

Oral Communication Problems Encountering English Major Students: Perspectives of Learners and Teachers in Palestinian EFL University Context

Abedrabu Abu Alyan
The Islamic University of Gaza
Palestine

Abstract

The present study investigates Palestinian English major students' problems in oral communication. To that end, qualitative analysis is manipulated to explore such potential problems from learners and teachers' perspectives. Levelt's (1989) L1 speech production model and De Bot's (1992) L2 speech production models are used as a theoretical framework for the study. Participants were 20 students and 6 senior teachers from a large Palestinian university in Gaza. Analyzing data from participants' interviews, the study unveiled that students' incorrect pronunciation, limited vocabulary, lack of exposure to the target language, and L1 interference were amongst the main oral communication problems. The study also revealed that students had not developed the habit of extensive listening and reading. Further, the students were unable to organize their ideas and meanings in a coherent way, and they seemed to lack self-confidence. The pedagogical implications of the study are of significant value to EFL university teachers who are interested in developing learners' oral communication skills.

Keywords: exposure to the target language, L1 interference, oral communication problems, self-confidence, speech production models

Introduction

Globalization has promoted English to a world-leading-medium of communication. Many scholars have accentuated the importance of communicating in English effectively and appropriately, particularly with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. However, learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) are often preoccupied with developing their oral communication, which is direly needed to improving their academic performance, professional development, personal and social effectiveness (Lafford, 2004, Richards & Renandya, 2002).

In this study, oral communication refers to students' ability to speak English fluently and effectively. Nunan (1991) argues that a success in language learning is measured in terms of learners' ability to carry out a conversation with interlocutors in the target language. Nonetheless, speaking seems to be a challenging skill to develop (Fulcher, 2003, Jamshidnejad, 2010, 2011; Levlt, 1989; Ya-ni, 2007) in foreign language context, despite the many years of language instruction and use of various teaching methodologies and approaches. Communicating in a foreign language can be a highly complex multi-faceted skill (khan, 2010). This study investigates Palestinian English major students' problems in developing oral communication in order to highlight the complexities and challenges involved in this skill from teachers and learners' perspectives.

Literature Review

Speaking can be perceived as an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving, and processing information (Burns & Joyce, 1997; Lindsay & Knight, 2006; Richards & Renandya, 2002). Although the desirable goal of learning a foreign language is to communicate effectively in that language, scholars have observed that EFL learners have formidable challenges in communicating in English. Numerous researchers have investigated the complexity of oral communication in second language (L2) (see Skehan, 1998; Bygate, 1998, 2001; Ellis, 2003; McCarthy, 1998). House (2003) maintains that scholars studied oral communication problems employing two different approaches: the linguistic approach and the interactional approach. On the one hand, the linguistic approach comprises language-based problems, in which the linguistic differences play key role. The interactional approach, on the other hand, refers essentially to the social factors such as socio-cultural differences (as cited in Jamshidnejad, 2010).

A number of previous empirical studies examined English as a second language (ESL) university students' oral communication problems while studying in English speaking countries (Ferris, 1998; Kim, 2006). Ferris (1998), for example, investigated the perception of ESL international students about their listening and speaking problem at three American tertiary institutions, and revealed that the students faced challenges in oral presentations and whole class discussions. Apparently, the inability to communicate one's emotions and ideas can lead, in some cases, to a feeling of frustration and *apprehension* (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

However, EFL learners in departments of English in the Arab world face oral communication problems due to various reasons. Rababah (2005) points out that English language departments admit high-school-student graduates without taking into consideration their level of language proficiency and ability to continue in a program of English studies. In crowded classes, teachers naturally may not be able to pay close attention to every individual student and create adequate opportunities for language use and interaction.

Further, Rababah (2005) argues that lack of enough exposure to the target language can be one of the problems facing Arab learners of English; hence, the teaching context may not be conducive to developing oral communication skills, and learners face challenges in their speaking output. To the best of my knowledge, there is scarcity in literature that examines Palestinian English major students' oral communication problems in university context. The present study bridges the gap in literature through exploring Palestinian English major students' problems in developing oral communication in order to highlight these complexities and challenges from learners' and teachers' perspectives.

