Speaking Difficulties Encountered by Young EFL Learners

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Abstract: *Speaking is the active use of language to express meaning, andfor young learners, the spoken language is the medium through which a new language is encountered, understood, practiced, and learnt. Rather than oral skills being simply one aspect of learning language, the spoken form in the young learner's classroom acts as the prime source of language learning. However,speaking problems can be major challenges to effective foreign language learning and communication.*

English as foreign language (EFL) learners, no matter how much they know about the English language, still face many speaking difficulties.Many studies have indicated that oral language development has largely been neglected in the classroom, and most of the time, oral language in the classroom is used more by teachers than by students. However, oral language, even as used by the teacher, hardly ever functions as a means for students to gain knowledge and explore ideas. To develop the knowledge to deal with oral communication problems in an EFL context, researchers first need to know the real nature of those problems and the circumstances in which 'problems' are constructed.

Keywords: *Speaking, Speaking difficulties,language acquisition, Oral language learning*

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the Ministry of Education in Oman (1996), basic education aims to make the learner gain necessary skills for life by developing his/her communication skills, self- learning, and ability to use critical thinking to deal with science and modern technology (Al Abri, 2008). Obviously, it is necessary to develop communication skills. English oral communication skills are part of this skill set, and thus, students should be supported to gain these skills. Learners of English in Oman often do not have opportunities to speak English outside the classroom, and for many of them, the course book is the only place where they meet English (Al Zedjali, 2009). Although speaking is considered a main language skill that students should improve, it has been widely noticed that they face many difficulties in speaking English. This study aims to find out what speaking difficulties are encountered by grade 5 students in basic education schools in Oman. It also aims to find out the main factors that contribute to the existence of these difficulties.The results of this study can help the Ministry of Education, the EFL teachers, the curriculum designers, and the designers of assessment tools to understand the reasons why our young learners in grade 5 basic education schools find it difficult to speak in English, and consequently, their plans for change and improvement of the students' speaking skill can produce more effective results when these factors are considered.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Teaching of Speaking

The use of English as a second language (ESL) or foreign language (EFL) in oral communication is, withouta doubt, one of the most common but highly complex activities necessary to be considered when teaching the English language especially because we "live at a time where the ability to speak English fluently has become a must, especially who want to advance in certain fields of human endeavor"(Al-Sibai,2004, p.3).

The focus of teaching speaking, of course, is to improve the oral production of the students. Therefore, language teaching activities in the classroom should aim at maximising individual language use (Haozhang, 1997). In the past, oral communication instruction was neglected

because of the misconception that oral communication competence develops naturally over time and that the cognitive skills involved in writing automatically transfer to analogous oral communication skills(Chaney,1998).

However, Ur (1996) considered speaking as the most important skill among four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) because people who know a language are referred to as speakers of that language. This indicates that using a language is more important than just knowing about it because "there is no point knowing a lot about language if you can't use it" (Scrivener,2005,p.146).

2.2 Oral Language Acquisition

Oral language acquisition is a natural process for children. It occurs almost without effort. The ability to speak grows with age, but it does not mean that such growth will automatically lead to perfection. To speak in more effective ways requires particular attention and constant practice (Zhang et al., 1995). Speaking fluency appears to develop with increased exposure to second language(L2) input (Al-Sibai, 2004). Input refers to the language data which the learner is exposed to (Zhang, 2009).

Although it is widely recognised that input is very essential for language acquisition, it is not sufficient if not followed by interaction and output (the language a learner produces)because the processing of comprehension is different from the processing of production, and the ability to understand the meaning conveyed by sentences differs from the ability to use a linguistic system to express meaning. When input is negotiated and learners produce output in interaction, they selectively "take in" portions of comprehensible input and choose a correct linguistic form to express themselves. This process makes it possible for the learners to internalise what they have learned and experienced (Swain, 1985, as cited in Zhang, 2009).

2.3 Oral Language Learning

For language learning to take place, there are four conditions that should exist, and they are the exposure, opportunities to use the language, motivation, and instruction."Learners need chances to say what they think or feel and to experiment in a supportive atmosphere using language they have heard or seen without feeling threatened" (Willis,1996, p.7). A fact that is highlighted by second language research is that progress does not occur when people make a conscious effort to learn. Progress occurs as a result of spontaneous, subconscious mechanisms, which are activated when learners are involved in communication with the second language. The subconscious element demands a new range of activities, where learners are focused not on the language itself but on the communication of meaning (Littlewood, 1984). Harmer (1982) also argued that in a communicative task, the students' attention should be focused on the content of what they are saying, rather than the form. They should use a wide variety of language.

