

Factors Behind Weaknesses of Afghan Students' Speaking Skills

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ABSTRACT

The current study aimed to explore major factors behind common weaknesses in speaking skills of Afghan students were majoring in English at Shaikh Zayed University. A descriptive research design was employed in the study, and a modified close-ended questionnaire was distributed to collect data from (20) female and (80) male students. Also, IBM SPSS Statistics 24th version was used to analyse collected data; frequency and percentage were presented in tables. Furthermore, the study's findings revealed that fear of making mistakes while speaking, low self-confidence and poor grammar knowledge were the leading factors behind common weaknesses of students' speaking skills.

Keywords- Weaknesses, Speaking skill, fluency, communication.

I. INTRODUCTION

As one of the requirements of social existence, languages play a significant part in human life. English today is a significant position as one of the world's most widely spoken languages and a primary medium of interpersonal communication. As a result, learning English has gained worldwide popularity and importance. It is crucial to be fluent in all aspects of the English language to use it in every aspect of life. Speaking ability is important when using English as a communication tool, and it has always retained its significance in second language learning and instruction. It provides a channel for students to interact with others and share knowledge, thoughts, and opinions. Alonso (2018) has claimed that focusing on speaking ability in a second language is inherently difficult since it involves one of the most demanding recording abilities in second language data. One of the English language skills that any foreign language learner must master is the ability to speak. In line with this, Nunan (1991) stated that for those who mastered speaking skills is the single most important aspect of learning a second or foreign

language, and the success of students is measured in terms of the ability to carry on conversation. As one of the needs of social life, languages play a significant part in human life. English today holds a significant position as one of the most widely spoken languages in the world and as a fundamental language for interpersonal communication. As a result, learning English has gained importance and popularity globally. Using English in all aspects of life requires mastery of all language skills. Speaking ability is important when using English as a communication tool, and it has never lost its significance in second language learning and instruction. It allows students to interact with others and share knowledge, thoughts, and opinions. Alonso (2018).

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Compared to other languages, English is considered a medium of instruction in various universities across the globe. Therefore, students who are interested in pursuing higher education are expected to have a considerable proficiency in the English language. Moreover, In the Afghan context, the

communicative competency of most students across the country seems low. It may be because of some factors. One of the factors is that this country has been experiencing armed conflict for decades, so the experience has affected every layer of society in this country. Besides, other factors play roles in students' low level of English proficiency. Rubio (2007) stated that low self-confidence and some psychological barriers such as fearfulness, insecurity, anxiety and feeling of being apart from people can affect students' speaking performance. Also, Lukitasari (2003) conducted a study about learners' strategies in dealing with speaking problems. The result revealed that students face many speaking difficulties because of using their mother tongue and need more vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation competency. If the findings of the above studies are taken into great consideration, the above factors may be involved in poor proficiency in English in the Afghan context. Therefore, this issue indeed needs to be explored empirically so its findings will provide data that can be valuable to the concerned educators.

III. SIGNIFICANCE AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The findings of this study will be helpful to the instructors and students of the department of English, Shaikh Zayed University and will offer practical recommendations to instructors and students of the stated department. Also, the current study is limited to female and male students majoring in English at the department of English, Shaikh Zayed University, at the beginning of the 2021 academic year.

3.1 Purpose of the study

This paper explores factors behind the weakness in speaking skills of students majoring in English at Shaikh Zayed University. The study's findings may give valuable insights and recommendations to students for improving their English speaking skills.

3.2 Research Questions

What are the factors behind the weakness of Afghan students' speaking skills who major in English at Shaikh Zayed University?

Are there differences in the research sample's judgements about the causes of Shaikh Zayed University's students' poor speaking fluency that are statistically significant?

