



International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies



Journal homepage: <http://www.eltjournal.org>

Speaking in their Language: An Overview of Major Difficulties Faced by the Libyan EFL Learners in Speaking Skill

[PP: 96-105]

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History

The paper received
on: **07/07/2014**

Accepted after
peer-review on:
24/08/2014

Published on:
01/09/2014

Keywords:

Speaking skill,
EFL learners,
Libyan students,
Mother tongue
interference,
Arab learners'
difficulties

ABSTRACT

Of the four major language skills, speaking is regarded as the most crucial and central one as it enables the learner to establish successful communication in that language, which is often the main aim of learning any foreign language. That is why it forms the focus of attention in any foreign language teaching and learning as failure to master this crucial language skill leads to the failure to establish successful communication. However, mastering this language skill does not go so easily with the EFL learners and particularly for the Arab EFL learners as many factors, including the mother tongue interference, hinder and influence the process of learning and mastering this crucial foreign language skill. The consequent result is that the EFL learners, especially Arab learners, encounter various difficulties while communicating in English and speak the language in their own way with the flavour of their mother tongue, Arabic. This problem of the Libyan EFL learners, encountered while speaking in English, is the subject of investigation in this paper. Various other problems, nature of these problems, sources of these problems and some pedagogical suggestion to overcome these problems are also some of the central topics of discussion in the paper.

Cite this article as: Pathan, M., Aldersi, Z. & Alsout, E. (2014). Speaking in their Language: An Overview of Major Difficulties Faced by the Libyan EFL Learners in Speaking Skill. *International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies*. 2(3), 96-105. Retrieved from <http://www.eltjournal.org>



1. Introduction

In the world of today, where English has become the part and parcel of every aspect of life, teaching and learning it is gaining impetus. Countries all around the world are attempting to literate their young generation in English with the aim of making them able citizens who can establish and maintain successful communication with the people of the world for various reasons. Libya, being part of this brave new world, is also doing all it can to make English the integral part of its education system. As a part of this broader aim, English is taught in schools and colleges. However, learning it does not prove to be the easy task for the Libyan Arab EFL learners who wish to learn it to establish successful communication by using it but they face many difficulties while learning, mastering and using it specially while speaking in English. These difficulties, faced by the Libyan Arab EFL learners, nature of these difficulties and the reasons behind them as well as some useful suggestions to overcome these difficulties are the focus of research discussion in this article.

2. Methodological Framework

Speaking skill, being the central and one of the most important language skills, has been the subject matter of constant discussions, debates and researches for pedagogues and language researchers for centuries. As learning any foreign language often rotates around this skill, a vast body of literature has been constantly generated on various issues related to teaching and learning of this skill. Offering a survey of all this literature about speaking skill will be highly impossible understanding the limits of this research article. However, attempt has been made to look at the current topic in the light of very closely associated works.

It is known fact that learning English as a foreign language often does not go down well, principally in the Arab countries,

where there are very restricted opportunities of practicing it. Due to the lack of required exposure and opportunities to use and practice it, learning and mastering this skill becomes highly difficult often leading to the conclusion among the learners that English is very difficult language resulting in frustration and failure. This has been reflected in various studies on the problems faced by the Arab EFL learners. Be it the discussion of problems faced by Arab learners of English both in speaking and writing (Abdul Haq, 1982 and Harrison et al, 1975, or just lexical errors (Zughoul, 1985), or syntactic errors(Kambal, 1980), or Pronunciation and performance related errors (Mukattash, 1983, or motivation related problems (Suleiman, 1983; Zughoul, 1985, 1987; Ibrahim, 1983) to mention a very few. Studies like these do offer a glimpse into the nature of the problems prevailing among the Arab EFL learners for years.