According to Ellis (2003), this can be done by involving learners in performing two types of communicative tasks: focused communicative tasks and unfocused communicative tasks. Both of these tasks seek to engage learners in using language pragmatically rather than displaying language. They seek to develop language proficiency through communication."Through communication learners can integrate separate structures into a creative system for expressing meaning" (Littlewood,1984,p.91).

2.4 Factors that Cause Speaking difficulties to EFL Learners

Zhang (2009) argued that speaking remains the most difficult skill to master for the majority of English learners, and they are still incompetent in communicating orally in English.According to Ur (1996), there are many factors that cause difficulty in speaking, and they areas follows:

1.*Inhibition*. Students are worried about making mistakes, fearful of criticism, or simply shy.

2.*Nothing to say*. Students have no motive to express themselves.

3.*Low or uneven participation*. Only one participant can talk at a time because of large classes and the tendency of some learners to dominate, while others speak very little or not at all.

4.*Mother-tongue use*. Learners who share the same mother tongue tend to use it because it is easier and because learners feel less exposed if they are speaking their mother tongue.

In addition, Rababa'h (2005) pointed out that there are many factors that cause difficulties in speaking English among EFL learners. Some of these factors are related to the learners themselves, the teaching strategies,the curriculum, and the environment. For example, many learners lack thenecessary vocabulary to get their meaning across, and consequently, they cannot keep the interaction going.Inadequate strategic competence and communication competence can be another reason as well for not being able to keep the interaction going.

Some learners also lack the motivation to speak English. They do not see a real need to learn or speak English. Actually "motivation is the crucial force which determines whether a learner embarks in a task at all, how much energy he devotes to it, and how long he preservers" (Littlewood, 1984, p.53). The development of communicative skills can only take place if learners have the motivation and opportunity to express their own identity and relate with the people around them (Littlewood, 1981).

Teaching strategies also contribute to this problem as they are inadequate, and they do not put emphasis on speaking, which results in a meagre development of this skill. Besides, vocabulary items are taught in isolation, and listening materials are not used by the majority of schoolteachers because of the large number of teachers compared with the number of cassettes available. Teacher-training programs were found to be not very successful in changing the teachers' methodology (Rababa'ah,2005).

Furthermore, all the other subjects are in Arabic, and English is seen as an academic subject only, which means exposure to the English language is insufficient. The lack of a target language environment can be considered another problem, which of course results in a lack of involvement in real-life situations. Not allowing learners to participate in discourse can be another reason for speaking difficulties. "Children need both to participate in discourse and to build up knowledge and skills for participation" in order to learn discourse skills (Cameron, 2001, p.36). Furthermore,

"language is best learned when the learners' attention is focused on understanding,saying and doing something with language, and not when their attention is focused explicitly on linguistic features"(Kumaravadivelu,2003,p.27). It isworthy to mention that researchers recognise that learners can improve their speaking ability bydeveloping learning strategies that enable them to become independent learners(Nakatani,2010).

Littlewood(1981) argued that some teachers use L1 for class management. Nevertheless, this can be another factor that contributes to the problem of speaking difficulties. This is because using L1 means sacrificing valuable opportunities for well-motivated foreign use. In addition, it tends to devalue the foreign language as a vehicle for communication.Learners see it as allocated to communicatively nonessential domains such as drills or dialogue practice, while the mother tongue remains the appropriate medium for discussing matters of immediate importance.Another main reason for other teachers to use L1 is vocabulary and grammar.Although their attitudes are of disagreement with L1, this is not reflected in their practice (Al-Busaidi, 1998).

2.5 Review of Related Studies

There are some studies which have investigated the speaking difficulties encountered by EFL learners. For example, one study(Dil, 2009) investigatedTurkish EFL learners' communication obstacles in English language classrooms, and it reported that anxiety and unwillingness during the English speaking process are considered two of the biggest obstacles forEFL learners. Anxiety and unwillingness are caused by the fear of being negatively evaluated whenmaking mistakes, particularly in front of their friends.This study also revealed that students who perceive their English as "poor" feel more anxious and are more unwilling to communicate in English classes than the other students perceiving their English level as "very good, good, and OK."

