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Barriers to Mastery EFL Communication Skill in Iraqi Governmental Schools

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Abstract

Many foreign language learners have problems in using the foreign language in an effective way especially speaking skill. So the current paper tries to seek these difficulties through trying to find an answer to the following question: " What are the prominent barriers of speaking that hinder Iraqi EFL learners from mastering speaking?" and by verifying the suggested hypothesis which says " The linguistic aspects are the common barriers of speaking". To prove the hypothesis and to answer the question a questionnaire that contains 15 items is presented to 60 third intermediate students out of 240. The data were analyzed using SPSS. The results showed that the linguistic barriers were at the top of the pyramid followed by the psychological barriers and then the social ones.

Key Word: Speaking Barriers, foreign Language, Motivation, Anxiety, Role plying.

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معرفة السيطرة على مهارة التواصل في المدارس الحكومية العراقية

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المديرة العامة للتربية في محافظة نينوى / ثانوية بادوش للبنين

المستخلص

يعاني الكثير من متعلمي اللغة الاجنبية من مشاكل و معرقلات في استخدام اللغة الاجنبية بصورة فعالة و بالأخص في مهارة التحدث. لذلك تحاول الدراسة الحالية البحث عن هذه الصعوبات من خلال ايجاد جواب للسؤال التالي " ما هي ابرز المعرقلات التي تمنع الطلبة الدارسين للغة الاجنبية كلغة ثانية من السيطرة على مهارة التحدث؟" و من خلال اثبات الفرضية المقترحة و التي تقول " الاسباب اللغوية هي معرقلات مهارة التحدث الشائعة" . من اجل اثبات الفرضية و من اجل ايجاد جواب للسؤال المطروح فقد تم اعتماد الاستبيان الذي يحتوي 15 فقرة و الذي وجه ل 60 طالبا من طلاب الثالث المتوسط من اصل 240 طالب. تم تحليل البيانات باستخدام برنامج تحليل بيانات الحزمة الاحصائية . اثبتت النتائج ان المعرقلات اللغوية كانت على رأس الهرم تتبعها المعرقلات النفسية و من ثم الاجتماعية.

1. Introduction

Foreign Language learning is the feeling of uneasiness, tension, nervousness, and dread experienced by non-native speakers and school students. These feelings may stem from any second language context whether they are related to productive skills speaking and writing, or receptive skills such as reading and listening. The fear of learning foreign languages is a form that the psychologists call a specific dysphoric reaction. Some learners experience anxiety in learning the foreign language more than others and may feel anxious in many different situations.

1.1 The research question

The present paper asks the following question

What are the common barriers of speaking that hinder Iraqi EFL learners from mastering speaking?

1.2 The hypothesis

The present study hypothesized that the linguistic aspects are the common barriers of speaking.

1.3 The significance of the study

The present paper is important as it tries to:

1. To investigate the main reasons that cause problems to students when speaking.

2. To help learners overcome speaking barriers.
3. To assist teachers focus on the barriers that their students have and take them into consideration.
4. Make a contribution to the field of language learning by specifying the major barriers to help L2 teachers use the appropriate speaking strategies.

2. Theoretical Part

2.1 What is Speaking?

Before talking and discussing the different aspects of speaking, it is necessary to define it at first. Florez (1999:13) defines speaking as a process that involve two participants at least to arrive at the communication of ideas and information. Burns and Joyce (1997:9) states that speaking is an interactive process that includes those who engage in the communication to construct meaning by producing, receiving and processing information. In 2007 Harmer mentions that speaking is " the ability to speak fluently and presupposes the ability to process information and language ' on the spot' ". (284). While Nunan (2003: 217) claims that speaking is a way of interaction through it the interlocutors can use language and signs to build and share knowledge and information in various contexts. And Rizvi (2005: 92) says that speaking " is an interactive communicative process that involves speakers and listeners". It becomes clear that speaking is a process that is strongly related to comprehension in which learners depend on their vocabularies that acquired through listening or reading to contact with the others in a correct way.

