ESL students' difficulties in producing spoken language during class: identifying factors

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Abstract

Communication is one of the most important skills humans possess. Adults need to be competent in oral communication during all facets of life, especially for education, where students must express themselves. Communication becomes harder when trying to learn a second language. When English learners attempt to speak, they face challenges that reduce their probabilities to communicate their ideas clearly. Classrooms tend to be noisy but grow quiet when English students are required to participate; they have a hard time communicating their thoughts and opinions during class. What challenges students' spoken abilities? Language instruction intends to provide learners the necessary knowledge to speak English properly, thus, learners are required to take grammar and pronunciation courses where activities like conversations, speeches, presentations, or impromptus are included. These activities require the production of spoken language. This article's purpose is to list factors that negatively influence spoken performance during class by some English language degree students at Universidad Tecnológica Oteima. By identifying the elements that have an impact on English students' spoken performance, professors may be better equipped to address these issues and have a greater participation in classes where student's oral production is required.

Keywords: Classrooms ESL learning, spoken English difficulties, anxiety, ESL instruction.

1. Introduction

In Latin America, like the rest of the world, English has become a necessity to compete in the global market. For this reason, many countries, including Panama, have made large investments to become competitive. English has become a priority to the Panamanian government who has invested more than 80 million dollars to train English teachers, Panama seeks to become a bilingual country (Logan, 2017).

Panama has made significant changes in its English learning policy. Programs like English for Life, After School, and Panama Bilingüe have been implemented in elementary, junior high school, and high school levels, however adequate conditions do not yet exist in both, student achievement, and teacher's qualifications proficiency (Cronquist & Fiszbein, 2017).

In higher education, several Panamanian universities offer a bachelor's degree in English, Universidad Tecnológica Oteima is one of them. The academic program at the English school includes courses such as Phonetics, Conversation, and Speech, which focus on developing the speaking skills of students.

As students graduate and become professionals, the need to be a good communicator and commanding good communication skills becomes essential to acquire, maintain, and succeed in a job (Morreale, Osborn, & Pearson, 2000). The inability to communicate contributes to a person's diminished social and learning skills acquisition (Hanline, Nunes, & Worthy, 2007).

Language allows us to communicate orally by speaking. Harmer (2001), states that speaking is more than knowing the language itself. When that language is not a mother tongue, speaking a second language becomes more complex and there are different factors that contribute to the ability of producing spoken language.

The article lists the factors that contribute to the difficulties faced by students at the time of producing spoken English in the classroom, there is ample research on the subject. For explaining these features, the article uses the categorization used in Thao & Nguyet's (2019), in their study "Four aspects of English-speaking difficulties encountered by tertiary English-majored students", dividing these factors in four types: affective, linguistic, instructional, and social.

Then, the examined research was used to identify behaviors that fall into affective, linguistic, instructional, and social factors, and to understand how these aspects influence the way students learn and their performance when producing spoken English in the classroom. Each of these elements are closely associated to the student's performance and attitudes in the classrooms and influence one another.

2. Key contributing factors

Most research, although using different language to factors that contribute to the production of English language in the classroom, they all fall under the same categories given in the research by Thao & Nguyet (2019). Another paper with similar categorization is "Challenges faced by bachelor level students while speaking English", where Chand (2021), goes on to explain that the most prominent problems students experienced were feeling nervous, a deficiency of vocabulary, the failure of using grammatical patterns, pronunciation, fear of making mistakes, overuse of native language, and lack of confidence.

Asif, Bashir, & Zafar (2018), in their study found that speaking in the classroom is impacted by social, institutional, psychological, and linguistic causes. The researchers created a table to show their categorizations of the problems students in their research faced when trying to speak English. A lot of the problems listed are the same or are closely related to the two previous studies (Figure 1).

Table 1: Problems of speaking

Themes generated	Specific problems
Personal problem	Nervousness
	lack of confidence
	hesitation
	anxiety
Social problem	Fear of criticism/ insult from the peer
	Fear of committing mistake
	Fear of correct pronunciation
Linguistic problem	Problem in choosing an appropriate word
	Problem in fluency
	Mother tongue comes first in mind
	Problems in using appropriate grammatical patterns
Environmental problems	Teaching method
	Classroom interaction
	Institutional system

Figure 1: Problems of speaking. Source: Asif, Bashir, & Zafar (2018).

