



## Paper title: A Study on English Speaking Skills among the University Students in South Libya

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### ABSTRACT

English is an international language and it has grabbed the status of a link language in the globalized scenario. This is the reason why, acquisition of English language skills, especially the speaking skills, has been considered one among the important skills to be obtained by the learners where English is not the learners' mother tongue. This paper studies the English language speaking skills among the university students in south Libya, particularly in and around Brack, Alshatti region. Studying the factors that hurdle the students' English speaking abilities has been the problem of the research. The objective of this paper is to present the level of the university students in English speaking skills in the region in their day to day communication and suggest effective ways to improve their skills thereby. This study is conducted at the Faculty of Education, Brack, Sebha University, Libya. The researcher, being an English lecturer at the same faculty for more than three years, assesses the English speaking skills of the students through thorough interactive observation on a regular basis while teaching in the class and lists out the beneficial ways that can boost the English oral skills of the students. Hence, the recommendations are made on the basis of the qualitative analysis of the researcher's observations.

### العنوان: دراسة عن مهارات التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية لدى طلبة الجامعة بجنوب ليبيا

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### الكلمات المفتاحية:

لغة التواصل  
مهارات التحدث  
طلاب الجامعة  
التواصل اليومي  
الملاحظة التفاعلية  
التحليل النوعي

### الملخص

اللغة الإنجليزية هي لغة دولية وقد اكتسبت مكانة لغة الارتباط والتواصل في سيناريو العولمة، وهذا هو السبب في أن اكتساب مهارات اللغة الإنجليزية وخاصة مهارات التحدث التي تعتبر من أهم المهارات التي يجب أن يحصل عليها المتعلمون، حيث لا تكون اللغة الإنجليزية هي اللغة الأم. تدرس هذه الورقة مهارات التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية بين طلاب الجامعات في الجنوب الليبي، لا سيما في منطقة براك وما حولها. مشكلة البحث تكمن في العوامل التي تعيق قدرات الطلاب على التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية. الهدف من هذه الورقة هو تقديم مستوى طلاب الجامعة في مهارات التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية في المنطقة في اتصالاتهم اليومية واقتراح طرق فعالة لتحسين مهاراتهم بذلك أجريت هذه الدراسة في كلية التربية، براك، جامعة سبها، ليبيا. يقوم الباحث بصفته محاضرًا للغة الإنجليزية في نفس الكلية لأكثر من ثلاث سنوات، بتقييم مهارات التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية للطلاب من خلال الملاحظة التفاعلية الشاملة على أساس منتظم أثناء التدريس ويسرد الطرق المفيدة التي يمكن أن تعزز اللغة الإنجليزية الشفوية مهارات الطلاب. ومن ثم يتم تقديم التوصيات على أساس التحليل النوعي للملاحظات الباحث.

### Introduction

English has become a window to see the world. The reason, to some extent, is that the growth and development of a nation in the fields of health, education, scientific research and training, international trade, tourism and bilateral relations with the other nations has been linked with the nation's ability to communicate in English with the rest of

the world. In other words, a nation's all round progress largely depends on its ability to communicate in an international language like English.

Libya is an oil rich nation located in North Africa with a population of around 6.5 million and Arabic is the national language of the

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country. Its academic history reveals that English teaching and learning was banned for few decades in the country by the ruling authorities. Ultimately, it resulted in the evolution of a nation completely deprived of English language skills among its children and youth.

Though one's mastery over a language is determined by one's skills in LSRW (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing) areas of that language, speaking is the most important area as it helps individuals to communicate quickly not only in Libya but anywhere in the world. According to Oxford English Dictionary, "Speaking is the action of conveying information or expressing one's feelings in speech".

This paper studies the English speaking skills of the university students in south Libya. This study is conducted at the Faculty of Education, Brack, Sebha University, Libya. The students on whom the study is conducted belong to different departments of the faculty including the students of English department and they are from different villages and towns in the southern region of the country. English department students study core subjects of English language and the students of the other departments study General English in two modules.

