

Exploring the Weakness Problem in English Speaking Skill Faced by Students at *Institut Supérieur des Métiers du Bâtiment, des Travaux Publics et de l'Urbanisme* : A Case Study of First Year Students

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the weakness problem in English Speaking Skill faced by first year students at Institut Supérieur des Métiers du Bâtiment, des Travaux Publics et de l'Urbanisme (Higher Institute of Construction Trades, Public Works, and Urbanism), referred to hereafter as ISM-BTPU. The objectives of the study were to explore the main reasons that caused the weakness of speaking among the students and to provide some solutions and recommendations to overcome this problem.

This study is a descriptive study in which the researcher used two instruments of data collection: a questionnaire and an interview. The questionnaire was designed and distributed to a randomly chosen sample of sixty students of first year. Only Fifteen students out of the sixty participants in the questionnaire were sampled for the interview.

The results of the study showed that low level of the students in speaking was mainly due to lack of confidence, shyness, and anxiety, along with problems such as fear of criticism, fear of committing mistakes, mother tongue interference, pronunciation, and lack of training in English language skills. In the light of these findings, the researcher suggested a number of recommendations.

Keywords: speaking skill, weakness problem, ISM-BTPU, first year students

Introduction

Language is a tool of communication that has a big role in human life. People cannot communicate without language. It is one of their necessary needs for communication and connection with others although from different background. At present, English occupies an important status as one of the most widespread languages in the world, and one of the main ways of human communication. Internationally, it is the dominant language in all fields and areas, and learning it has become a requirement in many fields, jobs, and professions. Therefore, the importance of learning English is dictated by the nature of social, scientific, professional, and technological changes. It has become an essential tool for entering the global and local job markets. (Mirza, 2018)

In this regard, one researcher points to the growing awareness among people today of the importance of the English language and their need to learn an international language that is understood and used by the largest number of people. The demand for learning English is increasing day by day. This is confirmed by the increasing number of English language schools and institutes spread around the world. The intense competition among these educational institutions is focused on attracting those who wish to learn the language and master its skills, as well as on everything that makes learning this language easier. (Al-Zaili, 2008)

English language has four main skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Speaking is a very crucial skill. It is the means through which people can communicate with others to express their ideas, opinions, and hopes to attain certain goals. When speaking English, many students face difficulties and problems. In most cases, and when they want to participate, they find themselves unable to speak or express their ideas. Sometimes, they use their native languages in English classes. This issue is also recognized by many English teachers, and many research studies tried to analyze and find solutions to this problem. Nevertheless, no research study has been conducted here in Mauritania in this field. Maybe this study is the first in this area. Accordingly, this study attempts to explore the reasons behind the weakness of speaking among the students of the first year at ISM-BTPU and to recommend some solutions to overcome this problem.

Statement of the problem

English is an international language. Learning it has increasingly become a top priority for educational systems worldwide. Many countries in the world consider English as necessary to be learned by students or society in general. Given the necessity of learning and teaching English at the present time, the Mauritanian government has decided to include its teaching from the first year of middle school through the end of the undergraduate level at university, i.e., over a period of ten years. Even at the master's level, many specializations include English language teaching in their programs. Therefore, it is crucial to evaluate educational and training programs for teaching English in educational institutions and universities, and to work to develop and support them with modern technologies and training methods that facilitate the learning process. Students must master the four skills in English. These basic skills are reading, writing, speaking, and listening which are essential to develop the communicative needs of the learners. Ardila (2013) pointed out that the four main skills are classified into two types: the first type is receptive, and this includes reading and listening skills, where language is developed through receiving ideas or message. The second is productive which includes writing and speaking skills, where the language is produced.

Among these skills, speaking has an important place and role in the human daily life communication. According to Pourhosein Gilakjani (2016) speaking is of great significance for the people interaction where they speak everywhere and every day. Speaking is the way of communicating ideas and messages orally. If we want to encourage students to communicate in English, we should use the language in real communication and ask them to do the same process.

Unfortunately, despite its importance, speaking skill receives low emphasis in language learning. Alsobhi & Preece (2018) argued that of the four English language skills, speaking enjoys a superior status. Accordingly, it should be given high priority while teaching. Teachers should implement authentic speaking materials in English classes in order to prepare students for effective speaking. Here in Mauritania, teaching English speaking skill to English learners has always been an exhausting task because it is considered a foreign language, i.e. not widely spoken or used in everyday interactions. For such a reason, Mauritanian teachers of English are required to persistently implement new teaching strategies to tackle the problems regarding speaking skills in the classroom.

