

## Saudi EFL Learners' Speaking Skills: Status, Challenges, and Solutions

**Abdulbari Mahboob Ahmed Al-Hassaani**

Department of English, College of Arts, University of Bisha, Bisha, Saudi Arabia  
&

Department of English, College of Education, University of Aden, Aden, Yemen  
Corresponding Author: [barihasani9@gmail.com](mailto:barihasani9@gmail.com)

**Abdulkarim Fadhl Mahmood Qaid Al-Saalmi**

Department of English, College of Education, Saber, University of Aden, Aden, Yemen.

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### Abstract:

This study focused on Saudi female English as a foreign language (EFL) learners, second-year level, English Department, College of Arts, Bisha University. Most the learners are exposed to the English language at a late stage, which is one of the challenges they encounter. The main objective of this study was to identify the main challenges faced by the Saudi female EFL learners in English-speaking skills. Main question of this research was what are the Saudi EFL learners' main challenges in English-speaking skills in and outside the classroom? The significance of this study was to get a benefit both learners and teachers. This study contributed to finding solutions to the challenges encounter the Saudi English as a foreign language (EFL) learners in the English-speaking skills. This study used only one of the academic research methods, which was the students' questionnaire. The study concluded that the Saudi English as a foreign language (EFL) learners need enough time to practice English-speaking skills in the classroom and they should be motivated to speak English with anyone in and outside the classroom. The syllabus and teaching materials of the English-speaking skills courses need development to match the needs of the learners in their daily lives and to meet the demands of the labor market. The recommendations and solutions would help to tackle the current status and challenges in learning English-speaking skills.

**Keywords:** *Bisha University, Challenges, EFL learners, Saudi female learners, Solutions, Speaking Skills*

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## Introduction

This study was concerned Saudi EFL learners of English-speaking skills of the second-year level, female section, English Department, College of Arts, University of Bisha. Although, Saudi EFL learners learn English as a foreign language from class seven till they join the university, the Saudi EFL learners still face challenges in English-speaking skills when they try to speak English in the classroom. They lack motivation, encouragement, and enough practice. Fearing criticism for making mistakes and shyness inhibit the learners from speaking English. This factor affects the speaking fluency of Saudi EFL learners. When learners are afraid of mistakes, they are probably more hesitant, Al-Ghazali, (2019). Practicing phonological or grammatical features through a speaking performance can be self-initiated or done in pairs (Brown, 2007). Speaking English as a foreign language was much harder than speaking our mother tongue language due to its different complex rules.

## The rationale of the study

This study would help understand the challenges and factors that hinder English-speaking skills' learning and teaching process at the University of Bisha. It would also help the teachers to improve the situation in teaching the English-Speaking Skills course. The present study would also raise the awareness of the Saudi EFL learners to master the English-speaking skills at the university level. This study will contribute to identifying the challenges encountered by Saudi EFL learners. This study will benefit both the learners, the teachers, and educationists.

## Objectives of the Study

- To identify the main challenges of the Saudi English as a foreign language (EFL) learners in English-speaking skills.
- To investigate the main reasons for the learners' low English-speaking skills.
- To investigate the adequacy and appropriateness of the current syllabi and teaching materials for English-speaking skills courses at Bisha University .
- To provide some recommendations and solutions that might help both teachers and learners to improve and develop learning the English-speaking skills at Bisha University.

## Questions of the research:

- 1- What are Saudi EFL learners' main challenges in English-speaking skills in and outside the classroom?
- 2- What are the reasons for the Saudi EFL learners' low English-speaking skills?
3. How adequate and appropriate are the current syllabi and teaching materials for English-speaking Skills course at Bisha University?
4. What are the solutions and suggestions that can help the current situation to improve the Saudi EFL learner's English-speaking skills at Bisha University?

