciplines. This

questionnaire was patterned after from the one used by Soomro and Farooq (2018), adapted to the needs and requirements of the context in which this present study was conducted. Questionnaires were distributed to student–participants randomly selected from both male and female sections in Majmaah University’s College of Education. Questionnaires were apportioned to male and female students equally. Male participants returned seventy-one completely filled questionnaires, which makes a response rate of more than 70%, compared to 81 questionnaires returned from female participants: a response rate of 81%. The analysis of the data was carried out via the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and the results displayed in descriptive tables.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Cronbach’s alpha was run to measure the reliability of results in all sections of the questionnaire. The range of alpha scale for all question items in all three sections was above 0.8; thus, the reliability of the constructs is .80 (i.e., 80%) which is above than the required value, that is, 0.60 (Cronbach, 1951). Therefore, the results of this study are reliable. The survey results are displayed in Tables 1, 2, and 3 in the subsequent subsections.

Strategies to Teach Speaking Skills

Table 1

Questionnaire Section 1: Strategies to Teach Speaking Skills

Section 1: Strategies to teach speaking skills	Mean	Standard deviation
The teacher designs and uses speaking activities in the classroom.	3.35	1.566
The topical knowledge helps the students to prepare and perform the task.	3.35	1.598
During the task, the teacher encourages the students to go on with their task.	2.55	1.666
The teacher clarifies pronunciation points during the lesson to help students improving their speaking skills.	2.45	1.540
The teacher interrupts and makes corrections (like pronunciation, structure, etc.)	3.30	1.352
When a student gets stuck during the tasks, the teacher helps and guides them to continue.	3.60	1.504
The teacher listens patiently and provides feedback to individual students after the task is performed.	2.4	1.585
The teacher encourages students to speak in English during pair and group work.	3.75	1.553
The teacher conducts role play activities and uses picture description in the class to improve speaking skills of the students.	3.40	1.363

The mean value for the first two items ($M = 3.35$, $SD < 1.6$) suggest that students believe that teachers do design and use speaking activities in the classroom and that the topical knowledge (the relevance of such activities) does assist students to perform tasks (namely, speaking) in the classroom. However, learners feel that they do not get a required level of encouragement from the

teachers and teachers do not spend enough time on clarifying pronunciation points. Students also think that teachers interrupt and make corrections (like pronunciation, structure, etc.). One positive point that emerged was that students feel that they get sufficient support ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.5$) when they have found themselves stuck while performing classroom tasks. Teachers' feedback is one of the areas where students feel dissatisfied. Although teachers do not support or encourage individual students ($M = 2.55$, $SD = 1.67$) while they perform tasks, teachers are perceived to be relatively better at extending support for the pair (dyad) and group work. The participants' responses ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.36$) indicate that teachers also arrange role play activities and use picture descriptions in the class.

External and Internal factors

Table 2

Questionnaire Section 2: External and Internal Factors

Section 2: External and internal factors	Mean	Standard deviation
The students are provided ample time to perform a speaking task.	3.70	1.494
The students prepare well before performing the speaking task.	2.40	1.633
The students feel motivated and confident while performing the speaking task.	2.50	1.629
During the speaking task, other students/listeners are supportive and tolerant.	3.45	1.866
There are shy students who can't speak in the class.	3.80	1.670
Some students switch over to L1 during the speaking task.	4.05	1.572
The students practice English language outside the classroom to improve their speaking skills.	2.60	1.602
The teacher gets irritated by the mistakes made by students in speaking task and stops them.	2.70	1.772
The teacher scolds students who don't speak or speak with poor pronunciation.	2.03	1.667
The students are capable of identifying their weaknesses and strengths in speaking tasks.	2.30	1.403
The students don't have knowledge of the culture of native speakers of English.	4.20	1.255
The students make a lot of pauses or use 'ah,' 'um,' etc. in their speaking tasks.	4.15	1.533

The students construct sentences in L1 and then translate the same in English. 4.10 1.418

Valid N (listwise)