2.2 The Importance of Speaking

Speaking is seen as a significant ability that humans have since they are customized to speaking before other skills and it has a considerable role in communication. Speaking English language is not an easy task because most learners are unable to master this skill simply for they do not have enough exposure to English and they do not use the second language in their daily use. To overcome the difficulty of speaking , English teachers have to support their learners with speaking activities to improve the speaking ability and perform well in real life situations. In addition, English speakers need to understand FL features as : how grammar works, how vocabularies are used appropriately and how words are pronounced and comprehended correctly(Pollard 2008: 34). Thus , it is vital for English teachers to concentrate on speaking skills inside the classroom for the following reasons:

1. Speaking plays a crucial role in communication. It is the way by which people communicate and exchange their thoughts.
2. Focusing on speaking in the classroom will allow and encourage learners to participate in debates and discussions. (Rao: 2019: 9)
3. Performing speaking inside the classroom will help learners to get rid of the fear that inhabits their minds.

4. Speaking can help learners become stronger through building their self-confidence. (Rivers 1981: 66)

2.3 Features of Speaking

Fluency and accuracy are among the important features of speaking. For English teachers, fluency is the main goal that teachers wish to achieve in teaching speaking. Fluency means the ability and capability of expressing ideas and thoughts in a way in which hesitation plays no role. It is the role of teachers to teach their students how to express their ideas and to escape imitation. So, to be fluent in speaking means to speak without pauses since these pauses may damage the conversation specially if the listeners are lost. In addition, these pauses can indicate that the speaker has a problem therefore he/she cannot continue. In order to avoid such problems, Thornbury (2005:40) suggests tricks to fill the pauses and reduce the stress. These fillers as "uh, um, I mean, short up, etc.." can help both interlocutors continue their conversation and reach their goal.

The second feature of speaking is accuracy. It examines the structures and vocabulary of the language because such errors are expectedly occur. So, focusing on the language structures means to focus on the use of subordinate clauses, sentence structures in addition to the use of correct grammatical sentences through looking at the committed errors and watching the spoken utterances. Most foreign language learners cannot and fail to communicate cause they do not gain enough amount of vocabularies to use while communicating. This forms a problematic area in learning the second language and it needs teachers to employ their efforts to help the learners overcome this problem (Kelly 2000:11). Pronunciation also makes a problem in communication. Mispronunciation leads to misunderstanding which leads to miscommunication. So, to master the second language needs to master the above aspects to enhance the speaking abilities of the learners.

2.4 Speaking Barriers

It is known that FL learners face difficulties in speaking English so it is crucial to find out the sources to these difficulties. There are three major barriers that asks teachers to figure them out. These barriers are psychological, linguistic and social. To begin with, the psychological barriers that form problems are: motivation, anxiety and self-esteem. **Motivation** refers to the desire for doing something. In the environment of learning the desire for learning is very essential because it motivates learners to learn effectively. So motivation can strongly influence communication.

The second aspect of the psychological barrier is **anxiety**. In FL language classrooms, anxiety seems to be occurred very often. Most learners cannot control their fear and tension when they think of speaking. When the teacher asks the students to do oral presentation or to exchange ideas in the class using the English language, most students are under anxiety. This factor is very important because it may destroy the students' motivation and this may due to break down communication. So, students have to reduce their anxiety so as to keep speaking going on. **Self-esteem** is the third aspect of the psychological barrier. Having problems with self-esteem is a common barrier in speaking. When students have low self-confidence, motivation and anxiety they will fail in communication for these aspects together are obstacles that prevent students from mastering speaking skill. Whereas learners with high self-confidence can overcome communication problems and can speak freely and fluently (Juhana 2012:103).

The second major barrier is the linguistic barrier. The linguistic barriers involve wrong pronunciation, poor vocabulary and grammar. **Pronunciation** is the articulation and production of the speech sound. Incorrect pronunciation builds up an obstacle to speaking for foreign language learners. Learners need to pay attention to pronunciation features as stress, intonation and sounds to create a clear message (Kelly 2000:8). **Grammar** also forms a barrier to speaking. To speak the foreign language, learners have to utter correct grammatical sentences which make the communication runs easily because grammar is one of speaking bases and when students lack this base, their communication will not go in an easy way. The last aspect of the linguistic barrier is the **vocabulary**. The lack of the vocabularies certainly leads to a big communication problem. FL learners suffer from this lack so consequently they cannot find the appropriate synonym for the forgotten word and in this case the communication is broken.