With such survey in background, the present paper aims to look at the problems and difficulties faced by the Libyan Arab EFL learners. The study is based on the researchers' observation of the students' difficulties and problems in speaking English. As faculty at the department of English, teaching courses in speaking skills for years, researchers observed the problems encountered by the Libyan EFL learners in speaking and felt the need to investigate it in order to understand the problem in more detail, to share with others, and with the aim of making some useful pedagogical suggestions to help overcome this problem. The most recurring problems, and examples related to them, were noted down and are used in the paper to substantiate the claims in the study.

3. The Arab EFL learners' Difficulties in Speaking Skills

Various studies by scholars like Mukattash (1983); Suleiman (1983); Zughoul (1985, 1987); and Ibrahim (1983)



find that most of the Arab students' problems are due to the reasons such as: a) students' lack of information regarding the university or college they are enrolled in; b) deficiency in the English language curricula offered by some schools and universities; c) awful teaching methodology; d) problems with proper language environments; e) lack of personal impetus on the part of the students; f) mother tongue interference etc. In most of the Arab countries, English subjects are only studied in schools, and that too in a very unprofessional manner and for a quite limited period which make learning and practising English more difficult for the Arab EFL learners. Role of mother tongue interferences in different language aspects and skills has also been investigated in this regard by various scholars like Alam (1983); Wilkins (1972); Mark (1970); Kachru (1980); Bernstein (1974); Gardener (1960); Golding (1965); Khan (1995, 1997, 2000, 2003, 2005) and was found to be one of the reasons for difficulties faced by the EFL learners in speaking.

4. Overview of Major Difficulties Faced by the Libyan EFL learners in Speaking

The Libyan EFL students face different problems in speaking skill. From the observation and the personal experiences of the researchers, first as EFL learners and then as EFL teachers, it can be said that most of the problems faced by the Libyan EFL learners are related to pronunciation, use of adjectives, erroneous use of grammatical and syntactic rules, prepositions and idioms, negative transfer and semantic errors. Each of these is briefed below with examples recurred in the speech of the Libyan EFL learners.

4.1. Pronunciation related Problems

One of the problematic areas for the Libyan EFL learners is the pronunciation of English words. This may be, primarily, due to the differences in the sound systems of the two languages. As various English sounds do not exist in Arabic language,

nearby sounds in Arabic are used to replace them or sound like that. For example, Arabic language does not have these sounds in English- consonants such as: /p/, /v/, /t/, /d/, /tʃ/, /dʒ/, ;vowels such as: /ə/, /ʊ/, /ɜ:/ and diphthongs such as: /eɪ/, /aɪ/, /aʊ/, /əʊ/, /eə/, /ʊə/, /ɪə/. These differences in the sound systems affect the pronunciation of English words by the Libyan EFL learners. For instance, the absence of sounds like /p/ confuses the Libyan EFL learners since they comprehend it as /b/ (nearby, similar sound from Arabic) and also pronounce it as /b/. This is evident when one listens the Libyan EFL learners pronouncing *pen* as /ben/, *problem* as */brɔblem/. As the sound /v/ also does not exist in the Arabic sound system, it is always substituted by the Libyan learners with the sound /f/ and can be heard pronouncing *have* as */hæf/. The sound /ə/also causes a problem because it does not exist in the Arabic language for example, "i" in "*possible*" is pronounced /ə/ but unfortunately most students pronounce it as */pɔsɪbul/ or */pɔsɪbul/ and the word "*mother*" is pronounced as */mɔder/.

Some pronunciation difficulties are also due to varied pronunciations of teachers. In Libya, EFL teachers of various nationalities are employed. One can find Arab, African, Filipino, Indian EFL teachers in Libya. The pronunciations of these EFL teachers are quite different from standard RP. These differences also contribute in learning erroneous pronunciation. In addition to this, the learners watch Hollywood movies and try to master the American pronunciation. This is quite clear when one find the Libyan EFL learners pronouncing words like *girl* as /gerl/, *verb* as /ferb/, *dance* as /ðæns/, *can't* as /kænt/.

