

Difficulties in Speaking English among the EFL Students in Iraqi Kurdistan Region

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Abstract

Speaking is a measure of linguistic ability and a fluent speaker is considered as a skilled language learner. In Kurdistan Region of Iraq -KRI, English is taught as a foreign language from elementary to university. However, Kurdish students, even university students, have challenges with speaking English and show their attitudes to speaking as one of the complex skills in language learning. This paper revealed that most learners have personal, linguistic, social, and environmental speaking challenges. Lack of confidence, insufficient vocabulary, reluctance, nervousness while speaking, fear of making errors, lack of an appropriate setting to practice English, and lack of instructor enthusiasm were major problems of Kurdish students. This study looked at students' speech problems and their reasons. The researchers collected data from 12 second-year students in the National Institute of Technology, in Sulaimaniyah city, as an example by adopting a semi-structured interview. The data were collected and analyzed in two significant categories: difficulties and reasons, with three subgroups. The research focused on psychological, social, environmental, interpersonal, and linguistic issues as challenges of speaking difficulty, instructor and instruction, core curriculum, misuse of mother tongue, insufficient education, and classroom culture as causes of speaking inadequacy. The researchers recommend the development of a positive atmosphere, promoting knowledge acquisition, modifying teaching approaches, and rewriting courses.

Keywords: English for specific purposes (ESP), speaking skill, Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)

1. Introduction

Since 1970s the English curriculum in Iraq consisted of English for Iraq books 6, 7, and 8 the content of which focused on dialogues, grammar, sounds, and exercises. However, Kurdistan Regional Government KRG in (2007) decided to develop a new curriculum of English language which is called (Sunrise) for secondary and high schools with focus on the four essential skills: writing, reading, listening and speaking. (Amin, 2017). Learners of English as a Foreign struggle with the ability to communicate effectively orally (Ur, 2002). It is expected that a person who studies a language would eventually become fluent in that language. Users of that language are often expected to have a high level of fluency in spoken communication. According to Richards and Renandya (2002), many people learn English primarily to enhance their oral communication skills. The capacity to converse in English is one of the English language abilities that any foreign language student must achieve. The most typical question from anyone who wishes to know English language skills is whether they can speak this language. Based on Nunan (1991), improving speaking is one of most learners' essential duties in learning a foreign language. The capacity to carry on a conversation in the language is used to measure success. Humans use vocabulary to communicate, share information and knowledge, and express their ideas and thoughts.

Meanwhile, Walija (1996:4) noted in Wibowo (2014) that language is the most effective mode of communication for conveying ideas, messages, intentions, feelings, and opinions to others. Therefore, language is not only used as a communication tool to get human beings, but it is also one of the most significant components of human life. Writing, reading, speaking, and listening are the four skills to learn in English. For many learners, the most essential of them is speaking skills. The capacity to have a conversation in English is the most critical aspect of learning English, which improves this skill. Speaking is regarded as the most significant ability among the four ones, according to Ur

(1999:120). Consequently, learners studying a foreign language are more motivated to learn how to speak it.

Moreover, Richards (2002, p.201) stated that "a significant majority of the world's language learners study English to improve their speaking skills." It means that the outcome of oral communication or speaking competence uses to evaluate English ability. Over three decades, the function of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in language and teaching English to meet the requirements of learners for vocational and professional aims have been studied (Hui, 2017; Pham, 2013; Ramirez, 2015). ESP is frequently associated with a process of determining "learner needs" and implementing "goal-oriented" teaching approaches and "process-oriented" learning (Celce-Murcia, 2001; Nunan, 1988b; Widdowson, 1983). ESP courses, in particular, are intended to address not just the learners' present needs but also their specific future needs (Dudley-Evans & St-John, 1998; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). As a result, ESP course design includes instructors understanding the nature of the students, their requirements, and how English should be taught in connection to specific curriculum settings.