Theoretical Framework

Many researchers have argued that speaking should be seen and investigated as an independent skill (Levelt, 1989; De Bot, 1992; Bygate, 2001; Kormos, 2006). It has also been considered as a highly demanding and complex cognitive skill that involves different competences and mechanisms (Levelt & Roelofs & Meyer, 2000). Rested on a solid empirical basis, Levelt's (1989) model of speech production of L1 seems to be an effective example in the field psycholinguistics. The latest version of Levelt et al. model (1999) emphasizes five main processing components: conceptual preparation, grammatical encoding, morpho-phonological encoding, phonetic encoding and articulation. It also assumes three stores: mental lexicon, syllabary and knowledge of the internal and external world.

Levelt (1989) places the *lexicon* at the heart of his model of L1 speech production. To him, a lexical item has two levels of representation: the *lemma* (contains semantic and syntactic information) and the *form* (contains morphological and phonological information). According to Bei (2013) the conceptualizer controls macro-planning stage, which provides general knowledge and discourse knowledge as input for the formulator in the next stage. The formulator combines the vocabulary, grammar and syllbary to generate phonological plan, which is used in the final stage, i.e. the articulator, for actual speech production. Further, Schueze (2002) explains that a speaker conceptualizes the content of a message, puts it into a preverbal speech plan, and then encodes the message by exchanging information between *lemmas and forms*. The message is finally articulated and checked for comprehension (ibid).

However, in second language acquisition (SLA), scholars (see De Bot, 1992, Poullisse & Bongaerts, 1994; Payne & Whitney, 2002) have emphasized the complexity of speaking performance and highlighted learners' incomplete knowledge of the L2 (Figueiredo & Mota, 2009). Several models of speech production have been presented (see De Bot, 1992; Levelt, 1989) to illuminate the interdependencies and complexities of peoples' speech production. These models basically assume four distinctive levels of knowledge: *semantic, syntactic, morphological, and phonological*.

De Bot (1992) was the first to apply Levelt's model for speech production in L2. He essentially adapts it to the *lemma* level as well as to the *word form*. Bei (2013) argues that the conceptualizer supervises the whole course of speaking for appropriacy of the content and accuracy of the language and pronunciation. Although L2 speech production shares many of characteristics of L1 speech, there are some significant differences (Poullisse, 1990). First, learners' knowledge of L2 is not as adequate as that of L1; therefore, learners use strategies to compensate for the limitations of linguistic and lexical knowledge as well as grammatical structures. Second, the degree of automatic information processing seems to be lower in L2 speakers, so learners may appear less fluent and have to pay more attention to grammatical and phonological encoding phases (ibid). L2 speech production studies have also shown a

compelling evidence of a higher level of hesitation phenomena, e.g. repetition, correction, filled pauses, slips of tongue (Lennon,1990). Third, L1 traces exist in L2 speech, which may lead to accidental code switching at the phonological, lexical, syntactic and pragmatic levels (Khan, 2010).

All these differences are obviously manifested in L2 compared to L1 speech, and therefore any model of L2 speech production has to deal with these differences. Kahn (2010) maintains that in L2 speech production, speakers' knowledge of the L2 seems to be incomplete and speech processing involves more complicated steps; moreover, L1 is still active and may impact L2 speech production. These factors can elucidate learners' struggle to *conceptualize, formulate, and articulate* messages in L2. Consequently, L2 speakers' communication output seems to be more problematic (Khan, 2010). This study explores predominantly Palestinian English major students' problems in developing oral communication in order to highlight the complexities and challenges involved in this skill from students and teachers' perspectives.

Research Question

This study attempted to answer the following general question:
How do Palestinian English major students and teachers perceive oral communication problems?

