Speaking in the Target Language: Issues and Considerations

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Abstract—**As English is the most widely used language in the world in various areas such as technology, science, and business, many Arab countries including Saudi Arabia have shifted into more focus on communicative English language instructions. However, there is still a persistent gap between what is intended to be taught and what is expected to be produced by EFL students. The purpose of the present study is, therefore, to highlight the factors that contribute to Saudi EFL students' reluctance to speaking meaningfully and purposefully in the target language. A survey is conducted to find out Saudi EFL students' communicative proficiency at Jazan University. Instructed interviews are also carried out to include the voice of teachers on what hampers their students from producing oral output. The results showed that Saudi EFL students are encountering many challenges that hinder their developmental processes of speaking. Based on the research findings some recommendations were made for both teachers and students.**

Index Terms—**speaking, CLT, pre-task planning, communicative strategies**

I. THEORETICAL AND APPLIED BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

A. Speaking: A Demanding Task

The difficulty to speak in a foreign language is common and universal among foreign language students. Despite of the years of exposure to the target language, EFL students find it difficult to converse or even construct a simple question. It is no surprise, that EFL students feel incompetent and lose interest in just thinking about practicing speaking. Indeed, speaking is a difficult task to perform in a foreign language. It is cognitively a demanding process that requires lots of efforts on the part of EFL students. Sasayama, S. (2011) argued that,

For language learners, however, their language knowledge has not yet been proceduralized or automatized and thus processing of the language consumes greater amount of attention. As a result, concurrent attention to task content and language forms becomes difficult to be achieved (p.110)

Based on Cromer's (1974) cognition hypothesis for first language acquisition (FLA), Robinson (2003b) claimed that regardless of the fact that adult L2 learners have sufficient knowledge of their surroundings, they still don't have enough linguistic competence to communicate in their early stages of L2 learning.

In recent years, some SLA researchers (Robinson 2005, 2007; Robinson & Gilabert, 2007) have pinpointed that cognitively challenging speaking tasks could potentially have great impact on the oral production of L2. However, such claims have been criticized by many SLA scholars (Skehan & Foster, 2001; VanPatten, 1990) explaining that when speaking tasks are cognitively difficult, L2 learners usually struggle in identifying different aspects of L2 language such as content and linguistic forms. Skehan & Foster (2001) explained that for L2 learners, focusing concurrently on task content and language production is problematic and could result in less accurate utterances. Sasayama, S. (2011) concluded that difficult writing tasks were rather better than speaking tasks in eliciting more accurate utterances among L2 learners.

Being a demanding task, many problems arise during students' attempt to speak and could even reduce their willingness to communicate. Munjayanah (2004, p.17) discussed four problems of speaking. which are more likely to be encountered in may EFL speaking contexts:

1. Inhibition: EFL learners are inhibited about speaking in class as they are usually worried or feeling shy from making mistakes.

2. Nothing to say: Many learners are not capable of speaking claiming that they can't think of anything to say

3. Low or uneven participation: particularly in large classes and where a few students are dominating the discussion.

4. Mother tongue use: Learners find it natural and effortless to use the mother whenever possible in class.

There are other problems of speaking. However, the ones mentioned above are more likely to be experienced in many EFL speaking contexts.

One of the recurrent challenges, observed by the researcher, in the Saudi EFL classes is that only a few competent students, who usually have better exposure to English, participate in class while less competent are reluctant to speak. Even when less competent students speak in the target language, they are usually answering a question and this attitude of learning greatly limits students' expected output.

B. CLT and Speaking

SLA researchers explained that Communicative Language Teaching has been introduced in the EFL context to enhance learners' communicative competence in authentic contexts (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Littlewood, 2007). As Brown (1994) suggested CLT is an approach that fosters L2 learners take responsibility of their own learning. Widdowson (1990, p.159) described Communicative Approach as follows:

"...it concentrates on getting learners to do things with language, to express concepts and to carry out communicative acts of various kinds. The content of a language course is now defined not in terms of forms, words and sentence patterns, but in terms of concepts, or notions, which such forms are used to express, and the communicative functions which they are used to perform."