## Literature Review

The Saudi EFL learners encounter challenges in English-speaking skills at the University of Bisha. For English as a foreign language (EFL) learners, speaking English is a crucial skill since it is essential for communicating verbally with others. Poor environments, lack of interest, and

lack of motivation are the primary factors behind learners' inability to speak English (Alhmadi, 2014; Ali, et al. 2019). Therefore, English-speaking skills need a good background.

Dewi, (2015) stated that English is used in every corner of the world to communicate with people from different backgrounds, ethnicities, and cultures. Al Hosni, (2014) indicated that anxiety and unwillingness to participate in speaking skills lessons are the main barriers to practical English-speaking skills learning. Teachers of English at University should focus on speaking skills such as fluency and accuracy because learners should be accurate and fluent in learning English speaking skill. The English language teaching objectives are to improve the learners' comprehensive ability, especially oral expression, and motivate EFL learners to have adequate opportunities to use the foreign language fluently, Al-Tamimi, (2014). Saudi EFL learners are exposed to the English language at a late stage. English-speaking skills are considered one of the most challenging aspects of EFL learners in the Arab world. Many Saudi EFL learners found it difficult to speak English fluently. Classroom activities such as storytelling, speeches, and debates could alleviate the problem of poor oral skills. Saudi EFL Learners can practice English-speaking skills in the classroom using the learner-centered approach rather than a teacher-centered approach where they feel free to discuss and correct each other (Gathumbi & Masembe, 2005; Larasati, 2018; Bin-Hady, 2020). Saudi EFL learners will need the teacher's feedback while practicing English-speaking skills in the classroom.

The researchers, as university teachers, realized that motivation and practice are the most critical factors to improve the Saudi EFL learners in English-speaking skills. If the learners of English are well-motivated to practice different real-life situations in English-speaking skills, this way will improve their level of English-speaking skills. Motivation and practice are two sides of the same coin. Al-Hosni, (2014) observed that some learners are not motivated to communicate in English as they do not see a need to learn or speak English. Therefore, English language teachers should explain the significance of studying English-speaking skills to their learners.

English-speaking skill is an essential part of communicating with others for social interaction and other communication purposes. The need for good communication skills in English has grown worldwide, according to Richard, (2006). Ability to speak English is one of the essential skills in English due to its superior status. Thus, English teachers must prioritize English-speaking skills in the classroom. Therefore, teachers should adopt a communicative approach when teaching English-speaking skills in the classroom. English-speaking skills are vital for the Saudi EFL learners in and outside the classroom. In the communicative approach, language is essentially an instrument of communication. Brown, (2007) indicated that communicative language teaching is an approach to language teaching methodology that emphasizes authenticity, interaction, student-centered learning, task-based activities, and communication for the real world. Practical speaking skills create many benefits for communicating in both the targeted and mother tongue languages. The EFL learners had the experience of their mother tongue language. When they study English, they find many differences between the two languages. Therefore, they try consciously to learn the English language (Al-Sobhi & Preece, 2018; Al-Ahdal, 2014).

### **Communicative Language Teaching Materials and Syllabus**

Teaching materials intended to facilitate communicative language usage in communicative instructional systems. This teaching strategy will assist teachers and improve Saudi students' proficiency in interacting with others in English. According to Richards and Rodgers, (1986), three

materials are used: 1) Text-based materials. 2) Task-based. 3) Realia. Teachers of English speaking-speaking skills at the University of Bisha should provide a variety of authentic and communicative materials for teaching English-speaking skills to improve the level of their learners. The current English courses should focus on communicative English to meet learners' needs and achieve the desired teaching objectives of English-speaking skills.

### Methods

This study used only one instrument/tool of the scientific research methods to gather data and information which was quantitative research method (Students' questionnaire). Collecting of data by using questionnaire has many advantages, according to Sarantakos, (1998). Few of these advantages are:

- Questionnaires produce quick results.
- They give greater assurance of anonymity.
- They also provide a more comprehensive look at the responses because researchers can reach respondents more rapidly than other research methods.

### Participants

Participants in this study were female students from the English Department, second-year level, College of Arts, University of Bisha in Saudi Arabia. The total number of respondents was 50, and all were female.