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

Speaking is a means to orally express opinions, thoughts, facts, and feelings to others. According to Numan (2003), speaking is a productive oral skill which consists of constructing systematic verbal utterances to convey meaning. In acquiring English speaking skills, some students make problems or errors when trying to convey their ideas, opinions, feelings, or thoughts. Most importantly, some factors are behind the weaknesses of

students' speaking skills. A low level of vocabulary knowledge is one of them, and it plays a fundamental role in human communication. In any language, vocabulary is significant for written and spoken discourses. Similarly, Balqis (2018) stated that learners with a low vocabulary level could not express their concepts as clearly as they wanted. She also stated (2018) that the lack of vocabulary is a major challenge among ESL/EFL learners, which affects the flow of speech of the speakers. Therefore, learning vocabulary is significant for ESL/EFL learners. Furthermore, the past literature has revealed that not only a low level of vocabulary but also a lack of grammar knowledge and poor pronunciation are barriers for students to speak fluently. Widianingsih and Ingatan (2016) conducted a study on grammatical difficulties encountered by second-language learners. The results showed that the main grammatical difficulties were the lack of subject-verb agreement, plural markers or tense rules. A study by Lukitasari (2003) revealed that learners performed poorly in their assigned activities due to poor pronunciation and low grammar and vocabulary knowledge. Also, Keong (2015) investigated the speaking skills of Iraqi undergraduate students at Garriyan University. After employing survey and interview as their research instruments in a mixed-method study, the findings they got are as follows: participants encountered several difficulties with their verbal skills, including pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary.

In addition, some research has found that fear of making mistakes while speaking and having anxiety during communication are other key factors behind students' weaknesses in their speaking skills. Speaking anxiety is the most frequently cited concern by foreign language learners which may negatively affect their performance and ability to speak the target language, especially in speaking English (Mak, 2011). Fear of making mistakes prevents the productive performance of language learners while learning the target language, and anxiety can discourage language learners and cause them to lose confidence in their abilities (Hashemi & Abbasi, 2013). As disputed by many theorists, the fear of making mistakes becomes the main factor of students when they speak English in the classroom.

Moreover, some studies have revealed that the mother tongue of students has affected student's fluency in speaking skills. In 2015, at the English language centre at Taif University, Alasmari looked into the obstacles that Saudi Arabian students and English language instructors have when trying to speak the language well. One hundred forty-two students from Taif University made up the study's sample. The study's findings indicated that students' attitudes towards the English language and their propensity to converse in their native tongue both outside of class and with professors and peers inside of it are the main causes of their poor levels of oral proficiency. Furthermore, some

research revealed other factors behind students' low-level oral proficiency. A study by Taiqin (1995) asserted that ninety-five per cent of students said they had difficulty speaking because they were afraid of making errors in class, had no idea what to say, and were not confident and comfortable in the class. Also, the study of Al Nakhalah (2016) found a few more factors playing roles in students' low oral proficiency. Such a study was carried out to determine the language barriers English language learners at Al Quds Open University faced. The study's findings showed that some students had trouble speaking for many reasons, including shyness, nervousness, fear of making mistakes, and lack of confidence. In addition, having reviewed a large body of literature relevant to the weaknesses of students in their speaking skill and lacking studies on the stated area in the Afghan context, particularly in the departments of English of all public and private universities across the country, give a clear picture to researchers to carry out some research on the same subject in stated context and to come up with effective solutions and recommendations to the problems.

V. METHODOLOGY OF STUDY

A descriptive study design was employed in the present study. For data collection, a closed-ended questionnaire was distributed to students majoring in

English at the English department of Shaikh Zayed University at the beginning of 2021 academic year. The total number of participants was (N=60), of which forty students were male, and 20 were female. The age of participants ranges from 20-27 years old.

5.1 Data collection and sampling methods

A closed-ended questionnaire was used to collect data from participants. The questionnaire is designed in two parts. The first part is about the demographic information of participants, and the second part is used to find out the weakness of students' speaking skills through various items having five points Likert scales; agree, strongly agree, disagree, strongly disagree and neutral. Furthermore, participants were selected through a sample random sampling method for data collection. Through this sampling method, every participant has an equal chance of being selected (Creswell, 2012). Moreover, for the instrument's reliability, a questionnaire pilot test was conducted and shared with some experienced lecturers of Shaikh Zayed University. After this procedure, some modifications were brought to the questionnaire. Also, IBM SPSS Statistics 24th version was used to analyse collected data; frequency and percentage were presented in tables.

5.2 Findings of the Study

To find out factors behind weaknesses of students' speaking skills, data from participants were collected and analyzed through SPSS 24th version.

