

The Reasons behind the Weakness of Speaking English among English Department's Students at Najran University

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Abstract

This study intended to explore the reasons behind the weakness of speaking among the English Department's students at Najran University. It also explored the impact of gender on the perception of the study sample. For the purpose of this study, two research questions were provided and discussed. The participants of this study were (N=59) students at English Department of colleges of Science and Arts (Sharurah) of Najran University for the academic year 2017-2018. Among the participants, there was (N=29) female students and (N=30) male students. This study is a quantitative study. The data for this study was collected through a questionnaire. The findings of this study revealed that the teaching and learning environment weakness, then the weakness of the students themselves were the main themes discovered by the sample. They also revealed that gender difference did not play a significant impact on the opinions toward the reasons behind the weakness of speaking English among English Department's students at Najran University. The implementation of this study may help the instructors to resolve the problem and may find some strategies to help them.

Keywords: Speaking, weakness of speaking, English students, Najran University.

1. Introduction:

Language plays an important role in human life as it is one of the necessities of social life and it is individuals' means to express their needs. At present, English occupies an important status as one of the most widespread languages in the world, and one of the main ways of human communication. Hence, the learning of English has become increasingly important and popular in Saudi Arabia. As a result, it has been given great significance in institutions, schools, universities, and colleges.

Speaking is a crucial skill in second language learning and teaching. It is the means through which students can communicate with others to express their ideas, opinions, information, and hopes or to attain certain goals. When speaking English, many English students face difficulties. Alonso (2018) has stated that the focus on speaking skill in a second language is inherently challenging, as it concerns one of the skills within second language data that is most difficult to capture. Compared to receptive skills, but also compared to written production, it is possibly the most difficult skill to teach, the most difficult skill to assess and the most difficult skill to investigate". (105)

Arab learners of English which encounter major problems in speaking. This problem has been discussed by many researchers such as Akasha (2013); Kardwish (2016); Alnakhalah (2016); Al-SobhiPreece (2018). It has reported that Saudi EFL learners face many difficulties from many angles in practicing speaking skill. The first difficulty refers to the instructors who deal with the learners, and some other refers to the psychological factors which affect the learners when they are speaking, and others refer to the environment and others to learners themselves as the researchers have found some learners afraid to make mistake during speaking process and others feel shy. Speaking as a productive language skill is a crucial element in learning a foreign language context.

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However, the researcher noticed during her career and teaching the course of Learning and Teaching Strategies and other courses at the College of Science and Arts in Sharurah that the students face problems in expressing their ideas effectively. In most cases, and when they want to participate, they use Arabic in English classes. This issue is also recognized by the researcher's colleagues. Nevertheless, the real reason for this problem hasn't been scientifically identified since the establishment of the department of English language in 2009 at the Faculty of Science and Arts in Sharurah.

The current study is an attempt to identify those reasons, which are associated with the students' weakness in speaking English. Language instructors have to understand students' speaking difficulties in English and instruct effective speaking strategies in order to help students solve their speaking difficulties and improve their speaking ability.

2. Literature Review:

Speaking plays an important role in daily communication and educational purposes. According to Nassiri and Pourhosein Gilakjani (2016), human communication is a complex process. People need communication when they want to say something and transmit information. Speakers use communication when they are going to inform someone about something. Speakers apply language according to their own goals. Pourhosein Gilakjani (2016) expressed that speaking is of great significance for the people interaction where they speak everywhere and every day. Speaking is the way of communicating ideas and messages orally. If we want to encourage students to communicate in English, we should use the language in real communication and ask them to do the same process.

Unfortunately, despite speaking importance, speaking skill receives inadequate emphasis in language learning. Thus, it is important to prepare students for effective speaking by implementing authentic speaking materials in English as a foreign language (EFL) classes. Alsobhi & Preece (2018) contended that of the four English language skills, speaking enjoys a superior status. Accordingly, it should be given high priority while teaching. In spite of its importance, teaching English speaking skill to Arab EFL learners has always been an exacting task for Arab teachers of English because it is considered a foreign language, i.e. not widely spoken or used in everyday interactions. For such a reason, Arab teachers of English are required to persistently implement new teaching strategies to tackle the problems regarding speaking skills in the classroom.

