



An Investigation into the Factors Affecting Oral English Proficiency: A Case Study of Fifth-Semester Students at Faculty of Languages and Translation, Misurata, Libya

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تحقيق في العوامل المؤثرة على الكفاءة الشفوية في اللغة الإنجليزية:
دراسة حالة لطلاب الفصل الخامس بكلية اللغات والترجمة بمصراته، ليبيا

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Abstract:

This study endeavors to explore the factors that influence the oral English proficiency of fifth-semester students. A qualitative research methodology was employed to gather data. The participants included thirty fifth-semester students from the Faculty of Languages and Translation at Misurata University. Two instruments were utilized: classroom observation and semi-structured interviews. The classroom observation, conducted by the researcher, concentrated on highlighting the elements that affect students' oral English performance during class activities, while the interviews offered profound insights into students' perspectives and valuable recommendations for enhancing their oral proficiency. The findings revealed that insufficient vocabulary, fear of making mistakes, grammatical inaccuracies, mispronunciation, reliance on the mother tongue, fear of criticism, misunderstandings, inadequate in-class practice, and shyness constituted the primary factors that negatively affect students' oral English capabilities.

Keywords: Oral English proficiency, Vocabulary deficiency, Fear of mistakes, Mispronunciation, Mother tongue interference, Shyness, Motivation.

الملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف العوامل التي تؤثر في الكفاءة الشفوية باللغة الإنجليزية لدى طلاب الفصل الدراسي الخامس. استخدمت الدراسة المنهج النوعي لجمع البيانات، حيث شملت المشاركين ثلاثين طالباً من كلية اللغات والترجمة بجامعة مصراته. تم استخدام أداتين بحثيتين: الملاحظة الصفية والمقابلات شبه المهيكلة. ركزت الملاحظة الصفية، التي أجرتها الباحثة، على تحديد العناصر التي تؤثر في أداء الطلاب الشفوي باللغة الإنجليزية أثناء الأنشطة الصفية، في حين قدمت المقابلات رؤى معمقة حول وجهات نظر الطلاب وتوصيات قيمة لتعزيز كفاءتهم الشفوية. أظهرت النتائج أن نقص المفردات، والخوف من ارتكاب الأخطاء، والأخطاء النحوية، وسوء النطق، والاعتماد على اللغة الأم، والخوف من الانتقاد، وسوء الفهم، وضعف الممارسة داخل الصف، والخلل، كانت العوامل الأساسية التي تؤثر سلباً في قدرات الطلاب الشفوية في اللغة الإنجليزية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الكفاءة الشفوية في اللغة الإنجليزية، نقص المفردات، الخوف من الأخطاء، سوء النطق، تأثير اللغة الأم، الخلل، الدافعية.

Introduction

A strong command of English, particularly oral communication skills, is essential for students seeking to succeed in their future careers and to navigate professional contexts such as job interviews with confidence. Consequently, students who demonstrate higher proficiency in English are more likely to achieve career success. The ability to communicate effectively in English constitutes a key competence that distinguishes individuals in today's globalized job market.

According to Mazouzi (2013), maintaining a balance between fluency and accuracy is fundamental to effective communication. Fluency refers to the capacity to speak smoothly and without undue hesitation, whereas accuracy emphasizes the correct use of grammar and vocabulary. Both dimensions are indispensable to teaching methodologies as well as to students' mastery of speaking skills.

Despite its significance, oral proficiency remains one of the most challenging skills for learners to develop. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, students are often hesitant to speak due to a range of obstacles. Common challenges include fear of making mistakes, shyness, limited vocabulary, and mispronunciation (Zhang, 2009). Such factors can impede learners' communicative competence.

Nevertheless, certain factors can significantly enhance oral proficiency. Motivation is a powerful one, since a highly motivated student can achieve greater success than a less-motivated but more intelligent one (Reece & Walker, 1997). This study investigates the factors that negatively affect students' oral English proficiency, with a specific focus on the Faculty of Languages and Translation at Misurata University, Libya.

This research employs a qualitative approach to explore the factors influencing the oral English skills among fifth-semester students enrolled in an oral communication course. The study's participants consist of students from the Faculty of Languages and Translation. Data is collected through semi-structured interviews and a detailed observation form, allowing for a comprehensive investigation into the factors affecting students' oral English proficiency. The overarching aim is to develop a deeper understanding of these factors from the perspectives of those directly engaged in the learning process.

Statement of the Problem

The researcher posits that several factors may negatively influence students' oral English performance, including limited vocabulary, low self-confidence, and insufficient motivation. Accordingly, this study seeks to investigate the factors that influence students' oral English proficiency.