### Research problem

It has been observed by the researcher while teaching in class that the students at the College of Education, Brack are facing problems in speaking English. Hence, the research problem remains the identification of the factors which cripple the students' speaking skills.

### Research questions

The present study is aimed at answering the following questions.

1. What is the level of university students in speaking English?
2. What are the common impediments that cripple their ability to speak English
3. What are the effective ways to improve their English speaking skills?

### Objectives

1. Assessing the English speaking skills of the university students in South Libya
2. Finding out the students' strengths and weaknesses
3. Recommending effective ways to improve the students' speaking skills in English where necessary.

### Literature Review

#### Vocabulary Building

Vocabulary building is the most important concern of any foreign language learning process.

Without having adequate vocabulary knowledge, learners may not show the desired results in language learning process and its competence (Macis and Schmitt, 2017). In the view of Adam (2016) lack of vocabulary knowledge hinders the real communication of the learners of English as a foreign language to a great extent. For this reason, it is necessary for the undergraduate students to build certain basic vocabulary in order to make them able to communicate in English. Cohen, (2014) argues that learners, language instructors and teachers, curriculum developers and language researcher all agree on the view that vocabulary learning is indispensable part of L2 learning. However, learners and teachers are uncertain about the best practices of learning vocabulary (Schmitt, 2008)

#### Pronunciation development

After obtaining stock vocabulary needed to communicate, the students need to improve their pronunciation skills. Harmer (2001) emphasized that through pronunciation instruction; students not only learn different sounds and sound features but also improve their speaking skill. In order to avoid the pronunciation problems of the learners, teachers can play a vital role. Teachers should teach their

learners that slow speech with correct pronunciation is much better than past speech with wrong pronunciation. (Rasekhi Kolokdaragh, 2010).

Scott and Tucker (1974) examined the English errors in the speech and writing of the Arabic speaking students and classified them into 14 types: "verbs, prepositions, articles, relative clauses, sentential complements, repetition of subject or object, nouns, pronouns, surrogate subjects, word order, quantifiers, adverbs, adjectives, and genitive constructions". Their findings suggested that the major sources of errors are verbs, prepositions and articles. These errors were termed as mistakes of performance, mother tongue influence/interference, or false intralingual analogy.

Ridha (2012) investigated the essay writing errors in English in the works of EFL learners and specified the errors committed by the Iraqi EFL learners, revealing that the major cause of errors is none other than L1 transfer. This is reinforced by the fact that the majority of the learners depend on their L1 when they express their ideas or feelings in L2. The study showed that different kinds of errors could be detected in the writing output of the learners' essays but out of the types of errors, the grammatical errors were considered to be the most frequent and serious ones. It was also found that their writings were highly influenced by the Arabic language. The study also discussed the extraordinary assistances to the field of language where teachers are required to give more attention to interference, influence or transfer phenomena. Furthermore, all these issues were portions of the key problems which EFL learners have to take in their construction written or spoken.

### Methodology

The researcher is a lecturer who teaches English to the students of different departments including the students of English department at the faculty. He has regular interaction with the students in the class to observe and assess their English speaking skills.

Hence, an observation method followed by the qualitative analysis of the findings has been the methodology of the present study. The assessment of the students' speaking ability can be formulated through observation in the following interactive class sessions. All the following activities are meant for the students with the guidance of the teacher researcher

1. Using reading comprehension exercises and asking the students to read the text to observe the students' strengths and weaknesses in speaking English, especially with reference to pronunciation.
2. Using guided role playing activities to observe and assess the students' skills in vocabulary, pronunciation, sentence structure, prepositions and articles etc.
3. Using the speaking activities with years and dates to observe the students' ability to pronounce the years and dates.

### Advantages of Observation method

1. It is time saving.  
The researcher gets an opportunity to get the desired data for analysis while he is engaged in interactive teaching sessions in the class. Hence, the researcher need not invest extra time for collecting data which is the base to formulate the final recommendations.
2. Most trustworthy data  
As it is an on-site method to collect data, it is mostly realistic and there is no scope for speculations. The researched observes the students in real time context and collects the data either by noting down his observations or recording the same (recording the students' speaking English texts or tasks) on electronic media.