Like other EFL learners, the Libyan EFL students, try to compare any sound of English they learn with the sounds of their mother tongue, Arabic, while learning and



practising pronunciation. When the sound does not exist in their mother tongue, they do not easily comprehend and master that 'new sound' and try to substitute it with similar or nearby sound from their mother tongue, which is Arabic. In addition to these, the Libyan EFL learners also face many difficulties with aspects like accent, stress etc. Lack of native speakers, as teachers, and any other similar environment to learn, master and practise such aspects of pronunciation also contribute to this problem faced by the Libyan EFL learners.

4.2. Problems Related to the Use of Adjective

Another problematic aspect of EFL learning for the Libyan learners is the use of adjectives. Most of the Libyan EFL learners do not learn English as a language which is completely independent and different from Arabic. They wish to learn it with the background of Arabic which often makes one to say that they speak English, not as English, but in their own language with flavor of Arabic. Their mother tongue not only interferes, with the sound system, in their pronunciation of English but also in the syntactic aspect. While constructing phrases and sentences, they tend to use the structure in Arabic regarding the use of adjectives into English.

In Arabic, adjective comes after the noun [N+Adj]; opposite to English, in which adjective comes before the noun. This difference results in negative transfer and one finds the Libyan EFL learners saying *number telephone* (رقم تلفون) [instead of *telephone number*], *teacher English* (أستاذ انجليزي) [instead of *English teacher*]. Therefore, sentences like **She is girl beautiful*, **my mother is teacher English*, **give me your number telephone* are quite common amongst the Libyan EFL learners due to misplacing of adjective. Another challenge is to use adjectives in proper order as they get confused. For example, the use of adjectives like- *beautiful, gold, little,*

Italian. The most recurred patterns were the following when asked to use these adjectives to describe noun *dishes*.

* The gold beautiful little Italian dishes.

or

* The Italian gold little beautiful dishes.

In Arabic, any order of adjectives is acceptable; however, in English the adjective order is not random as one has to follow certain order (Quantity or number, Quality or opinion, Size, Age, Shape, Color, Proper adjective (often nationality, other place of origin, or material), Purpose or qualifier) and thus the correct order will be:

The beautiful	little	gold	Italian	dishes
Quality	Size	Colour	Nationality	noun

4.3. Grammatical/Syntactic errors made by the learners

Libyan students face a lot of problems in speaking due to the grammatical and syntactic errors as well. They have problems with the use of indefinite articles (a, an) as they do not exist in Arabic, leading to their omission while English requires them in speaking/writing. One would listen most of the Libyan EFL learners saying ** This is interesting story* by omitting the article instead of *This is an interesting story*.

Libyan students also fail to use and understand tenses in English such as the present perfect tense and the past and present continues tenses. Again the reason behind this failure to master these tenses is the lack of these tenses in the Arabic language. Libyan learners do not use these tenses/ get confused while using these tenses while speaking as they fail to understand their uses. Arabic grammar is quite different from the grammar of English especially in the order of parts of speech such as the place of subject, object, verb, noun, etc. For example, in Arabic, in the present tense, we form the sentence as: "يأكلُ أحمدُ التفاحة:"

Verb + Subject + Object
يأكلُ أحمدُ التفاحة

While in English, this sentence is written as *Ahmed eats an apple* with structure-

subject + verb + object.

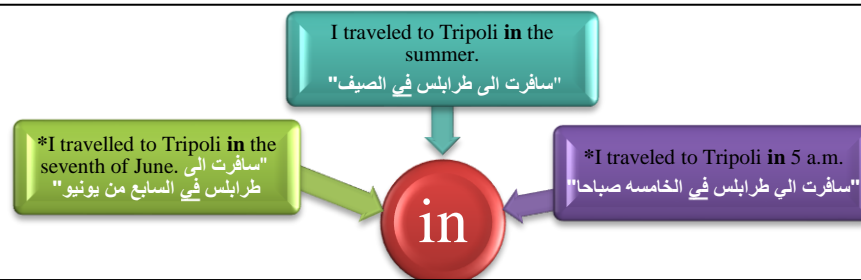
Such difference in structures often leads to the Libyan EFL learners to produce sentence in English like- *Eats Ahmad the apple due to negative transfer.