Methodology

The study employed qualitative content analysis method to analyze data gathered from semi-structured interviews (see Appendix 1). A semi-structured interview is flexible, allowing new questions to be generated during the interview; meanwhile, a researcher tailors a set of questions and a framework of themes to be explored (Lindlof & Tyor, 2002). This method allows the study to *generate understanding* of this real-world- setting and interpret participants' perception of their own linguistic, social, and individual problems in L2 oral communication. Although this qualitative study depended mainly on teachers and students' interviews as a main source of data, it maintained different reliable features of rigorous qualitative research such as quality, credibility, trustworthiness, and neutrality (Davies & Dodd, 2002). All the interviews were about participants' experience of oral communication problems; however, teachers' interviews manifested their experience of students' problems in L2 oral communication. The interviews were carried out in English, audio-recorded, and then transcribed. To protect the identity of participants, all the names used in this research are pseudonyms.

Participants

Participants in this study were 20 English major students and 6 senior teachers from an English department in a large Palestinian university. The students group comprised 13 female and 7 male students enrolled in different courses in spring semester of 2013. The teachers selected for this study have taught oral communication, or relevant courses. The study chose students and teachers who were interested in the research and accepted to take part. To gain an in-depth familiarity with students' problems in oral communication, the study interviewed the students as well as teachers once, or twice in some cases. All the names used in this research are pseudonyms.

Generating categories and themes

The study started with some preliminary categories to focus data gathering, coding, grouping, and analysis. These categories depended mainly on certain codes (words, phrases, and expressions) derived from the theoretical framework constructs, research question, and problem

areas. After gaining deep familiarity with the data through finding relationships and classifications, themes started to emerge from the different categories. Those themes were expressed overtly by the participants themselves, and the study discovered them through inductive and interpretive analysis of the participants' semi-structured interviews.

Searching for alternative understanding/perception

To search for other possible explanations and sound interpretations, the study asked participants, a critical friend, and community of practice whether they agreed with the study interpretations or had different understandings. The researcher's critical friend and community of practice played significant roles at different phases and helped in identifying the *blind spots* and suggesting various ways of seeing the data. The analyses conducted in this study are by all means exploratory. It is hoped that the research results can help Palestinian educators as well as teachers of English in general to better understand the problems and challenges that face Palestinian English major students in developing oral communication.

Results and Interpretations

Research Question: How do Palestinian English major students and teachers perceive oral communication problems?

Through analyzing students and teachers' interviews, the following themes emerged:

1 Linguistic Problems

a. Pronunciation constitutes an obstacle in students' fluent oral communication

Both groups of interviewees believed that pronunciation impacts learners' speaking ability and has a strong correlation with the lack of self-confidence. Mohammad, a senior teacher, illuminated that students' perception of 'self' and incorrect pronunciation can impact their participation in class discussion and interaction:

Many students do not participate or speak because they think that their English is not correct English. In terms of pronunciation, they do not know how to use stress and intonation patterns or pronounce certain words, so they keep silent. They do not want to speak or interact. Hamza, another teacher, thought that students encounter different types of pronunciation problems including consonant clusters, vowels, and supra segmental phonemes: Students face problems in pronouncing clear articulation of consonants and vowels, e.g., consonant clusters, rhythm, stress, and intonation. These have to do with typical phonological problems that EFL students generally have.

Ahmad, a freshman student, looked up to American native speakers, and he was deeply frustrated because he could not speak English as fluent as native speakers:

The major problem I am facing is, I think, I am always speaking wrong. American people or British people do not use the same expressions as I do. I decide not to speak because they speak something else. I look up to Americans and I cannot be like them, and it's frustrating.

Similarly, Heba, another freshman student stated, "I don't know the right pronunciation for all words, and that makes me upset because I feel that I am not a good speaker". As can be seen, pronunciation is seen as an obstacle that can hinder learners' fluency. Students believed that a good speaker should be as fast/ fluent as a native speaker. This resonates with Jamshidnejad (2011) participants' perception of ideal speaker:

It is therefore reasonable to assume that these qualities will feature as part of the participants' own self-image. L2 users who choose 'to be perfect' as their image of 'ideal speaker' would like 'to speak flawlessly, with no grammatical or pronunciation errors, and as easily as a native speaker (p.11).

