

## Attitudes of Saudi EFL Learners towards Speaking Skills

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### Abstract

This paper looks at intensive program students' perceptions of English-speaking skills and emphasizes the immediate need for improving them at all levels of higher education. For this purpose, 100 students (50 males and 50 females) of the intensive program from colleges of Arts, Business and Community, Saudi Arabia were administered a questionnaire. The data were analyzed quantitatively with SPSS. The findings of the study show that male and female students do not differ in their perceptions about learning to speak English and they are now becoming more aware of the growing importance of learning English. It is also found that lack of environment, interest and motivation are the most important factors that affect students' speaking skills. In addition, female students' perception towards English learning is more positive. The analysis also indicates that there is an undisputed agreement among the learners that English language will play an important role in Saudi Arabia. Finally, some implications for teachers to develop students' speaking skills are presented.

**Keywords:** attitudes, grammar for speaking, Saudi EFL learners, speaking skills, vocabulary for speaking

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## 1. Introduction

In an English as a foreign language (EFL) context, among all other language skills; Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing (LSRW), speaking is considered to be not only important but also most immediately sought after by all sections of people. There could be numerous reasons for this, such as personal interests, changes in curriculum, new socio-economic plans, more future job opportunities, and revised national development plans. As part of the current socio-economic reforms scenario, Saudi Arabia has introduced Saudi Vision 2030 and is implementing enormous changes in all sectors of development. It is one of the most ambitious plans to transform the country by preparing its youth for a promising future. One of its promises is to provide more opportunities for all through world-class education and training. On many occasions, it was mentioned that English language plays a key role in enhancing job opportunities and all efforts will be made to teach and improve English language skills of the students at all levels of education.

It is true that good communication skills are the need of the hour and most of the Saudi EFL students have realized this fact now. Need for improving speaking or communication skills is now felt by most of the Saudi EFL students as it is immediately sought after by companies in the job market. However, it is observed that some students on the intensive program lack basic competence in all language skills (LSRW). Since our focus is on speaking skills, as part of the classroom activities and also outside the classroom, attempts were made to assess these students' basic speaking abilities. Learners were asked few questions as part of the speaking classes and were encouraged to answer and speak up. To our surprise, it was found that students on the intensive program are quite inexpressive, lack confidence and lack even basic speaking or communication skills. It was rightly pointed by Alhamdi (2014a) that teaching speaking skills is often challenging and complicated process at all levels of Saudi education system. Hence, there is a great need to help students develop their abilities to express their thoughts, beliefs and experiences in an intelligent and affecting manner, as well as to help them gain confidence in themselves as they do so.

This paper, firstly, presents the theoretical framework about the importance of English speaking skills for English language learners and the role of vocabulary and grammar in improving this skill. Secondly, it puts forward the relevant literature review and research questions. The study, then, delves into the details of research methodology and data analysis. Before the conclusion, some useful recommendations to students and teachers are suggested.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study presents solid evidence on the significance of speaking skill for English learners and the role of vocabulary and grammar in improving this skill.

### 2.1 Significance of Speaking Skill

Hughes (2006) states that:

Speaking is the first mode in which children acquire language, it constitutes the bulk of most people's daily engagement with linguistic activity, and it is the prime motor of language change. It also provides our main data for understanding bilingualism and language contact (p.144).

Developing abilities to perform basic oral communication or speaking is strongly recommended. It is perceived that of all the four macro English skills; speaking seems to be the most important skill required for communication (Zaremba, 2006, as cited in Boonkit, 2010:1306). Mastering English speaking skills are vitally important for foreign or second language learners (Richards, 2008; Khamkhien, 2010). We can say that students' good communication skills are immediate evidence of sound knowledge of all other language skills. However, the distinction between competence and performance are quite clear. In other words, the ability to use language is different from the actual use of language. Therefore, Bygate (1987) has aptly put it in saying that "one of the basic problems in foreign language teaching is to prepare learners to be able to use that language" (p.3). For Saudi EFL students, to communicate in English language is a big challenge as they have a little knowledge of the target language. Hence, speaking is one of the main challenges for students in the first year programme and leads to students' frustration since the beginning of college education.