One of the most recognized account of the principles of CLT was identified by Nunan (1991) which are as follow;

1. An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language.

2. The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation.

3. The provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on language, but also on the learning process itself.

3. An enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning.

4. An attempt to link classroom language learning with language activation outside the classroom. (p. 279)

In the Saudi EFL context, there has been a continuous and deliberate efforts to bring about a change in the way English is taught and to move away from using traditional grammar textbooks into more integrated communicative ones. Many Saudi universities offered courses that focused on communicative integrated content in particular for those who are majoring in English language. In addition, general elective English courses are also offered to university freshmen majoring in other fields to develop students' English proficiency. The aim is to promote real time interaction among students and between students and their teachers through communicative tasks. Another aim is to build up learners' autonomy and free them from the feeling of guilt of not speaking the language they are learning. Teachers would, therefore, have less roles to play and mainly will act as facilitators for the communication processes.

Although the purpose of CLT is to engage learners in the pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language for meaningful purposes (Brown, 2007), teachers and language educators are facing various challenges in implementing the theories and practices of CLT in their EFL contexts, particularly when it comes to enhancing L2 oral performance (Liao, 2000; Takanashi, 2004; Yu, 2001).

SLA researchers (Liao, 2004; Littlewood, 2007; Nunan, 2003; Penner, 1995; Sampson, 1984; Yu, 2001) found a noticeable pedagogical dichotomy that has always been observed when incorporating CLT in the EFL context from that when it is used in the ESL context. Such differences in the implementation of CLT between the EFL and ESL contexts are the result of the resistance to using CLT in India (Deepti, 2004) and South Korea (Li, 1998); the language environment and learner's motivation (Stern, 1992); and political influences, the cultural diversities and the educational values (Sampson,1984).

In fact, many EFL teachers have been showing more preference towards using traditional teaching methods over CLT. Even though they are instructed to use CLT, they are more opt to traditional approaches (Chowdhry, 2010; Li, 1998; Littlewood, 2007; Nunan, 2003). Such tendencies have been interpreted as the result of some factors such as, teachers' ideologies and their surroundings (Li, 1998), large classes and students' low proficiency (Yu, 2001, Li, 1998)

Although, CLT has been considered for many years as one of the best practices for enhancing language speaking skills, many teachers failed to suit CLT practices into their EFL contexts. Lindsay and Knight (2006, p. 23) commented that

"CA is very widely used all over the world. It has shifted the focus in language teaching from learning about the language to learning to communicate in the language. However, there are problems associated with it. ... The most serious criticism of CA is that it is not as effective as it claims to be"

Despite of the prominence of CLT in the field teaching, most CLT practices has been written with the ESL in the mind and developed in English speaking countries. This fact could be the reason behind the EFL teachers' tendency to continue old practices in teaching oral skills in particular. This is not to say that EFL teachers should abandon CLT practices. Rather, they can always modify such practices according to their students' needs and learning preferences.

C. Task Planning and Speaking Effectiveness

Many SLA research findings emphasize the importance of giving EFL students ample chances to prepare for the language task in hand on enhancing students' language oral performance (Ortega, 1999, 2005; Thompson & Phillips 2009; Yuan & Ellis, 2003). Most of these studies on task planning focus on the effect of this preparation on the fluency, complexity, and accuracy of the L2 students. The aim was to establish a grounding on which EFL students can build on their communicative readiness towards more intelligible oral discourse.

Two major types of task planning among others are widely used in the field of SLA, namely *within task planning* which takes place within the performance of the activity and *pre-task planning* which takes place before performing the task (Ellis, 2005). Pre-task planning has been incorporated with the tendency to enhance students' language performance through noticing both content and form (Ellis, 2005, 2009; Ortega, 2005).

The statistical analysis of the above researches has shown that there is an influence of pre-task planning on fluency as well as accuracy for L2 students' oral language performance. However, the mixed results of these researches concerning the oral outcomes of pre-task planning do not prove that having time to plan could lead to significant improvement in

the students' oral output in the long run. Further, the EFL teacher is most likely acting as the controller of the activity in hand and the one who decides the topics under discussion, the procedures of the learning activities, and who can participate and who does not (Tsui, 1996; Nation & Newton (2009).

By including the voices of teachers and examining the extent to which students are proficient in producing oral discourse, the research is trying try to predict the factors that hinder Saudi EFL from speaking meaningfully in the target language. The present study is also an attempt to bridge the gaps between the principles of communicative language teaching and current classroom teaching practices.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

The participants for this study are 60 male students. They are level 6 English students at the English department, Faculty of Arts, Jazan University. Their proficiency levels range between low intermediate and high intermediate. They are selected randomly from different groups of the same level. They have already taken language skill classes along with intensive grammar and vocabulary courses. Now, they are being introduced to mixed courses in linguistics, literature and translation.