Al-Lawati (1995) also investigated the difficulties encountered by Omani students in their oral production of English and found out that thelinguistic domain (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and discourse) constitutes the most serious area of difficulty, and this is because, as explained by teachers, the learners have not yetdeveloped an adequate level in the basic abilities of the language. This is because—they think—of the curriculum thatdoes not provide enough opportunityfor learning and practicing new and varied vocabulary and does not provide enough variety in tasks designed for the teaching of grammar. This results in having very few

opportunities for students to practice the speaking skill, especially with the large number of students in class.

Another study (Ambu&Saidi, 1997)investigatedsomeissuesin teaching English speaking in a foreign language classroomand revealed that the huge number of students in the classroom, the insufficiency of the English teaching periods, and the syllabus that does not satisfy the learners' communicative needs are the main reasons for learners' speaking difficulties.

Additionally, because speaking is not tested, it is less emphasised by both teachers and students. This is consistent with Al-Lawati's (2002) findings in her studywhere students reported giving special attention to writing, reading, and listening tasks that are similar to exam items, and both teachers and students reported that they gave least attention to speaking tasks in the textbooks because speaking is completely excluded from exams.

Al-Abri(2008) argued that the lack of oral activities in textbooks is a strong reason for students' difficulties in speaking, and thus he recommended including some oral activities in the form of songs, rhymes, and simple stories and more conversational language to enable students to have more fun and enjoy learning to improve their speaking skill.

3 METHODOLOGY

This study was designed to address the following two main questions:

1. What are the main speaking difficulties encountered by grade 5 students in basic education schools in Oman?

2. What are the factors that contribute to the existence of these speaking difficulties?

3.1 Population and Sample

The present study is a case study. Only one cycle 2 basic education school is involved.The population consisted of grade 5 teachers and students in basiceducation schools in Oman. Four English teachers and three classes from one school were involved.

3.2 Research Instruments

Three instruments were used in the present study, and they are lesson observations, interviews, and curriculum analysis. Class observations were conducted and field notes were taken in order to find more about the speakingdifficulties that are encountered by grade 5 students in basic education schools in the actual classroom situation.

Four semi-structured interviews were conducted,three of which with grade 5 English teachersand one with grade 5 students. The interviews aimed to find more about teachers' and students' beliefs regarding the factors that causedifficulties to students when trying to speak in English. All the interviews were recorded, and most of their parts are transcribed.

Curriculum analysis of the grade 5 basic education (English for Me) textbooks is done to find out the role that curriculum may contribute to the problem of speaking difficulties.

The analysis is based on two main issues: the frequency of speaking activities included and the type of those activities in terms of being communicative or non-communicative. The description of the types of the tasks is based on the characteristics given by Ellis (2003) on the recommended communicative tasks that promote the use of language. The analysis aimed to find out how speaking is introduced in the textbooks and through what type of tasks.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

Data obtained from observations, interviews, and curriculum analysis were analysed qualitatively following the Holiday (2002) approach as cited in Al-Shabibi (2004). This approach suggests organising data using a thematic approach, where data is taken holistically and rearranged under themes according to the questions and the issues brought by the researcher to the research.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 The Main Speaking Difficulties Encountered by Grade 5 Students

The data collected on this issue revealed that there are three major speaking difficulties encountered by the students at this level, and they are linguistic difficulties, mother tongue use, and inhibition.

5.1.1 Linguistic Difficulties

Data collected through observation showed that students struggle to find the appropriate vocabulary item when trying to speak in English, which reflects their insufficient vocabulary repertoire. Data collected from the student interview supported this because one of the students reported,"We want to speak, but we don't know the word."

The interviewed students also pointed out that they find it difficult to build sentences when they try to express their ideas.One of them said,"We do not know how to say it." Although teachers spend a long time teaching grammar rules, students still cannot form short sentences when they try to speak in English.

5.1.2 Mother Tongue Use

This problem is strongly related to the previous one, which is linguistic difficulties. During my class observation, I noticed that students tend to speak in Arabic when they discuss the rubrics of different tasks, and when I asked them about the reason for that in the interview; they explained that by saying,"We do not know how to say it." They meant how to discuss their ideas in English, so they shifted to Arabic. Therefore, the inadequate vocabulary repertoire and weak sentence building skills are the reasons for using the mother tongue.