4.4. Problems related to the use of Prepositions

The system of prepositions, with differences in Arabic and English languages, is another problematic area for the Libyan

EFL learners. Preposition in Arabic are less and limited compared to the prepositions in English. The prepositions in Arabic include- *Min, Ela, Ala, Fi, Ba, Kaf, Lam*, etc. While speaking, many students prefer to translate preposition into Arabic which leads to the confusion and error. Some examples of misuse of English preposition *in*, due to literal translation, are presented in the following figure-

Figure 1: misuse of prepositions "in"



This figure shows the wrong translation of the preposition "*fi*" in which students translate it, in all the sentences, as "*on*". The proposition "*Fi*" must be translated

differently into prepositions like *on, in* and *at* keeping in mind the context of use as is shown in the following table.

Table 1: Proper use of Arabic preposition في [fi]

English correct translation	Arabic
I travelled to Tripoli on the seventh of June	سافرت الى طرابلس في السابع من يونيو
I traveled to Tripoli in the summer	سافرت الى طرابلس في الصيف
I traveled to Tripoli at 5 a.m.	سافرت الى طرابلس في الخامسة صباحا

Another example is Arabic preposition *على* "*Ala*". The Arabic preposition *على* [*Ala*] can be translated as *on, over, at, off, onto, above* depending on the context of use. However, most of the Libyan EFL learners get confused with it and think that *على* can be translated only as *on* in all the contexts resulting in wrong sentences such as *The thief jumped on [over]the wall, The bird flies on [above]the building, The water spills on [onto] the floor* etc.

4.5 Problems in the use of idioms

Like any other EFL learners, Idioms of English are problematic for most of the Libyan learners as learning idioms requires a lot of knowledge about the unique meaning of them. According to Al-Shawi and Mahadi (2012), an idiom is a form of speech or an

expression that is peculiar to itself. It is known fact that most idioms cannot be understood if they are translated literally and this becomes another problematic aspect for the Libyan EFL learners while trying to learn, understand or translate them literally. This problem is primarily due to the differences in cultures- Arabic & English. Though some idioms like *Reading between the lines* are easy to understand as they are similar to the idioms in Arabic like- *القراءة بين السطور* which means "finding the real message in what you're reading or hearing, a meaning that is not available from a literal interpretation of the words". However, there are many idiomatic expressions which pose challenge to the Libyan EFL learners as no equivalent

translations of them, in the Arabic, are available and also due to differences in the cultures. For example, *fighting chance* which means (having a reasonable possibility of success) is misunderstood and translated literally, and thus wrongly, as قتال فرصة (a chance for fighting). Some other problematic and wrongly translated idioms include- *Give someone a piece of your mind* which means (criticizing people strongly and angrily). The Libyan EFL learners translate it literally -

قم بإعطاء شخص ما قطعة من عقلك and sometimes ask "How can I give someone a piece of my mind? which often sounds quite weird to the listener. The idiom *Let the cat be out of the bag* which means (revealing the secret) is often translated as-

دع القطعة تخرج من الحقيبة and is misunderstood as an order to release a cat which is there in the bag.

4.6 Semantic Errors (errors in collocation)

A semantic error can be defined as a violation of the rules of semantic system particular to English language. Insufficient knowledge of English collocations is one of the reasons behind making semantic errors while speaking. Collocations are the groups of words which commonly go together such as, *life and death, piece of advice, commit suicide*, etc. This aspect of English language is another problematic area for the Libyan EFL learners. This is because, they do not know how to associate/ collocate words as most of the learners prefer to use a word that appears to be semantically suitable. Some examples are illustrated in the following figure.