Investigating the factors (both internal and external) affecting the speaking skills of learners, the results show that students have pointed to a variety of factors that they believe do have an effect. The most important factor ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 1.255$) is that students do not have knowledge of the culture of native speakers of English. This is followed closely by another major factor ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.53$), in which learners introduce pauses or hesitation markers such as “um” or “ah” to fill their speech. A third factor ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 1.418$) is that students construct sentences in L1 and then translate the same into English. This is known as “mother tongue interference,” in which learners think in L1 before producing output in L2. A fourth salient factor ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.57$) is that students will give up on the L2 in the middle of the speaking activity and switch to L1. Students face a great deal of difficulty, as indicated by their reports that they make a lot of pauses in performing their speaking tasks. That is why learners think they are not capable ($M = 2.30$, $SD = 1.4$) of identifying their weaknesses and strengths in speaking tasks. It is worth noting that in such circumstances teachers do not scold those students who do not try to speak or who speak with poor pronunciation. Students report that they do not practice English language outside the classroom in order to improve their speaking skills. In addition, students feel shy in performing speaking tasks in the classroom. Learners also think that they do not have sufficient motivation and confidence to perform better at spoken tasks. The survey participants reported that their fellow students are supportive and tolerant when one of their classmates performs a speaking task ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.866$).

Difficulties and Needs

Table 3

Questionnaire Section 3: Difficulties and Needs

Section 3: Difficulties and needs	Mean	Standard deviation
The students like to improve their speaking skills.	3.86	.829
The students feel anxious before performing the speaking task.	4.07	.795
Pressure to perform well helps the students to perform better.	2.93	1.387
The students have got a lot of opportunities to practice their speaking skills outside the classroom.	2.71	1.274
Students cannot perform well as they are afraid of making mistakes during the task.	4.21	.556
Some students can't perform well as they forget or can't think of some ideas during the task.	4.01	.847
Competency in oral skills is necessary for securing a good job in future.	4.35	.892
The students feel difficulty in comprehending other speakers so can't respond properly.	4.28	.451

The students have got excellent grasp of vocabulary and use proper words when speaking.	2.16	1.301
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The descriptive table indicates that students report that they wish to improve their speaking skills ($M = 3.86$, $SD < 1$). However, more than half of the student-participants believe that they do not get enough opportunities to practice their speaking skills outside the classroom ($M = 2.71$, $SD = 1.274$). Other factors that inhibit learners from performing are anxiety and pressure: almost two-thirds of all respondents report that they cannot perform well as they are afraid of making mistakes during the task ($M = 4.21$, $SD = .556$) or because they forget or cannot come up with ideas during the speaking activity ($M = 4.01$, $SD = .847$). Although students realize (by strongly agreeing to the proposition) that competency in oral skills is necessary for securing a good job in future ($M = 4.35$, $SD = .892$), they cannot excel in this area as they have neither a solid stock of vocabulary nor strong knowledge about the use of appropriate and correct lexical words in speaking ($M = 2.16$, $SD = 1.3$). They also felt strongly that they have problems in comprehending other speakers, such that they were unable to provide an appropriate spoken response ($M = 4.28$, $SD = .45$). Eachers apparently play their part in designing and presenting speaking activities. However, learners report not being able to perform at a level that encourages their teachers. Many of these students realize that teachers do try their level best to devote time to and assist their students, but despite this the students report being unable to achieve the desired results.

The internal and external factors elicited by the survey items were predominantly linguistic and psychological in nature. Some sociocultural factors also surfaced in the responses, such as peer pressure, the expectation that a student must obey and not disappoint the teacher, and that students lack knowledge of the culture associated with the target language, all of which create difficulties for them to develop speaking skills. Students also reported relying more on the grammar translation approach, in which they construct sentences in L1 and then translate the same into English. Thus, a variety of internal and external factors, including shyness, peer pressure, and anxiety, affect their performance. These findings correspond with those of Soomro and Farooq (2018). The respondents reported that they were unable to give their best performance in the class due to hesitation caused by the fear that they might make mistakes in speaking. This study found that learners are prone to shyness and are fearful of making errors and confronting criticism. Moreover, the survey revealed that during speaking tasks students conversed in their mother tongue more often than in the target language. Overall, they lack exposure to the target language even in the classroom, and this is further aggravated by the environment outside the classroom, where opportunities are scarce to practice their target language in natural situations.