## Findings

The following are the major findings through classroom observation while having interactive teaching sessions with the students. Most of the students face difficulties in the following areas as mentioned below.

1. Lack of basic vocabulary to express their views freely
2. Mother tongue influence on the sentence structures
3. Pronunciation difficulties with reference to some English speech sounds and multisyllabic words

## Discussion and Analysis

The findings of the study are discussed in details in the following section.

1. Basic vocabulary that is used in day to day communication.

Most of the students are observed struggling to use the right word in the right context. It is observed that they find it difficult to use even the words required for their daily communication with their fellow beings around. As part of the interaction with the students, the researcher got an opportunity to find that the students' non exposure to English speaking practice anywhere outside is the root cause of this problem. The students often say that they never have a chance to be in an English speaking atmosphere once they are out of English classroom. They also say that they never read any literature written in English once they leave their English class and most of them are not used to watch English news channels also.

2. Sentence structures and prepositions

After mastering the stock vocabulary, the next important factor that determines the level of the English language speaker is the structure of the sentence. During the observation, it is found that all most all the students are facing difficulty in expressing their views by using a right sentence structure. It is thought that the mother tongue influence is the major factor that influences the English speaking of the students.

This is found in terms of order of 'adjective' and 'noun' in a sentence. In English, adjectives always precede the nouns or other subjects whereas in Arabic, it is the reverse practice. It influences the students English speaking.

Another difficulty the students face is with the usage of prepositions. They are confused I using simple prepositions like in, on etc. For example, they say 'in' before the names of days.

3. Pronunciation issues.

- (a) With reference to /p/ sound

This is the most common difficulty of the students to pronounce /p/ sound. It is thought this is also the result of the mother tongue influence on their English pronunciation.

- (b) With reference to multi syllabic words

It is also found that most of the students face difficulty in the pronunciation of multisyllabic English words.

- (c) With reference to the /ts/ and /ks/ sounds at the end of the word

When the students are given words which end in /ts/ or /ks/ sounds, they have a habit of inserting an extra

sound /i/ between /ts/ or /ks/. For example, if they are given a word 'six' to pronounce, they pronounce it as /sikis/ where the correct pronunciation should be /siks/

4. No enough exposure to English speaking activities outside the class room.

While interacting with the students in the class, it is found that they are never used to speak English outside the class room.

## Recommendations

A foreign language aspirant should have the quality of learning and practicing it on a regular basis until he or she achieves fluency. Libyans are more talkative by nature. This particular quality can be considered the strength or a positive vibe in possession of mastery over a new language. If they apply this tendency in acquisition of a foreign language like English, they can become fluent speakers of English in a short span of time. Their only issue or the weak point is the lack of stuff (vocabulary, pronunciation, sentence patterns etc) which is very important to start practicing a new language. Lack of this stuff has been the root cause of most of the Libyan students not being able to speak English well. Hence, this study mainly focuses on this area and draws in some effective ways to obtain the necessary skills that will enhance the ability of the students in speaking English. The first and foremost requirement of learning a language is to know the basic vocabulary used in day to day communication. Vocabulary learning is important for second language learners pursuing higher education because their vocabulary size determines their effective use of language (e.g. Alderson, 2005; Schmitt, 2010). The first step in acquisition of the basic vocabulary is to identify the words that are used in daily communication. The students have to list them out with the help of the teachers and practice them regularly.

When the vocabulary acquisition practice goes on a regular basis, the scope of the students' vocabulary will increase. In fact, language learning gets momentum when there is a continuous vocabulary growth (Schmitt, 2008). With continuously increasing vocabulary stock, students find ways to express their views without difficulty though they face difficulty in speaking exact sentences in the initial stages.

