

Teaching English Speaking Skills to the Arab Students in the Saudi School in Kuala Lumpur: Problems and Solutions

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ABSTRACT

Of the four English language skills, speaking enjoys a superior status. Accordingly, it should be given high priority while teaching. In spite of its importance, teaching English speaking skill to Arab EFL learners has always been an exacting task for Arab teachers of English because it is considered a foreign language, i.e. not widely spoken or used in everyday interactions. For such a reason, Arab teachers of English are required to persistently implement new teaching strategies to tackle the problems regarding speaking skills in the classroom. Although a number of studies have been carried out to investigate the difficulties related to teaching English language skills to the Arab students in the Arab World, the current study is regarded the first study which highlights the problems in learning and teaching English speaking skill in the Saudi School in Kuala Lumpur where English is actively spoken as a second language. The main objective of this paper is to investigate the common problems which affect the teaching of English speaking skills to the Arab learners in the Saudi School in Kuala Lumpur. Additionally, it aims at exploring the areas of difficulty that prevent the Arab students from learning to speak in the English classes. This research also scrutinises the role of Kuala Lumpur ESL context on the Arab students' English language speaking skills. The current study adheres to qualitative method, and its data were collected via classroom observations and face-to-face interviews with four teachers of English and four students selected purposively. Findings included areas like learning and teaching difficulties. The study suggested some techniques to improve the teaching quality and enable the students to overcome their lack of speaking ability such as implementing communicative approach in the English classes.

Key words: Speaking Skills, Arab Students, ESL Context, Kuala Lumpur

INTRODUCTION

The strong presence of English language has made it the lingua franca in many countries and the most commonly spoken language in the world. Nowadays, English plays a prominent role in developing the world's education and business. This global significance makes English receives special attention in Saudi Arabia. Accordingly, it has been given great importance in schools, colleges, universities and institutions. For instance, English is taught as a core subject in public schools starting from the fourth through twelfth grades. However, most private schools start teaching English from kindergarten. During their general education, Saudi students study English for a total of nine years, and there are four 45-minute periods of English instruction per week. Additionally, English curricula are revised, updated and evaluated continually to meet the students' needs.

Statement of the Problem

Teaching speaking skills to Arab students has always been a challenging task to EFL (English as a Foreign Language)

teachers because it is a foreign language. This refers to teaching of English to learners in or from countries where it has not been traditionally used (McArthur, 2005). While speaking English, Arab students encounter many difficulties. The major one is that there is very limited opportunity in the Arab countries to learn English through natural interaction in the target language (Rabab'ah, 2003). Previous studies conducted in the Arab World such as (Hamad, 2103; Al-Seghayer, 2014; Mahboob and Elyas, 2014; Alrabai, 2014 and Alrashidi and Phan 2015) revealed that most Arab students are not intrinsically motivated, and they lack the basic language skills that would enable them to express themselves easily in the classroom. In a multicultural city like Kuala Lumpur where English is spoken as an active second language (Thirusanku & Yunus, 2014), Arab students are expected to acquire a higher level of proficiency than their counterparts in the Arab World. However, it seems that even in this conducive language learning context most Arab students find difficulty in communicating freely in English due to certain

factors such as students' limited knowledge of English language, lack of confidence and motivation.

Objectives

The three primary objectives of this study are to:

- Investigate the major problems which affect the teaching and learning speaking skills in the Saudi School in Kuala Lumpur (SSKL).
- Explore the role of the Kuala Lumpur English as a Second Language (ESL) environment in the Arab students' speaking skills.
- Suggest some solutions and strategies that would enhance the quality of teaching and learning of speaking English in the SSKL.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Role of Speaking Skill in Language Learning and Teaching

Throughout the world nowadays, there is an urgent need for people to speak English well. In most Arab countries, for example, English is considered a core subject in private and public schools as well as universities. For this reason, it is necessary for students to master good speaking skills and for teachers to know how to teach speaking well. One cannot deny that we speak every day more than we write. Accordingly, speaking grasps the highest importance in the language. As teachers, we certainly rely on our students' spoken responses of language to give us information about what they have learned in the classroom (Edge, 1999). In addition, speaking is regarded as the first step to confirm who knows or does not know a language. Ur (1996, p.120) emphasised that "speaking seems intuitively the most important language skill, and people who know a language are referred to as 'speakers' of that language, as if speaking included all other kinds of knowing, and many if not most foreign language learners are primarily interested in learning to speak." Roughly speaking, success in learning a language is measured in terms of the ability to carry out a conversation in the target language (Nunan, 1991). This makes language learners give high priority to speaking over the other language skills.

As far as teaching is concerned, Goh and Burns (2012) outline four categories of speaking skills which serve as a useful points of reference when planning a lesson. These four speaking categories are (a) correct pronunciation, (b) speech function, e.g. how a learner requests or explains something or express thanks, wishes etc., (c) interaction management including offering turns and regulating conversations as well as using verbal and non-verbal language and (d) discourse organisation which involves creating coherence and cohesion through structure and word choice. Accordingly, teachers should help students acquire meaningful fluency as well as conversational listening skills.