Speaking skills are defined differently. The following definitions are declared since they are specific and valuable content. Firstly, Quianthy (1990) claimed that "speaking is the process of transmitting ideas and information orally in various situations." Then Chaney (1998) mentioned that "speaking is the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, in various contexts." In the same line, Chaney noted that "speaking is known as making and sharing meaning process using a verbal and non-verbal symbol with a different context." (as cited in Leong and Ahmadi 2017). On the other hand, based on Brown (2004), "speaking is a productive skill that can directly and empirically observe; the accuracy and fluency invariably color those observations." These definitions of speaking show the relationship between verbal, interpersonal, and body language. According to the study, the ability to generate words and exchange thoughts is defined as speaking. As a result, speech is crucial in communication. Somebody may also use it to convey information to audiences. So far, we may determine two challenges that language learners frequently face when speaking: non-linguistic and linguistic issues. Brown (2001) identifies colloquial language, performance variables, reduced forms, and clustering as elements that make speaking challenging. These challenges with language problems will be described further here: (1) Clustering. Fluent speech is phrasal rather than word-for-word. Learners might utilize clustering for their output physically and intellectually (in-breath groups). (2) Reduction forms. Forms that have been decreased contractions, elisions, shortened vowels, and other issues provide unique challenges in speaking. Learners who do not master colloquial contractions may develop a stiff, literary style of speech, which demonizes them. (3) Variables affecting the performance advantage of spoken language is that the act of thinking while speaking permits us to express a given amount of corrections, backtracking, stops, and performance hesitations. It is a responsibility to train students how to pause and hesitate. For instance, the difference between non-native and native speakers is that pauses and hesitation do not exist when native speakers talk in English; otherwise, these issues would not appear in non-native speakers. (4) The use of colloquial language. Students should understand colloquial language vocabulary, idioms, and phrases and practice developing these forms .

At the same time, Ur (1996) identifies four variables that make speaking challenging for students learning a foreign or second language. Inhibition is the first. Unlike listening, writing, and reading, speaking needs audience exposure in real-time. Students are frequently inhibited while communicating in another language, shy of the attention that speaking attracts, losing face, being criticized, or fearful of making errors.

We may conclude from the previous explanation that students have difficulty communicating due to non-linguistic issues such as concern, fear, shyness, lack of enthusiasm, and low involvement in class, among others. On the other hand, linguistic problems include lack of vocabulary, misuse of grammar, passive learning, poor listening, and pronunciation. This research aimed to explore the challenges, sources of difficulties, and efforts made by learners in English for specific purposes at the National Institute of Technology to overcome those issues in speaking the English language. This research aims to explore the speaking difficulties of English learners in Kurdish, specifically at the National Institute of Technology, as I was a teaching staff there. In addition, it is to be a step towards reducing the fear of Kurdish learners speaking in the target language and improving their English proficiency. This research can also guide less motivated learners who suffer from a lack of confidence in learning English. This article reviews speaking issues in EFL classes and related research on the Kurdish background. The following describes research methods, data collection tools, sampling, and processes. The findings of the research will be presented based on the study questions.

2. Literature Review

There have been various studies that have looked at the speaking issues that EFL learners face. For instance, one research (Dil, 2009) evaluated communication obstacles of Turkish EFL students in English language classes and

showed that nervousness and reluctance are two of the most significant barriers for these students in their English speaking. This research also discovered that learners who believe their English is terrible feel more uncomfortable and are less ready to speak accurately. Also, Students who believe their English is "bad" are more uncomfortable and hesitant to communicate in English lessons than learners who believe their English is "ok" or "very good."

In another study, the challenges faced by Omani learners in 1995 in their English speaking skills are explored. It is revealed that, as described by teachers, the most significant area of difficulty is the linguistic domain (discourse, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary) since the students have not yet reached a sufficient level in the primary skills of the language (Al-Lawati, 1995). It is due to their perception of a curriculum that does not give a fair chance to learn and practice new and different languages and a lack of variation in assignments planned for teaching grammar. As a result, students cannot improve their speaking skills, particularly given the enormous number of people in a classroom.

Another study conducted on 70 master's students at Shih Chien University in Taiwan by Svetlana, Timina, and Butler (2011, as cited in Kabir, 2014) found that learners' reluctance and anxiety to speak, lack of motivation, rote learning, and uncomfortable and embarrassing topics prevent them from speaking English fluently.

Kurdish universities have a significant foreign language speaking anxiety problem even among students with high English competence. So it may hurt students' ability to learn English, mainly speaking. As a result, it is vital to study this phenomenon to determine the valid reasons for speaking fear among Kurdish university students and provide potential strategies for reducing it. Also, recognizing students' needs and circumstances can help instructors better understand how to teach students and achieve positive learning outcomes using suitable approaches (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

In addition, instructors and students do not test speaking and place less importance on it. Similarly is in line with the results of Al-Lawati's study (2002), in which she found that students focus more on the listening, reading, and writing parts that are similar to exam questions and that both teachers and learners pay the slightest attention to speaking activities in their books since speaking is widely obtainable from examinations.