### Research Design

The researchers designed a questionnaire for the Saudi EFL female learners at the College of Arts, University of Bisha. Teachers specialized in ELT in the English Departments referred to the questionnaire before administering the tool to ensure validity. The questionnaire was distributed to the participants of this study during class time.

### Results of the Study

The research tool used in this study was a quantitative scientific research method (students' questionnaire) for collecting data and information. The questionnaire was classified into three parts; the first part of the questionnaire was about general background knowledge of the learners and learners' main challenges in English-speaking skills, the second part of the questionnaire was about the reasons behind the Saudi EFL learners' challenges in English-speaking skills and learners' motivation to learn English. The third part of the questionnaire was about the exposure of the learners to the English language and the learners' opinion about the appropriateness of the syllabus and teaching materials for the English-speaking skills courses at Bisha University.

Table 1. *Sex of the Learners*

Status	Responses	
	Frequency	Percentage
Female	50	100
Male	0	0
Total	50	100

The above table shows the sex of the respondents who participated in this study. Fifty of the learners, 100% from the College of Arts at Bisha, were female. Statistical data indicated that all the participants of this study were female.

Table 2. *Learners Began Learning English in Schools*

Status	Responses	
	Frequency	Percentage
Class		
One	0	0%
Two	2	4%
Three	3	6%
Four	3	6%
Five	2	4%
Six	0	0%
Seven	40	80%
Total	50	100%

This item asked the participants when they began to learn English in schools. Two of the learners, 4%, answered they started learning English in class two, and no one opted for class one. Three of the learners, 6%, began to study English in class three, and three of the learners, 6%, began to learn English in class three. Two of the learners, 4%, began to learn English in class five, and forty of the learners, 80%, began to study English in class seven. The above table indicated that most of the learners in Saudi schools started to learn English at a late age, making it difficult to quickly handle courses in English in their College of Arts, Department of English, Bisha University.

Table 3. *Saudi Learners faced challenges in English-speaking skills*

Status	Responses	
	Frequency	Percentage
a. Yes	42	84
b. No	5	10
c. No response	3	6
Total	50	100

This item asked the learners if they faced challenges in English-speaking skills. Forty-two of the learners, 84%, replied with yes, and only five of the learners, 10%, said they didn't find any problem with English-speaking skills. Three of the learners, 6%, didn't respond. The statistical data implied that most learners still face English-speaking skills problems due to their weak background knowledge of English.

Table 4. *When the learners speak English in and outside the classroom*

When learners feel afraid and anxious to make mistakes in speaking English		
Status	Responses	
	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	26	52
Agree	14	28
No opinion	4	8
Disagree	4	8
Strongly disagree	2	4

Total	50	100
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The learners were asked if they feel afraid and anxious about making mistakes when speaking English in and outside the classroom. Twenty-six of the learners, 52%, strongly agreed that they felt frightened and anxious when speaking English, and fourteen of them, 28%, agreed. Four of the learners, 8%, didn't respond, and four, 8%, disagreed. Only two of the learners, 4%, disagreed on this item strongly. It indicated that there is no encouragement for the learners from the teachers' side to practice English-speaking skills in simple different situations, whatever mistakes they can make.

Table 5. *The practice of the learners in English-speaking skills classes*

Status	Responses	
	Frequency	Percentage
a. Yes	10	20
b. No	35	70
c. No response	5	10
Total	50	100

We asked the learners if their teachers give them enough practice and exercises in English-speaking skills in the classroom. Five of the learners, 10%, replied yes, and forty of them, 80 %, answered no. Only ten of the learners, 20%, answered yes, and thirty-five of the learners, 70%, replied no. Only five of the learners, 10%, didn't respond. These responses implied that most learners didn't practice enough in English-speaking skills classes. Teachers should control the class time for the sake of the learners to improve their English-speaking skills practice.