Common Problems Affecting Speaking Skills

Speaking, as stated earlier, gains a considerable significance among other language skills. However, learning to speak is

not an easy task because students usually face a number of problems that hinder them from speaking. These include five factors: (1) lack of exposure to language, (2) lack of motivation, (3) Students' anxiety and lack of confidence (4) limited knowledge of English and (5) inefficient teaching methodology.

Lack of Exposure to Language

The environment plays an influential role in developing a learner's language. Once a learner receives a lot of exposure to a second language and communicates with the people in the surrounding area, his acquisition of the target language is expected to be highly possible. In fact, the social context is important because it forms a number of learning factors such as second language learner's motivation, goals and proficiency (Beebe, 1985 & Kumaravadivelu, 2006). In his study, Wong-Fillmore (1989) concluded that social setting creates and shapes good chances for a second language learner because it develops his learning potential. In this way, learners who have plenty of opportunity to speak can achieve great fluency in speaking because they practise on a daily basis. However, in countries where English is spoken as a foreign language, students find it difficult to develop their ability to speak because they do not communicate in English in and outside school. In fact, lack of exposure to English in daily life interactions is considered one of the language barriers which limit Arab students' ability to achieve a high level of English fluency and competence (Khan, 2011 & Alrashidi1 and Phan 2015). Not only the Arab countries' students who face such a limitation of exposure, but also other Asian countries students like Vietnam, Japan, Indonesia and China whose students have difficulty in communicating in English due to the lack of exposure. Wang (2009) revealed that the Chinese students failed to learn English because much of their exposure consists of written English with little real spoken interaction.

Likewise, researchers like (Jdetawy, 2011; Mourtaga, 2011 and Alhaisoni and Rahman, 2013) pointed out that the Arab learners of English encounter problems in speaking due to their lack of exposure to the target language as well as their preference to use Arabic as a formal language of communication. In general, Arab students have little opportunity to learn English through natural interaction. Al-Seghayer (2014) pointed out that students in Saudi Arabia do not use English as the medium of instruction in schools. Furthermore, learning environment and family background play a vital role in success for learning process. In his study Abu-Ras (2002, p.17) stated that "after almost sixteen years of its application, the communicative ability of the Saudi students graduating from the secondary schools is still very poor". Researchers such as (Rabab'ah, 2003; Mahboob and Elyas, 2014 and Alrabai, 2014) also concluded that one of the major factors that led to the students' low level of English is the lack of the target language exposure. Thus, learners should be involved in real-life situations in order to develop their speaking ability.

On the other hand, the social context of Kuala Lumpur is entirely different from that in the Arab countries because

English is used as a second language whereas it is a foreign language in the Arab countries. Obviously, the situation in Kuala Lumpur seem to have a positive effect on the students' command of English because they can improve their speaking ability through communicating with people. Consequently, there is a strong relationship between second acquisition and the students' environment learning.

Lack of Motivation

In second language learning, motivation is a key factor which increases proficiency. It is known by two important elements: learners' demand for communication and their attitudes towards the foreign language (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). That is to say, if learners need to speak a foreign language in social or professional situations, for example, then they will appreciate the value and importance of speaking a foreign language and will therefore be highly motivated to speak. Similarly, if learners have a positive attitude towards native speakers of a foreign language and their culture, therefore their desire to communicate in the target language will then highly increase. Studies such as Al Noursi (2013), Al Asmari (2013), Alkaff (2013), Ahmed (2015), Tanni, (2015), Al samadani and Ibnian (2015), and Khan (2016) concurred that motivation plays a vital role in learning another language.

Students' Anxiety and Lack of Confidence

Students' anxiety and nervousness affect their progress in speaking the target language. Goh and Burns (2012) noted that anxiety has a negative effect on learning process and learners who suffer from language anxiety feel that speaking another language is a stressful experience. This experience hinders learners and makes them avoid or withdraw from active oral interactions. Speakers also worry about how listeners evaluate and view them. For this reason, they cannot take risk and put themselves in uncomfortable or embarrassing situations. Alhmadi (2014) indicated that anxiety is considered an influential intrinsic factor in the acquisition of speaking and oral communication skills. Asif (2017) reported that the Saudi EFL learners suffer from anxiety especially in speaking skills.

On the other hand, in speaking, confidence plays an important role in improving students' proficiency. Generally, students who are self-confident can learn better because they are brave and believe in their abilities. Krashen (1982) argues that learners with high motivation, self-confidence, a good self-image, and a low level of anxiety are better equipped for success in second language acquisition. On the contrary, students' lack of self-confidence can obstruct them from making progress in speaking. Harmer (2007) notes that students are often reluctant to speak because they are shy to express themselves in front of others, particularly when they are being asked to give personal information or opinions. Moreover, they worry of losing face if they do not speak well in front of their friends. Krashen (1982) suggests that language teachers can help students gain self-confidence by providing them proper language for social situations, good chances to practise the language and an attractive classroom environment.