3. Methodology

The research was carried out in the course of English for Specific Purposes in the National Institute of Technology department. The participants of this study were all second-stage English Department students who received the lowest passing grades in speaking. Moreover, a large number of students in these categories performed poorly. They enrolled in speaking interviews. The study focused on 12 students, seven males, and five females, who were selected out of 26 learners of English ESP, who received a B (the lowest passing mark) in speaking, and information provided by the lecturer on low-performing students selected for the semi-structured interview faced problems in both linguistic and non-linguistic. The interviewer interviewed 12 participants with poor speech fluency who were randomly selected (participants' speaking skill was evaluated in terms of their classroom performance). The researchers noticed the students' presenting skills and spoken fluency in class as faculty members. Thus, he picked participants who had trouble speaking skills and asked two main questions: (1) 'Why do students face difficulties speaking among the ESP department's second-year students? (2) How to overcome the challenges of Speaking English among them? The preceding is the data analysis technique. The data were gathered and translated into English after the interviews by the researchers. The information is divided into issues, causes, and solutions. The data were then explained according to the learners' speaking challenges, the sources of difficulty, and their efforts to improve speaking to identify the link between the issues, reasons, and efforts to resolve them. To ensure the data were highly accurate, the researchers explained and emphasized each student's response by asking them to repeat each question the writer had asked. To obtain accurate data, the researchers interpreted the results directly. In this research, tape-recorder was not utilized for the student's feelings, confidence, and less hesitation during the interview process.

4. Findings and Discussions

The researchers discovered that the participants encountered several challenges in speaking English, such as pronunciation issues with English vocabulary, low self-confidence, problems with grammar in use, lack of vocabulary, environment, Factors Influencing Course Content, insufficient education, the instructor, and Various Teaching Factors, Aspects of the Culture of the Classroom, interpersonal issues and mother language and accent. After conducting interviews with them. The problems in speaking experienced by second-year students at the National Institute of technology are detailed here.

1. Pronunciation issues with English words: The initial discovery was difficulty pronouncing English words.

During the spoken English activities, the participants had trouble pronouncing English words. A declaration by participant one revealed that "in speaking activities, the difficulty was in pronunciation" (P1.1). Based on Hetrakul (1995), students' most common challenge when speaking is pronunciation. Specific terms were difficult for them to pronounce. Pronunciation and spelling differ in English. During the interview, the researchers found that some participants made some incorrect English sounds. For instance, they mispronounced the words (think and that) instead, they read the words think as /θɪŋk/ and that as /ðat/ they expressed like this / sink/ and /zat/. So this issue belongs to that Kurdish alphabets do not exist with these two sounds /ð/ and/ θ/.

2. Low self-confidence: One of the most prevalent problems students practice. It may be observed in the statements of the participants. "The challenge in speaking had confidence," said participant two (P2.2), whereas "the difficulty in conversation is lack of confidence," said participant three (P3.2). It discovered that one of the obstacles to speaking was a lack of confidence. "When I want to speak English, I at once think about my errors and having not enough confidence makes me stop my speech specifically among my classmates" (P4. 2). Low self-confidence was a significant component in students' struggles, as confidence might help them achieve their objectives (Gruber, 2010).

3. Problems with grammar in use. On the one hand, both participants and two had to cope with this situation. Both individuals had difficulty with grammatical language, especially when speaking indirectly or spontaneously. "For example, if I forget one of my presentations, I make up my terms that are not by the grammar. As a result, the vast majority of the students consider their limited vocabulary a challenge. Another student out of the 12 participants voiced similar comments, saying, "I find it difficult to choose the suitable tense while talking." Another participant declares, "Since my mind automatically switches to Kurdish when I attempt to talk in English, I find it challenging to locate the right words to employ while speaking." We will be able to talk fluently again after that" (P1.3). "I did not know whether my language was awful or correct," said participant one (P1.3). Participant two, on the other hand, remarked, "Speaking is spontaneous, and it confuses me (in terms of grammar)." (P2.3). English language learners suffer from a range of grammatical issues, according to Shatz and Wilkinson (2010), including the third person singular, articles, the past tense, and the misuse of prepositions. Both persons had the same problem with grammar usage, but their situations were different based on their issues with grammar usage.

4. Lack of Vocabulary: The researchers found that all participants lacked language mastery. Speaking requires a large amount of vocabulary. Students cannot communicate their thoughts in phrases due to a lack of vocabulary. The participants' remarks proved it. "Sometimes I felt frightened to talk because I lack language," said participant three (P4.4). One of the challenges that all participants experience is one of the aspects of language. According to Shahzadi et al. (2014), the learners could not express themselves effectively or well since they lacked enough vocabulary. Despite the students having significantly diverse speaking experiences, they all agreed that a lack of confidence made them fearful.