The researcher has observed—through his long years of experience in teaching English at public and private universities and institutes—that there are problems and difficulties facing students in learning English, especially in speaking skills. Some of these problems are related to teachers and their need for qualification and training, while others are related to learners and their motivation. From this, the researcher saw the importance of conducting this descriptive survey study to monitor the difficulties and challenges facing students in learning the English speaking skill and to provide recommendations and suggestions to find solutions that contribute to improving and developing students' skills in acquiring the English speaking skill.

Many researches were conducted worldwide on difficulties in teaching and learning speaking skills and pointed out various difficulties and their causes, but this present study, which focused on speaking difficulties faced by first year students at ISM-BTPU, is the first of its kind, to the researcher's knowledge, in this field in Mauritania.

Research questions

1. What are the main reasons that caused the weakness problem in speaking skill among the first year students of ISM-BTPU?
2. What are the best solutions and recommendations to overcome the weakness problem in speaking skill?

Objectives of the study

1. To investigate the main reasons that caused the weakness problem in speaking skill among the first year students of ISM-BTPU?
2. To seek ways to develop the students' abilities in speaking skill and remedy their weakness in speaking.
3. To provide the learners with some solutions and some recommendations to overcome this problem.

Significance of the study

As it was mentioned, speaking skill is one of the most important skills to learn in English. It can help the students improve their abilities to master the English language in general and to be skillful –speakers of this language in particular.

Therefore, this study may prove significant since it seeks to achieve the following:

- ♣ The findings of this study will hopefully help in terms of diagnosing speaking difficulties and remedying them.
- ♣ This study will offer recommendations that will hopefully help instructors and students to overcome problems related to the speaking of English.

Limitations of the Study

The present study was limited to the following:

The Scope of Human: It was limited to female and male students in first year level at ISM-BTPU.

The Scope of Location: The study was applied and carried out at ISM-BTPU. Therefore, results might be generalizable only to ISM-BTPU.

The Scope of Time: The study was limited to the first semester of the academic year 2024-2025.

Definitions of Key Terms

1. **Speaking:** speaking is a productive skill. It is the ability of participants to communicate and express their ideas, thoughts, feelings, and needs in order to make sense of them (Brown, 2004). Speaking is also defined as an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving, and processing information (Florez, 1999).

2. **Speaking Skill:** is the students' ability to speak accurately and proficiently. Speaking skill is important as it is directly related to communication and interaction. There are many elements associated with speaking skill. According to Harris (1996), speaking skill is a complex skill that requires the use of a variety of abilities. It can be divided into four components when analyzing the speaking process: pronunciation, linguistic structures, vocabulary, and fluency. In this study, speaking skill refers to oral language performance characterized by ease, precision, and clarity in students' selection, organization, expression, and correct pronunciation of ideas.

3. **Speaking Weakness:** This refers to an inability to speak accurately and proficiently.

Methodology of the study

This research was designed as descriptive study. The researcher used the quantitative and qualitative methods to collect the required data of the research. The qualitative data will be collected by using interview technique tools to find out the main reasons that caused the weakness problem in speaking skill. In addition, the quantitative data will be collected by using questionnaire tools.

Sample of the study

The sample of this study was sixty students out of one hundred and twenty students. They were selected randomly to respond to the questionnaire and the interview items with the help of the researcher for explaining and facilitating any difficulties of these items. Among the participants, there was 22 female students and 38 male students. Their ages ranged from 17 to 19. Table (1) shows the distribution of the study population according to gender.

Table (1). Sample Distribution According to Gender

Variables	Categories	Frequencies	%
Gender	Male	38	63.33
	Female	22	36.66.....7
Total		60	100

Data collection Instruments

1. The questionnaire: The questionnaire consists of 31 items, which are structured into four domains. The first domain consists of four items. The second domain contains of fifteen items. The third domain consists of eight items. The fourth domain consists of four items. In these items, the students were asked to answer the questions based on a Five-Point Likert Scale measure consisting of the following choices: (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) neutral (4) disagree and (5) strongly disagree.

2. The Interview: The interview was conducted based on open-ended questions. Only Fifteen students out of the sixty participants in the questionnaire were sampled for the interview. They were selected based on their low fluency in speaking (participants' speaking skill was evaluated in terms of their classroom presentation and participation). Being a faculty of the institute, the researcher observed their speaking skill in the classroom many times; so that the researcher selected the fifteen students who were having problems in speaking for the interview.