Limited Knowledge of English

To speak fluently, learners should have adequate knowledge of English through which they can enhance their proficiency. The students' knowledge of how sounds are produced as well as how words are put in meaningful sentences is very essential (Canale & Swain, 1980). As far as phonology is concerned, learners should know to pronounce sounds correctly to avoid common problems that are usually transferred from their first language. Also, they have to be aware of features of speech such as stress, intonation and rhythm. In addition, learners should develop their own vocabulary size which helps them in their oral interactions. Goh and Burns (2012) point out that learners' lack of words can prevent them from expressing themselves accurately. They also added that learners need to know the grammar of English in order to be understood. To sum up, students should put a great deal of effort to enhance their phonological, lexical and grammatical knowledge of English. Likewise, teachers should use some helpful techniques to heighten their students' awareness of these language components.

While learning to speak English, Arab students make many errors due to the linguistic differences between English and Arabic. For example, there is no existence in Arabic for certain English sounds such as/p/and/v/which are usually replaced by most Arabic speakers with/b/and/f/(Javed, 2013; Ashour, 2017; Al-Sobhi, 2017). Such mispronunciations will create embarrassing and uncomfortable situations especially when interacting with native speakers of English. For example, words like *pig*, *park*, *van* and *vast* are replaced with *big*, *bark*, *fan* and *fast*. Moreover, Arabic speakers are not expected to correctly pronounce words with silent letters as *light*, *know* and *listen* or sounds with combinations of letters as in *cheese*, *pharmacy* and *special* if read for the first time. Accordingly, teachers should encourage their students to listen regularly to authentic English in order to speak correctly.

Ineffective Teaching Methodology

Using the most effective methods and strategies in teaching English speaking skills makes the students attentive while interacting in the classroom. The teacher's instruction of speaking skills is supposed to enhance the students' communicative competence. This aim can successfully be achieved through the implementation of some recent teaching methods such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which enhances the students' ability to communicate in the target language. In CLT, classes are learner-centered, i.e. students are not passive receivers, and a teacher plays many roles in the classroom in order to develop the students' speaking abilities. He is not only information provider, but also a facilitator, an organiser and a guide. Unfortunately, studies conducted in the Arab World revealed that most English classes are teacher-centered. Accordingly, students are not given sufficient time to practise English in the classroom. Researchers like Gubaily (2012) and Alhaisoni and Rahman (2013) found that the teaching method of speaking was not satisfactory, and it required more improvement in terms of teaching methodology. Additionally, teachers should change

their instruction from lecture mode into student-centred approach. Likewise, Fareh (2010) pointed out some challenges in EFL programmes in the Arab world such as teacher-centred instruction and inadequate training concerning English teaching methodology. Similarly, Alhaisoni and Rahman (2013) found that teachers of English in Saudi Arabia should improve the students' knowledge of the four basic skills and give up both lecture mode of instruction and the dictation of notes.

METHODOLOGY

The Setting

The study was conducted in the Saudi School in Kuala Lumpur (SSKL) which was established in 1990 and officially recognised by the Malaysian Ministry of Education in 1991 (Saudi Schools in Malaysia, 2017). The school has students from different countries both Arab and non-Arab. In spite of teaching different non-Arab minorities such as Malaysians and Singaporeans, most students come from different Arab countries chiefly from Saudi Arabia. The SSKL is totally supported by the Saudi government, and it is under the supervision of both the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The Subjects

In qualitative method, a researcher is purposeful in choosing participants and settings. He selects specific subjects to provide deep insight and thorough understanding of what he is studying (Ary, D. 2010). His experience in selecting the subjects plays an important role in what to include and what to exclude. In this study, four English teachers, whose ages range from thirty-three to sixty, were selected. The teachers represented different levels and came from different countries. Additionally, four Arab secondary school students were included.

Data Collection Methods

This study primarily adheres to qualitative research therefore the collection of the data can be obtained from different methods. In order to accomplish the objectives of this study, the primary methods used were face-to-face interviews and classroom observations.

Interviews

For the sake of the current study, the researchers conducted individual interviews with four English language teachers and four students as well. The interview questions with the teachers and students were carefully constructed and reviewed on the basis of the research objectives. The interviews were recorded via audio tape by the side of note-taking. While the teachers were interviewed in English, the interviews with the students were carried out in Arabic due their low English proficiency. The interviews took place in different locations including the school library and the counselor's office. The places were chosen for their conduciveness for

the participants and the researchers as well. The interviews were recorded then precisely transcribed based on the exact words and opinions of the participants. In semi-structured interviews, the participants provided further information and comprehensive descriptions of their feelings, opinions, experiences etc. In this way, the interviewer can acquire extensive data. In the course of the interviews, teachers and students' verbal and non-verbal communications were observed. This includes their facial expressions, gestures, voice level, hand movements etc. Right after the interview, the researchers jotted down the notes about the setting, duration of time and how the interviews went on. These notes helped very much in writing clear summaries of the current educational situation.