In their research, Jahedi & Lilliati (2020) itemized the following issues encountered by students when producing language: topics of interest, topic relevance to one's experience, teaching method, peers' points of view, their relationships, as well as positive reactions. They also identified factors such as the moderator's role, the size of the classroom, English competency, and the fear of being mocked at or judged.

Jaya, Petrus, & Pitaloka (2022), divided their research in three categories: affective-related difficulties, socially related difficulties, and linguistically related difficulties. They found issues in self-confidence and anxiety when speaking English in the classroom. Their socially related difficulties category is divided into two types of difficulties: 1) students' finding opportunities to learn English, and 2) students' understanding while in speaking class. Under linguistically related difficulties categories they identified were specifically vocabulary, fluency, grammar, and pronunciation.

While Bostad, Cwikla, & Kienzie (2015), described factors as playing a critical role in English speaking in the classrooms, the exposure to English, by the learners, their attitude, the pedagogical approach by the teachers, and the learners' personality.

3. Affective factors

Emotional factors that influence the learning process are known as affective factors. They refer to personal individual factors, interactions with other students, and interactions with the teachers. Affective factors are things like motivation, attitude, self-esteem, inhibition, and anxiety which makeup the individual's learning characteristics. Affective factors can have a positive or negative effect. In the Affective Filter Hypothesis, Krashen (1988), lists three kinds of characteristics that affect second language acquisition: motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety.

There are several studies that suggest that if a person is feeling uneasy, they are not able to retain information. In terms of cognition, students that are anxious were found to have difficulty processing meaningful input and to be less responsive to language output (Krashen, 1988).

The work of Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope (1986), has provided the most accepted definition of Foreign Language Anxiety, defined as a reaction which impedes their ability to perform successfully in a foreign language class. These authors want to acknowledge that there has been new research questioning the effectiveness of the "The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale [FLCAS]".

Anxiety has also been shown to have negative influences, both pervasive and subtle, on the three stages of cognitive processing: input, processing, and output (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991, 1994a, 1994b; Bailey, Onwuegbuzie, & Daley, 2000). In terms of achievement and performance, research has indicated that both general Foreign Language Anxiety and anxieties about specific skills, including listening, reading, speaking, and writing, have negative effects on student achievement and performance.

Students are unable to share their thoughts due to being afraid of been ridiculed by their peers, whether it is because they believe people will not agree with the opinions they express or because of their English pronunciation. Some reported feeling ashamed because they are supposed to speak better that they do (Jahedi & Lilliati, 2020).

4. Linguistic barriers

Linguistic barriers are difficulties that students face to be able to communicate in their target language. Linguistics is the study of language and its complex array of abilities like phonetics, pragmatics, semantics, grammar, among others and enables speakers to express thoughts, feelings, and opinions.

Another issue for the lack of spoken language in the classroom is pronunciation. Students are usually incapable of achieving good pronunciation; moreover, teachers tend to understand learners because they are used to their erroneous pronunciation. Besides this, learners repeat pronunciation patterns, and have limited opportunities to practice with native English speakers (Harmer, 2001).

English as a Second Language [ESL] learners experience frustration when trying to learn and retain grammar rules. The lack of vocabulary contributes to the inability to express themselves; vocabulary is an essential component of the language and is essential to effective communication. Without knowing the vocabulary, communication in a second language becomes more difficult, according to Rohmatillah (2014).

Grammar and syntax are also important, because it provides the building blocks of sentence formation which turns to be the base for people to understand the meaning of any language (Freeman & Freeman, 2014). When students have difficulties with syntax, it can make ESL learners stop trying to learn or recall grammar rules. On the other hand, when grammar and syntax are understood it builds ESL learners self-esteem, so they become more confident and motivated to learn more and more.