Table 6. *The Motivation of the Learners to Speak English*

Status	Responses	
	Frequency	Percentage
a. Yes	10	20
b. No	35	70
c. No response	5	10
Total	50	100

The learners were asked if their teachers motivate and encourage them to speak English in the classroom and anywhere. Ten of the participants, 20%, said yes, and thirty-five of them, 70%, said no. Only five of the learners, 10%, did not reply. It implied that students were sometimes motivated by English-speaking skills teachers. Inspiration and encouragement will allow the learners to break the wall of anxiety and fright.

Table 7. *The Class Time Allotted in practicing English-speaking Skills.*

Status	Responses	
	Frequency	Percentage
a. Enough	5	10
b. Not enough	36	72
c. Neutral	3	6
d. Rather enough	6	12
Total	50	100



In this item, the learners were asked their opinion about the sufficiency of the class time allotted in practicing English-speaking skills. Five of the learners, 10%, said that the class time allotted for practicing English-speaking skill was enough, but thirty-six of them, 72%, said it was not enough. Three of the learners, 6%, were neutral and six of them, 12%, said it was enough. This implied that the class time was insufficient for practicing English-speaking skills because most learners negatively replied. It also meant that the teachers rushed in their teaching the lessons according to the week's study plan because they wanted to finish the syllabus of the course English-speaking skills without giving the learners enough practice in English-speaking skills.

Table 8. *The Teaching Methodology Employed by the Teacher*

The teaching methodology in English-speaking skills was learner-centered.

Status	Responses	
	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	2	4
Agree	3	6
No opinion	5	10
Disagree	15	30
Strongly disagree	25	50
Total	50	100

In this item, the learners asked if the teaching methodology employed by the teacher of English-speaking skills were learner-centered. Only two of the learners, 4%, strongly agreed that the teaching method was learner-centered, and three of them, 6%, agreed that the teaching method was learner-centered. Five of the learners, 10%, remained with no opinion, fifteen of the learners, 30%, disagreed that the teaching method employed by the teacher was learner-centered, and twenty-five of them, 50%, strongly disagreed that the teaching method used in teaching the English-speaking skills was learner-centered. These responses implied that the teaching methodology employed by the teacher of the English-speaking skills course was not learner-centered, but it was teacher-centered.

Table 9. *Learners' Opinion About the Topics for the English-speaking Skills*

The Topics in the Syllabus are Appropriate in English-speaking Skills Course.

Status	Responses	
	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	15	30
Agree	15	30
No opinion	2	4
Disagree	10	20
Strongly disagree	8	16
Total	50	100

In this item, learners were asked about the appropriateness of the topics included in English-speaking skills syllabus. Fifteen of the learners, 30%, strongly agreed that the issues were appropriate, and another fifteen of them, 30%, decided that issues were appropriate. Two of the

learners, 4%, didn't answer. In contrast, ten of them, 20%, disagreed that the topics in the syllabus of this course were appropriate, and eight of them, 16%, strongly disagreed that issues were appropriate. These responses implied that the topics were rather good and needed some additions and changes for development.

Table 10. *Learners' opinion About the Materials in Teaching English-speaking Skills*

Status	Responses	
	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	18	36
Agree	13	26
No opinion	4	8
Disagree	8	16
Strongly disagree	7	14
Total	50	100

The learners were asked if the materials in teaching the English-speaking skills course were challenging. Eighteen of the learners, 36%, strongly agreed that the available materials were challenging, and thirteen of them, 26%, agreed that the available materials were challenging. Four of the learners, 8%, didn't give their opinion, while eight of the learners, 16%, disagreed that the available materials were challenging, and seven of them, 14%, strongly disagreed that the available materials were challenging. This statistical data revealed that most learners replied that the available materials in teaching English-speaking skills were challenging.