Classroom Observations

Combined with interviews, classroom observations were also used to allow the researchers gain a complete description of the classroom atmosphere including the interaction between the teachers and students. In spite of the importance of video-recording especially in classroom observations, the researchers were not able to videotape the observations because they were not granted the permission. However, the checklist which the researchers used and their detailed notes provided them with a clear picture of the actions which took place in the classroom. To conduct the audio-taped, non-participatory observations, four classes were observed from intermediate and secondary stages. The checklist which the researchers used was adapted from Schiffman Harold's Second Language Classroom Observation. It included five major features: a) lesson preparation, b) language use, c) lesson presentation, d) speaking activities and e) use of technology. In order to make the observation checklist go in line with the objectives of the study, the researchers included various key points related to the strategies of teaching speaking skills and the ways of managing speaking activities. Besides, the checklist included the use of the educational materials in teaching speaking skills due to their significant role in making the lesson easy to present. In addition, notes were made about the teachers' writing on the board, their interactions with students as well as the classroom activities and the teachers' proficiency in spoken English.

DATA ANALYSIS

Interviews

For the sake of analysing the interviews, the students' interviews were translated into English, and then transcribed. The translations were revised and the English transcriptions were read several times in order to get the exact meaning of what the participants said. After reading the participants' responses, the researchers fully examined each piece of information in order to make sense of the data as a whole. They narrowed down the collected data to develop the codes that precisely described the participants' responses. While coding, the researchers asked questions, made comparisons, examined words, phrases etc. Because the researchers did not follow a

linear process, they went back and forth between the stages of the data analysis and formulated the final codes which were closely related to the research objectives. Finally, they used their background knowledge, experiences and opinions to interpret and represent the findings of the study.

Classroom Observations

As far as the classroom observations are concerned, the researchers first prepared the notes and the checklists and read them many times in order to have a complete picture of the data collected. They also re-listened many times to the audiotaped observations. After they reduced the number of categories they extracted from the data collected, they developed the final central themes. Like interview analysis, the researchers did not follow sequential steps. Rather, they went back and forth between the stages. This extended the researchers' knowledge and enhanced their understanding of the data collected. In order to ensure the reliability of the observational data, a replication was conducted to examine the degree of agreement between the results obtained by the two researchers. After comparing the coding, the researchers made the final decision on the main themes. The observational data were also compared and contrasted with the interview data in order to support the results obtained.

It is worth mentioning, that the analysis of the data collected followed the process of inductive coding which helped the researchers generate the most important themes. Accordingly, the data collected were narrowed down into specific segments of information in order to create initial themes and come up with the most important codes. During the coding process, the researchers asked questions, made comparisons and examined repetitive expressions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results obtained from the interviews and classroom observations carried out with EFL teachers and students are divided into problems faced by the EFL teachers and others by ESL students. Besides, the teachers and students' perspectives of Kuala Lumpur ESL environment are highlighted.

Problems Faced by the EFL Teachers

Based on the interviews and observations, the researchers found four major problems that influenced the process of teaching speaking skills. These are (1) absence of listening & speaking tests, (2) teaching method is not communicative, (3) students' attitude towards speaking and (4) lack of necessary facilities.

Absence of Listening & Speaking Tests

In spite of the importance of speaking tests, the interviews which were conducted with teachers of English revealed their discontent about the absence of listening and speaking tests in both intermediate and secondary levels. It seems so obvious that tests in intermediate and secondary stages are biased to the skills of reading and writing along with

grammar and vocabulary. Accordingly, English tests are almost written. On the other hand, all the students' interviews showed that they have never been given any speaking or listening test. This could indicate that a students can get full marks without being tested in speaking or listening. This is because teachers have to follow the material given so in the exams, e.g. students do not expect to be given any speaking or listening questions. One teacher-participant firmly stated that

The reason beyond the students' low level in speaking is the assessment system. We teach the four skills in the intermediate level, but we never, test listening and speaking, so no marks for listening and speaking. The regulations by the Ministry controls the assessment, and you cannot set marks for speaking you only have written quizzes, and final term tests. So without speaking, students can achieve the full marks 100.

This was confirmed by all the student-participants. One student said that

The problem is that the textbook controls the teacher. I mean, the teacher has to abide by the textbook. For example, the textbook includes very limited listening and speaking practices which are not effective enough to improve the students' spoken ability.

Another student added that

We are usually tested in reading, grammar, writing and vocabulary but no tests for listening and speaking. Students only participate and speak when the teacher discusses the lesson.

In conclusion, students are always energised and motivated by marks. For this reason, they follow the marking scheme in order to achieve high scores. When important skills like listening and speaking are neglected and not assessed at all, the students' motivation towards them decreases and by the time the importance of such skills may gradually diminish.

Teaching Method is not Communicative

It is very important for teachers to choose the most effective methods and approaches in order to improve the teaching outcomes in general and develop the students' oral proficiency in specific. Accordingly, a language teacher is required to facilitate the communication process between the students by involving them in the activities taking place in the classroom to enhance their speaking ability and emphasise learner-centred and cooperative learning.