There are numerous reasons why learning speaking is important for Saudi students. As part of globalization, all countries are obliged to adopt English as an international language. According to Sayin (2015) "Good oral communication is essential to every aspect of life and work." He also says, "The essence given to speaking skills should be arisen day by day among students which is a real-life measure of learning a language" (p. 828).

Thus, it is necessary to help students develop their abilities to communicate with others, effectively, and powerfully. To achieve this end, students will have to be provided with techniques and strategies to actively perform in situations like engaging ideas, conveying information efficiently, arguing persuasively, and analyzing messages. English as a subject has been introduced at a primary level (grade 4) of education. There is a growing awareness and interest among parents, students and public in learning English for various occupational and job purposes. English language helps students to communicate and represent their culture to the world. The curriculum at college level emphasizes the need to learn English so that these students could perform better on the academic courses as they move on to advanced levels.

## 2.2 Vocabulary and Grammar for Speaking

For speaking mastery, learners need to have knowledge of vocabulary and grammar of the language. Most importantly, this knowledge needs to be practiced. Vocabulary and grammar are regarded as raw material for languages. There is a common tendency that the two fields of study are separate. However, Hunston, Francis, and Manning (1997) argue that words which belong to the main word classes (patterns) "eradicate the artificial divide between vocabulary and grammar" (p. 215).

Being acquainted with vocabulary is vitally important for mastering receptive and productive language skills (Viera, 2017 & Alqahtani, 2015). Vocabulary mastery is essential to both communication and language acquisition and lack of even basic vocabulary is one of the major reasons as to why second EFL learners lack speaking skills. "The common factor to all communication strategies is that the second language (L2) learner has to deal with not knowing a word in a second language; it is lack of vocabulary that is crucial" (Cook, 2008: 109). Revola in her study finds that the students were unwilling to speak English because they are lack of words

and phrases to express their feelings and ideas in English (Revola, as cited in Hakim, 2015). In their study on the relationship of vocabulary knowledge and speaking proficiency, Koizumi, Rie and In'nami, Yo (2013) "suggest the centrality of vocabulary knowledge to speaking proficiency" (p. 900). The greater the vocabulary knowledge, the higher speaking proficiency learners have. Khan, Radzuan, Shahbaz, Ibrahim and Mustafa (2018) prove that there is "a strong correlation between speaking proficiency and vocabulary knowledge" (p. 414). This means that there is a direct proportion between vocabulary and language proficiency. The wider vocabulary one has, the more fluent s/he is. Research shows that learning and using vocabulary is an essential component to college and career readiness.

In addition to vocabulary knowledge, one needs to improve his understanding of grammar rules and to practice using them to have high language proficiency. Without using grammar rules accurately, one might not be able to communicate the desired meaning. Dykes (2007) states that "We all use grammar from the time that we can speak in intelligible sentences" (p. 5). Mastering grammar, therefore, is the basis for language proficiency and no student can speak English well without becoming proficient at English grammar (Wang, 2010).

Thus, vocabulary and grammar are the two essential pillars that hold up languages. Words are the building blocks and grammar is the guide that shows how these building blocks are strung together to construct correct phrases and sentences. Fluency and accuracy are the outcomes of using correct grammar and vocabulary.

### 3. Literature Review

Many studies on teaching and/or learning English speaking skills, how to improve them and problems behind the low speaking proficiency of learners have been conducted in many countries whose native language is not English. In Pakistan, Khan and Ali (2010), in a study that looks similar to the present one, investigated college students' perspective on improving speaking proficiency. The study concluded that English was not taught as a language but rather it was dealt with as a subject. The majority of the students agreed that they were not given enough time to practice different speaking exercises; they could not speak because of the fear of being laughed at by their classmates; their teachers did not use English most of the time in the classroom. Some of the students responded that they could not speak English in front of their teachers.

