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An Analysis of Factors Influencing Learners' English Speaking Skill

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Abstract

Speaking is one of the most important skills to be developed and enhanced as means of effective communication. Speaking skill is regarded one of the most difficult aspects of language learning. Many language learners find it difficult to express themselves in spoken language. They are generally facing problems to use the foreign language to express their thoughts effectively. They stop talking because they face psychological obstacles or cannot find the suitable words and expressions. The modern world of media and mass communication requires good knowledge of spoken English. This paper aims at establishing the need to focus on the factors affecting on language learners' English speaking skill. This review paper traces out the body of research concerning the term speaking, the importance of speaking, characteristics of speaking performance, speaking problems, and factors affecting speaking performance. According to the review of literature, appropriate speaking instruction was found to be the learners' priority and a field in which they need more attention. This study can be useful to teachers and researchers to consider their language learners' speaking needs in English language teaching and learning context.

Keywords: speaking, importance, characteristics, problems, factors

1. Introduction

The learning of English speaking skill is a preference for a lot of English as a Foreign/Second Language (EFL/ESL) learners. Language learners sometimes evaluate their success in language learning based on how well they have improved in their spoken language ability. Teachers and textbooks use either direct approaches that concentrate on particular aspects of oral interaction such as turn-taking and topic management or indirect approaches which make situations for oral interaction by group work, task work, and other strategies (Richards 1990).

According to Harmer (2007) and Pourhosein Gilakjani (2016), human communication is a complex process. Persons need communication when they want to say something and transmit information. Speakers use communication when they are going to inform someone about something. Speakers apply language according to their own goals. So speakers should be both listeners and speakers at the same time for the effective communication.

Speaking is very important in second language learning. Despite its importance, speaking has been overlooked in schools and universities due to different reasons like emphasis on grammar and unfavorable teacher-student proportions. Speaking has been absent from testing because of the problem in assessing it objectively and the time it takes to carry out speaking tests (Clifford, 1987). Speaking is a skill which is worthy of attention in both first and second language. Learning the speaking skill is the most important aspect of learning a second or foreign language and success is measured based on the ability to perform a conversation in the language (Nunan, 1995).

Speaking is one of the most important skills of all the four language skills because individuals who learn a language are referred to as the speakers of that language (Ur, 1996). The main aim of English language teaching is to give learners the ability to use English language effectively and correctly in communication (Davies & Pearse, 2000). However, it seems that language learners are not able to communicate fluently and accurately because they do not have enough knowledge in this field.

When we talk about speaking, we do not mean just saying the words through mouth. It means conveying the message through the words of mouth. This skill is often ignored in some teachers' classes. Learners do not have enough opportunity either in their classes or outside to speak English. Unfortunately, speaking is not an important part of

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teachers' exams. Learners need a lot of practice to learn to speak. Learners can improve their speaking skill through listening and repeating. Teachers can give their learners some structures and ask them to repeat. This can remove their learners' shyness. Teachers can use short questions and short dialogues in the classrooms to develop their students' speaking skill (Bashir, Azeem, & Dogar, 2011).

Of the most difficult skills language learners face in language learning is speaking skill. It is believed that speaking is the most important of the four language skills. Many learners state that they have spent so many years studying English language but cannot speak it appropriately and understandably (Bueno, Madrid, & Mclaren, 2006).

2. Definition of Speaking

There are a lot of definitions of the word "speaking" that have been suggested by the researchers in language learning. In Webster New World Dictionary, speaking is to say words orally, to communicate as by talking, to make a request, and to make a speech (Nunan, 1995). According to Chaney (1998), speaking is the process of making and sharing meaning by using verbal and non-verbal symbols in different contexts. Brown (1994) and Burns and Joyce (1997) defined speaking as an interactive process of making meaning that includes producing, receiving, and processing information.

Bygate (1987) defined speaking as the production of auditory signals to produce different verbal responses in listeners. It is regarded as combining sounds systematically to form meaningful sentences. Eckard and Kearny (1981), Florez (1999), Howarth (2001), and Abd El Fattah Torky (2006) defined speaking as a two–way process including a true communication of opinions, information, or emotions. This top-down view regards the spoken texts as the collaboration between two or more persons in the shared time and the shared context.

