Improving English Speaking Proficiency Among Students at Public Universities of Karachi

Danish Wazeer
Lecturer in English,
Sindh Institute of Medical Sciences,
SIMS, SIUT, Karachi
Email: danish.wazeer@sims.siut.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

The research examined the academic practices and activities the students of public universities of Karachi perform in order to enhance their English language skills and the challenges they face in speaking English. Mixed Method as a research design was adopted in this study. With the help of a survey questionnaire, quantitative data was collected whereas for qualitative data, semi-structured interview was employed. For quantitative data, 71 students belonging to different public universities in Karachi were surveyed with questionnaires while 12 students of public universities were interviewed for qualitative data. The quantitative analysis was performed on computer software with the help of descriptive statistical techniques to get means and percentage of the acquired data about different practices the students are performing to improve their English-speaking skills and the challenges they face in speaking. Thematic analysis proposed was performed to generate potential themes from qualitative data obtained with the help of semi-structured interview. The findings of the study revealed that making conversation with friends in English with highest means (2.933) and highest percentage (58.66%) is the most frequent practice to improve English speaking skills and making grammatical mistakes with highest means (3.2) and highest percentage (65.2) is most frequent problem in English speaking skills for the students. The findings of thematic analysis revealed different themes related to activities the students perform in order to improve speaking skills of the students such as interactive speaking, experiential and creative learning and related to challenge the students face in speaking English such as psychological challenges in Speaking English, Linguistic and cognitive challenges.

Key Words: *Speaking Skills, Public university students, Classroom activities, Challenges. Mixed Method, CLT*

Introduction

English has remained a means of communication and speaking is one of the productive linguistic skills that make great contributions to making communication successful. English as a language is taken into consideration as a universal language and the easiest language in the world. It is being employed as an official language in a great number of countries including Pakistan, it has remained almost essential and significant for speakers of different languages to speak English since the English language has been the language of media, aviation, tourism, technology and science. Among the four English skills, speaking appear to be the most significant skill needed for communication (Zaremba, 2006). In addition to being an official language, English is the language of the literate and elite class in Pakistan. As a result, the person speaking English acculturate and fluently is taken into account as an educated and a part of high community in Pakistan. Like other English linguistic skills, speaking is one of the essential English linguistic skills to be used and enhanced for all of the people including students in Pakistan. Successful communication with the help of speaking usually establishes multiple benefits for speakers and business organizations, for instance productive speaking faculty help people achieve objectives and goals in ceremonial speaking activities, job interview, job training and other business needs (Osborn et al., 2008). It can be said that a person without having oral communication skills is supposed to suffer in this modern era of competition and might find it nearly impossible to acquire a higher position. An interactive process of making sense is referred to as speaking that incorporates producing and receiving information (Burns & Joyce, 1997).

Problem Statement:

One of the major problems in teaching English to the students is the teaching of oral communication that has not yet been resolved. Some researchers like Baily (2005) and Goh (2007) have set forward methods to improve speaking skills with the help of syllabus design, speaking assessment and teaching principles. According to Trent (2009), one of many reasons to be taken into account may be scarcity of confidence and anxiety regarding making errors. In Pakistan, the English language speaking skill of public university students in Karachi seems unsatisfactory. Comparatively, they write better than speaking. Pakistani Public university students do not have a good environment to obtain good speaking proficiency. These problems make the students have a low proficiency level in English conversation. This research has been carried out in order to examine the academic activities the students perform to enhance English speaking skills and the challenges they encounter while speaking English.

Research Objectives:

- To analyse the practices and activities the students enrolled in public universities in Karachi perform in the classroom to enrich their English-speaking proficiency

- To examine the challenges, the students of public universities encounter in speaking English.

Research Questions:

- What practices and activities do the students perform in the classroom of public universities to enhance their speaking skills?

● What challenges do the students at public universities in Karachi encounter during English Speaking?