5.1.3. Inhibition

It was noticed during the class observations that students' participation was very low. This is becauseof the previously mentioned reasons to inhibition. Students explained that their fear of making mistakes in front of their classmates was the reason for not speaking in the class. They expressed that, saying,"They will laugh at us if we make mistakes . . ." Unlike what is found by other studies, Omani learners in grade 5 are highly motivated to speak English, and they can see the need for that"when we meet somebody who speaks English,we can speak English."

5.2 Factors that Contribute to the Existence of these Difficulties

There are some essential factors that contribute to the existence of these difficulties, and they, as revealed by the class observation and interviews, are teachers' perceptions and tacit beliefs about teaching speaking, teaching strategies, curriculum, extracurricular activities, and assessment rules.

5.2.1 Teachers' Perceptions and Tacit Beliefs About Teaching Speaking

All the interviewed teachers emphasised the importance of teaching speaking as it is an important skill of the English language. Although they think it is very important to teach speaking, they donot spend enough time doing that, explaining this by not having enough time to do so. "In a lesson, we have many steps and four or five objectives, and we have to finish . . . for example today, we have to finish lesson 2 . . . we don't want to be late ."

The question here is, what is wrong if the teachers could not finish the lesson since they are still teaching something important, which is speaking?

The interview answered this question when one of the teachers said,"The supervisors want us to finish all the steps in the lesson." This indicates that teachers are worried about just finishing the steps, which means going through them, no matter if learning has taken place or not. These worries are created by some visitors and supervisors who insist on teachers to finish teaching the textbook 1 lesson steps in the time allocated for that lesson.

5.2.2 Teaching Strategies

Data collected through observation showed that teachers focus on teaching grammar points and vocabulary items rather than teaching speaking. Even when there is an opportunity to involve students in speaking, teachers just miss it and move on doing other tasks like reading and writing.Teachers attributed this to the shortage of time and their willingness to finish the lesson steps that do not include speaking as they claimed.

In fact, the interview had shown another reason besides the time worries, and it is the lack of speaking teaching strategies. The teachers think that teaching grammar and vocabulary items is enough to help students in speaking."We teach the vocabulary, grammar, but they don't study at home . . ." It seems that teachers are unaware that studying vocabulary items and grammar rules by students is not enough for improving students' speaking skill. Actually, teachers are not aware enough that focusing on teaching the form does not necessarily result in using it, and that'swhy students need to be engaged in communication—in order to improve their speaking skill.

Moreover, it is noticed that teachers tend to use a lot of L1 during the lesson especially when they explain a grammar point or give the meaning of some words and sometimes the instruction of a task. They also accept students' explanation of the meaning of vocabulary items in L1.They explained this by saying that they have no other solution to make sure that the students understood the point. One of them said,"We do not have another solution . . ." Another one said,"It will be clear for them, and they will get the right meaning." This obviously indicates that some teachers lack the necessary teaching strategies, and thus they use L1 as an alternative. Besides, they are indirectly and unconsciously conveying a message to students that using English cannot be helpful to clarify the meaning of instruction or unknown words,and this also might mean that teachers have low expectations of their students' understanding ability of English.However, there is no doubt that using lots of L1 reduces the amount of exposure to English during the lesson.

5.2.3 Curriculum

In the interview, teachers reported that the English curriculum for grade 5 English for ME emphasises the teaching of reading and writing skills, and there are no tasks included particularly for teaching speaking. They pointed out that speaking is integrated into reading and writing. In other words, they come across speaking when they teach reading and writing."We get it [speaking] from reading and writing . . . it is indirect." They discussed the idea of implicit inclusion of speaking skill in the textbooksand compared that with the Arabicsubject textbooks that include lessons that are allocated particularly for speaking. "In Arabic, they have full [whole] lessons for speaking."

From class observations, it was noticed that students speak very little in class, and that was mostly to answer the teacher's questions. Most of the time, those answers are single words or very short sentences, which, despite being similar to the real-life way of answering questions, do not provide the students with enough opportunities to use the English language.

5.2.4 Curriculum Analysis

Analysing grade 5 textbooks (English for Me) in terms of the frequency of speaking activities and the type of those activities/tasks revealed that there are very few tasks included particularly to teach speaking, which is consistent with what the teachers have reported. Those tasks are in the form of asking and answering questions, and mainly, they require students to drill a certain structure which obviously indicates that the form is more emphasised than the meaning. Tasks that encourage students to use the English language communicatively are not available. This leads us to say that grade 5 textbooks are not providing students with sufficient opportunities to use the English language communicatively.