Figure:2 Semantic Errors by the Libyan EFL learners

▶ Do a homework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Libyan students always say <i>"make a homework"</i> instead of saying <i>"do a homework"</i>. The understood cause behind this problems is that the Arabic translation of both verbs- "do" and "make" is same= "يفعل". For example one can often listen them saying <i>"I will <u>make</u> (do) my homework tomorrow"</i>.
▶ Knowledgeable person	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Libyan EFL learners often say <i>"educated person"</i> instead of "knowledgeable person" as a direct translation of "إنسانٌ منقَّب". For example one can listen them saying- <i>"Mohammad is an <u>educated</u> (Knowledgeable) person."</i>
▶ Beautiful teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many Libyan EFL learners face problems while using the adjective <i>"Beautiful"</i>. Most of the time, they use it in a wrong way. For example, while appreciating a teacher (male/female), one would listen them saying - <i>"Teacher you are very <u>beautiful</u> (Kind, nice) person"</i>. What they really mean to say here is- <i>"Nice/kind"</i> but used the adjective -<i>"beautiful"</i> as all these adjectives would mean the same in Arabic= "رائع".
▶ I love/like you	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sometimes, a teacher gets embarrassed when his/her student says- <i>"Teacher I love you"</i>. What they mean to say is- <i>"I like you" / "I like your way of teaching"</i> leading to many misunderstandings. In English, there are different meanings of these verbs of emotions (like, love). However, in Arabic, both verbs would have the same translation "أحب".

4.7 Other problems

There are some other problems as well including- lack of vocabulary, fear /

embarrassment while communicating, lack of interest and motivation, lack of practice/ lack of environment for practice, misconceptions about the target language etc.

5 Reasons/ Sources behind the problems

The Libyan EFL learners face various problems in speaking due to different reasons. Some of the factors, which contribute to these problems, are presented in the following figure and are discussed below-

Figure: 3 Reasons/Sources behind the problems faced by the Libyan EFL learners in speaking



The figure above offers a glimpse of some of the reasons behind the problems faced by the Libyan EFL learners in speaking skills. Differences in the language systems- mother tongue Arabic and target language English- and the negative transfer from Arabic into English by the Libyan EFL learners seem to be the main reasons behind most of the problems faced by them. Their failure to accept the fact the English is completely different language with its own systems and rules can be called as the primary source behind most of the errors in their speaking. They tend to learn English with Arabic in background which influences almost every aspect of their language including pronunciation, structuring etc.

Instead of looking at English language through Arabic language goggles, they need to learn to look at and learn English as an independent language with its distinct language system and rules. Their failure to recognise this is primarily because of the failure on the part of their teachers to make them understand this fact at the very early stage of their learning. And this failure on the part of the teachers is because of the facts that most of the EFL school teachers in Libya are neither trained properly for this reason nor are their skills upgraded. No specific EFL teaching courses are seriously taught and implemented which results in having ill trained EFL teachers at the school level where the foundation of the Libyan



EFL learners is laid. As the learners imitate their teachers so do the Libyan EFL learners. However, lack of ideal environment and teachers to imitate lead to beginning of faulty learning of English. Neither native speakers are available as teachers nor are the teachers who are trained and skilled by the native speakers. This results in learning English in the way it is understood and taught by the Libyan Arab teachers of English. And this is what the Libyan EFL learners try to do while speaking- they speak English in their own way.

