

Artículo de investigación

Major Speaking Problems that Adult EFL learners Face while Communicating

Los principales problemas de habla que enfrentan los estudiantes adultos de EFL mientras se comunican

Principais problemas de fala que os alunos adultos de EFL enfrentam enquanto se comunicam

Recibido: 12 de mayo del 2019

Aceptación: 3 de junio del 2019

Written by:

Sanaa Mohammed Khudhair

General Directorate of Education at Diwaniyah
Ministry of Education, Republic of Iraq

Abstract

Speaking is one of the most important skills in English language. It is the active form of language whereby EFL learners produce the language. This production of language goes through a mental process in connection with other skills such as writing. However, EFL learners use speaking skill to communicate most of the time. Therefore, teachers should put more emphasis on speaking skill inside the classroom. In fact, there are various reasons for teaching speaking skill. Nevertheless, there are major speaking problems that EFL learners face during the learning process. This research tries to highlight the importance of speaking skill and the reasons behind teaching it. It also addresses some major speaking problems that EFL learners face and the causes of these problems. Finally, the research suggests some solutions to overcome such problems.

Keywords: EFL Learners, Speaking, Speaking Problems, Communication, Language Production

Resumen

Hablar es una de las habilidades más importantes en el idioma inglés. Es la forma activa de lenguaje mediante la cual los estudiantes de EFL producen el idioma. Esta producción de lenguaje pasa por un proceso mental en conexión con otras habilidades como la escritura. Sin embargo, los estudiantes de EFL utilizan la habilidad de hablar para comunicarse la mayor parte del tiempo. Por lo tanto, los maestros deben poner más énfasis en la habilidad de hablar dentro del aula. De hecho, hay varias razones para enseñar habilidades para hablar. Sin embargo, hay problemas de habla importantes que enfrentan los estudiantes de EFL durante el proceso de aprendizaje. Esta investigación trata de resaltar la importancia de la habilidad de hablar y las razones detrás de la enseñanza. También aborda algunos de los principales problemas de habla que enfrentan los estudiantes de EFL y las causas de estos problemas. Finalmente, la investigación sugiere algunas soluciones para superar tales problemas.

Palabras clave: Aprendices de inglés como lengua extranjera, hablar, problemas de habla, comunicación, producción del lenguaje.

Resumo

Falar é uma das habilidades mais importantes do idioma inglês. É a forma ativa de linguagem através da qual os estudantes de EFL produzem a linguagem. Esta produção de linguagem passa por um processo mental em conexão com outras habilidades, como a escrita. No entanto, os alunos do EFL usam a capacidade de falar para se comunicar na maioria das vezes. Portanto, os professores devem colocar mais ênfase na capacidade de falar dentro da sala de aula. Na verdade, existem várias razões para ensinar habilidades de fala. No entanto, existem problemas importantes de fala enfrentados pelos alunos do EFL durante o processo de aprendizagem. Esta pesquisa tenta destacar a importância da capacidade de falar e as razões por trás do ensino. Ele também aborda alguns dos principais problemas de fala enfrentados pelos

estudiantes de EFL e as causas desses problemas. Finalmente, a pesquisa sugere algumas soluções para superar tais problemas.

Palavras-chave: Alunos de inglês como língua estrangeira, fala, problemas de fala, comunicação, produção de linguagem.

Introduction

Learning English Language is not an easy process for all EFL learners. It is a process whereby learners have to learn and master the four skills of the language. By doing this, EFL learners become able to properly use the language in any given circumstances. They will be ready to produce and express themselves in competent ways. Speaking, apart from writing, is particularly an important skill that produces the language. Without speaking skill, EFL learners will not be able to completely produce the language and communicate in any situation. Therefore, EFL learners have to pay more attention to this skill and always try to master it.

Furthermore, the majority of EFL learners face a lot of problems when it comes to speaking skill. Those problems become real obstacles for EFL learners whereby they turn into frustrated learners with poor speaking skills that prevent them from communicating properly. For most EFL learners, speaking is not an easy task to undertake. It requires acquiring some rules that can be achieved through the learning process. Therefore, the best place for EFL learners to learn and master speaking skill is the classroom.