B. Design

The present study entailed two techniques, a questionnaire and interviews. The two techniques were designed specifically to provide information on what could deter students from speaking. The questionnaire was intended to provide information on the communicative language aspects that students have or lack that could impact their oral production of L2. It was grouped into three sections; communicative knowledge, communicative participation and communicative strategies.

The questionnaire, using a five point likert-scale, was meant to examine the extent to which Saudi EFL students were prepared to produce oral output. The questionnaire included twelve statements along with a space at the end for students to add any other comments. Each statement was given a numerical score to reflect its degree of attitudinal approval. The items were carefully stated to avoid any bias in favor of either sides of the likert scale. Students were previously informed that their identities would remain anonymous so that they can be able to clearly and confidently describe their learning experiences. For this study, it was believed that twelve items would give a good picture of students' communicative ability considering that all students chosen to participate have had enough exposure to language skills and as such, they were more able to produce oral discourse. Further, the researcher conducted group conferences with the participants after the questionnaire was carried out. The aim was to reduce leniency and bias on the part of the participants and to elicit more responses in case the questionnaire did not cover other informative aspects of students' speaking experiences.

The second technique was the constructed interviews which targeted five teachers at the English department teaching the above participants. They are PhD holders. They are from different nationalities and have different cultural backgrounds. They are experienced teachers and have had long experiences teaching in Saudi Arabia and many other countries. They were all asked about the factors they think were contributing most to their students' inefficiency in speaking.

C. Procedure

The questionnaire was conducted in one session (See Appendix A). The participants were gathered in a big hall and instructed to take their time while responding to the survey. The participants were informed that they can ask questions whenever they found difficulty understanding the survey statements. The participants were encouraged to give thoughtful responses to the survey. The interviews with teachers were conducted on different sessions. Their responses were recorded. They were also told to report on any other thoughts they might have via emails.

III. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

A. Survey Findings

For the present study, higher means shows the positive side of the likert scale and indicates more readiness on the part of the students to produce output. Lower means indicates that students lack the particular language aspects included in the questionnaire

TABLE (1)
ITEMS SHOWING THE EXTENT TO WHICH SAUDI STUDENTS HAVE ENOUGH KNOWLEDGE TO PRODUCE OUTPUT.

(communicative Knowledge)	Poor (1)	Fair (2)	Average (3)	Good (4)	Excellent (5)
1. English pronunciation (speech sounds-stress-intonation)					
2. General listening comprehension					
3. Vocabulary knowledge					
4. Grammar knowledge					

TABLE (2)
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF 5-POINT LIKERT-SCALE ITEMS FROM ITEM 1 TO ITEM 4: (N: 60)

Item	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	1.65	0.40
2	2.13	0.79
3	4.05	0.69
4	3.85	0.77

Examining the means for table (1), item 1 and 2 have lower means representing the negative side of the likert scale. Although, students have good exposure to segmental and suprasegmental aspects of English early at their degree course, responses to item 1 and 2 show that students are not competent with regard to their pronunciation and listening knowledge.

However, responses to item 3 and 4 have higher means and indicate clearly that students are content with the knowledge they have in grammar and vocabulary. This is typical in many EFL contexts where the focus is more on accuracy rather than fluency. Both grammar and vocabulary courses, in the above EFL setting, are taught separately from other skills. Indeed, such traditional method of teaching does not lead to using forms in speech meaningfully (Van Lier, 1988; Krashen & Terrell, 1998).

TABLE (3)
ITEMS SHOWING THE EXTENT TO WHICH SAUDI STUDENTS USE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

(communication strategies)	Poor (1)	Fair (2)	Average (3)	Good (4)	Excellent (5)
5. Rephrasing your speech					
6. Using fillers					
7. holding a conversation					
8.Using fixed expressions (e.g. How can I help you?					

TABLE (4)
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF 5-POINT LIKERT-SCALE ITEMS FROM ITEM 5 TO ITEM 8: (N: 60)

Item	Mean	Standard Deviation
5	1.46	0.45
6	1.28	0.34
7	1.65	0.77
8	3.25	1.46

In table (4), as shown above, items, 5, 6, and 7 respectively have lower means and as specified above represent the negative side of the likert scale. Responses to items 5, 6 and 7 indicate that most participants do not use communication strategies necessary for holding conversations and avoiding communication breakdowns. Their teachers who participated in this study stated that there is no such use of these strategies ever in their classes. As Ellis (2008) put it out, "the function of communication strategies has been almost neglected or exclusively limited to compensating for L2 learners' lexical deficiencies" (p.509).

