



Teaching Speaking Skills among EFL Students at the University of Benghazi – Al-Abyar Branch

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1. Introduction

The development of speaking skills represents a central objective in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, particularly within higher education contexts where communicative competence is essential for academic success and professional engagement. Speaking is not merely the production of language; rather, it involves the dynamic integration of grammatical knowledge, lexical resources, pronunciation accuracy, and discourse management within real-time interaction (Harmer, 2001). Despite its importance, speaking remains one of the most challenging skills for EFL learners, especially in contexts where exposure to authentic language use is limited.

Within the Libyan educational system, English language instruction has historically emphasized grammar, reading, and translation. This tradition has contributed to the development of receptive knowledge; however, it has not adequately supported the development of productive skills, particularly speaking. At the University of Benghazi – Al-Abyar Branch, many students demonstrate a noticeable gap between their knowledge of English and their ability to use the language effectively in spoken communication. This gap raises concerns regarding the effectiveness of current teaching practices and the extent to which they align with contemporary approaches to language instruction.

Several contextual factors contribute to this issue. Limited exposure to English outside the classroom restricts opportunities for meaningful practice, while large class sizes reduce the likelihood of individual participation. In addition, teacher-centered instructional approaches continue to dominate many classrooms, where the focus remains on content delivery rather than student interaction. These conditions create an environment in which learners become passive recipients of knowledge rather than active participants in communication.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has been widely promoted as an effective approach to address such challenges. CLT emphasizes the use of language for meaningful communication and encourages interaction through tasks such as discussions, role plays, and collaborative activities (Richards, 2008). However, the implementation of CLT in the Libyan context has often been partial or inconsistent, limiting its potential impact on students' speaking development.

This study seeks to investigate the current state of speaking instruction at the University of Benghazi – Al-Abyar Branch by exploring students' experiences, challenges, and perceptions.

Through qualitative inquiry, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the factors influencing speaking development and to identify pedagogical practices that can enhance oral proficiency among Libyan EFL learners.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction to the Literature Review

The development of speaking skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts has attracted significant attention in applied linguistics due to its complexity and central role in communication. Speaking is not merely a linguistic skill; it involves cognitive processing, sociocultural awareness, and psychological readiness. This section critically reviews theoretical and empirical studies related to speaking instruction, with particular emphasis on communicative approaches, classroom practices, and contextual challenges relevant to Libyan higher education.

2.2 The Nature of Speaking in EFL Learning

Speaking is widely regarded as one of the most demanding language skills because it requires the simultaneous coordination of multiple linguistic and cognitive processes. According to Thornbury (2005), speaking involves the ability to produce language spontaneously while maintaining accuracy, fluency, and coherence. Unlike writing, which allows time for planning and revision, speaking occurs in real time, placing considerable pressure on learners.

Brown (2007) argues that speaking integrates several sub-skills, including pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and discourse management. These elements must operate together efficiently for successful communication. This complexity often leads to uneven development, where learners may possess grammatical knowledge but lack the ability to use it effectively in speech.

In EFL contexts, this gap becomes more pronounced due to limited exposure to authentic communication. Learners often rely on classroom input, which may not provide sufficient opportunities for spontaneous interaction. As a result, speaking proficiency develops slowly and remains limited.

2.3 Fluency and Accuracy in Speaking

One of the central debates in language teaching concerns the balance between fluency and accuracy. Fluency refers to the ability to communicate ideas smoothly and without hesitation, while accuracy involves the correct use of linguistic forms.

Skehan (1998) emphasizes that focusing exclusively on fluency may lead to fossilization of errors, whereas excessive focus on accuracy can hinder communication. Effective instruction requires a balanced approach that allows learners to develop both dimensions simultaneously.

In many traditional EFL classrooms, accuracy is prioritized through grammar-focused instruction. While this approach may improve knowledge of rules, it does not necessarily translate into communicative ability. Conversely, purely communicative approaches may improve fluency but fail to address persistent errors. This tension highlights the need for integrated instructional models.

2.4 Psychological Factors Affecting Speaking Performance

Psychological variables play a crucial role in shaping learners' speaking performance. Anxiety, lack of confidence, and fear of negative evaluation are among the most frequently reported barriers.

Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) introduced the concept of Foreign Language Anxiety, describing it as a situation-specific form of anxiety that affects language learning. This anxiety often manifests during speaking tasks, where learners feel exposed and vulnerable.

MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) further argue that anxiety negatively impacts both the quantity and quality of language production. Learners who experience high levels of anxiety tend to avoid participation, resulting in fewer opportunities for practice.

Confidence, on the other hand, has been shown to facilitate speaking development. Learners who feel comfortable in the classroom environment are more likely to take risks and engage in communication. This highlights the importance of creating supportive learning environments that reduce fear and encourage participation.

2.5 Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Communicative Language Teaching represents a paradigm shift in language education, emphasizing the use of language for meaningful communication rather than the mere study of grammatical forms. The theoretical foundation of CLT can be traced to Hymes' (1972) concept of communicative competence, which extends beyond grammatical knowledge to include sociolinguistic and pragmatic abilities.

Canale and Swain (1980) further developed this concept by identifying four components of communicative competence: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. These components collectively define the ability to use language effectively in real-life situations.

CLT operationalizes these principles through interactive classroom practices, such as pair work, group discussions, and task-based activities. Richards and Rodgers (2014) note that CLT shifts the focus from teacher-centered instruction to learner-centered interaction, allowing students to actively construct knowledge.

Empirical studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of CLT in improving speaking skills. For instance, Savignon (1976) found that learners exposed to communicative activities showed significant improvement in fluency and confidence. However, the success of CLT depends heavily on contextual factors, including teacher expertise and classroom conditions.

