

Difficulties and Weaknesses of Speaking Skill among Iranian EFL Learners: A Review Article of Speaking Obstacles in Applied Linguistic Students

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Abstract

Speaking skill is considered as a challenging skill for all language learners, especially non-native EFL learners. Non-native language learners, specifically, university level students, experience many difficulties and weaknesses in way of developing or improving speaking skill. According to the importance of speaking in means of communication and improving the related issues in spoken language, the present study reviewed twenty applied linguistics papers related to the speaking skill in order to classify and find problematic parts among university students. In other words, twenty papers which are related to the speaking difficulties and weaknesses were reviewed the university level students (applied linguistics students in Iran) in particular to enrich the review of article. According to previous studies, these applied linguistic learners (as EFL learner) can have problem in linguistic variables such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and intonation; psycholinguistic variables like anxiety, self-

confidence, and shyness, and also sociolinguistics variables such as culture, identity or sense of agency and etc. Moreover, educational related problems such as insufficient courses and lack of teachers' proficiency can put the learners in trouble. The main findings of this study can create a path toward improving and solving the difficulties and problems in speaking related issues in language studies.

Keywords: Difficulties, Weaknesses, Speaking Skill, EFL Learners, Applied Linguistic Students, Iran

1. Introduction

In today's modern world, learning languages, especially English, is one the main priorities of individual who wants to communicate with other people but learning a language is not always an easy task (Riadil, 2020). Learning English for non-native learners has been associated with challenges and difficulties which should be considered in order to improve the level of learning among these groups (SoodmandAfshar & Rahimi, 2016; Hayati, 2008). More particularly, speaking is one of the four macro language skills that should be improved in English for Foreign Language Learners (EFL) especially in non-native countries where people don't access to feedbacks and real context (SoodmandAfshar & Asakereh, 2016).

According the importance of speaking and purpose of communicating in English, many linguists and experts believe that speaking is

one the essential skill for each language learner in every stage of education, for instance in schools, language institutes or even in university level, specifically for applied linguistics students (Hayati, 2008; Ahmed, Pathan, & Khan, 2017). Although speaking by the means of communication is necessary for everyone, applied linguistic students should focus more on the speaking skills because they should represent the accurate and fluent way of speaking among non-native learners (Copp et al., 2021). Unfortunately, many studies revealed that applied linguistics as university EFL learners are not successful in speaking skill and they experience many difficulties and challenges during their education in universities where non-native context can change their potentiality to learn English (SoodmandAfshar & Asakereh, 2016; Zyoud, 2016). According to previous studies, these applied linguistic learners (as EFL learner) can have problem in linguistic variables such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and intonation; psycholinguistic variables like anxiety, self-confidence, and shyness, and also sociolinguistics variables such as culture, identity or sense of agency (SoodmandAfshar & Asakereh, 2016; Zyoud, 2016; Hayati, 2008; Ahmed, Pathan, & Khan, 2017). Moreover, some others believe that many speaking related problems are caused from educational systems problems such as insufficient courses and lack of teachers' knowledge (SoodmandAfshar & Asakereh, 2016). In other words, the mentioned variables or problems in EFL learners can be considered as necessities for being reflective and effective learner in the process of language learning but recent studies showed that EFL learners specially Iranian EFL learners in university level as applied linguistic students. Some experts believe that, applied linguistics students may face these

problems in a way of developing their speaking skills which should be considered in future research by linguists and scholars in the field of applied linguistic studies (Riadil, 2020; Al-roud, 2016). In other words, reviewing the faced problems in a way of improving speaking skill can help researchers to focus on the main issues and find a way in order to overcome these challenges. Recent studies manifested that finding problems in speaking skills particularly in non-native countries, like Iran, can be considered as first step in improving teacher and learner education (Alroud, 2016).

By all these mentalities and considering the importance of speaking as a skill in non-native contexts, this study reviews some problematic and challenging parts in Iranian EFL learners' speaking skill. More particularly, this study considered Applied Linguistics students who learn the knowledge of teaching English in university level in Iran. To achieve the objective of the study, this study encounters with certain issues and problems in these learners which can prevent them from communicating effectively.