Literature Review

Speaking as a productive skill

Language production is a dynamic process. It is simply the production of spoken or written language. Speaking is the process of creating vocal sounds in order to communicate and interact. Speaking is the most important skill used by EFL learners to communicate. Therefore, a well-constructed communication requires a very good knowledge of speaking skill and how it works. As mentioned earlier, learning and mastering speaking skill by EFL learners is not a simple task to undertake. There are certain aspects that EFL learners must take into consideration while learning speaking. They should have a kind of mental awareness about language production and how speaking works and that is because “in cognitive theory, language production is seen as an active process of meaning construction and expression” (O’Malley and Chamot 37). Therefore, EFL learners should know that one aspect of speaking

is that it is a tool to create meanings and enables them to express those meanings in order to communicate with other people. This process goes through a mental activity. Likewise, “language production can be divided into three stages, as can language comprehension. [...] although the stages of comprehension and production are analogous, in fact important differences exist in terms of the underlying mental processes” (qtd. in O’Malley and Chamot 37).

The relationship between speaking and writing as productive skills

As mentioned previously, producing the language is all about producing spoken or written language. Speaking is without any doubt a major skill in English language. It cooperates with the other three skills to enable EFL learners to produce correct English language. However, there are some differences between all English language skills, even the productive ones. For example, speaking and writing are productive skills; however, they differ from each other at some points. Talking about this, one might demonstrate some of the points regarding the connection between speaking and writing.

The relationship between speaking and writing is similar and different at the same time. In the light of this, both skills share the productivity of the language patterns, but they are different in usage according to the communicational situation. For example, an EFL learner cannot use writing when he is having a conversation with other people within any community, simultaneously, he cannot use speaking when he is preparing a formal piece of paper. However, the difference goes further between both speaking and writing whereby “in speaking the primary emphasis is on the building of relationship” (Tribble, 1996, p. 9), whereas “in writing the emphasis is on recording things, on completing tasks, or in developing ideas and arguments” (Tribble, 1996, p. 9). Obviously, it is clear that each skill has its own distinguished features and unique functions. In this regard, EFL learners should be able to make a difference about the use of each skill in the right place at the right moment.

In addition, Tribble (1996) goes further in showing the different use of speaking and writing by saying that language has its own styles, and the types of language that the speaker and the writer use are totally different, and that is due to the fact that even the social contexts are also different.

Despite the fact that speaking and writing are somehow different in usage, it is worth mentioning that they are similar in the sense of expressing and producing the language as a whole. "Spoken language and written language are 'saying the same things'" (Halliday, 1985, p. 93). In this regard, Halliday (1985) argues by saying that there is a sort of similarity between writing and speaking since both of them are in practise in different situations for different objectives, and both of them are used to produce the language. As a result, they are similar in the sense of practising process which they both share within any social context. Nevertheless, he admits that they also contrast in the way of usage due to the fact that each one of them generates a variety of realities since "writing creates a world of things; talking creates a world of happening" (Halliday, 1985, p. 93).

In a few words, speaking and writing are similar at some points but different at some others based on the context. It is true that both skills are important for EFL learners in order to produce the language. However, the Spoken form of language is sometimes somehow more important than the written form of language.

Importance of spoken form of language

The spoken form of language is the simplest form of communication. It is important for EFL learners for various reasons such as learning and communication. EFL learners "learn by talking, to us and to each other, reformulating what we have told them in their own words, or extending their learning by asking questions or suggesting future ideas of their own" (Locke, 2013, p. 1). Furthermore, EFL learners will not be able to communicate properly without the spoken form of language. Indeed, "Spoken language is perhaps the most basic and certainly the most common form of human communication, some cultures may not have a written language but spoken language is universal" (Locke, 2013, p. 1).

Moreover, speaking skill go through a mental process as it has been mentioned earlier. And it is simply noticeable that learning this skill can help a second language learner in

communication. Thus, the spoken form of language is of a great significance in reflecting the processes of production and communication. When EFL learners speak, the process does not stop there because "when we speak, a great deal more than just the mouth is involved" (Cornbleet & Carter, 2001, p. 17). So, it is not only a process of producing sounds arbitrarily, it is rather a highly sophisticated process that requires the involvement of the entire human body in order to produce and deliver the final message. Simultaneously, speaking is something natural, and as Cornbleet & Carter (2001) state that speaking could be done only by face to face situation just before the technology was invented, so the speaker and the listener have to meet physically in order to initialize a conversation and interact. But nowadays, the interaction expanded further than physical presence. It happens through far distances but at least the voice of the speaker and the listener will be present.

According to Bygate (1987), the process of communication through speaking cannot be obtained only by the speaker and the listener having the processor of each spoken word, and their ability to create a rationale set of words in some difficult situations during interaction but also achieved when those two persons are very well communicators, whereby they possess the unique ability to express themselves by saying what they want to say in an understandable way. Finally, the spoken form of language is more important than the written form in communication. That is why EFL learners should pay more attention to speaking skill when they learn it in the classroom in order to be able to communicate competently.