The last barrier is social. Social problems form an obstacle for speaking. In the classroom and as it is seen as the real situation and environment for performing speaking, learners are not ready to speak because such environment is not supportive. For example, the large number of students in the class does not encourage students to speak. In addition, most teachers depend on the mother tongue in explaining the lesson and here using the students' mother tongue discourage students to speak and communicate with each other or with the teacher.

2.5 Speaking Activities in the Classroom

To achieve speaking in the classroom, learners need intensive exposure and a set of activities. Speaking needs both teacher and learners cooperate with one another so as to make their communication easy without challenges. For this reason, teachers try to engage their students in interaction through developing the students' communicative competence and using activities that may improve and enhance speaking skills.

It is worth mentioning to say that discussion is one of the effective ways of speaking in the classroom. It plays a significant role in developing the speaking abilities of students. This significance comes from the fact that in the classroom and when the teacher uses this activity, he/she allows students to express ideas and to tackle different topics as they can talk about their individual experiences. Following this activity, students can communicate in an effective way (Harmer 2001:268).

Role play is a kind of common activities used in the classroom. It has many positive advantages as it gives students the chance to interact correctly and as Doff (1988:100) mentions "Role playing gives a chance to use language in new contexts and for new topics because they are 'acting out' a situation. It encourages students to use natural expressions and intonation, as well as gesture". This activity can be presented in many forms as role cards and simulation. Harmer (2001:271) says "Where two speakers have different parts of information making up a whole, because they have different information, there is a gap between them". Gap activities are another form of classroom speaking activities. Using this activity, students negotiate meaning and produce accurate speech.

By practicing the mentioned activities, students can overcome their fears and can become more proficient speakers since they will be able to formulate ideas in form of oral speech. Besides, teachers should encourage students to communicate inside the classroom and in the outside world.

2.6 The Previous Studies

It is of great importance to mention the studies concerning speaking barriers as the present paper tries to seek these barriers. Swain (2005 cited in Ali et al 2020:64) did a study to find out the challenges that learners have when communicating using the English language. The study discovered that the psychological factors play a vital role in speaking disabilities. In the same vein, Ariyanti (2016:187) investigated the effect of the psychological factors that affect the speaking of Indonesian students. The paper found out that the fear of making mistakes was at the top of the pyramid in addition to the lack of confidence and motivation. Lee (2009:149) conducted a study to find out the problems behind speaking disabilities for students who spend a long time in other countries. The analysis of the data showed that social aspects are the major barriers for students because students are socially inactive so they lack the ability of interaction.

Tsiplakides and Keramida (2009:67-89) did a case study to investigate the role of anxiety on speaking. the study sample was 15 students in lower secondary school in Greece. The data was gathered through the observations of the students and the results showed that anxiety negatively affected speaking. In the study of investigating Omani speaking disabilities, Hosni (2014:26) studied teachers and students in basic education schools. The data was collected through interviews and observations. The findings mentioned that vocabulary lacking is the common problem that most students share. The lack of vocabulary makes a barrier to speaking and therefore makes a barrier for communication.

Mridh and Muniruzzaman (2020:118) presented a paper to seek the speaking barriers among Bangladesh students. The study came up with the conclusion that the lack of words, vocabulary and practice are the prominent difficulties . The present study is a completion to the previous studies. It tries to investigate and determine the barriers to mastery communication skills at Iraqi governmental schools for most Iraqi students are unable to interact using the foreign language in their educational environment (the classroom) or at the outside environment (society).

3. Methodology

3.1 The Population and sample of the study

The study populations were 240 students of third intermediate class/ Badoosh Secondary school for boys in Nineveh. 60 students were randomly chosen to be the study sample through answering the items of the questionnaire during the second semester of the academic year 2021-2022.