2. Review of the Related Literature

In this part of the paper, some theoretical background issues are explained by the researchers to enrich the basis of the study and identify clues for finding EFL learners problems in speaking skill.

2.1. Theoretical Backgrounds of Speaking Skill

Regarding speaking ability and spoken skill, there have been presented several theories which indicate the capacity of learners to produce language. One of the most preliminary theories in this term is, according to Austin (1975), which elaborates on 'speech acts' in speaking. Speech act is the intention of the speaker and the influence on

the listener that contains answering, promising, apologizing, etc.

According to Austin (1975), who presented the theory of speech act, there are three types of speech acts: (1) locutionary, (2) illocutionary, and (3) perlocutionary; each is needed to be defined (Christison, 2018). Locutionary speech act is the utterance that is based on performance engaging both speaker and listener; while illocutionary act, according to Austin, is doing by saying; as acted and performed in speaking which is in contrast with locutionary act. And finally perlocutionary act is the influence of the speaker's speech on the listener, i.e. what is affected on the audience.

Considering that one of the most important and difficult skills in teaching English is speaking skill; Nunan (1999) states that language can be orally divided into two parts: monologue and dialogue. Monologue has only one speaker while dialogue has more than one speaker. Furthermore, according to Nunan (1999), based on the theory of behaviorism and audio-lingual method, students need to make a habit formation of the target language and finally they should interact and communicate with the language that they are engaged with; corresponding 'communicative language teaching'. Based on Edge in Penedidikan (2012, p.19) language production (speaking) has the following abilities:

- "1) Develop meanings logically and clearly
- 2) Express unambiguously the function of what one says or writes
- 3) Use language appropriate for the people one is addressing" (Edge cited in Penedidikan, 2012, p.19)

Moreover, according to Brown as cited in Penedidikan (2012), there are sixteen micro skills of oral communication (speaking) which are as:

- 1) Produce chunks of language of different lengths,

- 2) Orally produce differences among the English phonemes and allophonic variants,
- 3) Produce English stress patterns, word in stressed and unstressed positions, rhythmic structure, and intonational contour,
- 4) Produce reduced forms of words and phrases,
- 5) Use an adequate number of lexical units (words) in order to accomplish pragmatic purposes,
- 6) Produce fluent speech at different rates of delivery,
- 7) Monitor your own oral production and use various strategic devices pauses, fillers, self-correction, back tracking-to enhance the clarity of the message,
- 8) Use grammatical word classes, systems, word order, patterns, and elliptical forms,
- 9) Produces speech in a natural constituents-in appropriate phrases, pause groups, breathe groups, and sentences,
- 10) Express a particular meaning in different grammatical forms,
- 11) Use cohesive devices in spoken discourse,
- 12) Accomplish appropriately communicative functions according to situations, participants, and goals,
- 13) Use appropriate registers, implicature, pragmatic conventions, and other sociolinguistics features in face to face conversation,
- 14) Conveys links and connection between events and communicate such relations as main idea, supporting idea, and new information, give information, generalization, and exemplification,
- 15) Use facial features, kinesics, body language, and other non-verbal cues along with verbal language to convey meanings,
- 16) Develop and use a battery of speaking strategies such emphasizing key words, rephrasing, and providing context for interpreting the meaning of words, appealing for help, and accurately assessing how well

your instructor is understanding you. (Pendidikan, 2012, p. 19-20)

2.2. Empirical Studies about Speaking Skill

As stated above, speaking skill is one of the most difficult and challenging skills in learning a new language. Perhaps, it would be the last skill which is adopted by the learners after writing, reading and listening. So, many theories in the area of speaking skill and teaching spoken chunks have been exposed by several scholars. Thus, there are numerous difficulties, weaknesses and challenges in the process of teaching and learning speaking skill, especially among EFL university students, that is the concern of the present study.

Numbers of studies, in this term, revealed the difficulty and weakness points of the learners to get this skill such as: Nazara (2011), Dincer and Yesilyurt (2013), Gürler (2015), Hanifa, (2018) and Akkara, Anumula, and Mallampalli (2020) that all represented the both perspectives of teachers and learners about speaking skill and that the majority of the learners escape from oral communication based on their fear, anxiety or lack of confidence in producing output.