5. Environment: Individuals are affected by the environment. Students also learned from their surroundings since it aided in developing their talents. "I am not from a place where the English language uses as a language; thus, I cannot gain vocabulary from the surroundings," said participant five. We would know much more if everyone in our environment spoke English" (P5.5). Also, Participant 6 discovered that the setting where he previously worked did not speak English. "My basis was not in English (environment), so I only know a few vocabularies," he explained (P6.5). As can be seen from the explanations of participants five and six, the environment significantly influences expanding vocabulary and increasing students' confidence in speaking.

6. Mother language and accent: The majority of those who took part in this research also pointed their attention to the issue of excessive usage of their mother language while speaking. On the one hand, most participants noted a lack of proper classroom atmosphere and peer engagement. Nearly all classmates speak Kurdish in class instead of English. One student said, "Even lecturers utilize their native language (Kurdish) with students outside and occasionally in class." On the other hand, In a complementary manner, another participant said, "We do not have a way to ask questions in English; lecturers explain subjects in Kurdish and the local language." A classroom is a place for international students to practice English, but if the setting is adverse, they will not improve. The lack of a supportive atmosphere inhibits English learners. However, individuals in a specific location, community, or social group speak words referred to as an accent. Rather than a language taught as an adult or at school, the first language is our mother tongue that we acquire as newborns. An accent might occur due to the mother tongue, making it challenging to communicate in English. These results concur with those made known in Ur (1991), as described in her book. According to her, the main issues with speaking are poor or unequal involvement, one's mother language usage, and inhibition. Each person has their pronunciation; therefore, changing an individual's accent is typically impossible. Central vowels are the most difficult for Kurdish EFL learners, followed by high back vowels in

pronunciation. As a result, whenever "we come across these sounds in English words, we frequently substitute them with Kurdish ones because our accent impacts our English accent," was backed up by participant two (P2.6). Different Types of Students' Speaking Difficulties According to the six respondents the researchers questioned, the students had six obstacles while speaking. Respondents reported the following issues: Pronunciation issues with English words, Low self-confidence, Problems with grammar use, lack of vocabulary, the influence of mother tongue and accent, and environmental atmosphere. The above difficulties faced the ESP students based on linguistic and non-linguistic issues. So non-linguistic topics, including body language, facial expressions, gestures, and nonverbal communication, fear of making mistakes, and anxiety of making a laugh by their colleagues, all impacted those interviewed. There are 14 criteria of effective language learners in acquiring a foreign or second language.

According to Rubin & Thompson, cited in (Brown, 2001). Rubin and Thompson suggest 14 characteristics of effective language learners, all unique to successful language learners. According to the results of interviews with speaking students about their difficulties. The problems encountered by learners in Speaking were 'difficulty speaking,' 'less active in speaking,' 'afraid of making errors,' 'lack of grammar knowledge,' and 'lack of vocabulary,' and embraced in front of their friends. The students themselves are an essential aspect of speaking to overcome these challenges. The students are encouraged to be more confident in their speaking skills and not make errors. They must be innovative in searching for new methods for improving their speaking skills. Learners should use every opportunity to practice English in and out of the classroom. They might establish a pact with their peers to use English as much as possible in everyday conversations. Brown (2001: p.62), teachers' speech needs emotional support, including presenting a supportive attitude towards learners, identifying challenging activities and topics, and considering the state of the learner's language.

7. Factors Influencing Course Content: Even during the discussion, several students said the English course curriculum lacks speaking exercises. According to students, teachers want us to write in English, but we never speak it. One student said, "How can we practice English, and how can our instructor teach us speaking without speaking activities?" This is since the university was responsible for developing the program, said another participant (P.7.7).

8. Insufficient Education: Students believe that low education causes poor English proficiency, according to the findings. "We have a fragile foundation of English from the primary level alone, and it is now challenging to develop English at this stage," participants (p.7.8). They have learned that they could speak English well at this time if they could find a conducive setting to do so at the school level. As a result, the school environment contributes significantly to poor English proficiency in higher education.

9. The Instructor and Various Teaching Factors: Students' learning is directly impacted by teachers in the classroom and their teaching methods. Most of the participants in this research said that the teacher's contribution to speaking fluency development was the most significant causative element. According to the students' comments, lecturers are more engaged in the classroom than the students, who are only passive listeners. Harmer (2001) pointed out that more time should be spent discussing by students than by teachers to improve teaching and learning. Some students noted instructors' and classmates' lack of enthusiasm. They think instructors should inspire and motivate students in the language classroom. Participants said friends criticize someone who attempts to speak English.

