

Difficulties in Speaking English Among Iraqi High School Students at Al-Mutafawiqat School for Girls

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Abstract

In Iraq, English is a compulsory subject at schools, intended to prepare students for academic and professional futures in a globalized world. It is taught in schools from an early age. Despite this, many high school students across the country face significant challenges when it comes to speaking English. These difficulties hinder not only academic performance but also limit students' ability to engage with international educational and career opportunities. Understanding the root causes of these challenges is essential for developing effective strategies to overcome them. This study aims to investigate the common difficulties encountered by female high school students at Al Mutafawiqat secondary school for girls. It also suggests possible solutions. A survey study was designed to suit these aims. The participants of this study were 37 female students at fourth and fifth high school levels. Their ages were between (16) and (17) years old. The data was collected by using questionnaires. In analyzing data, the researcher analyzed the data based on each question and answer of the respondent. The researcher analyzed the data one by one to get the point of the research. This study has indicated that Iraqi female high school students at Al –Mutafawiqat school suffer from a high level of difficulty in speaking a second language. According to the results, the major factors that obstruct students' ability to talk in a second language were caused by linguistic and nonlinguistic factors. The linguistic factors were: lack of vocabularies. On the other hand the nonlinguistic factors (psychological factors) were: fear of making mistakes, shyness, anxiety, and mother tongue use.

Key words: Speaking, Skills, Difficulties, Students, Solutions

دراسة صعوبات التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية لدى طالبات المرحلة الثانوية في مدرسة المتفوقات الثانوية للبنات
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المستخلص

تُعد اللغة الإنجليزية مادة إلزامية في المدارس العراقية، وتهدف إلى إعداد الطلاب لمستقبل أكاديمي ومهني، وتُدرس منذ المراحل المبكرة من التعليم. وعلى الرغم من ذلك، فإنه يواجه العديد من طلاب المرحلة الثانوية في جميع أنحاء البلاد صعوبات كبيرة في التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية. وهذه الصعوبات لا تؤثر فقط على الأداء الأكاديمي، بل تحدّ أيضاً من قدرة الطالبات على التفاعل مع الفرص التعليمية والمهنية الدولية، لذلك، فإن فهم الأسباب الجذرية لهذه التحديات يُعد أمراً ضرورياً لتطوير استراتيجيات فعالة للتغلب عليه، تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى التحقيق في الصعوبات الشائعة التي تواجهها طالبات المرحلة الثانوية في مدرسة المتفوقات الثانوية للبنات، كما تقترح بعض الحلول الممكنة لتحسين مهارات التحدث لديهن. صُممت استبانة لتحقيق أهداف هذه الدراسة. شملت العينة 37 طالبة من الصفين الرابع والخامس الثانوي، وتتراوح أعمارهن بين 16 و17 عاماً. وقد جُمعت البيانات عبر الاستبيانات، ثم قام الباحث بتحليل كل إجابة على حدة، من أجل تحديد الأنماط المتكررة والقضايا الرئيسية. أشارت نتائج الدراسة إلى أن الطالبات في مدرسة المتفوقات يعانين من صعوبات كبيرة في التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية. ووفقاً للإجابات، فإن العوامل الرئيسية التي تعيق قدرة الطالبات على التحدث بالإنجليزية تنقسم إلى فئتين: عوامل لغوية وعوامل غير لغوية (نفسية) كالآتي: العوامل اللغوية: ضعف المفردات. العوامل غير اللغوية (النفسية): الخوف من ارتكاب الأخطاء، الخجل، القلق، الاعتماد على اللغة الأم. تُبرز هذه النتائج الحاجة إلى استراتيجيات موجهة لمعالجة النواقص اللغوية والعوائق النفسية على حدٍ سواء، وقد يكون من المفيد تشجيع بيئة تعليمية داعمة، وإدماج المزيد من أنشطة التحدث، وتقديم تدريبات

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لتقوية المفردات، بهدف تعزيز ثقة الطالبات بأنفسهن وتمكينهن من التحدث باللغة الإنجليزية بشكل أفضل.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مهاره، الكلام، صعوبات، طالبات، الحلول

Introduction

In the last few decades, our understanding of how second language (SL) is learned or should be taught has shifted significantly. Based on many academic researchers, the main goal of mastering any language is improving learners' communicative competence. Therefore, communicative language teaching method has become the most effected method for language instruction . Based on this , it is believed that among the four core language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—*speaking is often regarded as the most crucial for effective real-world communication.*

Goh and Burns (2012) emphasize that speaking is the most immediate and direct form of communication, playing a critical role in enabling learners to participate in meaningful conversations, classroom discussions, and professional interactions.