Thirty-four students from three colleges of a major university in Iran were assigned into experimental and control group by Gholamhossein and Siamak (2010) to find out whether philosophical questions and dialogues enhanced EFL college students' speaking skill. The study proved that the students' performance of the experimental group was much better than the performance of those in the control group. They outperformed the students of the control group in fluency, range, coherence and content. However, there was no significant difference between the two groups in terms of accuracy.

Alhmadi (2014a) conducts a study on barriers of learning speaking for the foundation year students at Tibah University in Saudi Arabia. The study presents some crucial barriers for learning English speaking such as anxiety, reticence (preference to remain silent in English classes), lack of motivation and encouragement to talk in English. Alhmadi (2014b,) conducts another study on

grammatical speaking errors made by the foundation year students. The errors have been classified according to their frequency from the most frequent errors, the misuse of singular and plural, to the least frequent errors- the use of regular and irregular verbs. Alharbi (2015) explores challenges behind public school students' low speaking proficiency. She has stated that "all EFL countries, including Saudi Arabia, suffer from a lack of authentic situations outside the classroom for practising English communication skills" (2014b:106). Alshahrani (2016) conducts a study on the effects of video conferencing on Saudi EFL students' speaking skills by engaging EFL students in real communicative tasks with native English speakers. He finds that Saudi EFL students have a positive attitude towards videoconferencing as a learning tool and it enhanced their speaking skills as it "creates a realistic communications setting" (p.3).

Bani Younes and Albalawi (2016) conduct another study on the factors that affect Saudi female students' speaking performance and the difficulties they encounter when they learn how to speak English from the students and their teachers' perspectives at Tabuk University. The study shows that conceptual knowledge, lack of motivation and confidence, teachers' feedback, anxiety, mother tongue interference, short time allowed for students' participation, poor input and instructions are all factors that affect students' speaking performance. The study lists certain difficulties that students face when they speak such as "fear of mistakes, fear of criticism, the disability to think of anything to say, speak very little, their mother tongue and students' feel shy to speak" (p. 268). However, disability to think of anything to say might be attributed to students' lack of background information on the topic they have been asked to talk about. In their study on improving speaking skills through active learning strategy in Indonesia, Askia, Manurung and Wahyudin (2016) prove that speaking skills could be improved by using active learning strategy.

Elhassan and Adam (2017) conducted a study on the impact of dialogic teaching on learners' speaking and thinking skills of 2-4 year students at Sudanese universities. The results of the study indicate that dialogue and questioning skills are more effective than other dialogic teaching components. Generally, dialogic teaching is not effective unless learners are given enough time to practice the skills. This approach encourages students to be engaged in different communicative situations and enhances active interaction among teachers and learners. It is more effective with motivated and fluent students.

Al-Sobhi and Preece, (2018) investigated problems that influenced the teaching of English speaking to Arab learners at the Saudi School in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The study examines the problems that these learners had when learning speaking skills and the effect of the ESL context on the students' speaking skill. Both teachers and students had problems in their teaching and learning respectively. Problems such as lack of linguistic knowledge and confidence, and overuse of Arabic affected the students' speaking proficiency. The teaching process was influenced by the lack of teaching resources and speaking tests. Both teachers and students considered Kuala Lumpur as a good place for Arab students to develop their English-speaking skills.

In two public and private Ecuadorian universities, Encalada and Sarmiento (2019) explore EFL students' viewpoints about using self-recording videos (SRV) to develop speaking skills. The major findings of their study show that SRVs motivate students to learn English and encourage them to speak English without fear. In addition, SRVs increase students' self-confidence. Eissa

(2019) proves that by adopting digital story telling strategy, in teaching EFL learners in Saudi Arabia at Northern Border University, learners were provided with new vocabulary and proper grammar. It also helped them master stress, tone and intonation and developed their speaking skills.