Additionally, Gilbert (2009) maintains that in many cases EFL students may not have the self-confidence to speak in class because they do not know how to pronounce a certain word appropriately. Further, they may be worried to be an object to their peers or teachers' evaluation and criticism.

b. Students lack adequate exposure to English inside the classroom

Unlike teachers who stressed the need to develop students' own language input and learning strategies, several students complained that classes were crowded, and they needed more practice in class. Amjad, a senior student, pointed out that he had always needed a conversation partner to practice the language communicatively:

The problem is that you do not have the interlocutor, the one to communicate with. The students are not given adequate space to speak. It's either a question you have to answer, or a short discussion, and it may take just five minutes, that's all. Even if you want to talk to students after class, they do not take it seriously.

Likewise, Alaa', a sophomore student, thought that classes were so crowded and few students participated in class discussions and activities:

Class time can be good if we have thirty girls or forty, but not eighty-five. There are some students who dominate the class and answer all questions, other students are shy. But those who dominate the class are so fast and fluent, and when we compare ourselves with them, we prefer not to speak.

Although some students complained about crowded classes and inadequate class practice, others were more aware of learners' responsibility towards their own learning and self development. Said, a junior student maintained that students should shoulder responsibility towards their own learning:

But the thing is that it's all on the student... think of the class as the only learning source, this is one tiny bit of English that he can get one section. You can go home and just keep listening and practicing, it's all on students.

Even though some students indicated that their classes did not have adequate speaking practices and interaction, others advocated developing learners' autonomy and effective learning strategies. The following section highlights teachers' perspective about learners' exposure to foreign language inside classroom.

c. Students have not developed the habit of extensive listening, speaking, and reading

On the other hand, several teachers articulated similar ideas regarding students' responsibility towards exploring various ways to enhance their own oral communication proficiency. For example, Naser, a senior teacher, suggested that students can develop their oral communication through extensive listening and extensive reading. Additionally, he encouraged students to use technology and the wealth of sources available on the Internet:

The major problem is the problem of extensive listening or extensive reading, if you like. Our students rarely listen to English; they live in an Arab speaking community, and all the time they speak Arabic, think in Arabic and laugh in Arabic. In terms of listening, if they like listening to news, youtube, clips, you know, this will enrich their information and background on how to manipulate the language.

Similarly, another teacher pointed out that students should be aware of the fact that class time alone may not be adequate to develop their oral communication proficiency. Therefore, students should be guided to the different sources outside classroom, including social networking, websites, and other Internet facilities:

Said: I don't think that even ten courses would be enough because we are talking about language.

We have the advantage of technology and the Internet, and also social networking, websites and ability to get exposure to the language outside classroom. This is important for the teacher to create the context in which students can learn the language. Many teachers also emphasized developing students' *learning strategies* that can potentially help them develop language proficiency inside and outside classroom. In a nutshell, teachers were deeply aware of class limited time; consequently, they highly recommended students to make the best use of technology and the Internet in order to develop their oral communication skills. Baker (2013) argues that the potential of these technologies is to enable intercultural exchange through access to authentic materials and intercultural communication with members of other cultures through the Internet. Additionally, they need to develop their self-learning strategies, *autonomy*, and responsibility towards their own learning (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2013).

d. Oral communication can be affected by limited vocabulary

A number of students maintained that lack of active vocabulary hindered oral communication proficiency. Ayman, a sophomore student, illuminated that he could not use the right vocabulary item in its appropriate contexts:

Sometimes I use three or four words to express one idea and this idea I can express by using one word. I keep rotating and rotating around to make the other one understands what I mean- it's lack of vocabulary of course.

Nonetheless, many teachers argued that vocabulary development cannot be learned by memorizing vocabulary lists. A senior teacher suggested that intensive listening and intensive reading could be an effective approach in contextualized vocabulary development:

Ameen: Some learners believe that vocabulary should be accumulated in their minds, and this is like a mistake... they think of vocabulary and its meaning in Arabic; they don't think of vocabulary as a dynamic language that should be developed through the process of intensive listening and intensive reading, I mean to learn vocabulary in context not in isolation.