Why teaching speaking matters

Speaking is a very important skill for EFL learners because it enables them to communicate while producing the language in an oral form. However, "speaking is one of the most difficult aspects of language learning. It is also one of the most difficult tasks for the teacher to help his students learn to produce the language" (Hasan, 1993, p. 145).

Considering the fact that speaking is an important way to communicate, the question is how will EFL learners communicate and interact without being able to speak proper English. An article entitled "Teaching speaking skills 2 - overcoming classroom problems" starts with a question "Why should we teach speaking skills in the classroom?" The article investigated the

reasons that can play an essential role for teaching EFL learners speaking. One of those reasons was motivation. For example, if a student turns up unable to speak or feel that he is not getting the opportunity to speak the language in the classroom; he will automatically become demotivated and discouraged. According to this, he will lack interest in learning the language. On the contrary, if the right set of activities concerning speaking been taught by the most suitable methods, the learner will enjoy using the language through speaking, and he will find himself learning it unconsciously.

Moreover, it is very important for teachers to pay more attention to speaking skill inside the classroom. The majority of EFL learners are eager to learn speaking skill. In fact, "for many students, learning to speak competently in English is a priority" (Hedge, 2000, p. 261) because "they may need this skill for a variety of reasons, for example to keep up rapport in relationships, influence people, and win or lose negotiations" (Hedge, 2000, p. 261). In the light of this, the teacher plays an important role in helping his EFL learners to learn speaking competently.

Furthermore, in a time when the communicative approach has developed, Hedge (2000) saw that teachers have been affected by that developmental step. Therefore, they have been concerned with achieving that students not only use speaking in a confined way but also practising and producing its elements such as pronunciation and vocabulary in free ways while communicating.

Additionally, EFL learners are in real need to learn speaking skill for various reasons as it has been mentioned earlier. Some specific reasons can be also important such as making themselves understood and being able to manage their own communication and interaction. As for the former, Hedge (2000) states that one of the ways of making oneself understood is thru using communication strategies. That is when most learners are eager to express themselves, but unfortunately, they end up with failure due to their lack of vocabulary and the structure that they need. Then their only solution for that problem is to switch into one or more communication strategies, such as changing the topic of the conversation or not being part of it at all. The other way that enables learners to make themselves understood is through the process of negotiation of meaning. This is an important process because sometimes a speaker might produce a misleading message based on his own

concept about illusionary shared knowledge between him and the listener. Therefore, this might increase the difficulty in interpreting the message by the listener. As a result, the speaker needs to be taught how to negotiate the meaning until making it clear, and not to stick into one meaning based on mistakenly assumed shared knowledge. Learners need to be taught some achievement strategies to be able to negotiate the meaning such as gesture and paraphrase in order to produce the message very clearly.

As for the later, Hedge (2000) sees that managing interaction can be done by following some rules that control any ordinary interaction. In other words, a learner is in need to be taught how to start a conversation, progress it, and close it flexibly according to some factors of status such as cultural standards, well appropriate formality in style of speech, and the level of courtesy that can coincide with the level of the relationship between people who are involved in that conversation. This leads us to the fact that a conversation is a major form of communication inside the classroom by EFL learners.

Moreover, when it comes to communication and interaction, each type of conversation has its own features and purposes. "The nature of this interaction is transactional" (Cornbleet & Carter, 2001, p. 27). And "the purpose is very precise-action is required as an outcome of the conversation" (Cornbleet & Carter, 2001, p. 27). However, as Cornbleet and Carter (2001) stated that some conversations have got the features of interpersonal purposes, for example, set up or carry on a relationship. Besides, a single person cannot establish a solo conversation, Thus, "in order to interact, you need more than one person" (Cornbleet & Carter, 2001, p. 27)! And even if there is more than one person, they cannot all overlap each other, each one of them has to wait his turn since "turn-taking is such a basic, simple principle that it's an unconscious part of normal conversation. We take turn to say something in a conversation. A speaks first, then B responds, then A comes back" (Cornbleet & Carter, 2001, p. 27). Certainly, a good conversation cannot be achieved without being able to speak properly. EFL learners cannot speak properly on their own, they need their teacher's help to be better at speaking in order to interact and communicate with others. That is what Hasan (1993) states that students are in need to be encouraged by their teachers to use speaking in order to be able to interact and express oneself.