Novitasari (2019) carried out a study on learners' perceptions and experiences with collaborative learning in their ESP speaking class. The study finds that the majority of the learners perceived collaborative learning positively. It reveals that collaborative learning enabled learners to work in groups, solve problems, communicate with each other, gain self-confidence that helped them practice and improve their speaking skill. The present study explores intensive students' viewpoints, at University of Bisha, about speaking skills and focuses on the immediate need for improving them at all levels of higher education.

#### **4. Research Questions**

The study attempts to find answers to the following questions:

1. What are the overall attitudes of Saudi EFL students towards speaking skills?
2. Is there a statistically significant difference between the attitudes of male and female students towards speaking skills?
3. What are the main factors that affect students' attitudes towards speaking skills?

#### **5. Methodology**

This section is devoted to present the method employed by the researchers to achieve the objectives and aims of the research.

##### **5.1 Participants**

In order to find out the factors behind the students' speaking difficulties as well as their own perceptions towards speaking skills, 100 male and female students from intensive programme of University of Bisha, Saudi Arabia were selected for this study. The students are from College of Arts and Community. Students' average age is between 18 and 20 years. All students are native speakers of Arabic and have some background of English as they studied English as one of the subjects in schools for six years before joining the university.

##### **5.2 Instruments**

A questionnaire was used in order to collect data that were quantitatively analyzed. The researchers also interacted with parents as and when they visited the department enquiring their children's progress. Such interactions added advantages to know more about learners' routine and also their academic interests outside the classroom.

##### **5.3 Data Collection**

The data were collected from the Department of English, College of Arts, University of Bisha, Saudi Arabia. Permission was obtained from the administration prior to collection of data. The questionnaire to students was administered during the regular class hours. Students were assisted with language difficulties while filling in the questionnaire.

#### 5.4 Analytical and Statistical Procedures

The data were tabulated into SPSS 22 software for statistical analysis to find out the frequencies, percentages, mean and standard deviations. Further, analysis of the exploratory factors, reliability of the components, and results of the independent t-test procedures were statistically formulated. The main aim of this quantitative analysis was to determine if there is any significant difference between male and female participants' perception of speaking skills. The findings of the analysis are presented under the discussion section.

#### 5.5 Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire was divided into three sections. The first section of the questionnaire elicited the students' gender and some yes/no questions. The second area was on barriers of speaking English and the third one was on the speaking skills remedies. Some items of the questionnaire were modified to suit Saudi Arabian context. The researchers distributed the questionnaire to 15 students as a pilot study to determine Cronbach alpha reliability scale. Then the questionnaire was distributed to all the participants. The questionnaire was translated into Arabic language to avoid misunderstanding of the items and to assure getting authentic responses.

### 6. Data Analysis and Interpretation

#### 6.1 Exploratory Factor Analysis

Male and female students were asked to rate 26 items measuring their perceptions about their English-speaking skills. An exploratory factor analysis was conducted to determine whether the number of items could be narrowed down to a few components. Principal component analysis (PCA) was used to extract the components; the scree plot was used to determine the number of components to retain. The retained components were rotated via a non-orthogonal Oblimin procedure.

The resulting pattern matrix is shown in Table 1. The five factors accounted for 58.47% of the variance. The first component (which accounted for 26.04% of the variance) consisted of the positive effects of learning English. The second component consisted of items measuring the difficulties while learning English; this factor accounted for 16.92% of the variance. The third component consisted of two items measuring embarrassment and lack of encouragement; it accounted for 6.57% of the variance. The fourth component consisted of two items indicating a preference for speaking Arabic; this component accounted for 4.78% of the variance. Only one item loaded onto the fifth component; this component accounted for 4.12% of the variance.

Table 1.