According to Tuan & Mai, (2015), there are some problems for speaking skill that teachers can come across in helping students to speak in the classroom. These are performance conditions, affective factors, listening skill, feedback during speaking tasks, inhibition, lack of topical knowledge, low participation, and mother-tongue use. The last problem related to the speaking ability is that when some learners share the same mother-tongue, they try to use it in the speaking class because it is very easy for them. A similar observation was made by Alharbi (2015) in Saudi Arabia where learners have low oral skills due to the absence of authentic language learning situations outside and inside the classroom. According to the author, there are several factors that influence the learning of speaking skills for instance use of mother tongue outside and inside classroom environment, low status of English in a country, learners' negative attitude towards English language, use of mother tongue by teachers to explain difficult concept, use of teacher-centered methodology and passiveness of learners in classroom.

From the above, if teachers want to help learners overcome their difficulties in learning a speaking skill, they should identify some factors that influence their speaking performance. (Tuan & Mai, 2015). Accordingly, this study attempts to explore the reasons behind the weakness of speaking among the English Department's students at Najran University.

2.1 Related Studies:

Many studies have found several factors that negatively affecting student's speaking performance and cause speaking problems.

Alasmari (2015) investigated the barriers that hinder the oral proficiency of Saudi preparatory year students and English language teachers at English language center, Taif University. The study sampled 142 students from Taif University. Results showed that attitudes of students towards English language, frequent use of students' mother tongue not only outside the campus but also inside the classroom with their peers and teachers, their inability to command proper pronunciation, appropriate grammatical structures, necessary vocabulary items, their hesitance to use the target language in front of their class fellows because of their fear of making mistakes etc.

were major oral barriers. The results of this study did not reveal any significant oral barriers in relation to the behavior of English language instructors, English textbooks, Neither English contact hours.

Keong et al., (2015) investigated speaking competence of Iraqi EFL undergraduates of Garmiyah University. They employed a mixed-method study, survey, and interviews as their research instruments, to answer three research questions, including (1) the difficulties that Iraqi EFL undergraduate students faced when speaking English, (2) the reasons behind the difficulties, and (3) the level of difference in ability among the students. The findings of the study indicated that participants faced some challenges in relation to their linguistics competences, such as vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. The study also revealed that the lack of English speaking practice, the tendency of mixing the language, and the absence of speaking activity in the course program are the main reasons leading to ELL students' speaking difficulties.

Al Nakhlah (2016) performed a study towards the difficulties of using English encountered by English language students at Al Quds Open University. The results of this study indicated that there are some difficulties in the speaking of the students due to some reasons such as fear of mistake, shyness, anxiety, and lack of confidence. The researcher adopted some recommendations, the most important one is to establish environment support and encourage the students to speak English frequently. On the other hand, he suggested carrying out more researches and studies regarding speaking difficulties encountered by English language students.

Leong and Ahmadi (2017) carried out a study on the factors influencing learners' English speaking skill by tracing out the body of research concerning the term speaking, the importance of speaking, characteristics of speaking performance, speaking problems, and factors affecting speaking performance. The results represented that the teachers should praise their students to speak English, give their learners enough time for speaking skill, remind their learners not to worry about making mistakes, and choose the best teaching method to keep their learners' involved in the speaking activity. In addition, Teachers should give their learners more opportunities to speak English through using some speaking tasks that help them to speak and urge them to take part in speaking activities.