In general, mentioned practical studies have shown the importance of teaching speaking skill in suitable ways so that the learners can overcome their fear and weak points in speaking. Hence, the present research gathered the findings of the previous ones and categorized them in order to clarify the reasons of the problem in learning speaking; that is seeable in 'Results and Findings section'.

3. Method

This section is organized into following sub-sections. The first sub-section presents information about the corpora in the current study. The second sub-section devoted to the design of this qualitative research. The third

sub-section deals with the procedure of the study.

3.1. Corpora

This research was based on analysis of a written text corpus of 20 research articles in the field of applied linguistics by focusing on the issues of speaking and speaking problems in EFL learners specially university students who are known as applied linguistic learners. The corpora of this research study were derived from the papers published between the years 2010-2021. More specifically, it included 20 Applied Linguistics research articles which had been published by Iranian writers in this period. The international journals in the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) were included like Journal of language and Social Psychology, Issues in Educational Research, International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature, International Journal of Foreign Language Teaching and Research, and etc. It should be noted that the criteria of using these articles were the novelty and relevance of the topic with speaking and easy accessibility of the papers. In other words, the researcher selected the articles based on their topics which were new and related to the speaking problems among university level students. Moreover, the accessibility of the articles in case of downloading them was used as other criteria.

3.2. Design of the Study

Descriptive and comparative design was employed for the purpose of this study. This research described a demographic segment of the subject of the research, without focusing on "why" it happens but gave descriptive answer to the question which speaking problems are frequent in applied linguistics students as university level learners and how these problems can influence the speaking skill. In other words, qualitative study was

chosen by the researchers in order to review the papers to find problematic and challengeable issues in a way of developing speaking skill.

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

Data collection procedure for the study had various phases. Firstly, the researchers tried to find the 20 applied linguistics articles from different data sources which are related to the speaking difficulties and weaknesses. It should be mentioned that all these 20 papers were downloaded from online data bases like Journal of language and Social Psychology, Issues in Educational Research, International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature, International Journal of Foreign Language Teaching and Research, and etc. Notice that all of the written materials were selected from 2010-2021 papers.

Secondly, as the aim of the study was investigate the speaking problems among EFL learners in university level or more specifically in applied linguistics students, the researchers started to extract the main problems of the retrieved materials.

In next step, the researchers started to categorized the found problems and weaknesses and identify corresponding types by reading and analyzing the extracted material. In other words, the researchers read all of the materials in Microsoft Word and highlighted the speaking problems in EFL learners and report the found difficulties among them.

4. Results and Findings

As stated earlier, the researchers focused on the previous studies about speaking difficulties for EFL learners; so they collected numbers of corresponding studies and categorized the findings in four major groups as following.

4.1 . Linguistic-related Issues

Studies show that many language learners face with lack of linguistic proficiency like grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and intonation. Regarding to have sufficient vocabulary knowledge, many EFL learners suffer from lack or limited vocabulary knowledge while speaking, which prevent them to communicate (Maftoon & Sharifi Haratmeh, 2012). Other important factor is not having enough grammar knowledge or making grammatical errors, especially when they want to translate the structure from one language to the other (Abbasi & Karimnia, 2011). In the side of pronunciation, on one hand, it can be mentioned the poor pronunciation of the students. According to Hashemian & Heidari Soureshjani (2013), the reason of such inappropriate pronunciation would be low knowledge of phonology and mispronouncing. On the other hand, the teachers ignore to teach pronunciation based on many reasons as: “lack of time, motivation, resources, materials, and educational facilities like computer technologies” (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016, p.1). So there is lack of speaking courses of instruction. Finally, the highlighted issue is about accents and dialects among EFL Iranian learners. As Tajeddin, Atai & Pashmforoosh (2020) concerned, the perspective of many teachers in Iran is exposed to English rather Englishes; i.e. they prefer to pronounce and lead their students to pronounce as native-like rather obeying their own accent while speaking, which makes the speaking process difficult and challenging for the learners.