Table 11. *The Motivating and Communicative Teaching Materials*

Status	Responses	
	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	9	18
Agree	8	16
No opinion	2	4
Disagree	16	32
Strongly disagree	15	30
Total	50	100

In this item, the learners were asked about their opinions, and if the teaching materials in teaching English-speaking skills were motivating and communicative. Nine of the learners, 18%, strongly agreed that the teaching materials in teaching English-speaking skills were motivating and communicative. Eight of the learners, 16%, decided that issues were motivating and communicative. In contrast, two of them, 4%, did not answer. Sixteen of the learners, 32%, disagreed that the teaching materials in teaching English-speaking skills were motivating and communicative.

Fifteen of the learners, 30%, strongly disagreed that the teaching materials in teaching English-speaking skills were motivating and communicative. This statistical data indicated that most of the learners didn't agree that the teaching materials in teaching English-speaking skills were motivating and communicative. This implied that the teaching materials of teaching English-speaking skills need supplementary materials to go with the needs of the Saudi EFL learners.



### Findings of the Study

1. The statistical data showed that most of the learners started to study English from class seven of their schooling, i.e., at a late stage before joining the university. It affected their level of English-speaking skills.
2. The Saudi female EFL learners at their second-year level encountered challenges in studying English-speaking skills because of their limited background knowledge in English.
3. Most of the teaching classes of English-speaking skills were teacher-centered rather than student-centered. Besides, the class time allotted for teaching English-speaking skills was not enough to give the Saudi EFL learners the chance to communicate in English. And to improve their level of English-speaking skills.
4. Some of the current syllabus topics and teaching materials were not appropriate to meet the needs of the EFL learners and match their needs in their daily lives in the labor market.
5. The absence of enough practice, motivation, and encouragement to the learners of English-speaking skills from the teachers' side made the Saudi EFL learners feel anxious and afraid of making mistakes when they tried to speak English in and outside the classroom.

### Conclusion

The researchers, as university teachers, recognized that the Saudi EFL learners need to have enough time to practice English-speaking skills in different status of real-life situations in and outside the classroom. The English-speaking skills should teach Saudi female EFL learners using a communicative language approach (CLT). Using communicative authentic teaching materials to teach English-speaking skills will benefit Saudi EFL learners who have positive attitudes toward studying English skills. Thus, teachers of English-speaking skills should change their teaching method from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered approach in teaching English-speaking skills at the University of Bisha. The teaching materials and syllabus topics on English-speaking skills should be motivating, communicative, authentic, and interactive. The solutions mentioned above tackle the current challenges in teaching and learning English-speaking skills encountered by Saudi female EFL learners in the College of Arts, English Department, Bisha University.

### Recommendations and Solutions

1. Teaching English should be taught at early stages in Saudi schools. Learning English at the beginning of their primary education will enable them to speak it as early as possible.
2. The Saudi EFL learners of English-speaking skills should be motivated and encouraged positively.
3. Enough class time should be allotted for the learners of English-speaking skills to better practice the English language in the classroom.
4. Teaching English-speaking skills should be a student-centered approach in the classroom rather than a teacher-centered approach. The student-centered approach will give the Saudi EFL learners a positive attitude towards learning English-speaking skills and understanding its strategies. On the other hand, this approach will enable Saudi female EFL learners to break the wall of anxiety and fear of making mistakes when speaking and communicating in English.
5. The teachers of English-speaking skills courses should develop the teaching materials to reach the level of realistic situations, authentic materials, and communicative topics in teaching English-speaking skills at Bisha University.

### About the Authors

**Dr. Abdulbari Mahboob Ahmed Al-Hassaani** is a Ph.D. holder. He graduated from India, in 2009. He is an assistant professor of applied linguistics, English Department, Aden University. He is currently teaching at English Department, College of Arts, University of Bisha, Saudi Arabia. DOI: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0017-4436>

**Dr. Abdulkarim Fadhl Mahmood Al-saalmi** is a PhD holder, graduated from India, in 2008. He is an assistant professor in methods of teaching, English Department, Aden University. He is currently working at Aden University. He is also a vice dean for the academic affairs, Community college in Yemen. DOI: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4204-7176>

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