

Students' Challenges in EFL Speaking Classrooms

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ABSTRACT: Speaking is considered one of the main skills of communication for English language learners. Students tend to face challenges through the process of learning and improving speaking skills. The current paper aims to study the difficulties students encounter in EFL-speaking classrooms and the major causes of these challenges. The sample for this study included six students studying the Listening and Speaking module as first-year undergraduate students for two semesters in the English department at Knowledge University. The study employed a qualitative approach using a semi-structured interview. Furthermore, it uses thematic analysis to analyze the raw data. This research paper examines the issues of speaking from students' perspectives to understand the demands and challenges of students in EFL classrooms that focus on speaking which have not been studied yet. The results of analyzing the data show that students have obstacles in EFL-speaking classrooms, like fear of making mistakes, shyness, limited vocabulary knowledge, and large class sizes. Finally, the implications of these results for both teachers and students and the limitations of the study are discussed.

Keywords: challenges, classroom, EFL, speaking skill.

1. Introduction

Learning and practicing English as a foreign language (EFL) is challenging. Therefore, learners encounter certain obstacles that could hinder the process of learning, especially communication skills which are essential tools for interaction. Brown (2007) believes that it is necessary for students who study language to be committed, manage their difficulties skillfully, and emphasize the targets (p.57). According to Bill (2001), learning the English language is problematic. Therefore, knowing the reasons that impede and hinder the learning process is significant (Shabani, 2012, p. 2378).

Learners need to have a vital role in learning communication skills because they are the interlocutors of the target language in language acquisition. Students' challenges are seen as integral parts of cognitive development. Learners consider speaking an essential skill to acquire because they think knowing the language is measured by how fluent they are in the target language. According to Richards and Renandya (2002), proficiency in speaking is the primary purpose of numerous English language learners worldwide (p. 201).

A. The problem statement

Tseng and Chao (2012) state that many researchers have emphasized communication skills, teachers' challenges, and teaching/learning approaches in preference to variables that influence classrooms (p.1844). In addition, previous studies have investigated speaking anxiety, challenges of teaching listening and speaking, teaching methods, and factors that affect learners' anxiety in language learning in the context of the Kurdistan region. However, researchers have not examined students' challenges in EFL speaking in classrooms in the context of Kurdistan. Thus, this research paper scrutinizes the challenges of speaking from students' perspectives to know the needs and challenges of students in EFL classes allotted to speaking.

B. Significance of the study

This research paper focuses on the difficulties and apprehension of speaking to students. Thus, it is significant to students since it is from the perspective of students. In addition, it may help English language teachers revise the curriculum and materials they adapt for teaching speaking. Also, University teachers need to implement in-class activities that boost students' communication skills.

C. The aim of the study

Many previous research papers focus on English language anxiety and fear of speaking; however, few studies have particularly addressed the challenges of students in English-speaking classes at universities in Kurdistan. The purpose of this research paper is to explore students' challenges and difficulties in EFL-speaking classrooms. The goal of this paper was to present some findings about the issues students encounter in not expressing themselves in English and notably what causes pupils to remain tongue-tied and speechless.

D. Research question

To find out the obstacles and barriers to speaking that face students, this research paper tries to answer the following questions:

1. What are the challenges that students encounter in EFL-speaking classrooms?
2. What are the major causes of the challenges?

2. Literature review

The use of the target language in authentic situations needs effort from learners. Stryker and Leaver (1997) have explained that "communication is very similar to learning to ride a bike or play an instrument. Despite this fact, it is generally known that the best mode to learn these skills is by doing them, and not by just studying them or doing exercises and drills" (p.1). The progress of students' level in speaking includes three main phases: awareness, appropriation, and autonomy. First, in the awareness stage, students become conscious of the attributes of the target language. Next, prior knowledge and the features of the target language are combined in appropriation. Finally, in the third stage, students tend to be autonomous and be able to use their attributes in authentic situations (Thornbury, 2007, p.40).

According to Tom et al. (2013), speaking skills could be the most challenging skill for learners to master; it is likely to cause difficulty when learners do not have good background knowledge of the English language (p. 666). In addition, speaking skill, among the four English language skills, is the hardest to acquire (Hinkel, 2006, p.114). Some factors make speaking skills so challenging to master. For example, students are afraid to make mistakes and be judged by their EFL class peers, which may lead to anxiety and lower self-esteem (Hammad & Abu Ghali, 2015, p.54). Another factor is that students are less likely to contribute to oral activities voluntarily (Bekleyen, 2009, p.672).

Koçak (2010) conducted a study showing that students become stressed and anxious in unfriendly classrooms. It is essential to consider learners' psychological well-being in learning; therefore, classrooms should be safe and sound (Trang, Baldauf & Moni, 2013, p.714). Students' positive attitude is crucial and boosts their motivation (Sunnarborg, 2002; AL-Wreikat & Bin Abdullah, 2010). Al Ansari (2015) carried out research to determine the causes of anxiety when they speak in class. The results show that one of the leading causes is that students fear the negative opinion of their peers in classrooms. Moreover, the results show that participants do not perceive mistakes as a standard way of learning any language. Instead, they believe making mistakes affects their "image" and could lead to losing face.