Another senior professor argued that limited vocabulary may not be the real problem. To him, some teachers do not draw learners' attention to the actual use of vocabulary in context:

Omar: I don't think that the problem is in the limited vocabulary; rather the problem is in using the vocabulary. They teach meaning, spelling and pronunciation, but they draw little attention or no attention at all to how to use the language, its actual use in context.

Likewise, Khalid , a senior student, concurred with his professors that learning vocabulary should be natural; i.e., not through the traditional way of memorizing lists of vocabulary "If you keep up with language, the vocabulary will come... just all come simultaneously". For some learners, limited vocabulary can constitute a problem in oral communication; however, teachers perceive vocabulary development as a dynamic process that should be taught or learned in context; i.e. through intensive listening and reading. Practicing a new vocabulary item in context helps learners to use it more effectively in real life.

Rababah (2005) argues that although the communicative language approach is widely used in Arab institutions, vocabulary items are still taught in isolation. She highlights the importance of teaching vocabulary in real-life- contexts. Zhengdong's (2012) findings echo with other research in that lack of vocabulary is regarded as a prevalent concern among EFL students and a major obstacle for oral communication. In short, while active vocabulary knowledge can lead to positive language reception and production, the inability to use vocabulary in context constitutes a serious problem for students to express their ideas and feelings in the target language.

e. Interference of L1 hinders oral communication

According to numerous teachers and students L1 and L2 interference seems to influence learners' oral communication proficiency. Farouk, a senior teacher, illuminated that L1 interference is apparent, especially in learners' pronunciation, vocabulary, writing, and even body language:

Interference between L1 and L2 has influence on pronunciation and choosing vocabulary in context. It has influence on the style of writing, speaking, and body language. Yes, mother tongue has influence on structuring sentences. Students sometimes try to think in Arabic and translate...this translation sometimes comes very literal, so the meaning is influenced by the mother tongue.

Similarly, another teacher argued that L1 interference was more noticeable in low level students, particularly in vocabulary, structure, and thinking in native language:

Hakeem: Slow rate in oral communication can be related to L1 and L2 interference. This often happens depending on the proficiency level of students. If students have low language proficiency, so you'll have high level of interference...students still think in their language, look for a proper word, or structure. This takes time and definitely this is L1 interference.

Furthermore, students indicated that L1 interference impacts their pronunciation of specific language features such as certain sounds, stress and intonation, grammar, and sentence formation. The following extracts serve as an illustration of students' perspective:

Nour: This is one of the fundamental difficulties, no one can ignore...this interference leads to negative impact on our performance and learning English. For example, there are a lot of sounds that constitute a problem for us...vowels are totally different, stress, intonation, grammar, sentence formation...I think everything is different.

Mohanad: Sometimes when you're talking to a native, all of a sudden an idea would cross your mind, but it is actually Arabic, so if you translate it into English, it sounds silly...it does not convey the message; yes, the Arabic language has a major role.

Consequently, according to teachers and students, L1 interference seems to impact some language aspects such as pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and sentence formation. In a study of paragraph writing involved 28 Thai English minor students, Bennui (2008) reveals that L1 interference plays part in students' writing in terms of words selection, sentence, and discourse. The lexical interference, for instance, takes the form of literal translation of Thai words into English, while the interference at the sentence level involves using same structures from Thai language such as word order, subject verb agreement, and noun determiners.

f. Students are unable to structure their ideas and meanings in a coherent way

One of the teachers explained that students were unable to structure their ideas and meanings in a cohesive and coherent way, and in some cases, they lack background knowledge about certain topics in L2:

Ameen: This has to do with the coherence of the argument, with how students structure their ideas and present them in a logical and comprehensible and communicative manner. From my experience, this can be with higher level students. It is related to the familiarity with the topic, so yes they have the structure, they have the language knowledge necessary for running a conversation, but they don't have many ideas about this topic.