The lack of ideal teaching and learning environment also contributes to the problems faced by the Libyan EFL learners in the speaking skill. Unrestricted use of Arabic in English classes in the schools, lack of familiarity with effective teaching approaches, lack of much required teaching infrastructure etc lead to the faulty teaching environment which in return results in lack of interest, lack of motivation on the part of learners. Though attempts have been made by the authority to provide good syllabus and teaching material for the teachers at the school level, attempt has not been done to train teachers in imparting effective and dynamic teaching. This results in teaching language skills by disintegrating them and in limited time which often do not contribute to create ideal learning environment. Nor do learners get many required opportunities for practising their language which results in only reception and no production. Nor is the situation much promising at college/university level. Lack of unified syllabus, lack of native speakers as EFL teachers, lack of well equipped, operational language labs, restrictions of teaching time and lack of much required English language learning and practising environment contribute to the problems of the Libyan EFL learners at the college/university level.

As mentioned in the earlier sections, lack of unified model to follow, learners often get confused with various

pronunciations- Arab, African, Indian, Filipino etc. and often end up in learning wrong pronunciation. Their quest to find native-like English language learning and practising environment often takes them to watch English movies, chat with people using various social networking sites. However, the diversity of such resources and no ideal model like RP to follow, they end up in learning various accents such as American, Australian, British, Canadian, Indian etc.

6. Conclusion & Pedagogical Suggestions

Learning any foreign language is not always so easy task particularly when the much required essential infrastructure, resources and teaching, learning and practising environment are not available. This is the case with the Libyan EFL learners and the result of which is they face various problems while learning English and particularly in speaking skill. Their speaking skill is influenced by their mother tongue, and due to various factors specified above. All these lead them to commit errors in almost every aspect of their language use including pronunciation, sentence construction, proper collocation, use of adjectives, preposition, idioms etc. The major problems faced by the Libyan EFL learners were classified and discussed along with the reasons/ sources behind these problems in the earlier sections of the article as outlined in the introduction. Though some problems and reasons behind them seem similar to the EFL learners from other countries (Abdul Haq, (1982); and Zughoul (1984); some problems and reasons behind them are quite unique and restricted to the Libyan context only and therefore they require separate, different efforts to overcome these problems.

Suggestions

After discussing problems faced by the Libyan EFL learners in speaking, and the reasons behind them, it is suggested that certain efforts need to be taken by all those



who are connected with the problem under investigation to help overcome this problem. EFL teachers in the Libyan schools need to be given intensive training in teaching English as a foreign language. It is because of the fact that the Libyan EFL learners start learning English from the schools and once their foundation in English is done perfectly; it would help in overcoming various problems at the later stage. The training of the Libyan EFL school teachers, preferably, should be done by the Native speakers and emphasis should be on teaching those aspects of English which make it different from Arabic. The EFL teachers should also emphasize on the sounds and patterns which are not available in Arabic and train the EFL learners at this early stage in these aspects making them realise that English is completely different language with various completely different systems.

The Libyan EFL learners should be offered enough opportunities in listening and practising those aspects of English which make it different from Arabic. Communicative and interactive language teaching and learning strategies need to be encouraged and practised in order to offer the Libyan EFL learners with adequate opportunities to use and practice the target language in relatively comfortable environment. A unified syllabus needs to be encouraged in order to bring uniformity in various colleges/ departments of the university such as Sebha University. While recruiting EFL teachers at the university level, focus should be on assessing pronunciation related aspects of the teachers from various nationalities. Systematic efforts must be done to build vocabulary of the Libyan EFL learners, with focus on various aspects related to it such as synonyms, antonyms, hyponyms, homonyms, collocations etc. Using contrastive analysis approach, focus must be on teaching those aspects which make Arabic and English different in a very

systematic way so that the learners understand how English is different and how various aspects in it should be treated and used differently in order to be appropriate and accurate. The Libyan EFL learners should also be careful while finding resources online in order to learn and practice English. They should attempt to learn only Standard English from authentic Native Speakers either from America or Britain in order to avoid confusion in different pronunciations and accents.

It is believed that with simple but serious attempts by all those who are directly or indirectly related to the problem investigated, the problems of the Libyan EFL learners in speaking skill can be overcome. Failing to solve the problem by all or some who are related/ connected with this issue will only make the Libyan EFL learners speak English in their own language in their own style.

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