Diep, L.T.N. (2017) explored measurements of factors affecting English speaking skills of students at the Foreign Language Department of Van Lang University in Vietnam. This study aimed at finding out the reasons behind the non-fluency of the university students in English speaking. The researcher adopted the quantitative and qualitative approach. To achieve the purpose of the study, the researcher developed the following instruments: open-ended interviews, class observations in addition to a questionnaire. The sample of the study included 270 students of the Foreign Language Department at Van Lan University in Vietnam. The questionnaire constituted six factors affecting English speaking and was divided into domains: confidence, proficiency and vocabulary, grammar, learning environment, and instructors. The data were analyzed by means of the SPSS program. The results of the study revealed that grammar, pronunciation, and methods of teaching have the highest impact on the English-speaking skills of the university students.

Having reviewed the previous theoretical and empirical studies related to subject of the study, the researcher concluded that there are a variety of factors encountered by students and that affect their EFL speaking skills. The literature reviewed has also given a clear picture for the researcher to further investigate the problem of the study, and to come up with recommendations and solutions to it.

3. Research Questions:

This study guided by the following research questions:

- What are the reasons behind the weakness of speaking English among English Department's Students at Najran University?
- Are there differences with statistical significance between the opinions of the research sample about the reasons behind the weakness of speaking English among English Department's students at Najran University due to the variable of gender?

4. Significance of the Study:

This study may prove significant since it seeks to achieve the following:

- The findings of this study will hopefully help the English Department's instructors at Najran University (Sharurah Branch), in terms of diagnosing speaking difficulties and remedying them.

- This study will offer recommendations that will hopefully help instructors and students to overcome problems related to the speaking of English.

5. Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of this study is to:

- Investigate the factors that cause speaking weakness.
- Offer recommendations that might help instructors and students to overcome and reduce these reasons behind the weakness of speaking English.

6. Limitations of the Study:

The present study was limited to the following limitations:

The Scope of Human: It was limited to female and male students in the eighth level in the English Department.

The Scope of Location: The study was applied and carried out in Najran University in Sharurah City Branch. Therefore, results might be generalizable only to the college of science and arts in Sharurah city.

The Scope of Time: The study was limited to the second semester of the academic year 2017-2018.

7. Definitions of Key Terms:

7.1 Speaking: It is a productive skill that requires students to express thoughts orally.

7.2 Speaking Skills: The students' ability to speak accurately and proficiently.

7.3 Speaking Weakness: This refers to an inability to speak accurately and proficiently.

8. The Methodology of the Study:

The researcher followed the analytical descriptive method in this study.

8.1 Participants:

The participants of the study were (N=59) students at English Department of colleges of Science and Arts (Sharurah) of Najran University. Among the participants, there was (N=29) female students and (N=30) male students. Their ages range from 21 to 23. Table(1) shows the distribution of the study population according to gender.

Table (1). Sample Distribution According to Gender

Variables	Categories	Frequencies	%
Gender	Male	30	50.8
	Female	29	49.2
Total		59	100.0

8.2 Instrument:

The questionnaire targeted students and it consists of 28 items, which are structured into five domains. The first domain consists of four items. The second domain contains nine items. The third domain consists of six items. The fourth domain consists of five items. The fifth domain consists of four items. In these items, the students are asked to select from the following choices: (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) neutral (4) disagree and (5) strongly disagree.

8.2.1 Reliability of the instrument:

In order to ensure the reliability of the instrument, it was administered, in a pilot study, to a group of (20) students who were not part of the research study sample. The reliability of the tool was verified by using two methods of calculation of reliability: Test-retest reliability and Cronbach's alpha equation.

Table (2). Cronbach's Alpha and Test-Retest Reliability Values for the Total Degree of Scale and Domains

No.	Domains	Cronbach's alpha	Test retest
1	The English language program itself	.720	.743
2	The students themselves	.733	.716
3	The instructors	.804	.813
4	The English language methods of teaching the English language.	.787	.743
5	The teaching and learning environment	.705	.710
The total degree of scale		.867	0.845

According to table 2, using: (Cronbach's Alpha and Test-Retest reliability), it is obvious that (0.867) and (0.845) reflect that the reliability is suitable for the study.

