

Enhancing the Algerian EFL Learners' Speaking Skills: A Case Study

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Résumé en Français

La prolifération des approches, méthodes, et techniques dans l'enseignement des langues étrangères constitue une nécessité absolue afin d'améliorer l'apprentissage d'anglais et de maximiser le rendement de l'apprenant. De nos jours, l'accent a été mis beaucoup plus sur l'écriture et la lecture aux dépens de l'expression orale, ce qui est en fait devenue indispensable dans l'approche moderne vis-à-vis le processus de l'apprentissage et l'enseignement d'anglais où de grandes attentions sont orientées vers les compétences en communication orale de la langue cible.

En effet, cette contribution vise à examiner les difficultés rencontrées par les élèves et qui entravent leur compétence orale; et introduire un éventail d'activités alternatives pour favoriser un apprentissage actif qui permet les apprenants de développer leur compétences en communication.

Mots clés: les compétences orales, les difficultés, l'interaction, performance orale, les activités orales.

1. Introduction: The Concept of Speaking Skills

Speaking is the primary tool for communicating, thinking, and learning in general, and learning a language in particular. It is through speaking, students learn concepts, develop vocabulary, and perceive the structure of the English language as essential components of learning. Furthermore, speech is a vehicle to link individuals to society, and a medium through which human beings communicate with each other. In this regard, Widdowson (1978) assumed that speaking implies a reciprocal exchange in which both reception and production play a part; and thus the ability of speaking entails both receptive and productive participation. By the same token, Chaney et al. (1998: 13) indicated that speaking is: "The process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, in a variety of contexts." This point led many scholars such as Richards et al. (2002) and Florez (1999) to consider speaking skills also as interactive and productive that involves producing and receiving and processing information to master the target language.

According to Brown (1994), teaching speaking involves both macro and micro skills, the former refers to producing the smaller chunks of language such as phonemes, morphemes, words, collocation, and phrasal units. Whereas, the latter implies that the speakers should accomplish appropriately communicative functions according to situations, participants and goals.

2. The Status of Speaking Skills in Language Teaching

English Language Teaching has long focused on written language at the expense of the spoken language. Actually, educators, researchers, and teachers acknowledged that even though some active pupils who wrote sentences and simple passages correctly; they are incapable to interact in English inside the classroom; unable to utter a very simple question or answer correctly and sometimes they even mispronounce some English words. In fact, many scholars and even ordinary people are convinced that a person being learning a language, incapable of speaking it; is simply as if learning a language in a vacuum.

Therefore, teaching speaking skills should not be perceived as an end *per se*, but rather a medium through which the EFL learners would be able to develop their oral proficiency. Besides, they are expected to have the benefit of practising all the language skills in an integrated, natural, communicative way, even if one skill is the main focus of a given session.

Learning foreign languages, especially English language, has become increasingly important in Algeria in recent years. Algeria has introduced English as a second foreign language after French in education. It is taught as a compulsory subject across the curriculum, from the middle cycle to high education. The Algerian educational authorities have shifted from one approach/method to another in order to pave the way for improving the teaching/learning of English language. Despite these educational procedures to maintain the teaching/learning of the target language, secondary school learners encounter difficulties and display low achievement particularly in oral skills. To account for this pedagogical problematic, one should bear in mind that English being taught as a foreign language, means that unlike French L2, there is an absence use of the target language within the social community.

3. Case Study: Rationale and Procedure

The present study employed a case study in order to explore the aspects of English language that represent difficulties and yield obstacles to the learners whereby they manifest their low achievement and inability to interact orally in the classroom and they generally resort to use L₁ i.e., Arabic language either for asking or answering the questions when interacting with their instructors and peers. And to implicate alternative oral tasks that can be appropriate for enhancing their oral interaction within the classroom. In this regard, an interview was conducted on first-year learners at the secondary school level resided in the mountain of a village called Ouled Mimoun around Tlemcen, Algeria. The total number of the subjects was fifty-seven; they were enrolled in both literary and scientific streams; and they were chosen at random to synthesis reliable data.

For the purpose to elicit information about the difficulties the learners generally encounter while speaking English; this pie chart shows that most the respondents identified approximately the linguistic difficulties such as vocabulary about 19,30%; grammar structure (26,32%) ; and pronunciation about (22,81%) . Moreover, the results

demonstrated that 26,32% of the informants faced grammar difficulties by being unable to structure correct sentences. While others reported on their difficulties that laid in the lack of vocabulary and pronunciation; vocabulary and grammar construct real obstacles by the rest of the learners.

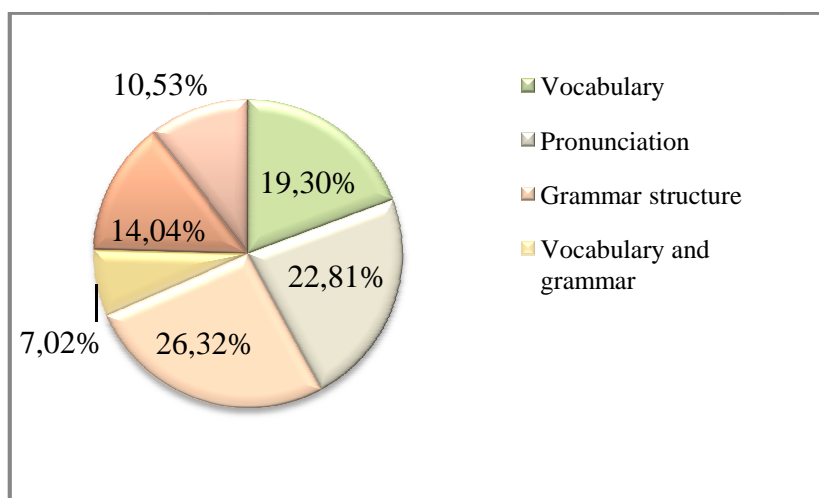


Figure1. Difficulties in Oral English U

Furthermore, to explore whether the respondents take part in oral tasks such as dialogues, interpreting a picture, and to what extent they do involve themselves to these tasks, the results presented in the pie chart below, demonstrates that over 14% of the pupils, they quite attempted to use oral English and made efforts to perform these kinds of tasks, whereas 72% of them they replied a little bit.