4.2. Psycholinguistic-related Issues

By reviewing the mentioned articles in the field of applied linguistics, another problematic area for language learners, especially non-native EFL learners in university level, is psycholinguistic-related issues. In other words, many applied

linguistic students (as EFL learners) experience psychology related problems and the lack of potentiality in speaking can be caused from these kinds of problems. As previous studies mentioned, many of these students suffer from confidence-based issues such as lack of self-confidence, being afraid of making mistakes, and unwillingness to speak (SoodmandAfshar & Asakereh, 2016; Ghanbarpour, 2016; Ghonsooly & Khajavi, 2012). i.e. low self-confidence can influence the speaking of learners because s/he assume her/himself as a person who doesn't have enough capacity to communicate in non-native language (Asakereh & Dehghanzad, 2015). Moreover, being afraid of making mistakes is very common in university students because they think that teacher or professor or maybe other classmates are aware about their problems and the issues of World Englishes is not acceptable for them (SoodmanAfshar & Asakereh, 2016; Azarfam & Baki, 2012).

In addition to this, students' anxiety can influence the quality of speaking skill. As recent studies reported, although applied linguistics learners have enough knowledge in general English, they are not capable to speak accurately and fluently because they have anxiety in their performance (Safarimoghdam & Ghafournia, 2019; Abedini & Chalak, 2017). Moreover, the problem of shyness can be considered as another psychological problem among EFL learners especially university students in the field of applied linguistics which has put the learners in trouble (Babapour, Seifoori, & Chehreh, 2018; Mohammadian, 2013). To explain it clear, shyness or being shy can put the speaking endanger because it can influence the focus on speaking skill. Recent study by Alavinia and Salmasi (2012) declared that the problem of shyness and low self-confidence can occur because of the unfriendly behavior of classmates or

teachers. Another study showed that, the emphasis of teachers on speaking part and push the learners to speak can make students anxious and hysteric (Safarimoghdam & Ghafournia, 2019; Abedini & Chalak, 2017). Subsequently, teachers' lack of encouragement in way of improving speaking skill can be listed as a source to create psychological problems for language learners (SoodmanAfshar & Asakereh, 2016).

4.3 . Sociolinguistic-related Issues

Learners may suffer from lack of proper context, sense of agency and socio-linguistic aspects that impact their language learning especially in terms of speaking skill. One of the stressed aspects in learning is cooperation and participation in the community. The highlighted factors discovered by the previous researchers are discussed here in detail.

One of the most important reasons of hesitating to speak is not having chance to speak outside the classroom because the official language of Iran is known as Farsi or Persian and the EFL students don't have the opportunity to communicate in English outside the classroom; so this may make them weak to have English speaking output. Khajavy, Ghonsooly, Hosseini Fatemi, & Choi, (2016) asserted the role of cooperation and communication interrelated with learning inside the classroom. The high cooperation among students, the high level of proficiency in learning and speaking. A classroom is a context united of different individuals gathered together with various backgrounds, lifestyles, Mirhosseini, Sazvar, & Rashed (2017) and cultures; so a class is a collection of variety. When people seat near to each other respecting different ideas and attitudes the atmosphere would be more fruitful and friendly for all which is highly needed in education ambient; otherwise an

unfriendly atmosphere leads a class to less communication and interaction. Being ignored by the teacher or classmates is the other factor that prevent learner to speak. There must be equal chance to participate in discussion inside the classroom for all the learners, Cortazzi, Jin, Kaivanpanah, & Nemati, (2015). A useless type of class is teacher-centered one. Teachers should be tended to make classes more interactive and learner-centered as well as teacher-centered Zohrabi, Torabi, & Baybourdiani, (2012).

4.4 . Other Issues

There are many other issues that should be considered in order to improve the speaking skill of university level EFL learners. These problems can be a source of knowledge for future studies for EFL teachers and researchers. For instance, many organizational related problems such as insufficient courses in speaking in university programs, early morning classes or late afternoon classes, inappropriateness of sources with Iranian system, and also instructors' lack of proficiency can be considered other sources of problems (Eslami & Fatahi, 2010; Khanzadeh, Mirchenari, & Bakhtiarivard, 2013). It is worth to mentioning that these problems are out of the control of the learners and cooperating with the teachers, they should be investigated more in Iranian educational system. Obviously, we can say that Iranian educational system should improve the university courses by planning and considering the related studies in the way of syllabus and curriculum design in order to decrease the amounts of these issues (Abedini & Chalak, 2017). Moreover, teacher education improvement can facilitate the role of teachers or instructors in universities to modify the speaking skill among Iranian learners.