Objective of the Study

The primary objective of this research is to identify the factors that affect fifth-semester students' oral English skills at the Faculty of Languages and Translation and to propose practical solutions to address these factors.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following questions:

1. What factors negatively affect the oral English proficiency of fifth-semester students?
2. What solutions, from the students' perspectives, can help them overcome these factors?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it provides valuable insights into the challenges that hinder students' oral English proficiency, with a particular focus on fifth-semester learners at the Faculty of Languages and Translation, Misurata University. The findings will not only assist educators in designing more targeted teaching strategies but also empower students by highlighting practical solutions to overcome these difficulties. Ultimately, this study seeks to enhance the overall quality of English language instruction and better prepare students for academic success and future professional opportunities.

Literature Review

This section reviews research on the factors that influence speaking skills and the methods commonly used to teach them.

Factors Affecting Speaking Skills

A wide range of factors can significantly influence a learner's ability to communicate orally in a foreign language. Listening comprehension forms the foundation of speaking ability; as Doff (1998) and Shumin (1997) emphasize, learners must first understand what is being said in order to respond effectively. Similarly, Bozorgian (2012) demonstrates a strong correlation between listening comprehension and improved speaking performance.

Another key challenge is language anxiety. Research by Park and Lee (2005) and Tanveer (2007) reveals that stress and apprehension can severely restrict students' oral performance. In addition to psychological barriers, linguistic limitations also play a critical role. Mahripah (2014) argues that difficulties with pronunciation and

grammar can create significant confusion for learners, while Lukitasari (2003) found that limited vocabulary, weak grammatical competence, and inaccurate pronunciation directly impede speaking development.

Finally, a lack of confidence is a significant obstacle, which often arises from fear of being misunderstood or from insufficient encouragement by teacher's as noted by Dornyei & Ibid (2011) and Brown (2001). This lack of confidence can lead to shyness, a fear so powerful that it can make students forget what they intended to say (Baldwin, 2011).

Methods Used in Teaching Speaking Skills

Relevant research also points to effective teaching methods that can help students overcome these challenges. The key is to create a natural and interactive learning environment. Mang'eni (2010) and Gecaga (1986) found that group work, debates, and discussions are highly effective in promoting active engagement. Likewise, Margret (2010) identified other beneficial techniques, including dialogues and storytelling, which allow students to practice authentic communication and strengthen oral competence.

Review of Related Studies

Several recent studies provide further insights into factors shaping students' speaking performance. Rodriguez, Hernández, and Guerrero (2017), using a quantitative approach, identified limited vocabulary, mispronunciation, and overreliance on the mother tongue as primary barriers for tenth-grade students. Similarly, Mazouzi (2014) found that anxiety, low self-esteem, and lack of motivation negatively affected middle school learners' oral performance, drawing on both questionnaires and interviews.

Namazandost, Shatalebi, and Nasri (2019) demonstrated that cooperative learning techniques not only enhanced Iranian students' speaking proficiency but also increased their motivation. In addition, Boonkit (2010) concluded that learners' confidence, the creativity of discussion topics, and overall communicative competence are essential factors in developing effective speaking skills among non-native English speakers.

Methodology

This section outlines the research design, participants, instruments, and procedures employed in the study. The chosen methodology aligns with the primary objective: to investigate the factors that influence students' oral English proficiency.

Research Design

A descriptive qualitative research design was adopted to explore the factors affecting the oral English skills of fifth-semester students. As McMillan and Schumacher (2014) observe, "qualitative designs are just as systematic as quantitative designs, but they emphasize gathering data on naturally occurring phenomena" (p 31). In line with this approach, the present study utilized two qualitative data collection methods: classroom observations and semi-structured interviews.

The Participants

The participants consisted of thirty fifth-semester students enrolled in the oral English course at the Faculty of Languages and Translation at Misurata University. Two classes at the Faculty of Languages and Translation were selected to be the participants in the current study.

Research Instruments

Two instruments were employed to collect data: classroom observation and semi-structured interviews. As the instructor of the oral English course, I conducted classroom observations to document factors influencing students' oral performance during class activities. Observation enables researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomena under investigation (MRC, 2018). Semi-structured interviews were subsequently conducted with the students to elicit more detailed insights into their perspectives and experiences.

Data Collection

Data were collected over a period of three weeks through both observation and interviews. During this period, I attended six oral practice classes, carefully documenting observable factors that appeared to hinder or enhance students' speaking performance. Following the observations, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight participants to explore their perceptions of the challenges they faced and possible solutions. This combination of methods allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the issues under study.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed in two stages. First, the observation notes were examined to identify recurring patterns and themes related to students' oral performance in the classroom. This analysis provided a descriptive account of the key factors influencing their speaking ability. Second, the interview responses were analyzed to capture students' perspectives on both the negative and positive factors affecting their oral English proficiency. Together, these analyses offered a holistic understanding of the challenges and potential strategies for improving speaking skills among fifth-semester students.