3. The Importance of Speaking

Humans are programmed to speak before they learn to read and write. In any given, human beings spend much more time interacting orally with language rather than using it in its written form. Speaking is the most important skill because it is one of the abilities that is needed to perform a conversation. English speaking is not an easy task because speakers should know many significant components like pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. Learners should have enough English speaking ability in order to communicate easily and effectively with other people. Rivers (1981) studied the use of language outside the classroom situation and understood that speaking is used twice as much as reading and writing combined. According to Brown (1994), listening and speaking are learners' language tools.

Efrizal (2012) Pourhosein Gilakjani (2016) expressed that speaking is of great significance for the people interaction where they speak everywhere and every day. Speaking is the way of communicating ideas and messages orally. If we want to encourage students to communicate in English, we should use the language in real communication and ask them to do the same process.

Richards and Rodgers (2001) stated that in the traditional methods, the speaking skill was ignored in the classrooms where the emphasis was on reading and writing skills. For example, in The Grammar-Translation method, reading and writing were the important skills and speaking and listening skills were not of great significance. According to Ur (2000), of all the four language skills called listening, speaking, reading, and writing, speaking is the most important one that is very necessary for the effective communication.

The significance of speaking is indicated with the integration of the other language skills. Speaking helps learners develop their vocabulary and grammar skills and then better their writing skill. Students can express their emotions, ideas; say stories; request; talk, discuss, and show the various functions of language. Speaking is of vital importance outside the classroom. Therefore, language speakers have more opportunities to find jobs in different organizations and companies. These statements have been supported by Baker and Westrup (2003) who said that learners who speak English very well can have greater chance for better education, finding good jobs, and getting promotion.

Previous researches approve that persons cannot learn a language without many opportunities for meaningful repetition. Oral language interactions and the opportunity to produce the language in meaningful tasks provide the practice that is very important to internalizing the language. Asher (2003) supports the idea that very soon after teachers model the language, learners like to imitate what have been said. Krashen (1988) examined the relation between listening and speaking skills. He stated that when students speak, their speaking provides evidence that they have acquired the language. This idea led some teachers to jump quickly from speaking teaching to reading and writing teaching.

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When students learn English, speaking is significant to support their ability to apply the language. Speaking skill has been very important to the success of human beings. The significance of speaking skill is observed in the daily activities of persons. Speaking is an interactive activity and it occurs under the real time constraints. That is, persons can use words and phrases fluently without very much conscious thinking. Speaking skill enables individuals to produce sentences for the real communication, in other words they actually like to communicate in language to get specific objectives (McDonough & Shaw, 1993).

4. Characteristics of Speaking Skill

According to Mazouzi (2013), learners' activities should be designed based on an equivalence between fluency and accuracy achievement. Both fluency and accuracy are important elements of communicative approach. Classroom practice can help learners develop their communicative competence. So they should know how the language system works appropriately.

The first characteristic of speaking performance is fluency and it is the main aim of teachers in teaching speaking skill. According to Hughes (2002), fluency is the learners' ability to speak in understandable way in order not to break down communication because listeners may lose their interest. Hedge (2000) expressed that fluency is the ability to answer coherently by connecting the words and phrases, pronouncing the sounds clearly, and using stress and intonation.

The second characteristic of speaking performance is accuracy. Learners should be fluent in learning a foreign language. Therefore, teachers should emphasize accuracy in their teaching process. Learners should pay enough attention to the exactness and the completeness of language form when speaking such as focusing on grammatical structures, vocabulary, and pronunciation (Mazouzi, 2013).

According to Thornbury (2005), learners' correct use of grammatical structures requires the length and complexity of the utterances and the well-structured clauses. To gain accuracy in terms of vocabulary means to select suitable words in the suitable contexts. Learners sometimes apply similar words or expressions in various contexts which do not mean similar things. So learners should be able to use words and expressions correctly.