Interestingly, the mean of item 8 (3.25) is higher than the other items in table (4). This indicates that students are familiar with using fixed expressions considering that they are repeatedly exposed to them in their textbooks and in their teachers' speech.

TABLE (5)
ITEMS SHOWING THE EXTENT TO WHICH SAUDI STUDENTS CAN COMMUNICATE WITH THEIR TEACHERS AND PEERS

(communicative performance)	Poor (1)	Fair (2)	Average (3)	Good (4)	Excellent (5)
9. Communicating effectively with classmates outside of class (e.g., study groups, small group discussions, project work).					
10.Communicating effectively in class discussions					
11.Communicating with professors in or outside of class					
12. communicating via social media (oral channel)					

TABLE (6)
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF 5-POINT LIKERT-SCALE ITEMS FROM ITEM 9 TO ITEM 12: (N: 60)

Item	Mean	Standard Deviation
9	1.86	1.03
10	2.2	1.58
11	3.25	1.46
12	1.35	0.46

In the third category, as shown table (6), items 9 to 12 address the ability of Saudi students to effectively communicate in English inside and outside the class with their peers, teachers and friends. Items, 9, 10, and 12 have lower means indicating lower ability in communicating with peers, friends or participating in class discussions.

However, item 11 significantly shows higher means indicating that students are capable of conversing in particular with professors. Such result is perplexing and contradicting with students' previous responses. However, while having group conferences with students, it becomes clear that students indeed can have better communication with their

teachers rather than with their peers and friends. The reason behind such condition lies in the following explanations that students revealed during the group conferences with the researcher:

1. Most of the sentences uttered by students in communicating with their professors are in the form of short questions.

2. Students have plenty of time to plan for what they are going to say. Even in the class, some students may write down the question before asking it.

3. Most of students think of their questions in L1 (Arabic) and then translate it into English so they can minimize the occurrence of mistakes.

4. Outside class, students also do their best to be prepared with questions before heading to their professors' offices.

5. If, unexpectedly a student is asked, his answer is short meaning that he cannot proceed the conversation leaving the teachers with an impression that he is up to this level and not beyond.

Actually, there is no harm done when students prepare themselves for certain communicative tasks. This in fact a good step in their developmental processes in speaking whether their questions are the result of negative or positive transfer from their L1 to L2. Although such preparation is artificial and may not actually represent spontaneous speech, it might contribute to the students' ability to produce oral output in the long run.

As for the teachers' interviews, the researcher could collect valuable feedback. Indeed, learning from what the teachers of English is facing constitutes a springboard for the current study. The following are the teachers' thoughts to the above inquiry:

1. Large English classes seems to be a universal factor in EFL contexts hindering the students' effective participation in class and thus negatively affecting their communicative readiness to speak in English (Littlewood, 2007; Munjayanah, 2004; Van Lier, 1988)

2. Students' resistance to speaking in class is yet an interesting aspect where students are reluctant to minimal output production such as asking or answering a question. Students' usually avoid prolonged speeches as in commenting or expressing their thoughts or ideas. Most interviewees attributed that to the fact that students are afraid from making mistakes. A few blamed the social and educational upbringing where young men are encouraged to memorize and repeat rather than to think and react.

3. Communicative English textbooks are meant for EFL learning contexts rather than EFL ones.

4. Most courses offered are usually of theoretical nature with overwhelming information in linguistics and literature.

5. The very limited use of L2 where EFL students even close to the outside of their classes converse only in Arabic. As revealed by the interviewees, you won't hear students using even simple formulaic expressions in greetings.

6. Teachers' tendency to follow the traditional teaching methods even when teaching speaking skills. For example, in most speaking classes students are instructed to choose a topic, prepare it at home and present it in class. Most students tend to memorize information and as a result when presenting the topics they appear to be shy and unconfident. Students are rather repeating what they have memorized than expressing their thoughts and ideas. Peculiarly, students are usually forced to select topics that they cannot talk about even their L1.

7. In phonology courses, the focus is not on training students to produce speech sounds of English. It is more on introducing the articulatory system and the different organs responsible for the production of speech sounds.

8. Students are fearful of criticism or losing face particularly when they are asked to deliver a presentation in front of their classmates. This fear is more likely due to the lack of practice rather than the lack of knowledge.