Literature Review

A research carried out by Cotter (2009) suggests that the moment learners learn how to make use of English in the classroom context, they are supposed to be engaged in learning pertaining to how language functions. The students are required to be told to reflect on different aspects of language, to develop a common language for talking regarding language and to make use of such knowledge to examine texts critically in light of meaning, effectiveness, accuracy. A person speaking well is to comprehend the moment they have to use various grammatical points.

In a study conducted by Backlund (1990), the researcher proposed three domains of knowledge that put their effect on the effectiveness of oral communication: self- knowledge, social knowledge and content knowledge. If any one of these areas is found weak, oral communication is to be impaired to some extent. Other challenges that speaker encounters while speaking are: making use of inappropriate volume and pitch, dominating the conversation, employing excessive small talk without considering someone and interrupting people.

Bashiruddin (2003), carried out research so as to enhance oral communication skills of the students in lower secondary public school in Karachi, Pakistan. The sample of the research comprised two different education streams. One of the two is the private English medium school and the other is the government Urdu-medium school. English is taught as a second language in the two school systems. In both systems of schooling, teachers and students use Urdu language to communicate in the classroom and do practice of traditional methods that emphasize reading and writing skills; however, productive linguistic skills like speaking are of no importance. The finding of this study reveals that weak oral communication of students is caused by English teachers with low speaking proficiency.

Urrutia and Vega (2010) carried out an action research for the comprehending and measures taken to enhance speaking skills with the help of games in a public school entitled "Federico García Lorca" in Colombia city. The sample of this study consisted of twenty girls and twenty boys with the age range from 14 to 18 years. The study adopted teachers' journals, videos recording and questionnaires as data collection tools. The findings of the research reveal the fact that most of the students believe that speaking is found to be the most complicated faculty. The researcher realized that the students spoke English for a short period of time and most of the students in the class did not speak English in the English class.

Rama et al. (2007) did an action research regarding the hypothesis of employing language games to enhance speech skills in the English classes in a primary school referred to as "Jurong" in Singapore. The study considered 78 students as its participants. The two distinct methods for two different groups are employed in this study. The researchers divided students into an experimental group for which language games were used to improve speaking skills and a control group which was taught with a teacher centred method with real life activities involving the essential words to make a conversation. The findings of the study are revealed in two tables.

Hamzah and Ting (2009) carried out a qualitative and action research study for success of using group work in teaching speaking in an English classroom in a school entitled "SMK Damai Jaya" in the country of Malaysia. The sample of the study comprised 33 students and 3 English teachers. The researchers performed three oral activities in which students were kept under observation, afterward, they were given

questionnaires and three experienced English teachers were also observed. Questionnaires, observations and interviews were adopted in this study as research data collection tools. The researchers devised a questionnaire in Malay language with the help of which students remained able to provide their opinions pertaining to the group work activities to enhance speaking skills and their participation in the activities. The findings of the research revealed enthusiasm in group work related activities and proficiency in spoken language, since they were safe in expressing themselves in small groups that ignore anxiety while speaking in another language.

Theoretical Framework

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) appeared in the 1970 in response to the grammar-grounded approaches to language teaching. The main area of CLT is the fact that language should be learned or acquired with the help of its purposeful use in real communicative situations instead of with the help of memorization of rules of grammar and vocabulary keeping them in isolation. CLT is not taken into consideration as a single method but there are many principles which give priority to communication, fluency and real-world use of language. According to the theory, language is a tool for communication and speaking is a key component in acquiring communicative competence.

CLT stresses real- life communication related tasks such as debates, interview, presentation and interviews. It motivates and provides courage to the speaker for interacting. It promotes enriched fluency.

Methodology

Research Approach

The mixed method has been used in the study as a research approach since in this study both qualitative and quantitative data has been collected and analyzed. Concurrent Triangulation is one of the kinds of mixed methods (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative and quantitative data collection instruments and techniques such as survey and semi-structured interview questions are used.

