Spoken English of Saudi Undergraduate Students: Issues and Strategies

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Abstract—This study aimed to explore why some undergraduates at the University of Jeddah struggle with spoken English in personal and professional settings. Employing the explanatory sequential mixed method design, we administered a five-point Likert scale questionnaire to 107 Saudi undergraduate students. This was followed by observing a twenty-student Listening & Speaking class and conducting semi-structured interviews with three serving faculty members at the University of Jeddah. The results indicated that most students experienced difficulties in speaking English in personal and academic contexts. The students' spoken English difficulties could be attributed to the following major factors: limited use of spoken English in everyday personal and professional communication situations lack of linguistic competence, and speaking anxiety. It was also found that there were no significant differences in students' responses based on their year of study, major, and gender. We also suggested strategies and techniques; more precisely, we recommend increasing communication opportunities for students, employing CLT techniques, promoting the use of ICT, and collaborative learning. This study contributes to the current understanding of spoken English problems among Saudi undergraduate students and proposes relevant solutions.

Index Terms—spoken English, EFL, ESL, Saudi undergraduates, strategies

I. INTRODUCTION

Spoken English has been an essential tool of international communication for many decades, widely used across the world (Graddol, 2006). Multinational businesses, economic affairs, technology exchange, popular media, the publication of books and newspapers, and the globalization of education, all extensively use the language (Rao, 2019; Rahman & Singh, 2022). An individual's communicative competence is a predictor of his self-image, cognitive abilities and knowledge of the world (Luoma, 2004). Thus, considering its status as a lingua franca, obtaining communicative competence in English is highly desirable (Jenkins, 2007). Indeed, professional success largely depends on one's proficiency in spoken English (Pandey & Pandey, 2014). Those who achieve communicative competence in English are able to avail various opportunities in academia, society, and different professions (Brown, 2001; Cook, 2003; Crystal, 2003). Furthermore, proficiency in spoken English helps dignitaries of a nation collaborate on issues regarding two-sided interests (Phillipson, 1992).

However, despite its vital significance, numerous college students who learn English as a second language (L2) find it hard to communicate well in English. Achieving communicative competence in English is not easy in countries where English is not native and is taught and learnt as a second language (ESL) or foreign language (EFL). Students and common people need to apply considerable effort to acquire spoken English proficiency (Luoma, 2004). According to Lazaraton (2014), "speaking is an unfavorably complex and bewildering skill" (p. 107). The complexity of speaking is caused by the fractionation of speech as thought groups, suprasegmental features (stress, rhythm, and intonation), hesitation techniques, and the use of colloquial language (Brown, 2001). Learners struggle with speaking because they are required to synchronize several processes, such as generating ideas, using linguistic knowledge, and employing strategies concurrently (Johnson, 1996).

This problem is especially prevalent in Saudi Arabia. Various scholars have conducted substantial research and identified the causes of Saudi students' low proficiency in oral communication. For example, Al-Sobhi and Preece (2018) explored challenges the students faced while learning spoken English at Saudi School in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. They identified factors that hampered Saudi students' learning of spoken English, such as fewer opportunities to communicate in English, almost exclusive use of Arabic in everyday communication, and instructors' traditional teaching methods. Similarly, Rabab'ah (2016) found that not receiving ample opportunities to communicate in English hindered learners' acquisition of English. Additionally, learners' lack of motivation was a serious issue (Ali et al., 2019). Bani Younes and Albalawi (2016) identified learning anxiety, exclusive use of mother tongue, demotivation, fear of being judged by classmates, and traditional teaching methods as the causes of learners' low proficiency.

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A. Reasons for the Study

This study was conducted for the following reasons. First, while many studies in the non-Saudi context have regarded English pronunciation as a major problem area for EFL learners, studies in the context of Saudi Arabia have overlooked pronunciation as a focus area. Second, a good number of studies, including the ones in Saudi, have overemphasized anxiety as a factor impacting spoken English performance. Finally, while discussing remedies for spoken English, many studies have neglected the role of group activities to augment spoken English.