However, the classroom observations carried out by the researchers showed that the students were given minimal chances to practise English, i.e. most classes are teacher-centered. Most teachers used traditional methods, mainly Grammar-Translation Method, to present their lessons. Although the lessons were delivered in good English, there were many obstacles that made teaching not communicative. Generally, the teachers realise that they should apply the recent communicative methods in their teaching in order to improve the students' proficiency, but they cannot find the appropriate teaching materials and techniques to carry out the classroom activities, so they just use to the traditional ones. In addition, the interviews revealed that the teachers' general dissatis-

faction with current teaching situation was also due to the students' low level of English. One teacher pointed out that

Most students lack the basic knowledge of English. So, they find it difficult to participate in English in the classroom. So, they either keep silent or ask for Arabic translation.

Another teacher said

In fact, I was trying to make my classes student-centered. I'm trying my best to provide more time for students to talk and minimise my talking time, but the students in the SSKL do not prefer this. Even if I speak in English or give them much time to speak, they just shift from English to Arabic.

Such a result is consistent with Abu-Ras (2002, p.17) who stated that "after almost sixteen years of its application, the communicative ability of the Saudi students graduating from the secondary schools is still very poor". Likewise, researchers such as (Rabab'ah, 2003; Mahboob and Elyas, 2014 and Arabai, 2014) also concluded that one of the major factors that led to the students' low level of English is the lack of the target language exposure. As a result, these factors negatively affected the teachers' performance in the classroom.

Students' Attitude Towards Speaking

The interviews with teachers showed that most students consider English as a school subject to study and pass rather than a language to learn and communicate with people. That is to say, they follow the assessment in order to pass the exams. The teachers' interviews revealed that the assessment is the only motivator for the students to achieve high marks. One teacher pointed out that

Most of the students are caring only about passing the exams and a few are caring about learning and a few even caring about nothing just give them a text to prepare at home and test their reading and mark it ...

This was emphasised by another teacher who stated that *Students are after the assessment. Everything is judged by the assessment whether a continuous or a final formative one. In fact, marks and assessment are more important for the students than learning language itself, and the text is not supporting language learning but supporting this point of assessment.*

Actually, it is natural that students follow the assessment because they are required to fulfil at least the minimum mark of the course, fifty percent, by the end of the year. However, the marking scheme does not allot high marks for speaking. The students, in the teachers' opinions, have a negative attitude towards speaking and make no efforts in improving their speaking ability because it is almost neglected in the midterm and final tests.

On the other hand, the students' interviews revealed that they had positive attitude towards speaking. They feel that speaking is enormously important, but unfortunately it is not assessed by the teachers, i.e. not included in the tests. This makes them give high priority to the other skills which are considered the main sections of any English test. One student declared that

I feel that speaking is the most important skill because it is spoken on a daily basis here in Kuala Lumpur.

Another student pointed out that

Speaking should be given more importance because it is very important in communicating with the community. For example, when you order something or go to a place, speaking is the most commonly skill we use.

In conclusion, most students' attitude towards English language is positive in general and they feel that speaking is an important skill. However, this positive attitude was gradually weakened because speaking is not assessed. The absence of speaking test created a strong feeling that they should only consider getting high marks regardless of the importance of the skill. So, they lay great importance only to writing, reading, grammar and vocabulary.

Lack of the Necessary Facilities

Another problem that hindered the process of teaching speaking is that teachers are not provided by adequate educational materials such as audio CD's, posters and teacher's book. As the researchers observed, the classrooms are provided by computers, but they are not used by English teachers due to the lack of listening materials. One teacher mentioned that

Textbooks aren't provided with teaching materials: audios, posters, flashcards etc. and this makes teaching a difficult task. There are no listening classes here simply because there is no listening material.

When the researchers observed the student's textbook, they found that the book contains a listening lesson which includes a number of questions based on listening. However, the absence of audio CD's makes it difficult for teachers to present the lesson as it should be. One of the teachers commented that

There are limited portions of listening. Yet they are not available for teacher. The listening component is marginalized.

In listening, there is an urgent need for native speakers of English because students should be exposed to correct pronunciation. This enables them to pronounce words and sentences accurately. Another participant stated that

We only have listening without CD's so what is the point to give them listening. They should listen to a native speaker. They listen to the teacher all the time in the class, but this is not enough and they should hear and learn what is better especially from a native speaker's voice.

Furthermore, the school is not provided with a laboratory through which the students can practice listening and speaking. Besides, there is one library, but only few books are in English. One teacher pointed out that

I use the textbooks, the activity books and that's it. Actually we don't have an English lab, and the school library has a few English stories.