Data and Sampling

The target population of my study was all public university students in Karachi. Purposive sampling method or technique has been used in this study for collection of required data from the target population. Purposive sampling was employed since the research needed students who took part in English classroom activities in public universities existing in Karachi. Making the selection of these particular students made sure relevant, experience-grounded insights into the practices which improve speaking proficiency and the challenges being faced by them. The purpose 71 students from different universities was considered for being surveyed with questionnaire to get quantitative data whereas 12 students belonging to different universities were taken into account as research participants to be interviewed with semi-structured interview for qualitative data. The 71 students were selected for survey responses since they were studying in public universities in Karachi being enrolled in English courses and involved in classroom speaking activities. 12 among these 71 students, who volunteered for taking

part and possessed clear exposure to English speaking practices were selected. These students for being interviewed were also chosen to provide various perspectives.

Research Instruments

In this study, two different data collection tools were used to collect two sorts of data quantitative and qualitative. For quantitative data, a survey questionnaire was adapted from Eiadeh et al. (2016). The questionnaire contained five columns: Not at all, Rarely, Sometimes, often and very often. Each column had a particular value 1, 2,3,4,5 respectively. The most favourable statement was scored 5 for very often and for qualitative data, semi-structured interview questions were developed. For ensuring the validity and reliability of the data collection tools, expert opinion was obtained and pilot testing was performed.

Ethical Consideration:

All of the participants remained voluntary and all students gave informed consent prior to participating in interviews and surveys. Confidentiality and anonymity of participants were firmly maintained. Students have been informed that they could stop participating in the study at any time without any reason.

Data Analysis and Findings

Quantitative Data Analysis and Finding

The quantitative analysis was performed on computer software MS Excel with the help of descriptive statistical techniques to get means and percentage of the acquired data about different practices the students are performing to improve their English speaking skills and the challenges they face in speaking and to get know the most frequent practice they perform and most frequent challenges they encounter in speaking.

Figure 1

Activities performed by the students to improve English speaking skills
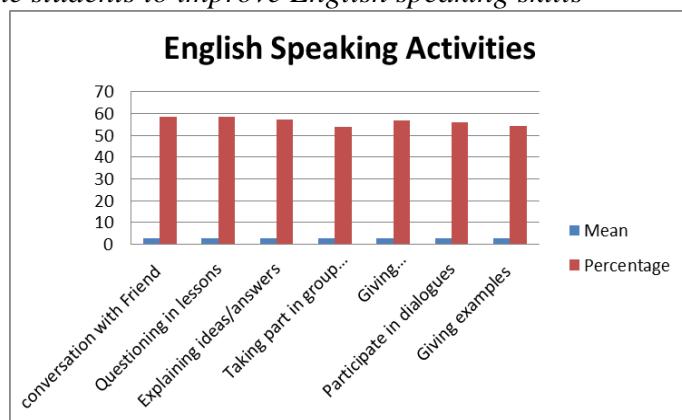
Table 1

Mean Scores and Percentages for English Language Activities

Activities in English	Mean	Percentage

Conversation with friend	2.93	58.66%
Questioning in lessons	2.92	58.53%
Explaining ideas/answers	2.86	57.33%
Giving presentations/oral report	2.84	56.80%
Participating in dialogues	2.80	56.00%
Giving examples	2.72	54.40%
Taking part in group discussion	2.70	54.00%

The Descriptive statistical analysis reveals the fact that Conversation with friends in English with the high means and percentage has been the most frequent practice and activity of public university students in Karachi to improve English speaking.