B. Significance of the Study

This study is important because it provides insights into the challenges faced by Saudi undergraduates in spoken English. It also offers remedial measures to solve the identified problems. A greater understanding of the problems and remedial measures can help develop Saudi undergraduates' spoken English proficiency. Additionally, the findings will magnify and refine the current knowledge regarding the oral communication difficulties faced by Saudi EFL students. Moreover, this study could help identify areas of improvement in the academic preparation programs offered for graduate students in Saudi Arabia.

C. Research Objectives

Considering the existing gap in the literature regarding why Saudi undergraduates struggle with spoken English, this study examined spoken English difficulties encountered by Saudi undergraduates. Moreover, it aimed to determine whether the students' perceptions of spoken English problems varied significantly according to their gender, major, and year of study.

D. Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:
1. What are the specific spoken English difficulties encountered by Saudi undergraduates?
2. What specific remedies can be offered to improve Saudi undergraduates' spoken English proficiency?
3. Are there any statistical differences between undergraduate students' responses based on their gender, major, and year of study?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Challenges to the Enhancement of Spoken English

Globally, experts, instructors, and researchers have contributed to the EFL domain by extensively publishing journals, books, theses, and research papers. Literature on the challenges of spoken English for EFL learners is voluminous and varied owing to substantial research focused on identifying the causes of students' low proficiency. A selected review of the relevant past studies follows.

Islam and Stapa (2021) conducted a study with 21 students and 11 instructors from five private universities in Bangladesh. By administering an IELTS-style test to the students and conducting semi-structured email interviews involving students and teachers, they aimed to understand students' present levels of communicative competence in English, barriers to its improvement, and what guidelines could be offered to help students elevate their proficiency. The findings revealed that most of the learners encountered problems such as anxiety, low confidence, fear of losing face, and peers' mockery. Additionally, other causes that hampered the students' learning included family background, low-input environment, and the complex nature of spoken English. The following problems were also identified: traditional teaching methods, poor linguistic competence, and lack of communication opportunities.

Similarly, Alrabai (2016) identified additional causes of Arab EFL learners' low proficiency, including instructors' excessive use of Arabic in class, inappropriate curriculum design, overcrowded classes, and lack of motivation. In a study with 638 undergraduate students from four universities in Taiwan (two with full English Medium Instruction & two with partial English Medium Instruction), Chou (2018) examined learners' anxiety, strategy use, and other problems they encountered while speaking English. In line with the findings of other studies mentioned above, this study also identified anxiety, complexity, inadequate content knowledge, poor linguistic competence, and confusion of stress, intonation, and homophones as the major problem areas.

Surveying 20 B.Ed. third-year and fourth-year ESL students (4 males and 16 females) at a tertiary teacher training institution in Hong Kong, Gan (2012) concluded that poor vocabulary, poor grammatical competence, imperfectly learned pronunciation and intonation, and inadequate communication opportunities, in and outside the class, hampered speaking proficiency. In addition, Gan identified problems such as inappropriately designed curriculum and poor environment outside the class.

Zrekat and Al-Sohbani (2022) conducted a study at the Arab Open University, with 74 Saudi undergraduates (26 male and 48 female) from the English department. Aiming to explore their spoken English difficulties, the authors found that inadequate communication opportunities, within and outside the class, deprived students of real communication situations. Furthermore, they argued that for many learners, the large size of the class decreased their chances of participation in communication activities. Additionally, they identified anxiety, poor grammatical competence, and lack of language resources as obstacles to learning.

B. Solutions to the Challenges of Spoken English

While some studies focused exclusively on identifying barriers to improving spoken English proficiency, others have gone one step further and proposed advanced solutions to those problems. Interviewing 11 teachers across five universities in Bangladesh, Islam and Stapa (2021) found task-based learning to be helpful in enhancing ESL/EFL learners' oral communication. Some scholars have recommended that new strategies be formulated to motivate EFL students to use English within and outside the class (Namaziandost et al., 2019). They also recommended replacing the instructor-centered model of learning with a student-centered model of learning, as the latter provides students with sufficient communication opportunities (Namaziandost et al., 2019). Additionally, Gan (2012) stressed incorporating a sufficiently intensive language improvement component in the curriculum of teacher preparation programs.