Table 1: Demographics Data

	Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	80	80%
	Female	20	20%
	Total	100	100%
Class	Freshman	20	20%
	Sophomore	25	25%
	Junior	25	25%
	Senior	30	30%
	Total	100	100%
Age		100	100%
Location	Khost	100	100%

Table 1 reveals that 100 participants took part in the current study. From the total, a good majority (80%) was male, and a small portion (20%) was female students. Moreover, among the participants, (20%) from

first-year students, (25%) from sophomores, (30%) from juniors and (30%) participants belong to the senior class. Also, all participants shared the same age range (20-27) and the same geographical location (Khost).

Table 2: (Influence of my mother tongue is one of the main factor behind my poor speaking skill)

Five-points Likert scale rating	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	19	19%
Strongly agree	28	28%
Disagree	17	17%
Strongly disagree	21	21%

Neutral	15	15%
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As shown in table 2, most participants believe that their mother tongue is one of the key factors behind their low level of speaking skill, but (38%) of the total participants think that their native language does not affect their speaking performance. A small portion (15%) of the total numbers remained neutral.

Table 3: (Because of my limited vocabulary knowledge, I cannot speak fluently in English.)

Five-points Likert scale rating	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	10	10%
Strongly agree	30	30%
Disagree	10	10%
Strongly disagree	30	30%
Neutral	20	20%
Total	100	100%

Table 3 presents that (10%) and (30%) of respondents answered that they agree and strongly agree, respectively, with the above statement (because of my limited vocabulary knowledge, I cannot speak fluently in English). However, the same total percentage answered that they disagree and strongly disagree with the above idea, and (20%) of participants did not share their views regarding the statement. As a result, it is indicated that half of all respondents believed that limited vocabulary was one of the key factors behind the weakness of their speaking fluency. However, the remaining half of the participants believed limited vocabulary did not affect their speaking fluency.

Table 4: (I have no fear of making mistakes while speaking English)

Five-points Likert scale rating	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	9	9%
Strongly agree	6	6%
Disagree	22	22%
Strongly disagree	55	55%
Neutral	8	8%
Total	100	100%

As table 4 describes that from the total percentage, a small portion (15%) insisted that they had no fear of making mistakes while speaking. However, a great majority (77%) agreed and strongly agreed that fear was one of the big factors behind the weakness of their speaking skill. The above percentage reveals that

most participants believed fear was a big barrier to their speaking deficiency.

Table 5: (I want to speak less because I feel shy while speaking English)

Five-points Likert scale rating	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	10	10%
Strongly agree	30	30%
Disagree	10	10%
Strongly disagree	40	40%
Neutral	10	13%
Total	100	100%

Table 5 presents that (10%) and (30%) of total respondents agreed and strongly agreed that shyness was a problem towards speaking fluently. On the other hand, (10%) and (40%) disagreed and strongly disagreed with the above statement. A tiny number (10%) neither agreed nor disagreed with the above statement. From the participants' responses, it is clear that half of the total respondents demonstrated that shyness was not an obstacle towards having great fluency in speaking.

Table 6: (When I speak English, I usually feel anxious)

Five-points Likert scale rating	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	15	15%
Strongly agree	31	31%
Disagree	13	13%
Strongly disagree	32	32%
Neutral	9	9%
Total	100	100%

As is shown in table 6, (46%) of the total participants agreed and strongly agreed that they felt anxious when they spoke English. However, almost the same number of the above percentage disagreed and strongly disagreed with the above statement.

Table 7: (I tremble when knowing that I am going to be called on to speak English)

Five-points Likert scale rating	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	20	20%
Strongly agree	35	35%
Disagree	13	13%

Strongly disagree	32	32%
Neutral	0	0%
Total	100	100%

Table 7 demonstrates that more than half of the total respondents answered that they agreed and strongly agreed with the idea that they felt a lack of self-confidence while speaking. However, (45%) of the participants believed that they did not feel self-confident when they spoke English.