5. Discussion on Findings of the Study

By the results and findings stated, it can be said that there are lots of reasons which lead to difficulties and challenges in speaking among EFL learners. As this study is a review of articles, the researchers gathered the findings of other scholars and put them into a unified paper to present.

Briefly and in comparison with other studies in terms of linguistic weak point, many students are ashamed of bad and inappropriate accent or pronunciation. Such matter prevents them to speak as more as the others. This may be based on lack of pronunciation instruction, Gilakjani (2016). Many other are afraid of using inadequate words based on their weak vocabulary. Such problem may come from transferring from L1 to L2 and/or spelling words Saigh & Schmitt (2012). But what is more in common among learners is grammar out of true structure even in higher levels of education, like university. This might because of less practicing, or lack of concentration to produce correct sentences, that is related to the psycholinguistic problems, Cam & Tran (2017). All above studies reached the same results and are in line with the researches done in linguistic weak points and named in 'Findings section'.

Based on psycho-linguistic weaknesses, low or lack of self-confidence can be considered as an important factor among EFL learners especially university students in the field of applied linguistics. This finding can be in line with the findings of SoodmandAfshar and Asakereh (2016); Ghanbarpour (2016); and Ghonsooly and Khajavi (2012) who said that Iranian university students suffered from lack of self-confidence. Moreover, other problems such as anxiety and shyness also influence the quality of speaking in applied linguistics learners and this finding can be in line with previous studies like Babapour, Seifoori, and Chehreh (2018) and Mohammadian (2013).

In addition to what have mentioned, unfriendly behaviors of teachers and learners and being afraid of making mistakes have been mentioned by recent studies like SoodmanAfshar and Asakereh (2016) and Asakereh and Dehghanzad (2015) as well as this study.

In terms of socio-linguistic points, according to Namaziandost & Nasri (2019) several students hesitate to participate in classroom discussions and so they lose the chance to improve their speaking ability; this may has psycho-linguistic factors (shyness, stress, etc.) or socio-linguistic weaknesses (lack of speaking instruction course). Gürler (2015) has asserted the correlation between self confidence and speaking skill. The more self confidence the learners have, the high level of proficiency in speaking they achieve. Such researchers faced with the same matter and asserted the similar weaknesses in the present study. Most were focused on the lack of speaking ability and less participation among the learners.

Moreover, problems of insufficient courses in speaking in university programs, early morning classes or late afternoon classes, inappropriateness of sources with Iranian system, and also instructors' lack or proficiency have been emphasized as important issues in speaking skill obstacles among Iranian university students in this study. These issues which have been explained in previous parts are also in line with some studies like Eslami & Fatahi (2010) and Khanzadeh, Mirchenari, and Bakhtiarivard (2013).

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to gather the past researches regarding speaking skill and its difficulties among EFL learners. Four major reasons, regarding challenges in speaking skill, were discussed in terms of linguistics (grammar, vocabulary,

pronunciation, and intonation), psycho-linguistics (anxiety, self-confidence, and shyness), socio-linguistics (culture, identity and/or sense of agency) and also other issues (insufficient courses in speaking in university programs, early morning classes or late afternoon classes, inappropriateness of sources with Iranian system, and also instructors' lack of proficiency).

It is a fact that no research is complete in its own right. The more areas are obtained, and the more questions will naturally be raised. The domain of speaking skill especially problems and difficulties is too vast to be explored in one single study. Future research is definitely needed to shed light on other aspects and effects of speaking-related problems. For instance, this study suggests other researchers to convey further experimental and even mixed studies on the mentioned problems to clarify the path for speaking skill development in a non-native country like Iran. Moreover, the findings of this study have certain implications for L2 teachers, learners, syllabus designers, and material developers. Language teachers in non-native countries can benefit from the results of the study and consider the problematic areas in their teaching and try to avoid them in the process of teaching. Moreover, syllabus designers and material developers and also educational system can use the results of the present study in order to decrease the amount of problems in EFL learners especially university students in applied linguistics field.

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