8.2.2 Validity of the Instrument:

The validity of the tool has been verified by using two types of validities, which are :8.2.2.1 Content Validity: To ensure content validity, the researcher discussed the problem with English instructors who have had experience in teaching English and then distributed the questionnaire to six referees from the College of Science and Arts at Najran University who are experts in this area. They were asked to judge the appropriateness of each item for the overall purpose of the study. Some of them suggested some modifications in the arrangements of some items which the researcher took into account.

8.2.2.2 Internal Consistency Validity:

Brown (2016: 133) asserts that the internal consistency validity indicates the correlation of the score of each item with the total average of the test. It also indicates the correlation of the average of each domain with the total average. This validity was calculated by using Pearson Formula. Table (3) shows the correlation coefficient of every item of the scale domains.

Table (3). The Correlation Coefficient between the Scale Domains and the Total Degree of a Scale

No.	Domains	No.of items	R
1	The English language program itself	4	.719**
2	The students themselves	9	.798*
3	The instructors	6	.657**
4	The English language methods of teaching the English language.	5	.680**
5	The teaching and learning environment	4	.756**

**.

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

As shown in the Table (3), there is a correlation between the domains and the total degree and each domain with the other domains. This shows a high internal consistency of the scale, which reinforces the validity of it.

Table (4). The Correlation Coefficient between the Scale Items and the Total Degree of Scale

N	R ²	N	R ²	N	R ²
1	.530**	11	.532**	21	.519**
2	.430**	12	.566**	22	.518*
3	.568**	13	.492**	23	.657**
4	.584**	14	.562**	24	.680**
5	.511**	15	.550**	25	.756**
6	.606**	16	.594*	26	.754**
7	.591**	17	.517**	27	.786**
8	.578**	18	.643**	28	.559**
9	.490*	19	.637**		
10	.522**	20	.693**		

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table (4) shows that there are statistically significant differences between items and the total degree of the scale, which indicates that there was a consistency between the items. This means that the scale was highly valid for the study.

9. Data Analysis:

In the present study, a range of statistical techniques such as frequencies, percentages, standard deviation, and means is used. In addition, SPSS V.20 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software is used to analyze the data. Multiple tests, including an independent-samples t-test, Cronbach's Alpha, and Pearson's Correlation, were conducted.

10. Findings

Findings are presented in response to the research questions as follow.

10.1 Answering the first question: "What are the reasons behind the weakness of speaking English among English Department's Students at Najran University?" To answer such question the researcher computed means, the standard deviation of the scores of the study sample on each domain and the total degree of the reasons behind the weakness of speaking English among English Department's Students at Najran University as shown in the table (6). Table (6) below shows the means recorded with the standard deviation written next to it in addition to the rank of each domain, since the students' questionnaire was divided into five domains: the English language program itself, the students themselves, the instructors, the English language methods of teaching the English language, and finally, the teaching and learning environment.

Table (6): Means, Standard Deviations and Ranks for the Sample of the Study Scores on each Domain and the Total Degree of the Reasons Behind the Weakness of Speaking the English Among English Department's Students at Najran University

No.	Domains	Means	SD	level perception of	Rank
1	The English language program itself	3.34	.667	<i>Moderate</i>	3
2	The students themselves	3.51	.757	<i>Highb</i>	2
3	The instructors	2.97	.608	<i>Moderate</i>	5
4	The English language methods of teaching the English language.	3.03	.836	<i>Moderate</i>	4
5	The teaching and learning environment	3.56	.771	<i>Highb</i>	1
Total degree		3.28	.527	<i>Moderate</i>	

The finding of table (6) shows that the mean of reasons behind the weakness of speaking English among English Department's students at Najran University came in moderate degree with a total mean of (3.28) and standard deviation of (0.527), and the fifth domain "the teaching and learning environment" came in the first rank with a high degree, whereas the third domain "the instructors" came the last domain with a moderate degree.

Table (7) shows means and standard deviation for the items of each domain.

Table (7).Means, Standard Deviations and Grade for the Reasons Behind the Weakness of Speaking English Among English Department's Students at Najran University as Items of each domain.