Spawa and Hassan's (2013) study reveals that learners' proficiency level impacts classroom activities. According to August et al. (2005), foreign language learners with low vocabulary take longer to learn new vocabulary items and are less engaged in conversation with their peers (p.54). Hamad (2013) states that Saudi female EFL learners are not proficient in oral skills compared to their performance in other language learning skills (p.92). The main purpose of his study was to determine the limitations of EFL university

learners' resistance to classroom participation and poor performance in speaking skills. According to the findings, students have difficulty speaking in classes and regard it as challenging.

The current research paper attempts to showcase the challenges and issues of EFL students in speaking classes. Even though several studies have examined the speaking anxieties of students, none emphasized the difficulties from the student's point of view.

3. Methodology

A. Research design

This study employs a qualitative design in which an interview is used to collect data. The rationale for choosing a semi-structured interview is to collect more data that could emerge with some follow-up questions (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p.319). The study aims to identify students' challenges in EFL-speaking classrooms. To achieve the aim of this research, a semi-structured interview was employed as a tool to understand and examine the attitudes of participants. The tool for collecting data is a semi-structured interview, commonly used for data gathering qualitatively in Applied Linguistics (Dornyei, 2007, p.144). Thirteen interview questions were designed by the researcher (see Appendix 1).

B. Participants

The researcher interviewed six students at the Department of ELT at the College of Education who studied the Listening and Speaking module for two semesters for the Academic Year 2021-2022 at Knowledge University in Erbil. The researcher chose participants randomly based on their interests to contribute to this study. To follow research ethics, participants read the consent form and signed it before the interview. The names of participants, responses, and information are kept confidential and anonymous. Table 3.1 shows the details about the participants.

Pseudonym	Gender	Department	Level
Ali	Male	ELT department	UG1
Karzan	Male	ELT department	UG1
Zhila	Female	ELT department	UG1
Muhamed	Male	ELT department	UG1
Hiwa	Male	ELT department	UG1
Shno	Female	ELT department	UG1

C. The Procedures of the Research

First, the participants were interviewed by the researcher, and their answers were recorded during the interview. Then, all the recordings were transcribed, and specific themes emerged from the extract themes. Afterward, the themes were categorized by the researcher. Finally, an expert researcher reviewed the research questions and themes to validate the paper's content.

D. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to code the transcription of the interviews. The rationale behind using thematic analysis for coding is that it gives in-depth details about the interviewee "Thematic analysis reports experiences, meanings, and the reality of participants or how events, realities, meanings, experiences are the effects of a range of discourse operating within society" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.9).

The data were examined descriptively, with information about each participant described. The interviews were then transcribed and evaluated for coding, and emerging themes highlighted from all participants. Then, the data were translated into English.

4. Findings and discussions

After analyzing the data, several themes emerged and indicated students' daily challenges in EFL-speaking classrooms. Through analyzing the data, questions of this study have been answered and presented via themes in the following sections.

A. The concern with making errors

Making mistakes and fearing being humiliated or mocked are the main difficulties students face. Almost all the participants are heterogeneous participants, who want to take part in oral activities; however, they cannot because of making lots of mistakes. He is afraid of being mocked and commented on as:

Generally speaking, I only participate a little. I would like to be more engaged in oral activities. However, I cannot elaborate on my answers, and I do not want to give incomplete answers. I try to speak broken English, but I feel like students are making fun of me. If I overcome my fear, I can practice speaking better. (Q.1)

Likewise, Karzan, a UG1 student in the ELT department, is afraid to make mistakes in class. Though he knew he was a weak student in class, he tried to speak with a limited register of English. According to him, being in a mixed-level classroom is another variable that increases his fear, as his clever classmates can notice his mistakes. In certain situations, it could be a mockery. Below is his statement:

I rarely participate in oral activities because I am afraid to make mistakes. I made a mistake once, and some students laughed and commented on my English. A group of students who have a strong basis and can speak English may mock my level of English, especially when I make mistakes. (Q.1)

In addition, Zhila commented, as one of the interviewees, on mixed-ability classes and mentioned it as an obstacle that increases her fear of speaking. She stated, "My major issue is that I do not want to make mistakes, yet my English is not good enough to speak up in class. My level is lower than the level of some students, so I compare myself to high-level students" (Q.1). This kind of comparison creates a more fearful and anxious atmosphere that hinders students from speaking.

This result is in line with Hammad and Abu Ghali's (2015) study. According to their results, in EFL classes, students are afraid to make mistakes and be judged by their peers, which may lead to anxiety and low self-esteem. Also, this finding corresponds to Al Ansari's (2015) findings, which revealed that one of the most common causes is students' fear of their peers' negative opinions in the classroom. Furthermore, the findings show that students do not regard errors as a natural act of learning any language. Instead, they believe that committing mistakes will harm their "image" and cause them to lose face.