As far as language learning is concerned, students can benefit and learn better if the materials are available. When the proper educational material is used, this will draw the students' attention and affect their performance positively. However, if there is a lack in the learning resources, the students will feel that learning is traditional and not interesting. As the researcher observed, there is a lack of learning re-

sources. The only available material that the students benefit from is the textbook. English learning facilities such as a language laboratory, a library, audio CD's, video tapes, interactive CD's etc. are not available in the school. The classrooms are only provided by computers, but they are rarely used by English teachers due to the lack of listening materials.

In conclusion, teachers lack the basic facilities which enable them to achieve their goals. Although the textbook contains listening and speaking lessons, it is imperfect because it lacks the audio CD's. As a result, preparing the lesson will be difficult for the teacher because it is illogical for a teacher to achieve a behavioural objective such as enabling the students to practise listening comprehension without having the audio CD's. In other words, the students should listen first, and then answer the questions based on what they have listened to.

Problems Faced by Students

Based on the interviews and classroom observations, the students faced three main problems while learning the speaking skills. These problems are (1) lack of linguistic knowledge, (2) lack of motivation and confidence and (3) excessive use of Arabic language.

Lack of Linguistic Knowledge

The students confined their lack of speaking in three linguistic components: sentence structures, vocabulary and pronunciation. No one can deny the importance of grammar and vocabulary along with clear pronunciation in communicating with others. If one fails to put a word in its right context or pronounce a word incorrectly, he might be misunderstood. For example, there are certain sounds in English that do not exist in Arabic like /p/ and /v/, so mispronouncing them could put the speaker in an embarrassing situation. Moreover, if a learner of English does not have a wide vocabulary, he will find it difficult to communicate easily. Likewise, a learner who has a rich vocabulary needs good knowledge of grammar to speak meaningful sentences. Accordingly, grammar and vocabulary are considered essential language components. One student participant pointed out that

If you don't have large vocabulary, you can't speak. Some people, for example, start the sentence then stop without finishing the sentence because of lack of vocabulary. If he has large vocabulary, he will not stop. Also, the students need good grammar because it makes the sentence sound correct. I think that grammar and vocabulary are important in improving the speaking skill.

Another student emphasised that

My vocabulary and grammar don't help me in speaking and sometimes and that why I sometimes don't know how to express myself right. So, I try my best to describe what I feel to convey the meaning.

Additionally, correct pronunciation is essential and requires a student to practise regularly in order to communicate clearly and easily with others. One student shared his experience by saying

I sometimes find that people don't understand me because I mispronounce some English words. This is ac-

tually embarrassing and may lead to quitting learning English. To overcome this problem, I regularly use my mobile to check the correct pronunciation of the new words.

The students' interviews revealed that grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary are essential components of learning how to speak. In fact, the students' narrow background of English is considered one of the key reasons which prevented them from speaking. In spite of their interest in speaking as the interviews revealed, their lack of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation dampens this enthusiasm. The students in the secondary stage are expected to communicate in English easily at least in the classroom activities. However, their low proficiency of English hinders them to participate actively in the exercises and activities prepared by the teacher.

Lack of Motivation and Confidence – 'Peer Mock'

The encouragement and support which the student receives from his teachers, parents and classmates help and facilitate his learning process. Students achieve better if they are encouraged and vice versa. It is generally admitted that students who are self-confident can learn better because they are brave and believe in their abilities. Accordingly, there is a strong relationship between motivation, confidence and students' performance and achievement (Elsheikh, 2015; Al samadani and Ibnian, 2015; Khan, 2016). On the contrary, lack of motivation and confidence can hinder the students' language proficiency. In this study, the mockery and ridicule which take place in the classroom creates fear of peer. That is to say, the student fears from his classmates' negative comments if he commits a mistake while answering a question or participating in a class activity. One student stated that

When I speak, I feel afraid to make mistakes because if I make mistakes my classmates will laugh at me.

In this way, the classroom environment is considered one of the main obstacles which prevents students from practising with each other as some students create unhealthy environment for communication.

The classroom is one of the main reasons which hinders me from practising speaking. It is almost because of the students' mockery and ridicule. For example, when I speak with one of my classmates, he looks at me and laughs and does not take it seriously.

In addition, some students feel that shyness and horror of error can put them in uncomfortable situations which in turn hinder them from taking part in any class discussion. One participant said

The biggest problem that the Arab students face is that we feel afraid and shy of speaking. Because of this fear, I sometimes keep silent despite knowing the correct answer. I also feel afraid that my answer is incorrect, which makes me feel embarrassed in front of my classmates.

In conclusion, motivation and confidence are important factors which accelerate the students' language progress. The study revealed that the students' fear of committing mistakes made them feel uncomfortable when they practised or participated in the classroom. Apart from that, the students' fear of being mocked or ridiculed by their peers negatively

affected their progress in speaking. That is to say, there is a lack of positive peer encouragement in classroom. So in order to avoid embarrassing situations, the students prefer to communicate in Arabic.