Mahmoud and Tanni (2014) suggested using communicative games to teach oral communication to EFL learners, which would make the classrooms communicative and enjoyable. Additionally, listening to experienced speechmakers can provide students with exposure to fluent language. Using the input acquired from listening, learners can then make good use of it while delivering a speech (Brown & Lee, 2015). Furthermore, facilitating group activities can dispel students' fear and increase their level of confidence. Accordingly, Patil (2008) asserted that instructors should prioritize developing learner's confidence to help them overcome their fear of making mistakes.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Method

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed method design. A five-point Likert scale questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and class observations were used for data. Quantitative data were collected through a Likert scale questionnaire, whereas qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews and class observations. Quantitative data were analyzed statistically, whereas thematic analysis was used to analyze qualitative data.

B. Participants

The participants were 127 B.A. second-year students at the University of Jeddah and three instructors of English at the same university. A total of 107 students completed a 20-item Likert scale questionnaire, which led to quantitative findings. Twenty students of Listening and Speaking-2 (KSEL-221) volunteered to be observed in the class, and three instructors agreed to be interviewed.

C. Instruments

The researchers used three instruments for data collection. First, a five-point Likert scale questionnaire comprising 20 questions was administered to the students electronically. The second instrument was semi-structured interviews with the three teachers. The interviews were conducted individually and face-to-face after the completion of the survey. Each interview lasted 30–40 minutes. Moreover, the third instrument was classroom observation over one academic semester (16 weeks).

D. Procedure

As mentioned earlier, data were collected through a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations. One hundred and seven students completed the questionnaire. Prior to the study, students were informed about the purpose of the study, after which they consented to participate. As for the semi-structured interviews, three faculty members volunteered to participate. Before the study, the participants were given details related to the objectives of the study and the interview protocol. The interview audios were transcribed and coded, and a thematic analysis procedure was used to analyze the qualitative data for themes and categories. Regarding classroom observation, which lasted 16 weeks, we obtained the consent of the listening and speaking teachers, prior to observing the classroom. One author of this study visited a listening and speaking class as an observer twice a week. As non-participant observers, we used a pre-designed format to assess students' learning of spoken English. The students' behavior was closely monitored and notes were taken. The following classroom activities were observed: group discussion (each participant of the five-member group participated in four group discussions), oral presentations (each student delivered four oral presentations), and role-play (each participant played various roles in seven situational conversations).

E. Data Analysis

Statistical Analysis Software (SPSS) was used to analyze quantitative data (the completed Likert-scale questionnaires) to determine the overall characteristics of the score distribution. To this end, means and standard deviations were calculated. To analyze qualitative data (semi-structured interviews and classroom observation), thematic analysis procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used. After the semi-structured interviews with the teachers, we carefully read the transcripts to acquire an overall sense of the interview responses. Next, we manually coded the transcripts, segmenting and labeling them to develop descriptions and themes. We were particularly interested in information that repeated, extended, or disputed the students' responses to the items on the questionnaire.

IV. RESULTS

A. Quantitative Findings

The response rate was 100 per cent. Of the 107 participants, 69 (64.2 per cent) were men and 38 (35.8 per cent) were women. Furthermore, 71 (67 per cent) were English language majors, whereas 35 (33 per cent) studied translation. Characteristics of the distributions of the answers were obtained by calculating means and standard deviations for each item (see Table 1).

Table 1 shows the information collected and analyzed by the researcher based on participants' opinions toward augmenting spoken English; the questionnaire items were rated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree).

In general, participants responded negatively regarding augmenting spoken English, revealing a high level of disagreement for the most of items, especially for: feeling relaxed and confident speaking English in academic and social settings; pronunciation and lexicon (stock of words) are up to the mark; producing a variety of grammatical English sentences easily; and carrying out contextually appropriate English conversation easily. Additionally, context-centered issues were rated very low (mean of 2.7); particularly, the following items had the lowest rating: using English frequently when communicating with the members of my family; socializing in my society involves frequent use of English; and my country's formal conversations such as debates and interviews are carried out in English. It is an exceptional challenge for the administration to enhance students' capability to boost their spoken English. By contrast, candidates provided positive feedback regarding instructors, implying that students have a high level of confidence in their teachers. There was an insignificant difference in overall scores between students according to their year of study: first year (M = 3.45), second year (M = 3.24), third year (M = 3.46), and fourth year (M = 3.67), and p = 0.27.