2.6 Teaching Strategies for Speaking Development

Effective speaking instruction requires the use of varied and purposeful strategies that promote interaction and engagement.

2.6.1 Role Play and Simulation

Role play allows learners to practice language in simulated real-life situations. This technique encourages creativity and reduces anxiety by shifting focus away from accuracy toward communication (Harmer, 2001).

2.6.2 Group Discussion

Group discussions facilitate the exchange of ideas and promote collaborative learning. They provide opportunities for extended speech and help learners develop discourse

2.6.3 Pair Work

Pair work is particularly effective in large classes, as it maximizes participation. It also creates a less intimidating environment, allowing shy learners to practice speaking.

2.6.4 Presentations

Oral presentations develop learners' ability to organize ideas and speak in a structured manner. They also enhance confidence and public speaking skills.

These strategies align with communicative principles and have been widely recommended in the literature.

2.7 Challenges in Teaching Speaking in EFL Contexts

Despite the availability of effective strategies, several challenges persist:

- **Limited vocabulary** restricts expression
- **Pronunciation difficulties** affect intelligibility
- **Lack of practice opportunities** slows development
- **Teacher-centered instruction** limits interaction
- **Large class sizes** reduce participation

Ur (2012) notes that these challenges are particularly pronounced in contexts where English is not used outside the classroom. In such environments, learners rely heavily on teachers for input and practice.

2.8 Speaking Instruction in the Libyan Context

The Libyan EFL context presents a unique combination of challenges. Traditional teaching methods, influenced by the Grammar-Translation approach, continue to shape classroom

practices. These methods emphasize memorization and written accuracy, often at the expense of communicative competence.

Research indicates that Libyan students frequently demonstrate passive learning behavior, with limited engagement in classroom interaction. This is partly due to cultural factors that discourage public error and emphasize teacher authority.

In addition, structural constraints such as large class sizes and limited resources further complicate the implementation of communicative approaches. Teachers may find it difficult to manage interactive activities or provide individualized feedback.

These factors collectively contribute to the persistent gap between theoretical knowledge and practical speaking ability among Libyan EFL learners.

2.9 Research Gap

Although extensive research has been conducted on speaking instruction and communicative approaches, several gaps remain:

1. Limited qualitative studies exploring students' lived experiences in Libyan universities
2. Insufficient focus on speaking skills compared to other language skills
3. Lack of context-specific research addressing local challenges

This study addresses these gaps by examining students' perceptions and experiences in learning speaking at the University of Benghazi – Al-Abyar Branch.

2.10 Conclusion of the Literature Review

The literature highlights the complexity of speaking as a language skill and underscores the importance of communicative approaches in its development. While CLT provides a strong theoretical framework, its effectiveness depends on contextual adaptation and implementation.

The Libyan context presents specific challenges that require targeted pedagogical solutions. Understanding students' perspectives is essential for designing effective instructional practices that promote speaking development.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, which allows for an in-depth exploration of students' experiences and perceptions. Qualitative methods are particularly suitable for investigating complex phenomena such as language learning, where subjective experiences play a significant role.

3.2 Participants

The study involved ten undergraduate students enrolled in the English Department at the University of Benghazi – Al-Abyar Branch. Participants were selected to represent a range of proficiency levels and backgrounds.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which provided flexibility while ensuring consistency across participants. The interview questions focused on:

- students' confidence in speaking
- perceived difficulties
- preferred teaching methods
- classroom experiences

Each interview lasted approximately 15–20 minutes and was recorded for accuracy.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. This process involved:

1. Transcribing the interviews
2. Coding the data
3. Identifying recurring themes
4. Interpreting the findings

This approach allowed for the identification of patterns and relationships within the data.

4. Results

The analysis revealed several key themes that reflect students' experiences in learning speaking skills.

4.1 Lack of Confidence

The majority of participants reported low confidence when speaking English. Hesitation, nervousness, and fear of making mistakes were commonly expressed.

4.2 Limited Vocabulary

Participants indicated that insufficient vocabulary restricted their ability to express ideas effectively. This limitation often resulted in incomplete or simplified responses.

4.3 Fear of Errors

Fear of making grammatical or pronunciation errors emerged as a significant barrier to participation. Many students preferred silence over the risk of making mistakes.

4.4 Preference for Interactive Activities

Students expressed a strong preference for interactive learning methods, including group discussions and role play. These activities were perceived as more engaging and less stressful.

4.5 Teaching Practices

Several participants noted that classroom instruction remained largely teacher-centered, with limited opportunities for speaking practice.

4.6 Importance of Practice

All participants emphasized the importance of regular practice in developing speaking skills.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Discussion

The findings highlight the complex interplay between linguistic and psychological factors in speaking development. The prevalence of anxiety and low confidence confirms that emotional variables play a critical role in language learning.

The preference for interactive activities supports the effectiveness of communicative approaches. When learners are actively engaged in communication, they are more likely to develop fluency and confidence.

However, the persistence of traditional teaching methods indicates a gap between pedagogical theory and classroom practice. Although CLT is widely recognized as an effective approach, its implementation remains limited in the Libyan context.

5.2 Conclusion

The study demonstrates that speaking skills among Libyan EFL students remain underdeveloped due to a combination of instructional and contextual factors. Improving speaking proficiency requires a shift toward more interactive and student-centered teaching practices.

5.3 Recommendations

- greater use of communicative activities
- increased opportunities for speaking practice
- supportive classroom environment
- emphasis on vocabulary development
- professional development for teachers

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