Similarly, Lestari (2017) argued that the capacity to convey and interpret meaning in social interactions has become a focal point in (SL) instruction, rather than just mastering grammatical forms.

Mastering speaking is not an easy job since it includes three different aspects that should be controlled by the student .The first one is the linguistic aspect that includes grammar , pronunciation and vocabulary . The second one is the functional aspect that deals with speaking performance . The third one is social norms aspects such as turn-taking, rate of speech, length of pauses between speakers.

The main focus of this study would be

investigating in –depth the students difficulties and challenges in speaking English. And what are the linguistics or non-linguistics factors that hampered the students' speaking abilities?

Value of the study

Oxford (2002) suggested many kinds of techniques teachers can use for assessing students' learning process. One of these is conducting open-ended surveys. She thinks that “Teachers should routinely conduct research in their own classroom to better understand the numerous factors which affect the choice and skillful use of learning strategies” (p. 122). After researching for any previous study about the difficulties in speaking that Iraqi high school students face , it was found that there is no previous investigation about the Iraqi students' speaking abilities . Therefore, it is hoped that the present study will fill a particular gap in the field to better inform instructors and methodologists regarding this issue. By using the findings of this study, this research will also help instructors to develop materials and teaching strategies which incorporate English skill specially to improve students' speaking skill.

Problem of the study

Many researchers claimed that its importance to enhance learners' speaking skills, since it's one of the main tools to convey any message . Moreover, academic researchers argue that speaking fluency significantly impacts learners' confidence and motivation, which in turn

accelerates the acquisition of other language domains. Furthermore, fluency in speaking can enhance listening comprehension, vocabulary retention, and grammatical accuracy, making it an integrative skill that supports overall language development. Therefore, it is designed to investigate the difficulties that influence the development of Iraqi students speaking competence in a foreign language classroom.

Aims of the Study

This study aims to investigate the difficulties in speaking that Iraqi female high school students at Al –Mutafawiqat secondary school suffer from a high level. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What kinds of difficulties do Iraqi female high school students at Al –Mutafawiqat school face when speaking a second language?
2. What are the main factors that make it difficult for Iraqi female high school students to speak a second language?

Literature Review

Public Speaking Competence

To learn any language there are four skills must be mastered, reading ,writing , speaking and listening . Brown (2001) believes that one of the most important skills is speaking, since it's an interactive activity . People can communicate their mental purpose to others , produce, receive, and analyze information through speaking. In the domain of teaching education , communication competence in general and public speaking competence in particular must be mastered .

Schreiber et al, (2012) claim that although there are different kinds of speaking competence, for

most universities it is important to teach public speaking competence which satisfies one of the main goal for higher education learning outcomes . Oksana (2013) believes that in the domain of teachers education , communication competence in general , and public speaking competence in particular, seems tom be a core learning outcome. To the best of my knowledge ,there is lack of communication skills training in Iraqi ELT universities in general and Al –kut university in particular .

Difficulties in speaking English

We can define speaking difficulties as the problems or obstacles that are presented by someone try to speak or understand spoken language . Doris and Jesica (2007) argued that language problems may become the obstacles reason for the students to improve their language performance.

There are two main factors that affecting the speaking competence development in the context of English Foreign language learning (EFL). These factors are low language proficiency and anxiety related to the speaking publicly in a foreign language classroom.

Low language proficiency. Inability to present properly the speakers' thought and ideas seems to be one of the main problem that EFL students most frequently face. According to Andrade as cited in Oksan (2013) " lack of language skills can undermine the sense of self- worth and threaten one's self -image". Moreover poor language proficiency students cannot easily understand spoken or written input . Having major grammatical errors or inability to pronounce correctly not only can disrupt the conversation but

also will be negatively evaluated by others.

Anxiety related to the speaking publicly in a foreign language classroom.

Brydon and scotte, (1997,p.g 58) defines speech anxiety as " the feeling of discomfort that people experience before or during speech in public " . A research was made by Horwitze and Cope argued that anxiety emerges while speaking or listening . All the students , who participated in the study , showed that having to speak in front of the class in the foreign language resulted in the highest level of anxiety .

Methodology

Methodology (Research Design)

The best method for answering the research questions seemed to be by designing a survey study. The questionnaire was administered to investigate the speaking difficulties that Iraqi female high school students at Al –Mutafawiqat school in the South part of Iraq face.

Thirty seven students at fourth and fifth levels participated in the study. Their ages ranged from 16 to 17 and the students who participated in the study were females.