TABLE 1
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Statement	M	SD
Student-centered issues		
I feel relaxed and confident speaking English in academic and social settings.	2.98	1.31
I am always looking for opportunities to use and improve my spoken English.	3.65	1.24
My pronunciation and lexicon (stock of words) are up to the mark.	2.89	1.24
I can easily produce a variety of grammatical English sentences.	2.88	1.28
I can easily carry out contextually appropriate English conversations.	2.82	1.39
Overall	3.04	1.11
Instrument-centered issues		
The instructional material used in the class is relevant, adequate, and varied.	3.87	0.89
My spoken English syllabus is well-designed in terms of coverage, structure, and emphasis.	3.76	0.91
The instructional material used in the class relates to aspects of my culture and society.	3.82	0.81
The instructional material is easy to comprehend.	3.33	1.17
The instructional material provides first-hand experience of the realities of the social and physical environment and encourages active participation in the lesson.	3.34	1.14
Overall	3.63	0.77
Instructor-centered issues		
My spoken English instructor is a highly motivated individual.	4.12	0.69
My spoken English instructor knows and teaches the subject well.	4.5	0.61
My spoken English instructor makes copious use of instructional material in the class.	4.13	0.81
My spoken English instructor uses a wide range of instructional materials in the class.	4.04	0.88
My spoken English instructor encourages learners to ask questions and speak up in the class.	4.28	0.75
Overall	4.25	0.61
Context-centered issues		
I get frequent opportunities to learn English through natural interaction.	3.21	1.36
I use English frequently when communicating with my family members.	2.39	1.41
At my university, subjects other than English are also taught in English.	2.84	1.53
In my society, socializing involves frequent use of English.	2.50	1.33
In my country, formal conversations such as debates and interviews are carried out in English.	2.56	1.48
Overall	2.71	1.19

A one-way ANOVA was used to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference in overall scores between students according to their year of study: first year (M = 3.45), second year (M = 3.24), third year (M = 3.46), and fourth year (M = 3.67), (see Table 2). A one-way ANOVA revealed a statistically insignificant difference in overall scores (F = 1.322, p > 0.05).

TABLE 2
TOTAL AUGMENTING SPOKEN ENGLISH

Year of study	M	n	SD	F	sig
First year	3.4541	37	.81763	1.322	0.271
Second year	3.2434	38	.83732		
Third Year	3.4633	15	.43114		
Fourth Year	3.6656	16	.53843		
Total	3.4118	106	.75070		

A Poisson regression analysis was run to predict participants' opinions toward augmenting spoken English based on the year of study and major of the student. The test revealed that the year of the study is the only significant variable; for every extra year spent at school, there was 1.0914 (95% CI, 0.23 to 5.147) times more positive opinion toward augmenting spoken English (p < .05; see Table 3).

TABLE 3
ESTIMATE FOR THE EFFECT OF BACKGROUND DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS ON AUGMENTING SPOKEN ENGLISH

Factor	IRR	95% CI IRR	Estimate	SE	T value	P value
First year of study	1.048	0277 t0 3.97	0.046	0.6799	0.005	0.946
Second year of study	1.091	0.23 to 5.147	0.093	0.7885	3.014	0.036
English	1.16	0.37 to 3.5	0.148	0.5784	0.066	0.798

Note. IRR= incidence rate ratio; CI= confidence interval; SE= standard error

B. Qualitative Findings

(a.) Teachers' Evaluation

Overall, as indicated by the responses of the participating teachers to the first research question, most students struggle with their spoken English performance. This overall inadequacy was explained by the participants with reference to the scant use of English in personal and professional settings, inadequate subject knowledge, and speaking anxiety. According to Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 (T1 and T2), scant use of English in personal and professional settings and poor command of English caused below-average speaking performance of students. For Teacher 3 (T3), speaking anxiety was the biggest challenge faced by most of his students. T1 remarked, "If I am to assess the level of communicative competence of the students, most of them struggle with constructing grammatically correct sentences." Echoing T1's stance, T2 observed, "Regarding speaking skills, I believe one's linguistic competence matters the most; I have seen students' anxiety come down as their linguistic competence went up." Singling out speaking anxiety as one of the biggest obstacles to speaking fluently, T3 said, "Students' level of proficiency in speaking skill varies; however, I would categorize their level as pre-intermediate and intermediate. The students' level is not up to the mark for post-secondary education, which obstructs their learning in the classroom. Their interaction with the teacher is often hindered by pauses and incertitude".