In a few words, speaking skill is very important for EFL learners. This importance derives from

the nature of speaking skill and its vital role in communication. Therefore, it is the teacher's major responsibility to exert much effort while teaching speaking skill. This is due to the various reasons that highlight the importance of teaching EFL learners speaking skill. Starting from EFL learners' ability to start a conversation in order to interact and communicate and ending up with their ability to negotiate the meaning in order to express themselves in an understandable way. Nonetheless, all of this cannot be completely achieved because there are major speaking problems that EFL learners face while communicating inside the classroom.

Methodology

Statement of problem

In one way or another, any teacher in any learning environment speculates some specific problems that his students face inside the classroom. Therefore, the teacher tries to find and apply the most suitable methodology in order to overcome such problems. For the purpose of this research, the researcher used '*action research*' as methodology to solve speaking problems that adult EFL learners face while communicating inside the classroom. The research answers the following questions:

1. What are the major problems that adult EFL learners face when they speak to communicate inside the classroom?
2. What are the reasons behind such major problems?

Sample

This research is a case study on adult EFL learners at *Al Zaiton* high school in Iraq. The study was applied on two classes. Each class contains forty students.

Instruments

As a qualitative research, the researcher used '*anonymous feedback*' as the main research instrument. Students were asked to use their mother tongue, which is Arabic, to freely express their thoughts about the two research questions. Students were given ten to fifteen minutes to write down their main ideas to answer the two questions. After that, the feedback was collected by the researcher for data analysis.

Data analysis

After analysing the data, it was clear that there are four major speaking problems that EFL learners face inside the classroom. Those are, poor grammar, lack of fluency, the use of native tongue and poor accent.

Findings and discussion

The major problems faced by adult EFL learners at Al Zaiton High School

Poor Grammar

The data collected through 'anonymous feedback' showed that almost all adult EFL learners at 'Al Zaiton' high school face problems with poor grammar where they end up unable to produce a correct full sentence in many situations. They said that this problem prevents them from speaking properly. One student said: "I know what I want to say but I cannot put it in a correct sentence." Another student said: "I have problems with verbs and when I try to speak, I keep thinking about which verb I must use but then I lose focus on what I am saying and I stop speaking." In fact, grammar is one aspect of English language that can stress many EFL learners. It is sometimes complicated for many EFL learners. However, grammar is very important and vital for correct production of English language. Good knowledge of grammar helps EFL learners to speak properly while communicating with other people.

Lack of fluency

The data collected through 'anonymous feedback' showed that the majority of adult EFL learners at 'Al Zaiton' high school mentioned that another problem they face is lack of fluency. They mentioned that lack of fluency is a real hindrance that does not allow them to speak freely. One student said: "I cannot speak English fluently because I make mistakes while speaking and this makes me shy." Another student said: "I always stutter while speaking and this makes me lose my confidence so I immediately stop talking." In fact, fluency is all about making language easy for EFL learners. It allows them to speak quickly without pausing for too many times. Fluency is very crucial for EFL learners because it allows them to smoothly communicate with each other.

The use of native tongue

The data collected through 'anonymous feedback' showed that half of the adult EFL learners at 'Al Zaiton' high school face another problem in speaking skill which is using their native tongue. In fact, this problem is connected with the first one that is poor grammar. Students mentioned that when they try to speak and they get stuck because of poor grammar, they tend to switch back to their native tongue in order to complete and deliver the message. This problem is also connected with semantics problems whereby students cannot find the proper vocabulary to use while speaking. One student said: "When I realise that I will not be able to grammatically complete the sentence, I either stop talking or continue speaking using my native tongue." Another student said: "I know what I want to say but I cannot find the right words to complete my thought so I say them with my native tongue." A third student mentioned that "I do not feel comfortable when I use my native tongue to deliver the message, this makes me unhappy while speaking." In fact, the use of native tongue while speaking in English language is a real problem that must be solved in any efficient way possible.

Poor Accent

The data collected through 'anonymous feedback' showed that some adult EFL learners at 'Al Zaiton' high school complained about poor accent as another speaking problem they face inside the classroom. They said that they do not feel comfortable while speaking if they do not speak in a perfect accent. One student said: "I want to speak like native speakers but I cannot, this makes me embarrassed so I stop talking." A second student said: "I love to speak English with good accent but I make problems by mixing American and British accent while speaking." Another student said: "I speak English with strong native tongue accent that makes the meaning not clear for the listener so I cannot continue speaking." In fact, accent is important for clear message delivery. It also helps EFL learners to smoothly communicate with each other in a nice way.