Mazdayasna (2012) concurs with the above finding in that learners have little opportunity to develop the skills for organizing their ideas cohesively and coherently while speaking the target language. It can be concluded that in addition to the linguistic competence, knowledge about a certain topic can be significant to run a successful conversation.

Besides the linguistic variable that seems to hinder or slow down oral communication, the interviewees highlighted some psychological barriers that may result partially from the insufficient linguistic competence, or from other various reasons. The following section discusses the psychological problems that English major students encounter in oral communication.

2 Psychological Barriers

English major students lack self-confidence

Young (1992) argues that speaking, from teachers and students' perspectives, is inarguably considered the most stressful skill among the four skills. Several interviewees thought that part of learners' inability to speak fluently is related to their lack of self-confidence, which can be due to insufficient linguistic competence and social misconception about the foreign language. Kareem, a senior teacher, states:

Students do not feel the confidence to stand and talk because they do not have the linguistic competence to make them talk, so they feel that they are going to be criticized or going to be ridiculed. This hinders their attempts to speak their thoughts. This *inhibition* is perhaps attributed, partially, to the social misconception that English is a difficult language.

In addition, Morad, another senior teacher, expressed explicitly that students feel inhibited to speak as a result of psychological as well as linguistic barriers:

There are some psychological barriers such as lack of confidence, fear of taking risks, not so many of them are risk takers. They are afraid of making mistakes. They have some inhibitions about how to articulate, how to pronounce words. So, generally they prefer to be on the silent side because they do not want to sound not proficient in the language in front of classmate or in front of the teacher.

Similarly, students explained that their inability to speak the language fluently was due to feelings of shyness and lack of confidence to speak in front of class. Samia, a freshman student stated, "We do not have enough confidence to talk in front of people. We do not trust our knowledge and language, so it is difficult to talk and express ourselves". Another interviewed student complained that speaking constituted a problem for him because he was worried about not being an affective speaker "sometimes I feel shy to speak and give my opinion to others even if I know the correct answer". Students sentiments comport with Heyde (1983) that self-confidence can be negatively affected when a language learner think of oneself as deficient and performs poorly in the target language. However, high self-confidence can be positively correlated with effective oral communication.

Further, students' inability to communicate effectively in a foreign language class may stem from the evaluations and attitudes of both teachers and classmates (Senel, 2012). Furthermore, Daly (1991) illuminates other possible reasons for students' communication apprehension in foreign language; for example, students avoid speaking because they are unprepared, uninterested, alienated from the class, or lacking confidence in their competence (as cited in Senel, 2012). In a nutshell, besides the linguistic problems, lack of self-confidence and inhibition can be amongst the main variables that hinder students' fluency in Palestinian EFL university context.

Pedagogical Implications

Based on my own findings and other research discussed in this study, a number of implications for EFL teaching and learning can be drawn. The teacher plays a key role in encouraging and putting learners at ease in developing their sense of self-confidence and trust,

and minimizing anxiety, fear, worry, and hunting for mistakes. State-of-the-art teaching techniques and strategies stress the need to encourage and empower learners to participate in class discussions and interactions through positive reinforcement, affective filter, and strong rapport. Wealth of activities can be utilized to help students express their ideas and feelings, for example, role play, information gap, presentations, drama and acting. These activities can be conducted in pairs, small groups, or team works. Many video clips about a variety of topics are available on ESL labs, youtube, or other websites.

Listening and speaking classes can employ authentic materials that mimic real-life-situations and engage students in different tasks. In this way, learners can expose themselves to the culture and norms of oral communication in the target language. Learners can be guided to use some applications on 'I pad' or 'I phone'; these applications access many interesting TV channels and radio stations in English. By the end of semester, learners can present their 'e-portfolios' in front of class. Further, to maximize practice, all teachers are invited to integrate oral communication activities (arguments, discussions, debates) in all courses and to make these activities as an essential part of *course assessment*. Consequently, this may lead to enrich the course materials and elevate students' oral communication skills and self-esteem.