Table 8:(Motivation plays a vital role in advancing my speaking skill)

Five-points Likert scale rating	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	20	20%
Strongly agree	25	25%
Disagree	15	15%
Strongly disagree	33	33%
Neutral	7	7%
Total	100	100%

Table 8 suggests that (20%) and (25%) of the total respondents agreed and strongly agreed, respectively, with the statement (motivation plays a vital role in advancing my speaking skill). Nevertheless, (15%) and (33%) of the total population disagreed and strongly disagreed, respectively, with the above statement, and a small portion ((7%) of the total respondents remained neutral.

Table 9: (I don't want to speak English because of my poor grammar knowledge.)

Five-points Likert scale rating	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	25	25%
Strongly agree	40	40%
Disagree	9	9%
Strongly disagree	9	9%
Neutral	17	17%
Total	100	100%

As it is described in table 9, a majority (65%) of total participants believed that poor grammar knowledge was a big factor behind the weakness of their speaking skills, and a small portion (18%) of total respondents thought that grammar knowledge was a big barrier when they spoke English. Only (17%) of the total participants neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement.

Table 10: (Because of my poor pronunciation, I am not interested in speaking English)

Five-points Likert scale rating	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	21	21%
Strongly agree	25	25%
Disagree	17	17%
Strongly disagree	28	28%
Neutral	9	9%
Total	100	100%

Table 10 presents that (21%), and (25%) of the total population agreed and strongly agreed, respectively, with the statement (because of my poor pronunciation, I am not interested in speaking English). On the other hand, (17%) and (28%) of the participants disagreed and strongly disagreed with the above statement. Only a tiny portion (9%) of the whole population remained neutral.

VI. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are consistent with the results of other studies. In terms of whether lack of **grammar knowledge** can be a factor behind the weakness of students' speaking fluency or not, findings of the current study demonstrate that a good majority (65%) of respondents believed that poor grammar knowledge prevents them from having great speaking fluency. Such a finding is consistent with the study of Lukitasari (2003), which indicated that learners produced poor performance in speaking activities they were assigned due to poor **pronunciation and low level of grammar and vocabulary knowledge**. However, the findings of this research, concerning whether low vocabulary knowledge and poor pronunciation can affect students' speaking fluency or not, contradict Luckitasri's (2003) results. In other words, the current study's findings suggest that less than half of the total population (46%) and (40%) of total respondents insist that poor pronunciation and low vocabulary knowledge affect their speaking fluency.

Moreover, the result of this study asserts that (46%) of the respondents agreed that **anxiety** affects their speaking fluency, and the majority (55%) of total respondents demonstrated that lack of self-confidence was another barrier towards weakness behind their speaking skills. Furthermore, the result of the current study reveals that **fear of making mistakes** while speaking is the leading factor in preventing them from having great speaking fluency. These results are consistent with those of Al Nakhalah (2016) and Asif (2017), who found that most Arab EFL students shied away from speaking and feared making mistakes. Also, regarding the effect of lack of motivation on students' speaking fluency, the current study reveals that (45%) and (48%) of participants agreed and disagreed,

respectively. Regarding the influence of mother tongue on students speaking skills, (47%) of the respondents asserted that their mother tongue plays a key role in the low level of speaking fluency. Also, the study by Alasmari (2015) revealed that students' use of their mother tongue frequently had a detrimental effect on how well they spoke to their peers and teachers within and outside the classroom.

In addition, concerning the initial research question (what are the causes of the deficient speaking fluency of Afghan students?). The study's results showed that the causes of weakening Afghan students' speaking fluency include fear of making mistakes, shyness, anxiety, lack of confidence, lack of drive, low level of grammar and vocabulary knowledge, and poor. The results of the current study answered the second research question (Are there differences in the research sample's judgements about the causes of the Shaikh Zayed University's students' poor speaking fluency that are statistically significant?). In other words, fear of making mistakes and low grammar knowledge is the leading factor behind the weakness of Afghan students' speaking skills.

VII. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The findings of the study reveal that shyness, the feeling of anxiety, poor pronunciation and the mother tongue of students are considerable contributing factors behind the weakness of Afghan students' speaking fluency and fear of making mistakes while speaking, low level of grammar knowledge and lack of self-confidence are the leading factors which prevent Afghan students from having great speaking fluency. Furthermore, the lecturers of the department of English should provide a safe environment where students feel free from making mistakes and have self-confidence.

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