3.2 Data collection Procedure

The data of this study were gathered through Likers Scale questionnaire which is devised by Rensis Likert to collect attitudes and opinions about a certain subject. This scale is psychometric response (measures and evaluates the psychological characteristics of individuals) used in questionnaire to get the preferences of the participants with the questionnaire statements. The questionnaire of this study contains 15 items. These items were divided to search three main types of speaking barriers namely: social, linguistic and psychological . Items no. 1, 2, 3,4 and 5 were put to look for social problems. Items no. 6,7,8,9 and 10 were written to find out the linguistic barriers while items no. 11,12,13,14 and 15 were seeking the psychological challenges (**See appendix I**). The gathered data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Science(**SPSS**) to get accurate results.

3.3 Findings and Discussions

Table (1)

The average and the standard deviation of the questionnaire items according to their ranking

No.	Items	Ranking	Average	SD
10	I have difficulty to put words together to make sentences.	1	3.82	92
6	I have a limited vocabulary.	2	3.76	90
7	I have problems in syntax .	3	3.70	1.06
11	I am under pressure when communicating.	4	3.65	1.04
3	The atmosphere inside the class does not encourage me to speak.	5	3.57	1.07
8	I am unable to speak fluently.	6	3.54	1.03
15	I have the fear of insult if I commit mistakes .	7	3.50	1.10
9	I hesitate to speak for I miss pronounce many words.	8	3.44	1.12
14	I speak English since my teacher wants me to do so.	9	3.39	1.09
5	I rarely practice my English outside.	10	3.37	1.02
12	I fear of committing mistakes that due to stop speaking.	11	3.36	1.13
13	The cooperation to speak English is not supportive.	12	3.29	1.11
4	The classroom environment is noisy.	13	3.24	1.10
2	I cannot communicate with my peers.	14	3.20	1.17
1	Speaking is not supported in the classroom.	15	3.18	1.17

The table above explains the average and the standard deviation for each item. Items no. (10/6/7) get the high ranking , the high average and the high SD. They scored (3.82/ 3.76/ 3.70) in average and (92/90/1.06) in SD respectively. These statements are seeking the linguistic problems which form a barrier to communication. Most students are weak in building up correct sentences. This weakness is accumulated because students pass to the next grade and they suffer from the lack of speaking ability. This problem is in spontaneous increasing and it is difficult to treat it by traditional ways. Moreover, vocabulary knowledge plays a vital role in speaking. If students lack vocabularies, they will lack their ability of speaking and this will lead to a barrier in communication. But if students have a large amount of words and vocabularies, this will help them to practice speaking skill with their teacher and peers. In addition to what explained above, syntax is another barrier to master speaking.

In most cases students misuse syntax when they misuse the tenses and aspects. If this happens the communication breaks down and both interlocutors lose their understanding. Here the research question " **what are the common barriers that hinder Iraqi EFL learners to master speaking skill?**" is answered through finding out the linguistic barriers that are common and shared by most students and the research

hypotheses " **the linguistic aspects are the common barriers of speaking**" is verified and proved when most participants select the lack of vocabularies, the misuse of grammar and mispronunciation of words to be their common barriers.

Items no. (11/3/8) are varied in their aspects. Item (11) is about psychological barriers and it gets 3.65 and 1.04 in average and SD. Item no. (3) is seeking social barriers and gains 3.57, 1.07 in average and SD respectively while item no. (8) with the average 3.54 and SD 1.03 is looking for a linguistic barriers. The majority of EFL learners are under pressure when they speak. The high anxiety the students have, the low chances and opportunities to communicate. Anxiety plays a negative role in communication for students think more about how to use the correct grammar, vocabularies, pronunciation and other factors. The large number of students inside the class forms another new barrier to speaking. When the class is too crowded , students will lose speaking. Such classes are not supportive and students do not feel ease to practice the communication skill. Fluency is another problem that EFL learners lack. Fluency is the ability of speaking with no mistakes and hesitation and the absence of this factor will result in a bad communication. Most Iraqi EFL learners do not have a fluent language to enable them master foreign language speaking .

Items no. (15/9/14) mention the psychological and linguistic aspects. These statements scores the averages (3.50, 3.44,3.39) and the standard deviations (1.10,1.12,1.09) respectively. Fear forms a barrier to speaking. Students have the fear of being insulted and of being misunderstood by the teacher or the students. Sometimes, students are afraid that their peers laugh at them if they speak English and commit mistakes and as a result most EFL students stop speaking the foreign language.