Results of the Study

The classroom observation addressed the first research question: What are the factors that affect fifth-semester speaking skills? The findings revealed several factors that negatively influenced students' oral English performance. A major issue was their limited vocabulary, which often led to misunderstanding and hindered effective communication. Additionally, a lack of confidence and motivation prevented students from engaging actively in classroom discussions. The observations also indicated that mispronunciation contributed to students' fear of correction and criticism, further discouraging participation.

The interviews provided more in-depth insights and confirmed the factors identified through observation. Overall, the students reported that their oral English performance was negatively affected by limited vocabulary, fear of making mistakes, grammatical errors, mispronunciation, reliance on the mother tongue, fear of criticism, misunderstanding, lack of practice in class, and shyness. These findings suggest that both linguistic and psychological barriers play a significant role in limiting students' speaking ability.

In addition, the interviews highlighted several possible solutions for improving oral English proficiency. Students suggested that selecting creative and engaging discussion topics—preferably chosen by students themselves—would provide greater opportunities for interaction. They also emphasized the importance of incorporating more classroom activities to stimulate participation. Furthermore, encouraging students to contribute actively and allowing them to speak without constant interruption were identified as effective strategies. Students noted that errors should be recorded by the teacher and corrected later, so as not to disrupt fluency. Finally, it was recommended that teachers provide a list of useful vocabulary prior to each session to help learners enrich their speech during discussions.

Discussion of the Results

The classroom observations revealed that limited vocabulary was the most significant factor constraining students' speaking ability. Many learners relied on simple and repetitive words, which frequently caused conversations to break down, as they were unable to articulate their ideas clearly. This finding aligns with Zhang (2009), who identified restricted vocabulary as a major barrier to oral fluency in EFL contexts, noting that learners often struggle to retrieve appropriate words and consequently lose confidence in communication. Furthermore, the observed lack of confidence and motivation among students appears consistent with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982), which posits that anxiety and low self-esteem can "block" language acquisition, even when opportunities to practice are available.

Interestingly, a small group of students with relatively higher speaking proficiency demonstrated greater confidence and motivation, actively participating despite frequent grammatical errors and mispronunciations. This echoes the findings of Reece and Walker (1997), who highlighted the pivotal role of motivation in second language acquisition, emphasizing that motivated learners often outperform their less motivated peers, regardless of their initial proficiency. These results suggest that cultivating a supportive classroom environment that lowers anxiety and fosters confidence may encourage wider participation and enhance oral English skills among students.

The interviews further confirmed that many students were hesitant to speak English due to shyness, nervousness, and inadequate vocabulary. While a few participants reported engaging in discussions when the topic was familiar, the majority admitted that fear of making mistakes and negative evaluation discouraged them from speaking. This is consistent with Al-Sobhi and Preece (2018), who found that anxiety and vocabulary limitations were the primary barriers to oral participation among Saudi EFL learners. Again, Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982) helps explain these findings: when learners experience stress or embarrassment, their affective filter rises, reducing their ability to process and produce language effectively. Thus, confidence and motivation emerge as central factors in enabling students to overcome fear and use English more freely.

Another noteworthy finding was the students' mixed reactions to teachers' corrective feedback. While some learners reported that mid-speech corrections disrupted their confidence and caused them to lose track of their ideas, others considered correction to be beneficial for improvement. This reflects Lyster and Ranta's (1997) argument that corrective feedback can be valuable but must be delivered in ways that do not discourage learners. Similarly, Panova and Lyster (2002) recommend the use of delayed feedback or gentle recasts instead of direct interruptions, as these approaches both support language development and sustain learners' willingness to participate.

Overall, the findings underscore the importance of creating a low-anxiety classroom environment where mistakes are viewed as a natural and constructive part of the learning process rather than something to be feared.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, this research confirms that limited vocabulary, fear of making mistakes, and shyness are the most significant factors hindering students' oral English proficiency. These challenges often discourage learners from engaging in classroom activities, even when opportunities for practice are available. The findings also highlight that motivation and a supportive, low-anxiety classroom environment are essential for encouraging students to participate and improve their speaking skills. Evidence from both observations and interviews demonstrates that when learners feel comfortable and motivated, they are more likely to take risks, participate actively, and view errors as part of the learning process rather than as a source of embarrassment. This underscores the critical role of the instructor in fostering a positive learning atmosphere that reduces anxiety and builds confidence.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that language instructors focus on strategies that not only build students' vocabulary and grammar but also actively reduce their anxiety. Implementing activities that encourage free expression, providing delayed feedback can all help create a more effective learning environment. Ultimately, developing oral proficiency requires a holistic approach that integrates linguistic knowledge with affective support, enabling learners to overcome both linguistic and emotional obstacles in their language learning journey. Finally, future studies could also investigate teachers' perspectives on the challenges and strategies for developing students' speaking abilities, which would offer valuable insights into effective pedagogical practices.

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Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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