B. Shyness

Shyness is another major challenge for students in EFL classrooms. Another participant is Muhamed who shows concerns about the challenges of being shy. According to Muhamed, part of this issue is the need for more practice before university. Studying English is mandatory from grade 1 to grade 12. However, students need to practice speaking, and no oral activity focuses on enhancing speaking skills. As he commented, "I do not have a good background in English, and I have not attended any foundation programs before UG1. I feel shy speaking in English. We did not study speaking as a skill or practice speaking before when I was in high school. It is a new module" (Q.1).

In addition, Muhamed, who is also another participant, believes another factor for his shyness is that both females and males are in classrooms. He stated, "Another reason for feeling shyness is we are in a mixed-gender class which is a new experience. We used to be in a single-gender class only" (Q.2).

Zhila wants to speak when she is ready. However, she becomes anxious when obliged to participate because she is shy. She states "Likewise, I feel shy to speak in class and become anxious when the teacher randomly calls upon me. Therefore, I prefer to contribute to oral activities voluntarily" (Q.2).

This result goes in line with Rafada and Madini's (2017) findings, in which around (55.2%) of respondents felt shy to speak in class in their study. Also, it is consistent with Bekleyen's (2009) results that learners in her study are less prone to volunteer to participate in oral activities. Furthermore, it is similar to the findings of Tom et al. (2013). Their findings show that speaking skill is the hardest skill to master when learners do not have good background knowledge of the English language.

C. Large class size

Overall, students believe that a large class size is another challenge because it reduces their chances of participation. Hiwa's primary concern is that the number of students in his class is thirty-eight students. There is not sufficient time to speak and participate in all orally-based activities. He commented:

I believe it is better to have fewer students in class. We currently have 38 students in the classroom, and not every student has enough chance to speak. I do not have the opportunity to participate in all the oral activities in a session. Sometimes, we should even wait for our turn to speak. (Q.1)

Likewise, Zhila noticed the same issue, and fewer students could help her to be more involved in the speaking activities. She stated, "If we are in a small class, we will have better engagements in oral activities. The time allotted is not enough for every single student." (Q.3).

Although Shno was allowed to speak as much as she wanted, she agreed that a small class size could be a better option for her as she commented, "I think I have enough chances to speak, but fewer students might be better" (Q.1).

This finding is in parallel with the results of the study conducted by Chen and Goh (2011). The results of Chen and Goh's (2011) study show that large class sizes limit the number of times learners must participate in activities and decrease the effectiveness of the practices they do. They also make it difficult for students and teachers to communicate.

D. Limited vocabulary knowledge

Lack of knowing sufficient vocabulary is another challenge for students when they try to speak in classrooms. Shno has a limited vocabulary size and cannot make novel expressions. She said, "Sometimes I want to participate, but I do not know the necessary words to make sentences. I do not know many words, and I am stuck" (Q.2).

Similarly, Hiwa suffers from the same challenge that works as a barrier to his class participation. His lack of vocabulary knowledge created a gap in his fluency. As a result, he cannot express his opinion and deliver presentations effectively. He commented, "Most of the time, I want to comment on a topic in class, especially when I deliver a presentation. I cannot express my opinions effectively because of not knowing enough vocabulary" (Q.2).

This finding is similar to the results of August et al. (2005). August et al. findings show that students are not involved in oral activities with their classmates and teachers when they have limited vocabulary knowledge. Also, learning new words and using them with their peers takes more time and effort (2005). Also, this result is consistent with one of Rafada and Madini's (2017) findings. Rafada and Madini's (2017) results suggest that not knowing sufficient vocabulary is a real challenge for students, making them more anxious when asked to contribute to oral activities.

5. Conclusion and implications

In conclusion, this study investigated the challenges of students in EFL-speaking classrooms. The findings show that students face challenges when they try to be involved in oral activities. The challenges, namely, are lack of vocabulary knowledge, fear of making mistakes, shyness, and large class size. The implications of these results illustrate that students should be exposed to the language in a positive classroom setting. Also, oral activities should reduce students' fear and shyness. Group work and pair work activities provide opportunities to utilize the language in a friendly classroom. In addition, having fewer students in a class could give students more chances to practice speaking and less room for being afraid of negative judgment from their peers. Creating a welcoming classroom environment for mixed abilities is crucial for all learners. Finally, the results of this study cannot be generalized because of the limited number of participants and the setting.

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Appendix 1: Students' interview protocol

1. What are the difficulties you may face in class?
2. What causes these difficulties in class?
3. Do you think this is a result from your low English level and proficiency? If yes, explain please?
4. To what extend these challenges have been addressed in this particular class that you attended so far?

5. Does this course meet your needs and expectations regarding learning English needed in your daily life and future career?
 6. What do you think about the course book used in this class?
 7. What are the main strengths and weaknesses of this particular course that you have attended?
 8. How often do you need to use English? What for?
- Would you like to attend the similar courses in the future? Why/ why not?