Thao & Nguyet (2019), stated that students may develop self-confidence, calm, and less self-awareness although making mistakes when speaking. They might also develop strong language skills to speak English without making errors. It may be argued that if English students who have studied the language for a longer amount of time, speaking issues do not significantly prevent them from speaking English.

5. Instructional factors

Sokip (2020), explains that language learning skills and the role of the teacher, the didactic materials, teaching methods and the curriculum are intrinsically associated. He also states that the role of the teacher is vital in language learning and should act as a facilitator which will increase learning proficiency while if the classes are teacher-centered with little opportunities to speak, students will become passive and will not get a lot of practice. Consequently, teaching practices and teachers themselves perform a vital part in language learning.

Teacher-centered, textbook-based instruction, memorizing content and other traditional classroom practices are still used by teachers. Sometimes teachers are forced to use a more teacher-centered approach, even while the teachers are motivated to incorporate communicative language education in their classes, they must take over because of students' low-level capacity to speak (Spawa & Hassan, 2013). Freeman (1989), indicates that, the teacher must create new ways to engage pupils and implement them in the classroom, even though they are not solely accountable for their oral communication skills. According to Freeman's essay, in the TESOL Journal, judgments made by teachers based on their knowledge, abilities, attitudes, and awareness affect classroom practice and student learning results.

According to Anderson (1981), as cited in Spawa & Hassan (2013), humans affective characteristics are influenced by beliefs. The beliefs that teachers have about teaching and learning, influence their teaching. The experiences and perceptions teachers had as language learners help to shape their future instructional practice. Borg (1998) found that the pedagogical system of a teacher is shaped by his or her educational and professional experiences.

6. Social barriers

The different issues that surround a person who is part of a society also include socioeconomic conditions and the relationship between social class and language learning outcomes, which depends on the students' economic level, more affluent students tend to perform better in learning a foreign language (Muñoz, 2001, cited in Mejía, 2014).

Another factor is age, when the younger people begin to learn a second language it makes a difference in the development of pronunciation and listening skills. A lot of research speaks about the sensitive periods for learning L2 indicating that there is gradual linear decline in learners' acquisitions of L2 as a function of age, and this decline continues until puberty (Oyama, 1976; Johnson & Newport, 1989; Flege, 1992).

It is true that younger children have a certain simplicity in acquiring language. It may be important to know if performance of the students' spoken language is related to the initiation of language acquisition.
Although no research was found specifically about students in Panama, it is important to note a research paper conducted in Colombia which shares many similarities with Panama, stating that it is important to consider the student's school of origin because there are significant differences between private and public schools. The expertise of English teachers and the methodologies they use are different (Mejía, 2014).

7. Conclusions

This study examined multiple factors that contribute to the poor performance of spoken English in the classroom. Affective, linguistic, instructional, and social elements were determined to be the key causes preventing students' spoken participation in the English classroom. Another aspect considered was that teachers should be aware of affective features like anxiety, self-confidence, fear of ridicule of students among others. It also showed a glimpse of what goes through the mind of students and the barriers they encountered whether be, self-imposed or not. These issues prevent students from fully engage in the learning process and to effectively produce spoken English. As a side note, it is interesting to point out that most English as a Second Language [ESL] teachers have at some point also been a learner and they could recollect their experience and apply the strategies used to help students overcome these barriers or at the very least to be capable of empathizing with the students.

Another key contributor explored was linguistic factors. These allow us to understand that sometimes it is not only the affective factor in play but lack of vocabulary, failure to use grammar and syntax appropriately as the most probable causes for low participation in the English classroom.

Teachers' didactic methods and strategies used in the classroom can make a difference in the dynamic created during class and the participation of students. Game based activities, role playing and discussions about topics suggested/picked by students eases students' trepidation and lowers their guard allowing for mistakes to happen without judgment. Additionally, creating a more comfortable environment for students to feel less anxious; adopting strategies to help students build their self-confidence, helps students' involvement which leads to being more receptive.

Students should become more active in their learning process; socially, they should look for opportunities to speak English both inside and outside the classroom. The 21st century offers many technological advances suggesting lots of opportunities to get practice by stream movies and shows in English, to take classes or use apps to increase proficiency.

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