Thornbury (2005) declared that pronunciation is the lowest level of knowledge learners typically pay attention to it. In order to speak English language accurately, learners should master phonological rules and they should be aware of the various sounds and their pronunciations. Learners should also know the stress, intonation, and pitch. All of these elements help learners speak the English language easily and effectively.

6. Speaking Problems

There are some problems for speaking skill that teachers can come across in helping students to speak in the classroom. These are inhibition, lack of topical knowledge, low participation, and mother-tongue use (Tuan & Mai, 2015). Inhibition is the first problem that students encounter in class. When they want to say something in the classroom they are sometimes inhibited. They are worried about making mistakes and fearful of criticism. They are ashamed of the other students' attention towards themselves. Littlewood (2007) expressed that a language classroom can also create inhibitions and apprehension for the students.

The second problem is that learners complain that they cannot remember anything to say and they do not have any motivation to express themselves. This is supported by Rivers (1968) who thinks that learners often have nothing to say probably because their teachers had selected a topic that is not appropriate for them or they do have enough information about it. Baker and Westrup (2003) also supports the above idea and stated that it is very difficult for learners to answer when their teachers ask them to tell things in a foreign language because they have little opinions about what to say, which vocabulary to apply, or how to use grammar accurately.

The third problem in the speaking class is that the participation is very low. In a class with a large number of students, each student will have very little time for talking because just one student talks at a time and the other students try to hear him/her. In the speaking class, some learners dominate the whole class while others talk very little or never speak.

The last problem related to the speaking ability is that when some learners share the same mother-tongue, they try to use it in the speaking class because it is very easy for them (Tuan & Mai, 2015). According to Harmer (1991), there are some reasons why learners use mother-tongue in their speaking classes. The first reason is that when teachers ask their learners to talk about a topic that they do not have enough knowledge, they will try to use their language. The second reason is that the application of mother-tongue is very natural for learners to use. If teachers do not urge their learners to talk in English, learners will automatically use their first language to explain something to their classmates.

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The final reason refers to the fact that if teachers regularly use their learners' mother language, their learners will feel comfortable to do so in their speaking class.

Hyland (1997) investigated learners from eight disciplines at five Hong Kong institutions. The findings of his research indicated that proficiency in English was a significant factor in the academic success of an English environment. The findings also showed that the learners' language difficulties were related to the productive skills of writing and speaking. Evans and Green (2007) examined the language difficulties experienced by the students at a Hong Kong university. The results of this study represented that the students' difficulties centered on the academic speaking such as grammar, fluency, and pronunciation and the academic writing like style, grammar, and cohesion.

7. Factors Affecting Speaking Skill

If teachers want to help learners overcome their difficulties in learning speaking skill, they should identify some factors that influence their speaking performance. Learners' speaking performance are influenced by factors like performance conditions, affective factors, listening skill, and feedback during speaking tasks (Tuan & Mai, 2015).

The first factor is pertinent to performance conditions. Learners carry out a speaking activity under different conditions. Performance conditions impact speaking performance and these conditions involve time pressure, planning, the quality of performance, and the amount of support (Nation & Newton, 2009).

The second factor is related to affective ones. Oxford (1990) said that one of the important factors in learning a language is the affective side of students. According to Krashen (1982), a lot of affective variables have been connected to second language acquisition and motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety were the three main types that have been investigated by many researchers.

Listening ability is the third factor. Doff (1998) says that learners cannot improve their speaking ability unless they develop listening ability. Learners should comprehend what is uttered to them in order to have a successful dialogue. Shumin (1997) represented that when students talk, the other students answer through the listening process. Speakers have the role of both listeners and speakers. It can be concluded that students are not able to reply if they cannot comprehend what is told. That is to say, speaking is very closely related to listening.

Topical knowledge is the fourth factor. Bachman and Palmer (1996) defined it as the knowledge structures in long-term memory. That is, topical knowledge is the speakers' knowledge of related topical information. It enables students to apply language with respect to the world in which they live. Bachman and Palmer (1996) assert that topical knowledge has a great impact on the learners' speaking performance.