The researcher finds the following to be also evident in the above teaching situation:

1. Most evaluation of students' achievements depends greatly on written responses via final exams, class assignments, reports and quizzes. Oral responses are only required in speaking courses which only constitute a small percentage of the overall courses offered in the program.

2. Lack of appropriate tools for measuring students' oral skills is hampering test fairness, validity and reliability of speaking test particularly those prepared by teachers.

3. More focus on accuracy comes at the expense of fluency. "Many teachers still work in environments where there is an emphasis on accuracy which virtually excludes spontaneous language use in the classroom (Lightbown & Spada, 1999, p.152).

4. Listening activities are almost neglected in class. Listening goes hand in hand with speaking. One cannot speak if he cannot understand what it has been said.

5. The presence of inappropriate feedback which may inhibit and demotivate students from speaking. As Baker & Westrup (2003) put it out that classroom feedback should be positive and encouraging.

IV. CONCLUSION

In general, the questionnaire results along with the teachers' responses and group conferences with students revealed clearly that Saudi EFL students are encountering many challenges and inadequate language practices which contribute to their limited speaking output.

Nevertheless, students share part of the responsibility for being passive and not finding out their own ways to speak. Students, in the above setting, who are better speakers of English usually attributed their success to their own persistent efforts to communicate. However, those students are few and thus considered as exceptions and do not represent the norm in the above teaching situation.

There are many suggested practices in the field of SLA which are intended to help EFL teachers as well as students to overcome some of the above mentioned hindrances. Yet what could work in one setting might not necessarily work in another teaching scenario. There are indeed no single best practices to fit all contexts.

However, one of the best practices that could fit in many contexts is the use of communication strategies (e.g. rephrasing-repeating-using fillers, etc.). It is believed by many SLA researchers and educators that such practices could fill in the communication gaps in the students' oral discourse and enhance their communicative deficiencies (e.g., Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1991, 1994; Færch & Kasper, 1986; Tarone & Yule, 1989; Willems, 1987).

EFL students also need to be trained and encouraged on using interactional communicative strategies. Richard-Amato (1996) proposed four strategies for students to learn spoken English:

1. Think of what you are going to say.

2. Think about the structures you are using but do not let them interfere with what you want to say.

3. Do not be afraid to make mistakes (mistakes are normal as you are learning a language).

4. When you are not understood, use repetition, gestures, synonyms, definitions, acting out, whatever comes naturally as you begin to feel more proficient in the language (p. 55).

EFL teachers should also be regularly reminded of good speaking practices as to help them resist their tendency to use traditional teaching methods which is usually the result of large EFL classes. Some of the good practices for teaching speaking has been proposed by (Harmer, 2001, p.102) and they are as follows;

a. Help students overcome their initial reluctance to speak. Be encouraging; provide opportunity; start from something simple.

b. Ask students to talk about what they want to talk about.

c. Ask students to talk about what they are able to talk about.

d. Provide appropriate feedback.

e. Combine speaking with listening and reading.

f. Incorporate the teaching of speech acts in teaching speaking.

In sum, EFL teachers should bear in mind that all teaching practices whether the focus is on accuracy or fluency or both are valuable in the true sense of the word if and only if they strike a balance in implementing these practices in their classes. Further, the best balance could be achieved if students' needs are the main guidance in tailoring the principles of our teaching and learning scenarios.

APPENDIX

Speaking survey for level 5 Saudi Students Studying in the English Department-College of Arts and Humanities. Jazan University.

On a scale of 1-5 how do you feel prepared for the following tasks?

Poor	Fair	Average	Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5

1. English pronunciation
(speech sounds -stress- intonation)

Poor	Fair	Average	Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5

2. General listening comprehension

Poor	Fair	Average	Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5

3. Vocabulary knowledge

Poor	Fair	Average	Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5

4. Grammar knowledge

Poor	Fair	Average	Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5

5. Rephrasing your speech

Poor	Fair	Average	Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5

6. Using fillers (OK-well, etc.)

Poor	Fair	Average	Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5

7. Holding a conversation

Poor	Fair	Average	Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5

8. Using fixed expression

Poor	Fair	Average	Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5

9. Communicating effectively with classmates outside of class (e.g., study groups, small group discussions, project work).

Poor	Fair	Average	Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5

10. Communicating effectively in class discussions

Poor	Fair	Average	Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5

11. Communicating with professors in or outside of class

Poor	Fair	Average	Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5

12. Communicating via social media
Other, please specify

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