No.	Domains and items	Means	S.D	level perception of	Rank
First domain: the English language program itself					
1	Lecture hours are not sufficient to have enough practice of speaking skills.	3.19	1.106	<i>Moderate</i>	4
2	There are no sufficient courses emphasizing speaking offered by the English language program.	3.59	1.140	<i>Highb</i>	1

3	The English language program emphasizes literature courses more than language ones.	3.34	1.154	<i>Moderate</i>	2
4	The English language program doesn't include speaking tests in the final examination.	3.27	1.324	<i>Moderate</i>	3
Second domain: the students themselves					
5	Our weakness in the speaking skills came as a result of our weakness in the basics of English Language when we joined the English department.	3.59	1.379	<i>High</i>	4
6	Lack of our interest to develop their speaking skills and dialogue in the English language.	3.59	1.116	<i>High</i>	4
7	We aren't completely aware of the value of speaking English.	3.07	1.230	<i>Moderate</i>	8
8	We rarely communicate in English with our language classmates out of the language class.	3.95	1.209	<i>High</i>	1
9	We almost don't have the chance to speak with our instructors of English out of the class.	3.41	1.161	<i>High</i>	5
10	We only speak the English Language inside the lecture-room.	3.80	1.336	<i>High</i>	2
11	We are worried about making mistakes or shy so, we prefer to remain silent rather than to orally participate in the classroom.	3.69	1.249	<i>High</i>	3
12	We are generally in favor of speaking Arabic.	3.36	1.242	<i>Moderate</i>	6
13	We have no motivated to express ourselves.	3.14	1.306	<i>Moderate</i>	7
Third domain: the instructors					
14	Instructors only use the English language inside the lecture room.	3.00	1.050	<i>Moderate</i>	4
15	Instructors usually use a mixture of English and Arabic in the lecture room.	3.20	1.171	<i>Moderate</i>	1
16	Instructors only use the English language to communicate with us outside the lecture room.	2.78	1.035	<i>Moderate</i>	5
17	Instructors let us use the Arabic language when we answer.	3.03	1.066	<i>Moderate</i>	3
18	Instructors don't encourage us to answer in the English language.	2.75	1.183	<i>Moderate</i>	6
19	Instructors don't give us the chance to speak, participate in discourse or express our point of view.	3.07	1.311	<i>Moderate</i>	2
Fourth domain: the English language methods of teaching the English language.					
20	Instructors don't make us do role-play to improve our speaking skill.	3.20	1.270	<i>Moderate</i>	3
21	Instructors don't let us make a presentation in the English language.	2.24	1.250	<i>Moderate</i>	5
22	Instructors don't depend on discussions inside the lecture room.	2.92	1.134	<i>Moderate</i>	4
23	Instructors don't use modern technology to teach speaking skills like a podcast, etc.	3.39	1.218	<i>High</i>	2
24	Instructors don't use different strategies to teach speaking skills like intonation, body language, etc.	3.41	1.176	<i>High</i>	1
Fifth domain: the teaching and learning environment					
25	There are more than 25 students in our English class.	3.64	1.186	<i>High</i>	2
26	Our small classes don't give us an opportunity to practice oral skills and communicate	3.31	1.193	<i>Moderate</i>	3
27	We don't learn oral skills in the language laboratory.	3.68	1.136	<i>High</i>	1
28	Language laboratories don't provide quality laboratory services.	3.64	1.126	<i>High</i>	2

Table (7) shows the following: the item (2) which states "There are no sufficient courses emphasizing speaking offered by the English language program" came in the first rank at the first domain with a mean of (3.59) and a standard deviation of (1.140). The item (8) which states "We rarely communicate in English with our language classmates out of the language class" came in the first rank at the second domain with a mean of (3.95) and a standard deviation of (1.209). The item (15) which states "Instructors usually use a mixture of English and Arabic in the lecture room" came in the first rank at the third domain with a mean of (3.20) and a standard deviation of (1.171). The item (24) which states "Instructors don't use different strategies to teach speaking skills like intonation, body language, etc." came in the first rank at the fourth domain with a mean of (3.41) and a standard deviation (1.176).