*Pattern Matrix for the Perceptions of Speaking English Skills*

|     | 1           | 2     | 3     | 4           | 5     |
|-----|-------------|-------|-------|-------------|-------|
| RQ1 | .272        | .009  | -.333 | <b>.538</b> | .275  |
| RQ2 | <b>.738</b> | .114  | -.158 | .217        | .049  |
| RQ3 | <b>.679</b> | -.012 | -.157 | .177        | -.249 |
| RQ4 | <b>.636</b> | .106  | .052  | .241        | .193  |

|      |             |             |             |             |              |
|------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|
| RQ5  | <b>.688</b> | .042        | .116        | .054        | -.167        |
| RQ6  | <b>.745</b> | -.200       | .216        | -.099       | -.098        |
| RQ7  | <b>.772</b> | .073        | -.011       | -.089       | -.007        |
| RQ8  | <b>.748</b> | .011        | .020        | .000        | .083         |
| RQ9  | <b>.775</b> | -.083       | .128        | -.080       | .035         |
| RQ10 | <b>.791</b> | -.010       | .002        | -.160       | .001         |
| RQ11 | <b>.670</b> | .082        | .045        | -.360       | .171         |
| Q12  | .383        | .270        | .238        | .105        | .029         |
| Q13  | .111        | <b>.607</b> | .054        | .139        | .065         |
| Q14  | .034        | <b>.766</b> | -.057       | -.052       | .020         |
| Q15  | .028        | <b>.841</b> | -.203       | .019        | -.206        |
| Q16  | .022        | <b>.841</b> | -.158       | .001        | -.238        |
| Q17  | -.031       | <b>.723</b> | .085        | -.166       | .071         |
| Q18  | .038        | <b>.535</b> | .317        | .057        | -.038        |
| Q19  | -.130       | <b>.703</b> | .213        | .063        | .190         |
| Q20  | -.239       | <b>.412</b> | .296        | .273        | .382         |
| Q21  | .110        | -.047       | <b>.806</b> | .007        | .012         |
| Q22  | .209        | .131        | .375        | .376        | -.239        |
| Q23  | -.136       | .007        | .202        | <b>.748</b> | -.111        |
| Q24  | .089        | .041        | <b>.699</b> | .048        | -.108        |
| Q25  | -.038       | .191        | .199        | .070        | <b>-.750</b> |
| RQ26 | <b>.623</b> | -.035       | -.054       | .157        | -.038        |

### 6.2 Reliability of the Components

As shown in Table 2, only the first two components had acceptable Cronbach's alpha. Nunnally and Bernstein (1994), a measure is moderately reliable if its alpha is .70 or higher. Because the third and fourth component had unacceptable reliability, individual items were tested separately.

Table 2

*Cronbach's Alpha for the Four Components (N = 171)*

| Variables                               | A   |
|---|-----|
| Positive effects of learning English    | .90 |
| Difficulties learning English           | .86 |
| Embarrassment and lack of encouragement | .62 |
| Preference for speaking Arabic          | .19 |

### 6.3 Results of the Independent t-test Procedures

The findings in Table 3 reveal that males and females differed significantly in their perceptions about the positive effects of learning English,  $t(169) = -2.02, p = .045$ . From the point of view of both male and female students' individual attitudinal and preferences of learning English language, it's quite obvious that they differ in their perceptions of how positively English language could

affect their present and future in all aspects. It shows that females had significantly more positive perceptions towards English learning ( $M = 3.97$ ,  $SD = .82$ ) than males did ( $M = 3.69$ ,  $SD = .90$ ). However, males and females did not differ in their perceptions about learning to speak English. This finding could be attributed to few reasons such as parental upbringing of students, focus in academics, inclination for pursuing higher education, and more career-oriented focus. An important finding is that males and females did not differ in their other perceptions about learning to speak English. This is mainly because of the prevailing same learning environment. It is true that this trait could be attributed to both male as well as female students equally. Moreover, from the findings, it could be inferred that still many students with their affluent attitude are not perfect in speaking English language. Some of the main reasons are: lack of awareness, lack of interest or motivation, lack of exposure to English, peer criticism, additional social responsibilities, non-existent of language laboratories and inappropriate guidance and support from teachers and parents.