This method of data collection was selected because it helps to measure the participants’ conscious and subconscious speaking difficulties , which would be very difficult to measure with other data collection tools, such as observations (Oxford, 1990).

In order to avoid misunderstandings when answering the questionnaire, it was illustrated to Arabic , since Arabic is the native language of all of the students in the current study.

The students were asked to rate each difficulty on a five-point rating scale in terms of their agreement from ‘strongly disagree ’, (valued as 1), ‘disagree (valued as 2), ‘neither agree nor disagree ’ (valued as 3), ‘agree ’ (valued as 4) and ‘strongly agree ’ (valued as 5), (see table one). To find out the level of speaking difficulty faced by the students, overall mean scores for each item in the questionnaire was calculated using the values ascribed to their choices as mentioned above.

These are sentences with which some people are important or not important. I would like you to indicate your opinion after each statement by putting a tick in the box to indicate your opinion

Table (1): Indicating the difficulties in speaking skill

| | |
|----------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. I do not master vocabulary in English | Strongly disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Neither agree nor disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. I often have no ideas about what to say | Strongly disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Neither agree nor disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. I am still confused about arranging words | Strongly disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Neither agree nor disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. I have difficulty remembering vocabulary | Strongly disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Neither agree nor disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree <input type="checkbox"/> |

| | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 5. I have difficulty in pronunciation | Strongly disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Neither agree nor disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. I am lack of confidence | Strongly disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Neither agree nor disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. I am afraid of making errors in class as I will be laughed at by my friends | Strongly disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Neither agree nor disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8. I am shy and uncomfortable if I make mistakes | Strongly disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Neither agree nor disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9. I am seldom speaking English in the class | Strongly disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Neither agree nor disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10. I prefer to use my mother tongue | Strongly disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Neither agree nor disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree <input type="checkbox"/> |

Finding and discussion

Students’ speaking difficulties Level

To identify the level of the students difficulties and challenges in speaking English, the mean scores

for overall difficulties was calculated for all participants. (Table 2) shows the results of this analysis.

Table (2): Descriptive Statistics: Students’ Overall speaking difficulties level

| | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|--------------------|----|---------|---------|------|----------------|
| overallmean | 37 | 1 | 4 | 3.10 | .775 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 37 | | | | |

*Note. SD= Standard Deviation

Oxford’s (1997) scoring system was used to evaluate the level of difficulty in speaking that the high school students at Al Mutafawiqat suffer from . According to this system, scale range of 1-5, where mean scores between 1-2.4 shows low level (Strongly disagree and/or Disagree), 2.5-3.4 shows medium level of difficulty in speaking (Neither agree nor disagree) and 3.5-5 shows high level of speaking difficulty (agree and/or strongly

agree). Based on the total mean score and Oxford’s (1997) scoring system, Al Mutafawiqat high school students appear to have medium level of difficulties in speaking with a mean score of 3.10. Unexpectedly ,the results revealed that almost 50 percent of the participants agreed that they felt difficulty in speaking a second language, since the participants are considered to have a high level of

proficiency in English . To some extent, this result may be due to students' not being familiar with the strategies that they can use to develop their speaking performance. In fact, there are previous studies about difficulties in speaking skill that showed the same result.

In this study , the researchers argue that the students' medium level of speaking difficulty was due to the linguistics factors and non-linguistic factors .

Hence, the result of the current study highlights the need for speaking courses to be included in the curriculum of the university and develop the students ' awareness of the variety of strategies that they can use to overcome their speaking struggles. This may assist them in finding the best speaking strategy that work for themselves and therefore improve their speaking competence .

Linguistics factors

The data reflects the mean scores of specific challenges students at Al- Mutafawiqat school for

girls face in mastering English speaking skill. The findings suggest moderate to high levels of difficulty across six out of ten areas

As shown in Table (3) below , four of these difficulties were linguistic obstacles These difficulties were (confusing about arranging words, having difficulty remembering vocabulary, do not mastering vocabulary in English (3.16), having no ideas about what to say (3.16)

Based on table 3 , the main difficulty faced by students while speaking English is "confusing about arranging words," (M = 3.34) and " having difficulty remembering vocabulary " (M= 3.33). 45 % of the students agree and strongly agree that they have difficulty in arranging vocabulary. while 37% of them were neither agree nor disagree which mean that they are confuse about this difficulty. On the other hand, while 46% of them were agree and strongly agree that they struggle in remembering vocabulary.

