

Lack of Oral Proficiency in English among Secondary Students in Misurata: Reasons and Remedies

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***Abstract:** The study was conducted to investigate why the secondary students in Misurata were unable to orally communicate in English fluently, even though they had studied it as a general subject during their school education. The main reasons for the students' poor speaking skills are the traditional teacher-fronted method of teaching, insufficient allocation of time for oral-skills training, and the teachers themselves not taking any interest in developing oral skills. The data for the study, among other things, were mainly based on the classroom observations of the lessons presented by 12 secondary teachers at five schools over a period of more than two months. The data analysis was carried out using tables in percentage to obtain accurate results. The findings clearly proved that the points stated in the hypothesis for the poor oral production of speech by the secondary students in Misurata were correct. Based on the conclusions drawn, recommendations that can positively help to develop oral skills among the students of secondary schools were presented.*

Keywords: secondary school students, Misurata, English language, fluency

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Introduction

When the present writer chose the teaching of the speaking skill and the difficulties encountered by secondary school students in Misurata as the ultimate goal of this study, he had the following in mind:

There is a general agreement among English language teachers that the speaking skill is the most difficult skill to develop. This may be because this skill requires competent teachers, appropriate classrooms, adequate time, a variety of learning activities, and linguistic and cultural knowledge, among other things. Some of our students in Misurata are good at grammar, reading and writing, but when it comes to speaking, they cannot express themselves fluently in English. Speaking is generally discouraged in English as a foreign language (EFL) classes. Speaking in class is only used when students are called upon to repeat or recall an answer. As a result, the oral production of the target language is almost absent in English classes in Libyan classrooms.

Learning to speak in the English language is often one of the most difficult aspects of language learning, especially if the students do not live in an English-speaking environment and all of them attend schools where English is taught as one of the subjects of the curriculum. In this context, it has traditionally been very difficult to achieve good standards of oral production because the input the students receive is insufficient. In addition, it is difficult to find realistic situations that motivate the students to communicate in the target language. Consequently, students could not share ideas, exchange thoughts or even converse in the target language. The fewer the opportunities that exist for students to engage in conversation, the worse listeners and speakers they become. Most teachers lack the right techniques for teaching the four skills, especially speaking. They always cram students' minds with information and grammar.

After teaching secondary students for 10 years, this researcher, who is currently teaching the undergraduate students of Misurata University, noticed that they are unable to cope with the required level of mastering the English language at this stage. A serious feature of this deficiency is that the secondary school students cannot communicate with others orally.

A quick look at the English-language classroom might reveal these students' lack of ability. Some of them may be able to produce one sentence or more, others can answer the teachers' limited questions or even the textbook-directed questions. However, most of them cannot engage even in a short conversation or discuss a simple topic. This means that they fail to use the language fluently in classroom

interaction, i.e. they are unable to produce a meaningful utterance on their own to express their ideas and feelings or to fill an information gap.

In language classrooms, the present researcher has observed that the oral aspect of the classroom interaction is completely neglected. Teaching English concentrates on ways of providing information to students rather than on the strategy of using the language. So the students fail to engage even in a short conversation.

The main hypothesis of this study is that teaching the speaking skill is relatively neglected in our secondary schools and this is attributed to the following factors:

1. The present English-language teachers do not apply *The Communicative Approach*, which considers the speaking skill as important as the other skills; even so, the course books being used are based on *The Communicative Approach*.
2. The time allocated for teaching and learning the speaking skill is insufficient.
3. The course books may neither give the means through which speaking can be practiced nor present enough quality activities through which they cover the students' needs and make them interested in practicing speaking.
4. The teachers' lack of knowledge of the techniques and activities that could be used to improve the speaking skill.

Method

In order to determine pertinent data needed to answer the identified research questions, the present research included both theoretical and practical methods.

Theories and concepts concerning teaching oral skill through various activities such as interview, discussion, role play and the like, as well as the historical process of teaching and learning the English language in Libya preparatory and secondary schools were established through reviewed literature and studies.