The sixth factor is related to the feedback during speaking activities. A lot of learners expect their teachers to give them the necessary feedback on their speaking performance. According to Harmer (1991), the decisions that instructors adopt towards their learners' performance depend on the stages of the lesson, the tasks, and the kinds of mistakes they make. Harmer (1991) also continued that if instructors directly correct their students' problems, the flow of the dialogue and the aim of the speaking task will be spoiled. Baker and Westrup (2003) supported the above statement and said that if learners are always corrected, they will be demotivated and afraid of talking. It has been suggested that instructors should always correct their learners' mistakes positively and give them more support and persuasion while speaking.

According to Mahripah (2014), EFL learners' speaking skill is affected by some linguistic components of language like phonology, syntax, vocabulary, and semantics and psychological factors such as motivation and personality. Phonology is a difficult aspect of language learning for EFL learners. As we know, English is not a phonetic language. That is, pronunciation of English words are not similar to their spellings. Words with similar spellings are sometimes pronounced differently because of their surrounding contexts like tenses and phonemes that come after them. This can cause a lot of problems for non-native speakers of English and they sometimes get confused in producing the English words.

EFL learners should have the knowledge of words and sentences. They should comprehend how words are divided into different sounds and how sentences are stressed in specific ways. Grammatical competence can help speakers apply and perceive the structure of English language correctly that leads to their fluency (Latha, 2012). Native speakers say what they want without having any problems because they are familiar with the language. If they have problems in expressing some concepts, they try to use other ways of telling those things. They may make certain mistakes syntactically but these mistakes do not change the meaning of the sentences they want to express and this doesn't create serious problems for the listeners to comprehend them. But the mistakes non-native speakers commit are those

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that change the meaning of utterances they want to convey and can create some problems for their understanding (Mahripah, 2014).

Motivation can influence and be influenced by the components of language learning. According to Merisuo-Storm (2007), an integrative and friendly view towards the people whose language is being learned makes sensitize learners to the audio-lingual aspects of language and making them more sensitive to pronunciation and accent of language. If learners have an unfriendly attitude towards the language, they will not have any substantial improvement in acquiring the different features of language. The above sentences support the view that just communicative competence is not sufficient for learners to improve their speaking skill. Without positive attitudes towards the speaking performance, the aim of speaking will not be obtainable for learners.

The fear of speaking English is pertinent to some personality constructs like anxiety, inhibition, and risk taking. Speaking a language sometimes results in anxiety. Sometimes, extreme anxiety may lead to despondence and a sense of failure in learners (Bashir, Azeem, & Dogar 2011). According to Woodrow (2006), anxiety has a negative effect on the oral performance of English speakers. Adults are very careful to making errors in whatever they tell. In their opinion, errors show a kind of unawareness which can hinder them to speak English in front of other people. Speaking anxiety may originate from a classroom condition with the different abilities of language learners. Learners are divided into two groups: strong and weak ones. The strong learners often dominate the slow and weak ones. The weak learners do not usually want to talk in front of the strong ones which leads to their silence during the whole class activity.

Inhibition is a feeling of worry that stops people from telling or performing what they want (Cambridge A. L. Dictionary, 2008). All human beings make a series of defenses to protect the ego. Due to the fact that committing mistakes is a natural process of learning a language, it certainly causes potential threats to one's ego. These threats disappoint the learners to talk English and prefer to be silent rather than being criticized in front of a large number of people (Brown, 2000). Risk-taking is pertinent to inhibition and self-respect. EFL learners who have a low self-respect tend to stop taking a risk of committing mistakes in their speaking tasks which resulting in the inhibition to the betterment of their speaking skill (Mahripah, 2014).

8. Previous Studies on the Factors Affecting Speaking Skill

In this section, some studies pertinent to the factors influencing speaking skill are reviewed. Park and Lee (2005) investigated the connection between second language learners' anxiety, self-confidence, and speaking performance. One hundred and thirty two Korean learners participated in this research. The results obtained from this research showed that students' anxiety level had a negative relationship to their oral performance.