10. Aspects of the Culture of the Classroom: It is thought that the environment of a class or organization directly affects learning. The classroom culture in this context is the system, customs, positions of the instructor and pupils, and the activities they carry out in class. According to Kumaravadivelu (2006), culture and education are inseparably linked. Students have also identified the classroom atmosphere as an influential component in this research. Some interviewees said that students come from all backgrounds and have varying perspectives on what should be taught in the classroom. "At the school level, we never spoke to our instructor in English, and we never spoke in front of the class. We used to stay mute in class since our harsh school instructor prevented us from speaking." (P.12.10).

11. Interpersonal Issues: Students' intelligence and academic performance levels may differ. In an interview, a participant (P.9.11) said, "My classmates laugh at me because my pronunciation is bad." Because they are afraid of being laughed at, this participant (P.9.11) starts to feel uncomfortable talking in front of the class. Another factor that demotivates students from using their English in class is their attitude about making errors. Similarly, one of the main issues with speaking is the teacher's instant criticism.

5. Conclusion

The researchers ultimately found some typical errors in the English-speaking class of English majoring sophomore students at the National Institute of Technology. After completing this research and reviewing the essential information acquired from the sophomore students of the ESP department. Difficulties with mother tongue,

vocabulary, pronunciation, and psychology were among these factors. The concerns of Kurdish EFL learners with English speaking issues were considered and investigated in this study. It is worth emphasizing the assessment and evaluation of participants' perceptions of speaking problems in this study. Speaking skills made many different issues for non-native speakers worldwide; apart from it, Kurdish learners have the same challenges. From the study findings and discussions, it is reasonable to state that the six students of English for Specific Purposes at the National Institute of Technology had some obstacles in speaking. Most students struggle with speaking because of a lack of vocabulary, a deficiency of confidence to speak, absence of experience talking in class, and difficulty conveying words or phrases. Students' most common cause of the difficulty was fear of making mistakes. The researchers discovered two challenges learners encounter when speaking: non-linguistic and linguistic issues. Researchers offered some recommendations as a result of the discussion. The most crucial is that speaking abilities do not stand alone; the students faced with mastery of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation of words must improve students knowledge. The researcher recommended altering current English courses, changing the teaching methodology, and shifting the role of the instructor in the classroom in order to resolve these issues. It also suggested developing a conducive English-speaking atmosphere in the classroom.

6. Recommendations of the Researchers

The researchers discovered from the investigation that it was difficult for Kurdish students to speak English well, particularly second-year English-speaking majors. The ability to talk must regard more seriously. The following recommendations can incorporate into the English teaching process. It also helps teachers, educators, students, and curriculum professionals develop educational environments and communication skills. Therefore, researchers focus on many suggestions based on the experience of previous studies. As a result, we would like to display the following recommendations for correcting and learning speaking skills for English majors at the NIT students of the ESP department.

A. Recommendations to the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research

- (i). Using different tools of the internet, classroom techniques, and (Audio, Video, Instructions, and Tools) in the curriculum, plans of the English program by (MHESR).
- (ii). Teachers should train to use internet applications related to the classroom's needs.
- (iii). Providing seminars, workshops, and symposiums to teachers to know their strengths and weaknesses.

B. Recommendation for the course designers

Curriculum designers should consider the importance of technology, and animation and related images are essential in promoting push students. In addition, participate in the EFL handbook on some topics implicitly related to the pragmatics and culture of the language.

C. Recommendations directed to EFL teachers

- (i). EFL teachers should consider integrating educational facilitators into the learning and instructive environment.
- (ii). Several methods and techniques of English Language Teaching should be focused on and adopted by teachers
- (iii). Applied active rather than passive teaching to make students become active learners.

D. Recommendations directed to EFL students

- (i). Self-practice: Students can practice speaking by themselves to achieve their goals and, for instance, talking and imitating in front of the mirror to build their shyness, confidence, and personality.
- (ii). Improve vocabulary: University students can discuss various topics. Make an effort to acquire many applicable new terms in various contexts: Using an extensive dictionary is an efficient approach to expanding vocabulary. Spend extra time listening: Listen while reading the material with their eyes and then read aloud.
- (iii). Effective listening: Try to imitate the pronunciation when listening to the lecture. Singing along to beloved English songs assists the student in speaking English fluently.

As a result, students could broaden their knowledge and make their voices more natural when interacting with foreigners. Furthermore, they should look for videos on Youtube connected to speaking instructions to acquire tactics and then practice them when conversing in English. These suggestions would be beneficial and necessary for students to learn to talk.

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