Table (3): The main difficulty faced by students while speaking English

| Descriptive Statistics | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|----------------------------------------------|----|---------|---------|------|----------------|
| 1. I do not master vocabulary in English | 37 | 2 | 5 | 3.16 | 1.014 |
| 2. I often have no ideas about what to say | 37 | 2 | 5 | 3.16 | 1.167 |
| 3. I am still confused about arranging words | 35 | 1 | 5 | 3.34 | 1.110 |
| 4. I have difficulty remembering vocabulary | 36 | 1 | 5 | 3.33 | 1.095 |
| 5. I have difficulty in pronunciation | 35 | 1 | 5 | 2.91 | 1.269 |
| 6. I am lack of confidence | 37 | 1 | 5 | 2.65 | 1.628 |

| | | | | | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|---|---|------|-------|
| 7. I am afraid of making errors in class as I will be laughed at by my friends | 37 | 1 | 5 | 3.00 | 1.509 |
| 8. I am shy and uncomfortable if I make mistakes | 39 | 1 | 5 | 2.97 | 1.376 |
| 9. I am seldom speaking English in the class | 37 | 1 | 5 | 3.03 | 1.433 |
| 10. I prefer to use my mother tongue | 37 | 1 | 5 | 3.32 | 1.248 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 36 | | | | |

The highest mean score points to significant difficulties in sentence construction. Thornbury (2005) states that one of the main obstacles in speaking is the real-time organization of words and grammar, which many learners find challenging due to limited grammatical competence.

Retention issues are also prominent. The results showed that the students do not only lack vocabulary, but also struggle to recall it during speaking tasks. Schmitt (2008) notes that vocabulary learning requires repeated exposure and meaningful use for long-term retention, especially in spoken contexts.

Not mastering vocabulary in English (*Mean* = 3.16) and having no ideas about what to say (*Mean* = 3.16) were also among the highest difficulties that the student faced in speaking. Students report moderate difficulty in mastering vocabulary, which is foundational to effective speaking. An equal mean score indicates that students often struggle to generate ideas when speaking. As Harmer (2007) explains, speaking involves not only linguistic knowledge but also the cognitive ability to formulate and organize ideas quickly. A limited vocabulary often contributes to this hesitation.

During the past decade, many researchers and writers have pointed to the importance of vocabulary acquisition for second language (SL) and foreign language (FL) learning and learners. Richards and Renandya (2002), for example, emphasize the role of vocabulary to develop language skills as: “vocabulary is a core component of language proficiency and provides much of the basis for how well learners speak, listen, read, and write” (p. 255). They emphasized that without sufficient vocabulary and strategies for acquiring new vocabulary, learners often learn less than their capacities and this may inhibit them from making use of language learning opportunities around them such as watching TV, listening to the radio or native speakers, and/or reading in the target language. According to Nation (2001), vocabulary is essential for all aspects of language use, especially in productive skills like speaking, where spontaneous recall of words is necessary.

Non-Linguistic Factors (Psychological Factors)

The data gathered from student responses reveal key affective and behavioral barriers that hinder their spoken English proficiency. As it was

deduced from the findings, non-linguistic factors such as "prefer to use mother language " (M= 3.32)"afraid of making errors in class as I will be laughed at by my friends" (M= 3.00) .These factors contribute to another difficulty which is a "seldom speaking English in the class " with mean 3. 03 . These difficulties were among the most troublesome aspects in second language speaking. The highest mean score indicates that students often resort to using their native language instead of English during class. This tendency reflects a lack of confidence or competence in speaking English, which aligns with Cook's (2001) findings that learners tend to default to their first language when the target language feels inaccessible or intimidating. According to Macaro (2005), overreliance on the mother tongue in the classroom reduces the opportunity for meaningful language practice, thereby impeding fluency development.

Affective factors such as fear, anxiety, and embarrassment also play a significant role. A mean score of 3.00 suggests that many students are hesitant to speak due to fear of negative peer evaluation. Krashen (1982) emphasizes the importance of lowering the affective filter in language learning, arguing that anxiety and fear can block language input and output. Similarly, Horwitz et al. (1986) note that foreign language anxiety is a major barrier to oral participation, especially in front of peers.

Students' infrequent use of English in the classroom, as reflected by the mean score, suggests limited speaking opportunities or motivation. This behavior may stem from both the aforementioned psychological barriers and a lack of structured speaking tasks in the curriculum. According to Littlewood (2007), speaking skill requires

consistent practice in communicative situations; without sufficient classroom interaction, learners struggle to develop fluency and confidence.