The item (27) which states "We don't learn oral skills in the language laboratory" came in the first rank at the fifth domain with a mean of (3.68) and a standard deviation of (1.136).

10.2 Answering the second question: "Are there differences with statistical significance between the opinions of the research sample about the reasons behind the weakness of speaking English among English Department's students at Najran University due to the variable of gender?" In order to test whether the students' perceptions about the reasons behind the weakness of speaking English among English Department's students at Najran University differ considerably among male and female participants, an independent sample t-test is applied. The following table shows the results:

Table (8):The Means and Standard Deviations for the Responses of the Sample the Reasons Behind the Weakness of Speaking English Among English Department's Students at Najran University in Accordance with the Variable of Gender and T-Test for the Independent Samples of the Significance of Differences between the Means.

Gender	Variable	No.	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	Sig.	Judgment
Male		30	3.28	0.524	0.118	0.906	No statistically significance at 0.05
Female		29	3.29	0.540			

According to Table 8, there are no differences with statistical significance for male and female, $t(0.118) < 0.05$. It is understood that male and female students are similar in terms of the opinions about the reasons behind the weakness of speaking English among English Department's students at Najran University.

Thus, results reveal that there are real barriers facing students in the College of Science and Arts (Sharurah) from their perception. The findings are consistent with the findings of several other studies. In terms of students' domain, the current study agrees with Al Nakhalah (2016) and Asif (2017) which indicated that most of the Arab EFL learners have a fear of making mistakes and they prefer to keep quiet, fearing they would make mistakes fatal to their images among classmates. The findings are also consistent with Alasmari (2015) study results. It revealed that students frequent use of their mother tongue not only outside the campus but also inside the classroom with their peers and teachers. Moreover, their inability to command proper pronunciation, appropriate grammatical structures, necessary vocabulary items, their hesitance to use the target language in front of their class fellows because of their fear of making mistakes etc. are major oral barriers. It also agrees with Leong and Ahmadi (2017) in terms of the instructors, as they should give their learners enough time for speaking skill. The study concurs with Diep (2017) study findings of the scarcity of modern teaching methods, and with IbnTalib's (2003) study results that the lack of English speaking practice, the tendency of mixing the language, and the absence of speaking activity in the course program are the main reasons leading to ELL students' speaking weakness. It also agrees with Alsobhi and Preece (2018) study results that the learning environment and teaching resources have topped the list of methods in terms of solving problems facing English Language Students in speaking. In conclusion, the results of this study give a satisfactory answer to the research questions: What are the reasons behind the weakness of speaking English among English Department's Students at Najran University? Are there differences with statistical significance between the opinions of the research sample about the reasons behind the weakness of speaking English among English Department's students at Najran University due to the variable of sex?

11. Recommendations:

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations can be stated:

- The objectives of the curriculum in the Department of English language should emphasize communication more than literature, and increase the numbers of English contact hours.
- English Department's Students at Najran University should be encouraged to use English as much as possible in their communication at college and at home, if possible. At college by activating English conversation club inside the college as students' activity to develop speaking skills and students can share and talk about anything in English during that time. Whereas at home by encouraging them to listen to English programs and movies on TV or the Internet as much as possible.
- Discussion between the English instructor and his/ her students in and out of the language class should be in the English language.

- Instructors should give English Department's students better opportunity to develop speaking skills in their class, because the classroom is the only place where they practice English skills.
- The language instructor should use a variety of strategies (e.g. verbal problem-solving, role-playing, presentation, intonation, and body language etc.) in order to encourage his/her students to speak the English language fluently and accurately in front of his/ her colleagues.
- There is a need to use effective modern technology such as videos, smartphones, and computers to teach English.
- Instructors should teach oral skills courses in the laboratories.
- Decrease the number of students in the speaking class (not to exceed 25 students).

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