*Challenges Encountered by the students in English speaking*
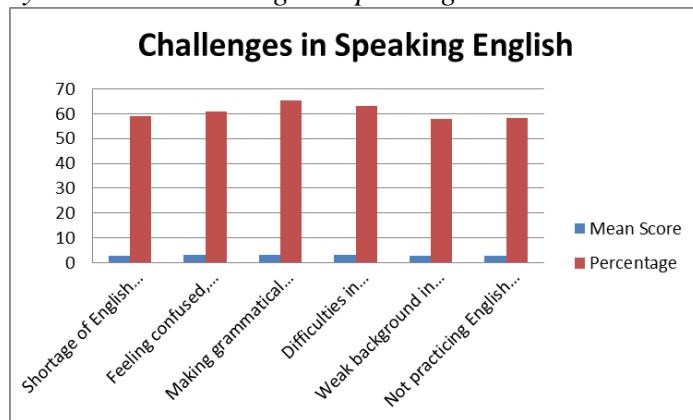
Table 2

Challenges Faced by Students in English Speaking

Challenges	Mean	Percentage
Making Grammatical Mistakes	3.20	65.3
Difficulties in Pronunciation	3.10	63.0
Feeling Worried in Speaking	3.00	61.0
Shortage of Vocabulary	2.96	59.2
Lack of Speaking Practice	2.92	58.4
Weak Background in English	2.89	57.86

The Descriptive statistical analysis reveals the fact that Making grammatical mistakes in English speaking with the high means and percentage has been the most frequent challenge encountered by public university students in Karachi to improve English speaking.

Qualitative Data Analysis:

Upon thematic analysis of the data obtained through semi-structured by being familiar with data, generating initial codes, identifying potential themes, reviewing and refine the themes and naming the themes, the following themes are mentioned.

Themes related to the classroom activities students performed for improvement of English-speaking skill

Theme 1: Interactive Speaking

One of the emerging themes is interactive speaking. Interactive speaking is based upon activities which can be performed to improve speaking skills. According to the students of Public university, they discuss things and concepts with their professor in English to improve English speaking skills. "*We discussed it with the professor in English".* Some students take part in English debate competitions in order to enhance English speaking skills. *"we participate in a debating competition."* Discussion with each other in English on current issues remains an activity of the students of university to improve speaking skills. *"we do discussion on current issues"* Students think the participation in various English language related event can lead to improvement of their speaking skills *"We participate in English event"*

Theme 2: Experiential and Creative Learning

Experiential and creative learning had emerged as other themes. In the opinion of some university students that role playing. "*we perform Role play to improve English speaking skills"*

Theme 3: Integrated Linguistic aspects and Skills practice

It is another emerging theme from interview data. According to some university students, reading English books in the class-room will help them to improve English speaking. *"By reading English books, we try to improve English speaking". T*hey have the opinion that with the help of listening to the lecture in English, they can improve their speaking skills as well. *"We listen to lectures delivered in English to improve our English speaking skills".* Incorporating new words daily in their word bank can be supportive to them to improve their speaking skills in students'.

Themes related to the challenges students encounter in improvement of English speaking skill

Theme 4: Lack of Linguistic Competence

Lack of linguistic competence is one of the emerging themes related to challenges in speaking skills of university students. In the view of some students, they are not fluent enough to speak English as a result they are unable to speak English "*I lack fluency in speaking"* one student says that he can't speak English since he has to translate form his first language while speaking in English *"I translate form Urdu to English".* Some students lack idiomatic expression as a result of this lacking they can't speak.

Theme 5: Psychological Challenges in Speaking

Some students reveal that they can't speak English because they get worried and confused. *" I feel fearful and shy when I start speaking English".* Some of the students hesitate to speak English before the audience and strange people. Some of the students doubt their ability to speak English.

Themes 6: Limited Language Exposure and Practice

According to some of the students, they are unable to speak English since they do not do English speaking practice daily and they do not have proper exposure to English.