The current study matches findings of Soomro and Farooq (2018) that language learning happens if learners are provided with a conducive environment either inside or outside of the classroom. The results of this investigation revealed that students do not pay attention to discussion even inside the class, nor are they able to point out their own strengths and weaknesses; these factors make it really difficult to achieve target competency. The responses showed inadequate motivation on the part of learners, which is congruous with the findings of Littlewood and William (1981). It pointed out that communication skills are correlated with learners' motivation and the people around them. This study has found that students fall prey to hesitation and shyness, both of

which adversely affect their speaking capabilities. There is compatibility between these findings and those reported by Rabab'ah (2003), indicating that a broad range of factors are at play which negatively affect the speaking performance of EFL learners. Those factors include uncondusive milieu, ineffective curricula, and apathy and low motivation on the part of learners. For example, many students think that insufficient stock of vocabulary is a major cause of their incapability to communicate in English.

The survey results show that speaking in the target language in the classroom, with at least some level of accompanying structure and support, is clearly daunting to these learners. Certainly, attempting to practice this skill outside the classroom is an even more challenging task. Nevertheless, students realize that proficiency in English speaking is essential to get good jobs. They wish to master this skill. However, they are unable to develop such skills due to the multiple barriers just discussed.

Conclusion and Recommendations

As this study has highlighted, numerous and varied psychological, linguistic, and sociocultural factors impact the speaking performance of these university-level English language learners in Saudi Arabia. The influencing factors are both external and internal. The barriers students face are considerable, but there are some straightforward ways to address and mitigate these problems. On the academic research front, it is essential that more research be carried out in order to understand more precisely how different factors influence Saudi EFL learners. The second part of Soomro and Farooq's (2018) study, a survey of EFL teachers, could be carried out in universities and language institutes around the Kingdom. Such studies involving large survey populations of learners and instructors may provide valuable data to inform the work of teachers and administrators alike.

On the policy and pedagogy front, EFL instructors and college administrators in Saudi Arabia have crucial roles to play if real improvement in learners' speaking performance is to be achieved. Teachers must be trained to utilize important strategies and techniques to teach speaking skills. They must also be supported by their institutions and administrations in developing and fostering a positive, conducive learning environment and providing all necessary facilities to expose learners to the target language culture by using appropriate methodologies. English speaking must not be confined to classrooms only. Students should be motivated to speak English in every place and at every opportunity. Institutions and instructors should stress to learners the importance of practicing the L2 outside the classroom in authentic situations, and point them to possible opportunities for doing so. Learners should be spurred on to communicate in English in a variety of environments; teachers can encourage students to leverage different social media platforms and watch and listen to English-language content such as videos, podcasts, and films, so as to expand their vocabularies, improve their diction, and thus enhance their speaking skills. Colleges and universities should provide facilities such as well-stocked libraries and internet access in the lab, so that students can obtain useful information about the language. These activities would optimally be accorded classwork credit and be monitored by the instructors in order to further increase students' integrative motivation. To increase instrumental motivation, teachers ought to help students increase their awareness and understanding of the doors that mastery of speaking performance in the English language can open for them in their future careers.

With the material and moral support of their institutions and administrators, teachers need to rethink their traditional role in order to fulfil students' psychological, academic, and social needs. As discussed earlier, studies have shown the strong influence of psychological factors. Therefore, instructors should understand the individual student's type of motivation and attitude; teachers should learn simple but effective ways to boost learners' self-esteem, thus increasing their positive attitude toward the target language. Teachers ought to be cognizant that relaxation can help in overcoming speaking anxiety; hence, they must do their best to provide an anxiety-free language learning environment so that learners can overcome these psychological impediments. To this end, employing Krashen's (2002) "affective filter" hypothesis and Gardner's (2011) theory of "multiple intelligences" and "frames of mind" as strategies can be beneficial for both students and teachers. They should utilize effectual methods of teaching so that English speaking becomes interesting and engaging for students.

In agreement with Soomro and Farooq (2018), I recommend that the use of English language must be prioritized in the classroom. Students should be discouraged from conversing in the native language so that target language competency and speaking performance mastery may be achieved. Instructors must not criticize learners for their mistakes; instead, teachers ought to gently guide students to self-correct.

It is clear that teachers and administrations need to tackle students' problems on multiple levels. On an individual level, they should provide students with one-on-one guidance and motivation. For this purpose, instructors and college guidance counselors can establish fixed office hours and encourage students to make use of these opportunities for individualized attention.

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Declaration of conflicting interests

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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