Excessive Use of Arabic Language

The significance of language exposure in improving the students' speaking ability is undeniable. In the Arab countries, students find it difficult to communicate in English because it is not used in their everyday life (Rabab'ah, 2003; Mahboob and Elyas, 2014 and Alrabai, 2014). That is to say. English is only a school subject not a means of communication. On the other hand, in Kuala Lumpur where English is spoken a second language the students are expected to have good command of speaking. However, the students still use their native language when they communicate with each other inside and outside the classroom because they feel that they can express themselves a lot better in their own language. One student commented that

After the class finishes, we speak Arabic because it is easier. Also, when I speak with my classmates in English, he switches to Arabic so I am obliged to speak Arabic.

Moreover, the means of instruction in the Saudi School is Arabic. English is only heard in the English classes which are four 45-minute periods per week. This means there is excessive exposure to Arabic than English. Besides, the schools' activities and programs are carried out in Arabic. This makes the use of English highly limited. One of the influential factors that weakened the student's ability to speak is that he is surrounded by Arabic most of the day, i.e. in school or house. One teacher participant pointed out that

Students use Arabic everywhere at home, school, meetings. In the SSKL, Arabic is the only medium of instruction and in the school about 95% Arab students. So, if they want to use English, they only use it malls or any place where only English is spoken. In fact, the students transferred the same Arabic culture and environment to Malaysia.

Compared with the Arab countries, Kuala Lumpur is considered a favourable environment for practising English. However, most Arab families created a culture similar to their own by living next to each other and gathering on a regular basis. In this way, they speak their own native language all the time. This was emphasised by another teacher who stated that

Here in KL or in any other similar situation, the students hear English more. Unfortunately, the students are not taking this good opportunity to improve their English. They are within the folk that they are together all the time in school. They speak Arabic. Outside school, they live in their compounds together and they communicate in Arabic.

One can improve his spoken English if he minimises exposure to his own language and starts practising the target language. The more one uses the target language, the higher level he achieves. On the contrary, when a language learner lives in an environment where he is surrounded by his native

language, he is expected not excel in the target language. Despite living in Kuala Lumpur, the students great exposure to Arabic inside and outside the school negatively affected their progress in English.

Researchers like Jdetawy (2011), Mourtaga (2011) and Al-Nasser, (2015) concluded that the Arab learners' lack of exposure to the target language is considered one of the main reasons behind their low proficiency of English. Clearly, Arab students have little opportunity to learn English through natural interaction. Khan (2011) pointed out that environment and family background play vital roles in success of learning process. Because of this, the communicative ability of the Saudi students graduating from the secondary schools is still very poor.

Teachers and Students' Perspectives of Kuala Lumpur ESL Environment

Compared with the environment in the Arab world, Kuala Lumpur is considered highly conducive to practise English because English is heard and spoken throughout the day. The students and teachers' responses were positive and emphasised that Kuala Lumpur is a suitable learning environment where students can improve their English speaking ability. One teacher stated that

The learning environment in KL has a good effect on the students because English is an active second language in Malaysia, so you can speak and hear English all day, but it is a foreign language in the Arab countries.

Another teacher added that

There is a big difference between the learning environment in KL and that in the Arab World in terms of language exposure and daily communication and culture as well. I think the students' English can be improved if they have non-Arab friends so that they will be obliged to speak English only.

The teachers agreed that in the learning environment in the Arab World does not help the students improve their speaking ability because English is only used in the classroom, i.e. the students' exposure to English is remarkably limited. The teachers also confirmed that there is a good chance for the students to practise English in Kuala Lumpur as it is a multicultural city and English is used as a lingua franca, i.e. a second language for communication. However, the students are not taking advantage of this good learning environment. Instead, they are using their own native language, Arabic, when they communicate. When they first arrive in Kuala Lumpur, most Arab families prefer to stay in the residential condominiums where Arabs are found so that they meet each other on a daily basis. This negatively influences the students' speaking ability because it minimises their chances of using English.

On the other hand, the students' perspective of Kuala Lumpur as a learning environment was highly positive compared with that in the Arab countries. They all agreed that a student can improve his speaking ability through communicating with the people in Kuala Lumpur. The students all agreed what has been mentioned about the everyday use of English in Kuala Lumpur and added that it is difficult to

practise English in the Arab countries especially outside the classroom due the lack of exposure whereas most people communicate in English in Kuala Lumpur, and this helps the students to improve their English better. One student pointed out that

The learning environment in KL is better of course because in the KSA English is spoken in very limited places like hospitals, and Arabic is the most commonly used language, but in KL more than 90 % speak English.

Another student confirmed what has been mentioned and said that

KL environment is much better because English is spoken in KL, and it is impossible to speak with a Malaysian in Arabic.

The current study revealed that Kuala Lumpur is a suitable learning environment where students can improve their English speaking ability. However, the Arab families' choice of residence negatively affected the students' progress in speaking skills. Most Arab families prefer to stay in the residential condominiums where large population of Arabs are found. Unfortunately, the students did not take advantage of this golden opportunity and that in turn minimised their chances of using English. In brief, language exposure greatly affects learning a language and learners who have plenty of opportunity to speak can achieve great fluency in speaking because they practise on a daily basis.