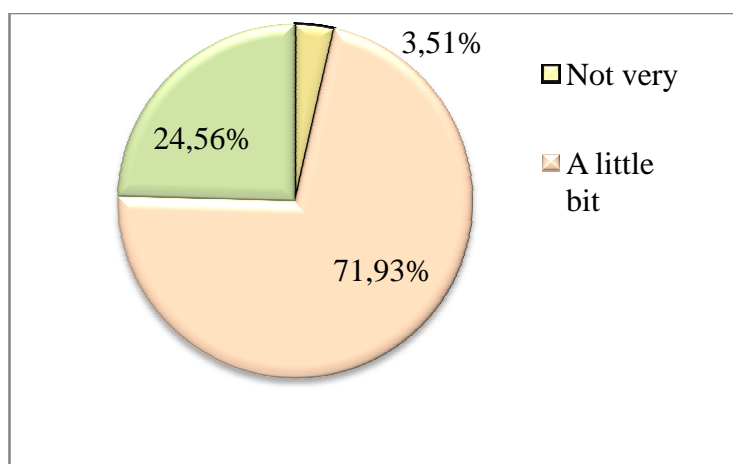


Figure2. Participation in Oral Tasks

Taking into account the large classes size, a pedagogical initiation to the field of teaching foreign languages which is splitting these classes into groups once a week as this procedure enables the learners to interact orally, regardless the limited time. Thus, the learners were asked about their attitudes towards this initiative procedure. Expectantly, most of the subjects favoured it; and only a minority preferred the full class as shown the following pie chart:

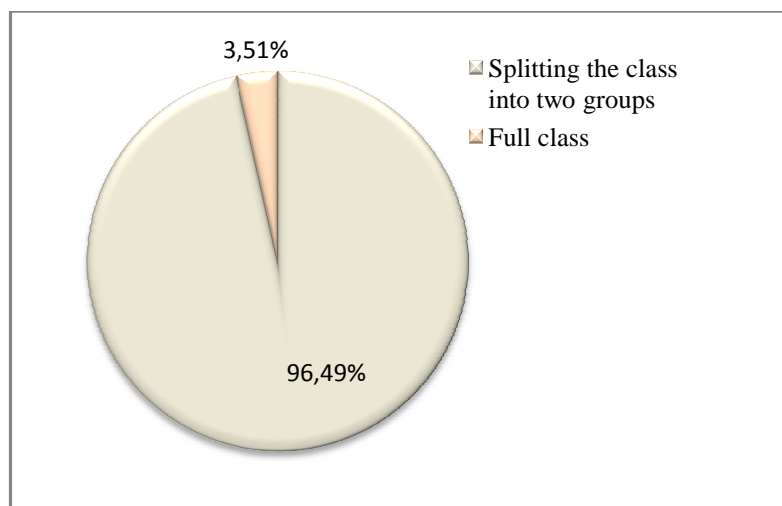


Figure3. Learners' Attitude towards Learning in Groups

4. Implications for remedial practice

As a rule of thumb, *practice makes perfect*; so if the learners do not make any effort to make use of the target language, they are supposed learning in vain. Hence, in an attempt to help students to grapple with the intricacies of language, and develop their proficiency in speaking, EFL instructors are appealed to introduce speaking activities to provide an academic and dynamic environment for language learning.

Many scholars and experts accounted working in group situation can better increase the performance of oral skills, for instance Ur (1991) assumed that implementing group work increases the sheer amount of learner talk going on in a limited period of time and also lowers the inhibitions of learners who are unwilling to speak in front of the full class. Besides, it is typically useful for oral practice than in the full-class.

Such a strategy enhances learning by inviting all the members of the group to make use of oral English and enable them to notice and share approximately the same abilities and difficulties. This implies that learners can increase their oral interaction and thus reduce their mother tongue use in the classroom.

Bailey (2007) also highlights designing classroom activities using group work or pair work so as to provide valuable practice that enable them to exchange their ideas,

express their opinions, and develop their communication skills and to ensure an interactive process of language learning.

Meaningful Oral Drills

Over the recent years, these activities are considered as useful teaching-learning material because they provide practice of small, manageable chunks of language such as a tag ending, verb form, transformation, etc. Additionally, they provide a reason for speaking and are more engaging and motivating.

Dialogues and Role Play

Dialogues are primarily used to practise a function, structure or vocabulary and to illustrate degree of formality and values of the target culture. They are also used to practise pronunciation and intonation. According to Doff (1990: 232) a role play is “ a way of bringing situations from real life into the classroom”.

5. Conclusion

Evidently, the results have revealed that the common difficulties which inhibit the EFL learners are stemmed not only from their lack of knowledge of all the language aspects i.e., vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation; but also from the lack of practice and the quasi absence of classroom conversational activities.

To develop speaking skills, all the parameters are responsible for the success or failure and can contribute to a great deal of EFL pupils in developing basic interactive skills necessary for their learning process. The instructors should promote oral interaction in their classes, and to ensure that most of the students are able to actively participate. Evidently, to assign small groups is an effective way to attain this goal by avoiding the use of the first language only in the last resort.

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