Possible Solutions and Recommendations

1. Enhancing Vocabulary Mastery. A limited vocabulary directly impedes fluency, idea expression, and confidence. To improve vocabulary mastery, the following strategies are recommended:

- **Contextualized Vocabulary Instruction**

Rather than isolated word lists, vocabulary should be taught in meaningful contexts. Nation (2001) advocates for teaching high-frequency words through topic-based reading, listening, and speaking activities to reinforce usage.

- **Repetition and Retrieval Practice**

Schmitt (2008) emphasizes that repeated exposure and active recall (e.g., through flashcards, word maps, and speaking tasks) enhance long-term vocabulary retention and retrieval during communication.

- **Productive Vocabulary Use in Speaking Tasks**

Students should be encouraged to use new vocabulary in oral presentations, role-plays, and discussions. This reinforces word meaning and helps integrate vocabulary into active use (Thornbury, 2005).

2. Supporting Idea Generation During Communication. Students often face a lack of ideas, especially in spontaneous speaking. This can be alleviated by strengthening their content knowledge and providing planning support:

- **Use of Pre-speaking Activities**
Brainstorming, mind mapping, and short writing tasks before speaking can help students generate and organize their thoughts (Harmer, 2007).
- **Incorporation of Visual and Multimedia Prompts**
Pictures, videos, or short reading passages can stimulate ideas and offer language input to help students express opinions or narratives (Littlewood, 2007).
- **Personalized and Real-life Topics**
Selecting themes that are relevant to students' lives increases motivation and content familiarity, thus reducing cognitive load during speaking (Dörnyei, 2001).

3. Improving Sentence Structure and Word Arrangement

Confusion in arranging words indicates difficulty with grammar and syntax. To address this:

- **Grammar-in-Use Speaking Activities**
Grammar instruction should be integrated into communicative tasks where students practice using target structures in context (Ellis, 2006). For example, sentence transformation, story retelling, and information gap activities promote correct word order.
- **Structured Speaking Frames and Sentence Starters**
Providing models, sentence stems, and functional expressions helps scaffold speech and improve syntactic accuracy, especially for lower-proficiency learners (Nation & Newton, 2009).
- **Peer and Teacher Feedback on Speaking Performance**
Corrective feedback, when done supportively,

helps students notice and correct errors in structure. Recording and reviewing student speech also allows for reflective practice (Richards & Lockhart, 1996).

To address Non-Linguistic challenges, educators can adopt several strategies:

1. **Create a Safe, Supportive Speaking Environment**
Teachers should foster a non-judgmental atmosphere where errors are viewed as natural steps in the learning process. Positive reinforcement, tolerance of mistakes, and peer support systems can help reduce anxiety (Young, 1991).
2. **Increase English Exposure and Use in Class**
Establish English as the default classroom language through clear policies and consistent modeling. Implement pair work, group discussions, and speaking games that require active use of English (Littlewood, 2007).
3. **Use Confidence-Building Speaking Activities**
Begin with low-pressure activities (e.g., rehearsed dialogues, role plays) and gradually move to spontaneous speech tasks. Scaffold students with vocabulary lists, sentence starters, and functional phrases to reduce reliance on L1 (Nation & Newton, 2009).
4. **Integrate Affective Strategy Training**
Teach students how to manage anxiety using relaxation techniques, self-talk, and preparation strategies. Encouraging self-reflection and peer encouragement can also help build self-efficacy (Oxford, 1990).

Limitation

This study is limited to the investigation of the difficulties in speaking that high school students

at Al- Mutafawiqat secondary school for girls most frequently suffer from . However it did not include both genders or all secondary schools in the South part of Iraq. The other limitation was with the questionnaire itself that was used to measure the level speaking difficulties. Although the questionnaire was adopted from previous researchers it did not include all difficulties that students may face in speaking .Also another study must have occurred to discover the speaking strategies that high –proficiency students and low proficiency students follow in learning speaking skill.

Conclusion The statistical findings, when viewed in light of current research, highlight that vocabulary-related challenges significantly affect students' speaking performance. Issues in recalling vocabulary, forming coherent sentences, and generating ideas are consistent with research that emphasizes the interdependence of vocabulary knowledge and speaking fluency. Enhancing vocabulary can lead to better speaking competence, increased learner confidence, and more successful communication in English. Also the data indicates that students face both emotional and practical barriers in developing their spoken English skills. These include:· A strong tendency to revert to the mother tongue, Fear of peer judgment and making mistake and Limited active use of English during classroom activities

These findings are consistent with prior research emphasizing the role of motivation, confidence, and classroom environment in language acquisition (Dörnyei, 2001; Krashen, 1982).

Recommendations

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