Through speaking, mispronunciation is a normal state happens in the class. The wrong pronunciation confuses the students, which in turn constitutes an obstacle for them to continue speaking. While the loss of motivation plays the most important role in communication. Most students do not have the motivation that helps them to speak English . Perhaps this is because the large number of students in the class, or the student is forced to speak English only because the teacher wants . the loss of motivation also comes from the traditional ways of teaching that the teacher adopts which make students constantly bored.

Statements with numbers (5/12/13) got the averages (3.37, 3.36, 3.29) and the SDs (1.20, 1.13, 1.11) in sequence. In fact, most students do not use the foreign language in the outside world (outside the classroom). For them, the use of language ends with the end of the lesson. This is one of the reasons for the formation of obstacles for students in being able to speak, and this will lead to a failure to control the communication skill. Once again, the fear of making mistakes appears among students that may lead to stop speaking. Fear is one of the psychological factors that have a prominent role in the learning process. The fear of making mistakes, which may be verbal or grammatical, is one of the main reasons for not mastering the skill of speaking. Students stop speaking and stop communicating as soon as they commit linguistic errors especially when the teacher alerts them to the errors or corrects them.

Collaboration within the classroom is one of the helping factors to speaking. When the classroom environment is not suitable for practicing speaking, this will lead to the loss of the desire for communication and this loss will be an obstacle to do communication. Here comes the role of the teacher in making the suitable environment for the students to encourage them practice speaking. He can divide the students into small groups and asks one of the students to be the spokesman of the group. Following this way , students will have the desire to communicate.

Items (4/2/1) are the last group if items to be discussed. These items gained the averages (3.24, 3.20, 3.18) and SDs (1.10, 1.17, 1.17). The classroom is the educational environment in which students are engaged . So this environment must be quite so as students can speak freely. But the classroom becomes the noisy environment for students . This noisiness becomes a factor for not mastering the foreign language speaking. In addition, most students cannot communicate with their peers because the use of the mother tongue ,which affects speaking process, and because that the intelligence of students is different from one student to another and this difference leads to different performances in the classroom. It is worth mentioning that if speaking is not supported due to the above mentioned factors , there will be a failure in communicating. Therefore, it is necessary for English teachers to find ways that may assist students improve speaking or at least help students not to lose the desire for speaking.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

The following points are written as conclusions:

1. The results of the study showed that there are different factors that have a negative effect on speaking skill.
2. The most prominent factor was the linguistic one which contains different aspects as the absence of the vocabularies, the misuse of syntax and the weak pronunciation.
3. Anxiety and the lack of motivation are among the psychological barriers that play a negative role in mastering communication but to a less degree than the linguistic barriers .
4. The social factors which are embodied through the classroom environment also have a bad effect on speaking.
5. The current study recommends that foreign language teachers should help EFL students overcome the speaking barriers in order to avoid occurring in speaking problems by focusing on the methods of teaching speaking. It also recommends that other researchers do studies to investigate the ways of improving communication skill for governmental students in Mosul.

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Appendix I

Dear students..

The researcher is seeking the common speaking barriers through the present paper entitled " Barriers to mastery EFL communication skill in Iraqi governmental schools". Please write down your answers and thanks for cooperation.

Item No.	Items	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	Speaking is not supported in the classroom.					
2	I cannot communicate with my peers.					
3	The atmosphere inside the class does not encourage me to speak.					
4	The classroom environment is noisy.					
5	I rarely practice my English outside.					
6	I have a limited vocabulary.					
7	I have problems in syntax .					
8	I am unable to speak fluently.					
9	I hesitate to speak for I miss					

	pronounce many words.					
10	I have difficulty to put words together to make sentences.					
11	I am under pressure when communicating.					
12	I fear of committing mistakes that due to stop speaking.					
13	I cannot speak when the teacher watches me.					
14	I speak English since my teacher wants me to do so .					
15	I have the fear of insult if I commit mistakes .					