Teachers can also encourage extracurricular activities including different types of clubs, reading club, speaking club, acting club, games, competitions, etc. Teachers of oral communication skills should have workshops with other teachers in the department to spread the culture of spoken language and its crucial significance in our modern age. Additionally, vocabulary items can be contextualized, i.e., to focus on collocation and actual use with concrete examples. Teaching methodology should move from teacher-centered classes to learner-centered classes, and the materials used should serve that same goal, even the assessment should be changed accordingly. To develop oral communication, students are invited to develop their own sustainable learning strategies, autonomy, and self-dependence.

Study Limitations & Future Research

Although the findings of the study could to a large extent highlight Palestinian English major students' key oral communication problems, many limitations should be addressed here. The participants of the study were 20 Palestinian English major students and 6 senior teachers. The findings are limited to the participants and the university context, and therefore the study cannot make generalization about English major students' oral communication problems in different EFL contexts (Marshall & Roseman, 1999). Moreover, that limitation derives from the uniqueness of a single setting, conceptual framework, and design of the study. However, it is hoped that there will be aspects of the findings which will be informative and inspiring to other EFL teachers and researchers.

In future research, it can be suggested that the oral communication problems should be carried out involving specific problems such as the impact of self-confidence, inhibition, pronunciation, or limited vocabulary on oral communication. Different variables such as learners' individual differences such as attitudes, age, and gender can also be taken into consideration in future research in foreign language classes. The present study was about the overall problems that Palestinian English major students encounter in oral communication.

Conclusion

Within the context of globalization and growing need for intercultural communication, foreign language educators are invited to place more emphasis on developing students' oral communication skills. The purpose of the study was to investigate Palestinian English major students' oral communication problems. The study used qualitative content analysis to analyze participants' interviews. The participants were 20 students from different levels and 6 teachers from a reputable university in the Gaza Strip, Palestine. The study revealed that incorrect pronunciation, limited vocabulary, lack of exposure to the target language, lack of self-confidence, and L1 interference were amongst the main oral communication problems.

The study also unveiled that the students had not developed the habit of extensive listening and reading in the target language, and they were unable to organize their ideas and meanings in a coherent and cohesive way. It can be concluded from the study that oral communication has been considered as a highly demanding and complex cognitive skill that involves different competences and mechanisms (Levelt & Roelofs & Meyer, 2000). Besides the linguistic competence, the perception of the *self* and other affective factors have been highlighted. Interestingly, the study explored and compared students and teachers' perceptions about oral communication problems, hoping that each side becomes more aware of his responsibility towards easing oral communication problems.

About the Author:

Dr. Abedrabu Abu Alyan is an assistant professor in the department of English at the Islamic University of Gaza. He graduated with a doctorate in education from the University of Massachusetts, USA. His research interests are TEFL, intercultural communication, CALL, and discourse analysis.

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Appendix 1

Interview Questions

The main goal of this study is to investigate Palestinian English major students' problems in developing oral communication (speaking) in order to highlight the complexities and challenges involved in this skill. **The study employs semi-structured interview for data gathering; however, the interview may cover some or all the following questions.**

1. What are the major problems that English major students face in oral communication (speaking)?

2. Do you think that these problems are due to a limited vocabulary or inadequate knowledge of L2 in general?
3. Some scholars believe that these problems are caused, partially, by learners' attitude towards the TL and culture, lack of motivation, self confidence, or support from teachers? What do you think?
4. Do you agree that the large number of students in class and lack of adequate practice are really responsible for the problems?
5. Some scholars think that learners have many phonological, syntactic, and morphological complexities that make them unable to express themselves and articulate their ideas fluently. Have you noticed any of these problems?
6. Does the problem have anything to do with teachers' textbooks/materials and teaching methodology?
7. Some researchers argue that oral communication should be integrated in all courses, and shouldn't be limited to one course or a couple of courses. What do you think?
8. Do you think that this problem is due to L1 and L2 interference and lack of similarity between the two languages in terms of their phonetic, semantic and syntactic systems?
9. From your perspective, how oral communication or speaking can be developed in our department? Any recommendations?