THE PROPOSED SOLUTIONS TO THE SPEAKING PROBLEMS

In order to solve the problems which the teachers and students encountered, the researchers grouped them into three categories. These categories are organised according to the responsibilities of: (1) the SSKL, (2) the English language teachers and (3) the Arab students.

The Role of the SSKL in Improving Speaking Skills

The SSKL should provide the English teachers with the necessary teaching materials which make them present the lessons effectively. In order to achieve the speaking lessons objectives, language teachers need adequate teaching facilities such as a language laboratory, a library, videotapes, educational software, audiotapes, pictures, posters, flashcards and teacher's manual. Likewise, the classrooms should be provided with learning facilities which develop the language skills in general, but with more emphasis on speaking. In the SSKL each classroom is supplied with a computer which can be used effectively. For example, the students can listen to conversations and stories recorded by native speakers of English. They can also watch educational video clips and programmes.

Furthermore, the SSKL can provide English teachers with in-service training. For example, seminars, workshops and training courses should be regularly held for the teachers to improve their knowledge and method of teaching. Unlike most Arab countries where a small number of language centres are available, Kuala Lumpur English language centres attract big numbers of Arabs every year in order to

learn English. Many of these centres such as British Council and ELS provide professional teaching programmes like TESOL and CELTA where candidates are exposed to online, face-to-face courses as well as authentic practicum. Teacher training should be given high importance because it plays a fundamental role in enhancing the quality of the teachers' performance in the classroom which consequently improves the students' level of English. The SSKL situation is by far better than any school in Saudi Arabia in terms of language teaching because Kuala Lumpur environment creates many chances for teachers to develop their teaching quality. For example, the SSKL can arrange mutual school visits to other local and international schools where English is used as a medium of instruction. This not only assists the teachers in terms of teaching techniques and methodologies, but also exposes them to others' experiences in the field.

Besides, the SSKL can provide the students with scheduled enrichment classes in order to increase their speaking level. In such classes, the students should be exposed to phrases and expressions which are used in everyday situations. The teachers should encourage the students and give them chances to express themselves in English.

The Role of the Teachers in Improving Speaking Skills

To improve teaching, EFL teachers can make their classes student-centred by giving the students more oral tasks in which they work in pairs or groups to achieve the objectives of the task. Unlike individual tasks, group work maximises the students' chances to perform a specific communication function such as requesting permission, explaining a process, giving an opinion and offering a suggestion. During the activities, the teacher's role is to encourage the students to practise English and provide them with constructive feedback. Ur (2007) lists a number of communicative activities and games, e.g. brainstorming and role play, which enhance the students' ability to speak fluent English. The classroom speaking activities can be taken and adapted from different sources such as newspapers, magazines, textbooks and websites.

In addition, teachers should encourage the students while participating and doing the activities in order to develop their confidence. The study showed that most students' attitude towards speaking English was positive. Unfortunately, this good attitude gradually declined because the speaking skill was totally neglected. The researchers suggested that the teacher should raise the students' awareness of the significance of the speaking skill in their future. For example, all the secondary students who are looking forward to joining international universities are required have high proficiency of English. Nowadays, an international applicant has to fulfil the English language proficiency requirements for admission without which his application would be unsuccessful. In this way, the students' will put great effort to achieve a high score in such tests in order to enter a university.

The Students' Role in Improving Their Speaking Skills

In order to speak well, the students should improve their linguistic knowledge of grammar and vocabulary first. They

should memorise new phrases and expressions in order to help them in the class discussion and their daily life as well. In the classroom, the students should motivate their classmates by saying encouraging words and phrases. Here comes the role of the teacher to increase the students' awareness of the negative effects of mocking and making fun of others. The teacher can select some excellent students to motivate and energise the weak ones. The teachers' help, advice and inspirational talk can gradually change the current classroom environment to a favourable one. Language exposure requires that a student uses the sentences he knows in his daily conversations with others' in and outside school. This greatly affects learning a language and accelerates learners' progress. The students are also advised to follow online channels and programmes which are specially designed to improve listening and speaking skills such as VOA Special English, BBC World Service and Randall's Lab.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The primary objectives of the study are to investigate the major problems which affect the teaching and learning speaking skills in the SSKL and to propose some possible solutions for them. In order to achieve these objectives, the researchers analysed the data collected from the students and teachers' interviews and the classroom observations. The analysis revealed that the teachers encountered many difficulties when teaching speaking skills such as the absence of speaking tests and the lack of teaching resources. These negatively affected the teacher's performance and his way of teaching in the classroom. Additionally, the students' lack of linguistic knowledge, excessive use of Arabic and their lack of confidence were the major underlying causes for their low level of English. On the other hand, the teachers and students' perspectives of Kuala Lumpur ESL learning environment were much better compared with that in the Arab countries. The students considered Kuala Lumpur as a suitable place where they can develop their spoken ability. However, their daily overuse of Arabic in and outside the classroom with their classmates, friends and family members minimised their chances of using English.

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