For the practical part, classes in different secondary schools in Misurata were visited and observed over a period of several weeks during the school year to learn about their attitude towards the whole process of teaching and learning the speaking skill.

The main goal of the classroom observation was to have a close look at the methods of teaching speaking, to investigate the activities and techniques used by the English teachers in teaching speaking, and to find out how they deal with their students when they teach this skill. In the present study, the observation took place in five secondary schools with 12 different English teachers at different stages. Lessons conducted by 12 teachers, of whom 10 were Libyans, one was Iraqi and another was Egyptian,

were observed. All of them are university graduates. Their experience is between one and 15 years. The duration of the observation was about two months. Each teacher was observed for two periods (40 minutes each).

The classroom observation is considered a reliable source of data that can supplement other sources. Via classroom observation, authentic data on the actual teaching/learning process can be recorded in the classroom. According to Stern (1996) “we must know what goes on in the classroom in order to understand better what language teaching is really like” (p.493). Cohen (1998) states that “Observational methods rely on participant and non-participant observers to produce the data – whether from structured observation schedules, from ethnographic field notes, or from other methods” (p. 30). In participant observation, the researcher usually gives instructions to the class with the teacher, while in non-participant observation the researcher does not take part in instructing the class. The present researcher here relied on non-participant observation in collecting data because it was believed to be more reliable and accurate in collecting data on teaching methodologies.

In preparing the observation, the investigator provided a checklist to find out more about the problem of speaking.

Results and Discussions

The method of collecting data employed in this study, i.e. the classroom observations, confirms the fact that the secondary-school students in Misurata are not able to use the foreign language orally. In other words, they are unable to express their ideas and feelings or to produce meaningful utterances on their own in English. Consequently, the findings of the present study are the following:

1. An obvious dominance of the structure approach in the teaching/learning process. It is a fact that English teachers in our secondary schools emphasize the grammar rather than the speaking skill. Although the new syllabus is based on the Communicative Approach, the results indicate that teachers still cling to the traditional methods.
2. The passive attitude on the part of the students who were unable to initiate or solve a problem or even fill an information gap when they felt they needed to do so. They directly resort to their mother tongue to fulfil these needs.
3. The dominance of questions that are extremely dependent on the text material or Yes/No or one-word answers, and the absence of questions that demand the student’s self-expression.

4. Students expect their teachers just to help them learn linguistic competence and to give them as much information about the language as possible.
5. An ignorance of the speaking-activities group-work and pair-work technique in our secondary schools, which can be attributed to five factors: The first is the teachers' lack of knowledge about the methods and techniques of teaching speaking. This was obvious: While delivering the questionnaire to the teachers, most of them asked the writer about the meaning of some terms such as information gap, role play, etc. The second is the physical situation of the classes. However, the physical situation may not be a problem, especially for pair work, because the two students sitting at each desk can form a pair. Third, this useful technique may be beneficial if it is used in classes that contain no more than 20 students, but large classes are really difficult to monitor and control when they are grouped, and it is hard for the teacher to gain attention and make the students reunite for general discussions at the end of the activity. Fourth, the shortage of time is considered a vital factor. Finally, the absence of the speaking part in the tests makes English teachers neglect these useful activities and techniques.
6. The teachers' excessive use of Arabic in English classes influences the students to use Arabic in order to help themselves understand the material more quickly and more easily.
7. The occurrence of the immediate correction by the teachers leads to creating hesitant speakers. This phenomenon (immediate correction) may be because of the shortage of the period specified for teaching English, i.e. teachers may neither have enough time to wait for the students to finish the activity, then discuss the mistakes with them nor to ask for self-correction or peer correction.

Notes during the Classroom Observation

During the classroom observation, in addition to the checklist points, the researcher noticed some other points that are worth mentioning.