5.2.5 Extracurricular Activities

Because the classroom time and textbook tasks do not provide students with enough opportunities to use English, extracurricular activities can be another alternative to overcome this problem. It was found from the interview with the teachers that students are encouraged to participate in an English assembly that is conducted once a week. However, only the good students participate in that English assembly, and having it once a week makes the chance of using English very limited,let alone that these assemblies do not provide an authentic and communicative way of using the English language.

As the teachers pointed out, the students are not provided with other opportunities where the need to use English is created. In other words, students' exposure to English is almost limited to the classroom only. Students are not encouraged to use English in authentic situations. For example, students are not encouraged to visit places where they can use English communicatively. Teachers think that "there are no places" where students can go and use English apart from the classroom.

5.2.6 Assessment Regulations

According to the assessment document of the ministry of education (2010), continuous assessment of speaking skill consists of one-way speaking assessment, which refers to the individual contributions, and two-way speaking assessment, which refers to students' interaction. In order to fulfil these assessment requirements, sufficient time in the lessons should be allocated for speaking, which, according to the interviewed teachers, is not possible because most of the time is spent on teaching reading and writing. They reported that "the book focuses on reading and writing." Furthermore, the teachers pointed out that because speaking is not included in the midsemester and final exams, they are given less attention in the lessons. "It [speaking] is not in the exams . . . there is no focus on it."

The only method teachers use to assess their students' speaking skill is through their class participation when they answer the teachers' questions or when they practice the dialogues given in the textbook. "We assess them when they answer questions and when they ask and answer each other."

6. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study suggest that grade 5 students encounter some speaking difficulties that can be overcome by putting more emphasis on this skill. Many issues related to teachers, teaching strategies, curriculum, extracurricular activities, and assessment regulation should be considered. Teachers need to be trained on how to integrate speaking to other skills and how to teach it communicatively. Their awareness of how language is acquired and learned should be raised. Moreover, teachers need to be enlightened on the different teaching strategies that may reduce their use of L1 in their classes.

In order for the curriculum to provide students with frequent opportunities of speaking, communicative tasks should be included. Those tasks should focus on getting students to convey the meaning rather than the form. This can help students acquire the language better as many researchers declared. Involving students in extracurricular activities can provide them with more chances to use the language, and the classroom will not be the only place where they are exposed to the English language. To achieve this, all English teachers, English supervisors, school administrators, and staff of the Ministry of Education should work together .Assessment tool designers and curriculum designers should work cooperatively in order to reach an alignment between what is introduced in the textbooks and how it should be assessed.

7. CONCLUSION

This study revealed that the main speaking difficulties encountered by grade 5 students are linguistic difficulties, mother tongue use, and inhibition. Students are unable to speak in English because they lack the necessary vocabulary items and grammar structures. They also lack sentence formation skills, which result in using the mother tongue. Students also think of making mistakes in speaking in front of their classmates very embarrassing, which results in preferring not to speak to avoid such situations.

There are five main factors that contribute to the existence of these speaking difficulties: teachers' perceptions and tacit beliefs of teaching speaking, teaching strategies, curriculum, extracurricular activities, and assessment regulations.

The study shows that teachers believe in the importance of teaching speaking, yet they do not spend enough time for that because of the shortage of time because priority is given to the coverage of the textbook topics, which emphasise teaching reading and writing rather than speaking.

The teaching strategies that are used by the teachers emphasise teaching the form of the language, which is indicated by focusing on teaching grammar rules and vocabulary items. Students are required to produce short accurate sentences while the communicative use of the language is almost neglected. In addition, teachers think it is very important to use L1 in order to give the meaning of some words and explain the grammar rules. They believe that using L1 is very necessary to make sure that the students understand the meaning and get the point.

Besides, it was found that grade 5textbooks do not provide students with frequency of opportunities to use English communicatively, and they donot include sufficient tasks that are particularly designed for speaking.

Moreover, the classroom is the only place where most students are exposed to English. Extracurricular activities that aim to improve students' speaking skill are very rare and limited to the English assembly,which is conducted once a week.

Because speaking skill is the only skill that is not included in the exams, it is given less teaching emphasis. The focus is mainly on teaching reading and writing besides grammar and vocabulary. Although the teaching of speaking can be integrated into other skills like reading and writing, teachers think that time is insufficient to do that,and priority is given to other skills rather than speaking because they are included in the exam and speaking is not.

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