Reasons behind these major speaking problems that adult EFL learners at Al Zaiton High School face

Concerning the second research question, the data collected through 'anonymous feedback' showed that adult EFL learners at 'Al Zaiton' high school provided some reasons for such

problems based on their own learning experience.

Regarding 'poor grammar' students claimed that grammar in itself is difficult to master. They mentioned that they cannot understand the mechanics of grammar and how it works. They said that tenses are somehow complex along with verbs. They also mentioned that English language grammar is totally different from Arabic grammar and this makes it more difficult. Adult EFL learners at 'Al Zaiton' high school claim that all of these factors are the reasons behind poor grammar that prevents them from speaking properly in order to communicate.

About lack of fluency, students declared that being shy is one major reason to prevent them from being fluent while speaking. According to them, being shy triggers lack of confidence and this creates a kind of deficiency in fluency in return. As a result, they cannot speak properly. In relation to the use of native tongue, students who faced this problem said that the main reason behind it is weak overall knowledge about English language particularly poor grammar as mentioned earlier.

With regard to poor accent, students who face this problem mentioned that the first reason comes to their mind about this issue is the amount of time they spend while listening to correct spoken English language. They say that they do not listen to English sufficiently so they cannot produce correct accent. Accordingly, they try to invent their own accent such as mixing the American and British accent while talking or including their native tongue accent which makes them unclear while they speak.

Implications and suggestions

As stated earlier, adult EFL learners at 'Al Zaiton' high school face some major speaking problems that prevents them from communicating properly with each other. Furthermore, students also mentioned some reasons behind those problems. Therefore, it is the teacher's responsibility to overcome those problems by solving the reasons behind them. For example, the teacher in general has to pay more attention to speaking skill inside the classroom. Second, the teacher should allocate decent time to teach grammar. In addition, the teacher should add some extra tasks and homework that keep students involved outside the classroom. Accordingly, focusing on the teaching of grammar allows students to overcome two if not three of the major speaking

problems they face while communicating. By learning good grammar, students will be able to speak fluently with less use of their native tongue. Third, the teacher has to always encourage his students to speak only in English inside the classroom. On the other hand, the teacher has to discourage his students from using the native tongue inside the classroom. This will increase students' pace in speaking English language freely. Last but not least, the teacher has to allocate some time for listening inside the classroom in order to help students develop a good accent. He can also motivate them to watch some good English movies or listen to some good English music outside the classroom that can help them build a good accent. All in all, it is the teacher's responsibility to solve and overcome any problem that his students face inside the classroom.

Conclusion

As it has been mentioned earlier, speaking is a crucial skill for EFL learners in order to be able to communicate in an appropriate way. The process of producing speaking involves a certain kind of a mental activity. Besides, speaking is also connected with the other three skills mainly writing as they are both the active form of language. Teachers around the world try hard to keep their students up to the level by teaching them English language in efficient ways. At the same time, many teachers try hard to focus on speaking skill. However, there are major speaking problems that EFL learners face during the learning process. Those problems have to be identified and addressed by the teacher in order to overcome them. This will certainly produce good EFL learners with decent communicational skills.

References

Bygate, M. (1987). *Speaking*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
 Cornbleet, S., & Carter, R. (2001). *The Language of Speech and Writing*. London, England: Psychology Press.

Halliday, M. A. (1985). *Spoken and Written Language*. UNSW Press.
 Harmer, J. (1998). *How to Teach English*. England: Addison Wesley Longman Limited.
 Hasan, A. S. (1993). *Methodology of Teaching English*. Damascus: Damascus University Press.
 Hedge, T. (2000). *Teaching and Learning in the Language Classroom: A guide to current ideas about the theory and practice of English language teaching*. Oxford, England: OUP Oxford.
 Locke, A. (2013). *Teaching Speaking and Listening: One Step at a Time, Revised Edition*. London, United Kingdom: A&C Black.
 Lawtie, Fiona. "Teaching Speaking Skills 2 - Overcoming Classroom Problems." Think Articles of BBC Feb. 2004: 10 pars. 20 Jan. 2010, British Council, Caracas, <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/articles/teaching-speaking-skills-2-overcoming-classroom-problems>
 O'Malley, J. M., & Chamot, A. U. (1990). *Learning Strategies in Second Language Acquisition*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
 Tribble, C. (1996). *Writing*. London, England: Kogan Page Publishers.