1. Five teachers out of 12 considered the speaking part of the course book as odd pages. When the students asked them in Arabic if these pages were important or not, they (teachers) answered (in Arabic too) that these pages would not be included in the final examination and consequently they asked their students to cross out those pages and write the Arabic word for "cancelled" on them.
2. No teacher gave the students enough time to solve a problem or to discuss anything. They just wanted the answer as soon as they finished asking the questions.

3. None of the teachers that were visited tried to draw the students' attention to the importance of speaking.
4. Although many of the speaking lessons assigned in the textbook needed to start listening to the cassettes, the teachers did not use the cassettes and recorders in class. Strangely, they never referred to the listening lessons at all.
5. It was noticed that some students used old copies of textbooks handed down by ex-students. This allowed them to provide answers that were already written in their books without thinking about the meaning or the structure.
6. The writer noticed that two teachers commented humorously on the students' mistakes instead of encouraging the students to speak in the class. This led students to withdraw from the speaking activity, keep silent and never speak again.
7. All the teachers used the mother tongue in different degrees. As a consequence, students may become dependent on the mother tongue all the time, and when they (students) try to speak in English, they will directly resort to their native language.

Conclusion

The main objective of this study was to identify the problems encountered by our secondary-school students in speaking. It was hypothesized that the inability of using the language orally in the class on the part of the students was attributed to lack of emphasis on the teaching of speaking.

The results obtained in this study showed that all the classroom activities and techniques used by the current teachers in secondary schools in Misurata are teacher-dominated and not communicatively based. Although the new syllabus is based on the Communicative Approach and most teachers agree that the assigned books are excellent and adequate for our students, the traditional way of teaching English is still in use in the classrooms of Misurata's secondary schools, which in turn does not help the students learn to speak English. On the other hand, implementing the communicative approach leads to the development of students' speaking skill. Moreover, students' awareness of the aim of learning foreign language skills, especially speaking, helps them participate actively and develops their level of competence.

One of the most important reasons that English teachers do not emphasize teaching the speaking skill is the absence of the speaking part on the English exams. Therefore, via this study, some classroom activities and techniques were as well as

the ways in which English teachers correct the students' mistakes and assess the students' oral performance.

It can be concluded that it is neither understandable nor reasonable to expect teachers to emphasize teaching a topic that is completely neglected in the examinations. If speaking were to be included on the examinations to measure the students' ability to communicate orally, teachers would certainly change their attitude towards teaching speaking, i.e. they will give it more time and emphasis because they only teach what will be tested.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the present study, the following recommendations are suggested:

- The teacher should modify his / her teaching strategies, techniques and classroom activities to achieve the new syllabus' communication-based objectives.
- Students' active participation in oral activities in a context that ensures free expression of intentions must be encouraged.
- Teachers should encourage their students to express their ideas and intentions, and the questions should elicit thinking and judgment.
- The teachers should use plenty of group and pair work that maximizes the class time available for students to speak.
- Students should not be interrupted while they are talking in order to let them to pay more attention to fluency and communicative power. However, this should not be at the expense of language accuracy.
- The teachers should try to reduce the use of the mother tongue as much as possible.
- Speaking skills should be assessed during the school year as well as at the end of the year. Consequently, students will devote more attention to the various aspects of classroom speaking activities.

- The time allocated for teaching English should be increased in order to allow teachers to have enough time to teach the speaking skill and to give weak students remedial work.
- Reduce class size to give the teacher the opportunity to teach the speaking skill by dealing with the students individually and to get more active learner participation.
- Speaking should be integrated in teaching with the other three language skills (listening – reading – writing) as well as the other language features such as vocabulary, pronunciation, etc.
- Teachers should help students overcome their fear of speaking in English by always responding to what they say with respect and encouraging other class members to do the same.
- Urgent in-service training courses are needed for those teachers who are assigned to teach this new syllabus to make them aware of the new developments in the field of ELT (English Language Teaching).

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