Discussion

Upon performing the analysis of quantitative data, it has been known to us that various academic activities have been used by the students of the public university in Karachi to improve speaking skills. The following are the activities: conversation with friends, questioning in lesson, explaining ideas/answers, taking part in group discussion, giving presentations, participating in dialogues and giving examples. The results reveal the fact that all the activities are done with different degrees of frequency and conversation with friends is the most frequent activity with 2.93 means and 58.66 percent. Questioning in lessons is with 2.92 means and 58.53 percentage, explaining ideas in English is used in the classroom with 2.86 means and 57.33 percentage. Giving oral presentations is used as an activity in the classroom with 2.84 mean and 56.80 percent. Participating in dialogue is used with 2.80 mean and 56 percentages. Giving examples in English is performed in the classroom with 2.72 mean and 54.4 percent. Taking part in group discussion is employed in the classroom by the students with 2.70 means and 54 percentages. It has been revealed with the help of the examination and analysis of the students' responses that taking part in group discussion is the least frequent practice the students do for improvement of their speaking skills.

The other research question was pertaining to challenges the students of public university encounter while speaking English. Having performed quantitative data analysis, it was revealed that various challenges the students face while speaking English including Making Grammatical Mistake is the most frequent challenge faced by the students with 3.2 mean and 65.3 percent. Difficulties in pronunciation as a challenge is with 3.10 mean and 63 percentages. Moreover, feeling worried in speaking another challenge in speaking has 3 mean values and 61 percentage values. Shortage of vocabulary has 2.96 mean and 59.2 percent. Lack of speaking practice is with 2.92 mean and 58.4 percent. Weak background in English is with 2.89 mean and 57.86 percentage. As a result, in the light of responses of students, it has been revealed that having weak background is the least frequent challenge the students face with 2.89 mean and 57.86

In response to research question number two, thematic analysis was carried out and the thematic analysis was performed for data obtained through semi-structured interviews with public universities students. Upon completion of the analysis, some themes in relation with classroom activities to improve speaking skills including Interactive Speaking, Experiential and Creative Learning, and Integrated Linguistic aspects and skills practice emerged. Some themes related to challenges the students face in speaking including Lack of Linguistic Competence, Psychological Challenges, Limited Exposure and Practice emerged. The research remained similar to the other research of communication difficulties conducted by Liu and Jackson (2008), but dissimilar with (Suleiman, 1983; Mukattash, 1983; Ibrahim, 1983).

Conclusion

In short, it can be said that the findings of this research revealed some different practices of students to improve speaking skills. However, some other activities can be performed to improve speaking skills especially based upon technology which will remain very beneficial. After this research there is room for future researchers to estimate the impact of activities based upon technology on improvement of speaking skills of the students. It should be more focused that in the classroom, the lecturer should be interactive. As far as challenges in speaking are concerned, the solutions to these problems be provided to the students and their problems and challenges should be addressed so that they can be fluent and correct in speaking English since English speaking is referred to as key to success in Pakistani context.

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Appendix I

Tasks Performed to improve Speaking skills

1.   I participate in **conversations** with friends in English.
Never   Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Very Often

2.   I ask **questions** during lessons or activities in English.
Never   Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Very Often

3.   I **explain** ideas, answers, or concepts in English
Never   Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Very Often

4.   I take part in **group discussions in English.**

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Never   Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Very Often
5.   I give **presentations** or oral reports in English.
   Never   Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Very Often
6.   I participate in **dialogues in English**
   Never   Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Very Often
7.   I give **examples** to clarify my thoughts in English
   Never   Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Very Often

The factors that cause problems and weakness for students in English speaking skill

8.   I have a **limited amount of English vocabulary**
   Never   Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Very Often
9.   I feel **confused, shy, worried, or not confident** when speaking English.
   Never   Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Very Often
10.   I often make **grammar mistakes** while speaking English.
   Never   Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Very Often
11.   I face **pronunciation difficulties speaking English.**
   Never   Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Very Often
12.   I have a **weak background in English language learning**.
   Never   Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Very Often
13.   I **don't practice speaking English daily**.
   Never   Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Very Often

Appendix II

Q1: What are the elements that prevent you from speaking English with accuracy and fluency?
Q2: What strategies do you adopt to improve your English-speaking skills?