In fact, vocabulary development activities should be started at school level. It is the responsibility of the teachers at school level to start the Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) which will help the students to start speaking in later stages. Thornbury (2002) suggested that teachers could introduce VLS early, so as to enable the learners to understand the significance of VLS in enhancing their vocabulary. The following are the effective ways to building up vocabulary.

- (a) Teachers can ask the students to present a new word to the class every day.
- (b) They can ask the students to watch the scrolling news on TV to find new words.
- (c) They can ask the students to read story books or news papers to pick new words.

If the vocabulary building activities are not initiated at the school level, the students will remain poor in English speaking skills even when they join universities. When they attend university and later attempt to seek jobs, they find it extremely difficult to succeed in their educational and employment endeavors (Ramanathan, 2013). This particular lack of basic vocabulary among the university students by the time they enter the universities is a major drawback in their inability to express their ideas in English. In fact, the acquisition of vocabulary not only helps the students to express their views in a normal way, gradually it helps them to be effective speakers with effective language. It is also important for students to improve their

vocabulary so that they can use the language effectively (Warrier, 2007).

Usually, vocabulary teaching starts with a list of words and their meanings individually. Generally, vocabulary teaching focuses on the meanings of words, followed by their various forms, which is important for beginners (Thornbury, 2002). There is a chance to forget the list of words and their respective meanings when they are taught in this way. If the meanings are taught in context, the students will remember the meanings easily. They can also remember different meanings of a word very easily when it is taught in the context based pattern or which is also called incidental learning. Schmitt (2008, p. 329) reviewed second language vocabulary instruction and emphasised "...an explicit, intentional learning component and a component based around maximizing exposure and incidental learning".

As it is mentioned earlier, there is no need of learning vast vocabulary for communicative purpose. Limited vocabulary is enough to express the ideas that happen in daily life situations. Once the students acquire knowledge over the basic vocabulary, they should start practicing the words in sentences. When the students undergo this practice on a regular basis, they can get fluency over the learned vocabulary. Diagnose which of the 3000 most common words learners need to study and provide opportunities for developing fluency with known vocabulary (Hunt & Beglar, 1998). Besides the stock vocabulary used in daily communication, students need to be taught the way to speak days and dates, months and seasons in a year and numbers. With reference to numbers, students face difficulty in speaking under the influence of speaking numbers in their mother tongue. Teachers should take care to avoid that influence.

Speaking is the only productive skill and the quickest way to communicate when compared to the other integrated areas of a language. According to Oxford English Dictionary, "Speaking is the action of conveying information or expressing one's feelings in speech". In order to be able to communicate and improve one's skills in speaking, one has to obtain mastery over the basic vocabulary as it is mentioned earlier irrespective of the language one learns. Limited vocabulary is enough to communicate in day to day communication. The ways to get mastery over the basic vocabulary have already been discussed above. The teachers should take care of students' constant learning and improving their speaking skills using the vocabulary the students have learnt.

However, once after getting mastery over the vocabulary used in daily communication, one has to work on improving the stock vocabulary. "The learner must attain as high degree as possible of linguistic repertoire" (Littlewood, 1981: 6). The more they speak, the more the opportunities to think about a new word that suits the most in the given context. Practice is the only way to improve skills in speaking what so ever the context is. "With practice, many students show obvious progress in their ability to express and defend ideas in debate [and] they often quickly recognize the flaws in each other's arguments" (Davidson, 1995). Acquisition of English speaking skills is as same as an infant learning the sounds, words and sentences of his or her mother tongue during his or her growth. Hence, the teachers at schools and colleges should take the initiative to engage the students in speaking activities on a regular basis.

There are more than one simple ways to keep practicing English speaking in class. Teachers can choose the best options keeping in view the level of their students. They can consider JAM (just a minute sessions) as the initial speaking practice sessions. Here, the teachers can ask the students to talk something about anything for one minute. As the time span is less, most of the students will be able to participate and speak few words at least. Gradually, the teachers can guide the students for oral presentations on the topic of their choice. "Presentations have been shown to encourage students to become active and autonomous learners" (King, 2002). Freedom given to

students to choose the topic encourages their active participation.