Boonkit (2010) carried out a study on the factors increasing the development of learners' speaking skill. The results represented that the use of appropriate activities for speaking skill can be a good strategy to decrease speakers' anxiety. The results also revealed that the freedom of topic choice urged the participants to feel comfortable, persuaded to speak English, and increased the speaking confidence among EFL learners.

Ali Dincer and Savas Yesilyurt (2013) carried out a study towards teachers' beliefs on speaking skills based on motivational orientations. The results of their study indicated that the teachers had negative opinions about speaking instruction though they believed that it was of great significance in speaking skill. The results also revealed that the teachers felt unskilled in oral communication though they had various motivational orientations towards speaking English. The researchers indicated that that learners have different opinions about the significance of speaking skill in English language and this difference is related with the learners' motivational orientations and their competent/incompetent feelings in speaking skill. The results demonstrated that learners' self-assessment about their speaking skill was negative and they expressed themselves as incapable speakers of English. Just some of them expressed that they had a good position in taking part in speaking tasks.

Tanveer (2007) examined the factors caused anxiety for learners in learning speaking ability and the impact of anxiety on target language communication. The obtained results indicated that learners' feeling of stress and anxiety stop their language learning and performance abilities. The researcher emphasized that the high anxiety lowers the learners' speaking performance.

Eissa, Misbah, and Najat (1988) performed a study towards the difficulties of using English as a means of instruction and communication. The results of this study displayed that learners had many difficulties in using English language as a means of instruction. A lot of participants stated that their learners have low English proficiency. The results also

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indicated that a lot of learners faced serious difficulties in understanding the lectures' content without translating or applying L1 to deliver the content of the lectures.

Urrutia and Vega (2010) demonstrated that learners' oral performance was influenced by their lack of vocabulary, diffidence, and fear of being despised. It was also indicated that learners' cooperation, self-confidence, vocabulary knowledge, and the class environment encouraged them to improve their speaking skills. Prieto (2007) performed a study about the cooperative learning tasks. The findings of her study showed that one way to improve speaking skill is to interact with others, learn from others, and the choice of the topics based on the learners' interests in order to encourage them.

Bozorgian (2012) investigated the relationship between listening skill and the other language skills. The results revealed that there is a close correlation between listening comprehension and language proficiency. That is, the higher the listening score, the better the speaking score. Lukitasari (2003) carried out a study towards learners' strategies in overcoming their speaking problems. The results obtained from this study show that learners face a lot of speaking difficulties such as inhibition, nothing to say, low participation, and mother tongue use in their speaking classes. The other result of this study demonstrate that learners did not better their speaking skill because they had not learnt three components of speaking called vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation.

9. Conclusion

This paper reviewed the factors that affect students' English speaking performance. The mentioned factors in this paper have an important role in developing learners' speaking skill. The factors make learners less self-confident and less comfortable in their speaking classes. The findings of this paper indicated that learners with a low self-esteem, higher anxiety, and low motivation have serious difficulties in speaking skill in spite of having acceptable linguistic skills. The paper showed that students who have higher motivation and lower anxiety can speak easily and effectively. Thus, students should have a friendly and cooperative environment that can help them overcome their difficulties in oral performance. Based on the review of the literature of the study, teachers should understand their students' interests and feelings, improve their learners' self-confidence, and choose the best teaching method to keep their learners' involved in the speaking activity. Teachers should praise their students to speak English. They should build a friendly relationship with their students, make them feel very happy in the class and have a feeling of great enthusiasm and eagerness to study English in general and speak English in particular. The literature review of this study represented that teachers should give their learners enough time for speaking skill, help them overcome their timidness through friendly behaviors to make them feel comfortable when speaking, remind their learners not to worry about making mistakes, and give them true instructions and enough guidance. Teachers should give their learners more opportunities to speak English through using some speaking tasks that help them to speak and urge them to take part in speaking activities. In addition, teachers should know when and how to correct their learners' mistakes so that they are not afraid of making mistakes.

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