Both in the interview and the questionnaire, the questions were designed to explore both linguistic factors, such as grammar, pronunciation, and fluency, and non-linguistic factors, such as anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and lack of supportive environment that might hinder students from speaking.

The findings

The data collected from the interview and questionnaire showed that the problems of speaking faced by the students were caused by many factors. These factors were categorized into mainly two categories: linguistic factors and nonlinguistic factors. The causes and problems were further analyzed into different subcategories as shown below:

General causes	Specific problems
Linguistic	Problems in fluency
Mother tongue comes first in mind	
Problems in using correct grammar patterns	
Vocabulary	
Personal	Lack of confidence
Anxiety	
Shyness	
Nervousness	
Social	Fear of criticism from the peer
Fear of mistakes	
Fear of incorrect pronunciation	
Environmental	Institutional system
	Teaching method

Linguistic factors

This is the main problem most of the students face. Students feel great difficulty to select words for expressing a particular view. Most of them first think in their mother tongue and then they translate it into English to share their views, and, this way, speech is delayed due to translation from their mother tongue into the English language. Based on their responses most of the students focused on grammatical deficiency in speaking. They faced difficulty in using appropriate tense structure and prepositions in their sentence while speaking. Also, pronunciation was another problem for the students. Some of the students stated that they found difficulty pronouncing some words correctly so that they would not use such words even if they know the meaning and use of the words. Students also reported that they face problems while making sentences in English; they find problems in maintaining subject-verb agreement sometimes.

Other Non-linguistic factors

The majority of the participants' shared experience of speaking English showed how nervous they were when they faced the mass. Most students lost their confidence when they were asked to speak in public. Also, other inadequate personal behavior-related factors, such as shyness and low self-confidence, hindered the student's from getting their meaning across and/or keeping the interaction going.

On the other hand, the classroom is like a small society where students from various backgrounds come with different interests and attitudes. Thus, Different students might have different bits of intelligence, and they may perform differently and show various behavioral activities in the classroom. In the interview, it was clear that the students' attitude towards making mistakes was one of the main factors that discouraged them from speaking. Most students shared that they were afraid that their friends would laugh at them.

Also important, in this study many students pointed out the environmental factor as an important problem. Their responses in the questionnaire and interview showed the lack of environment in the class and out of the class. There is nobody who encourages them to speak in English neither the teacher nor friends become ready to practice in English. From their responses and the data collected, it was found that students had a very poor schooling as the cause of poor English performance. If they could get a good environment at the secondary school level to practice in English, then they could speak fluently in English at the university level.

Concluding the study with reference to its findings, it can be said that the present study found that difficulties and problems faced by the first year students at ISM-BTPU were more or less of the same nature. The majority of the students faced personal problems such as lack of confidence, shyness, and anxiety while speaking. Along with that social problems such as fear of criticism, and fear of committing mistakes also played a vital role in speaking difficulties. Linguistic problems such as lack of appropriate vocabularies, problems in initiating the speech, creating linkage among the sentences, mother tongue interference, and pronunciation of the words curbed the students from speaking fluently. In the same way, not having a suitable environment to practice English and the poor English background due to the students schooling were some common factors that led to students' poor skills in speaking.

Recommendations

1. The findings of the study strongly demand more attention from the national education policymakers to develop English language teaching quality at secondary school levels. The curricula and syllabuses should be updated timely, and the authorities should develop them in such a way that students can engage more and more through the lessons and tasks.
2. Students should consider English more as a medium of communication than only an academic subject.
3. The speaking skills can be improved in various ways, including outside class activities. Students may use the outside resources available on the internet.
4. Discussion between English teachers and their students in and out of the class should be in the English language.
5. Teachers should avoid using traditional methods and techniques. They should use modern techniques and strategies for facilitating any difficulties in speaking skill.
6. English teachers should use a variety of strategies (e.g. verbal problem-solving, role-playing, presentation, intonation, and body language etc.) in order to encourage their students to speak English fluently and accurately in front of their colleagues.
7. Creating a safe and supportive atmosphere is vital in speaking sessions. Students are more likely to participate when they are not afraid of making mistakes, or when they are not embarrassed and their answers are welcome.
8. Allowing for pair and group work may help students gain confidence and enhance their speaking abilities as they feel secure within the group.
9. Conducting further studies on the challenges and difficulties students face in English language skills at high schools and university institutes in Mauritania.

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