In the following phases of practicing English speaking; Role plays, Debates and Group Discussions can be more beneficial to the students. Teachers can plan the right activity for the right group of learners. In role plays, students will act different roles either given by their teacher or choosing them on their own. Besides developing the speaking skills, students will also develop coordinating skills as they work together before they perform an activity before the class. Debate is an activity where some students can talk on the positive side of the issue and the rest on the negative side. "Debate is an excellent activity for language learning because it engages students in a variety of cognitive and linguistic ways" (Krieger, 2005: 25).

Group discussion activity also helps students not only in terms of improving their speaking skills but also in terms of developing their listening skills. According to the Cambridge English Dictionary, the definition of 'discussion' is, "The activity in which people talk about something and tell each other their ideas or opinions". Once you listen well, you can talk well on the given topic and you will learn how to listen patiently and honor the opinion expressed by the other speakers in the group. Class room discipline, especially with those teachers who believe in traditional teaching methods, is one concern during the conduct of the discussion activities. Teachers should not be very strict in maintaining pin drop silence in the classroom while conducting the activity. "We need a "noisy classroom" to advocate active roles for students through debating and similar communicative roles" (Debbie Newman, 2010).

As it was mentioned in the findings, lack of knowledge regarding the sentence structures and simple prepositions has also been observed as one of the obstacles for the students to speak in English. Teachers can choose some basic sentence structures (subject + verb + object, subject + verb + indirect object + direct object, subject + verb + preposition + ..... etc) and make the students practice more and more on the structures till they obtain fluency. A list of stock prepositions (in, on, at, from, to, for, with etc) and their usage in sentences must also be taken care of.

Students are observed facing difficulty in pronouncing some English sounds like /p/ and words ending with /ts/ and /ks/. For instance students pronounce the word 'people' as 'beoble' (/p/ sound is getting replaced by /b/ sound). When they pronounce the words like 'cats' and 'six' they have a common tendency to insert an /i/ sound in between the last two sounds of the respective words. To be clear, for /kæts/, the students say /k ætis/ and for /siks/ they say /sikis/. To help students to come out of these pronunciation problems, the teachers have to select a list of words with these sounds and let the students practice them until they get perfection. The same is with multisyllabic words as well. The teachers have to divide the multisyllabic words into smaller parts and let the students practice the sounds in parts initially and then the whole word together. For example, if the students have problem with the pronunciation of a word like 'invigilation', it should be divided into individual syllables as /in vi gi la tion/. If the students are able to pronounce the individual syllables well, then they can try pronouncing the entire word together. Another best choice is to use the mobile phones. As most of the university students are seen using the android mobile phones these days, they can download any English dictionary which has pronunciation facility so that the students can check the pronunciation of any word with its spelling instantly.

Finally, as it is mentioned earlier in the findings, having enough exposure to English speaking and practicing it regularly are the only effective ways to become fluent speakers. In the general observation of the researcher, students of the region do not get a chance to practice English once they leave the class room. The first remedy to this obstacle is to find family members like brothers or sisters who have little exposure to English and practice English speaking at least for some time every day. Those who are not blessed with somebody to speak with them may rely on watching Standard English channels

like BBC on TV or listening to BBC radio will keep them in touch with English atmosphere even outside the class room. One more very important point to be added is that the Libyan teachers both at school and college levels better use more English when they teach though they use their mother tongue (Arabic) occasionally where the situation demands.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the researcher opines that there are certain common issues related to pronunciation, vocabulary, sentence structure, prepositions and articles that are hindering the students' English speaking ability. After assessing the students' existing speaking skills through classroom interaction and observation, some effective ways which can be more helpful to the students are recommended. These steps should be initiated by the teachers followed by the students' sincere follow up. If the above mentioned recommendations are kept in place and practiced well, the needed English language skills will certainly be developed among the students gradually and they will be able to speak English fluently. Finally, the researcher also hopes that the findings of this research can be used as a basis for the future research on the topic.

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