Table 3.

*Means, Standard Deviations, and Independent t-test Results for Perceptions about Learning to Speak English for Males and Females.*

| Variables  | Males<br>( $N = 99$ ) |          | Females<br>( $N = 72$ ) |          | $t$   | $df$ | Sig. |
|--|-----------------------|----------|-------------------------|----------|-------|------|------|
|  | $M$                   | ( $SD$ ) | $M$                     | ( $SD$ ) |       |      |      |
| Components   |                       |          |                         |          |       |      |      |
| Positive effects of learning English                           | 3.69                  | (.90)    | 3.97                    | (.82)    | -2.02 | 169  | .045 |
| Difficulties learning English                                  | 2.72                  | (.95)    | 2.81                    | (.86)    | -.64  | 169  | .523 |
| Items  |                       |          |                         |          |       |      |      |
| 1 Speaking English is very easy.                               | 3.34                  | (1.31)   | 3.25                    | (1.25)   | .47   | 169  | .640 |
| 21 Classmates will laugh and make fun of ... speak English.    | 3.29                  | (1.44)   | 3.47                    | (1.38)   | -.82  | 169  | .415 |
| 22 Speaking skills are necessary only to pass the oral exams.  | 3.25                  | (1.39)   | 3.40                    | (1.36)   | -.70  | 169  | .483 |
| 23 Most of the students prefer to communicate ... in Arabic.   | 2.73                  | (1.32)   | 2.93                    | (1.51)   | -.93  | 169  | .352 |
| 24 The teacher does not encourage students to speak English... | 3.37                  | (1.37)   | 3.60                    | (1.34)   | -1.07 | 169  | .289 |
| 25 Most of the teachers communicate with students in Arabic.   | 3.01                  | (1.27)   | 2.92                    | (1.28)   | .47   | 169  | .637 |

*Note.* Higher scores indicate more positive attitudes towards learning how to speak English.

## 7. Conclusion

To sum up, the present study has similar results to the previous studies in the literature in terms of factors that affect students' speaking skills such as lack of interest or motivation, lack of supportive environment and peer criticism. The present study proved that female participants had significantly more positive perceptions of how English could affect their present and future in all aspects, but males and females do not differ in their perceptions about learning to speak English. The positive attitudes towards speaking English make it easy for students to learn the skill fluently (Syafrizal et al., 2018; Toomnan & Intaraprasert, 2015). As the study finds that students are aware of the importance of speaking skills, the researchers suggest some tips for teachers to follow when teaching English-speaking skills. Anuradha et al. (2014, as cited in Hussain, 2017) have provided significant principles for teachers on how to teach speaking skill. Some of them are:

Encourage students to speak right from the first day... Tolerate the students if some of them simply repeat what they say. If a student gives one-word answer to any question, bear it for the time being. Let the learners speak actively with whatever English knowledge they have... Be well prepared in advance in terms of lesson planning, activities and tasks. Let the learners commit errors and mistakes at the primary stage. Interruption and correction hinder fluency and discourage the learner. Individual weaknesses should be taken into account. (Hussain, 2017: 15-16).

The above-mentioned suggested remedies for improving the students' speaking proficiency need to be taken into consideration by both teachers and students. If teachers follow these tips and many other teaching speaking strategies, they will immerse students in the language and improve their understanding and fluency at a good pace, with interest. Improving students speaking proficiency requires intensification of teachers, students and education policymakers' efforts. The researchers also recommend that further studies on improving the other language skills need to be conducted to come up with a clear image on how to improve students' proficiency in all language skills.

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