When asked to offer guidelines for students to improve spoken English, all three teachers emphasized the need for frequent oral communication drills in the classroom and providing students with a basic course in communicative grammar. Underscoring the need for practicing English speaking vigorously, T1 said, "To help students control their anxiety, instructors should create a classroom environment conducive to learning. They should motivate students to partake in various activities (e.g., group discussions, debates, presentations, and role-play conversations)". While T1 offered his suggestions on reducing anxiety, T2 and T3 stressed strengthening students' linguistic competence. T3 said, "A teacher should ensure that a large part of his lessons focuses on the use of language for purposes. If the functional purposes of language are the center of attention, in the course of time, students will attain linguistic competence".

(b). Class Observation

Students were observed for the following aspects of their spoken English: pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency, and anxiety. Overall, students experienced difficulties with words and pronunciation, fluency, and confidence level. However, as the classes went on, there was clear improvement. By the end of the 10th week, students had remarkably increased their vocabulary and improved their pronunciation. Improvement in fluency and confidence was not remarkable, but noticeable nevertheless.

1. Pronunciation

Most students learned to pronounce English words correctly. They assimilated the 44 English phonemes of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). They grasped the phonemes as individual sounds and pronunciation units. At the beginning of the semester, they mispronounced the sounds of English that do not exist in their native language, such as /b/ in place of /p/. They also learned to look up words in dictionaries with proper phonetic transcription. For example, they knew to distinguish between bit (/bɪt/) and bet (/bet/). Moreover, they understood how primary stress differs from secondary stress and when to place which type of stress on the syllable(s) in a word. For instance, they learned that if a disyllabic word (conduct) is a noun, the first syllable (/ˈkɒn.dʌkt/) will carry primary stress; by contrast, if the same word is a verb, the second syllable (/kənˈdʌkt/) will carry primary stress. They also learned to recognize diacritics (signs written above or below a sound or syllable to indicate a difference in pronunciation or word stress). Because students

were taught to read words phonemically and phonetically, a majority of them began pronouncing English words correctly.

2. Vocabulary

The researcher observed that most students suffered from limited lexical size in the first quarter of the semester. While participating in communication activities, some did not show any signs of anxiety or stage fright, although they could not sustain their interaction due to limited stock of words. However, in the next three quarters, the students showed significant improvement. A series of communication activities (group discussions, presentations, and role-plays) motivated them to improve their speaking abilities. A majority of the students enriched their word stock by memorizing new words used in different communication situations, which subsequently elevated their confidence level.

3. Fluency

Another observation in the first quarter was that the students' limited stock of words often prevented them from expressing themselves fluently and correctly. A good number of students often stopped to think of correct words, frame grammatical sentences, and consider the content of a conversation. They would also forget what to say during conversations with classmates or communication activities. However, in the last two quarters, the researchers' notes of class observation recorded an improvement in students' performance. Most of them actively participated in classroom interactions and group activities, answered questions correctly, and showed positive attitudes toward learning. Sufficient in-class communication opportunities for the learners helped them overcome fluency problems.

4. Anxiety

The researcher found that adequate communication opportunities in the classroom proved to be effective in improving learners' speaking ability and increasing their confidence and motivation. Students who were previously quiet and shy became actively involved in in-class communication activities. The observers were glad to notice that most students started spending time self-learning at home. Three students did not actively participate in the communication activities and could not improve considerably, whereas the majority of the learners made good use of the classroom communication opportunities and developed into confident speakers.

V. DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore students' spoken English problems, offer guidelines accordingly, and determine differences between their perceptions based on their gender, major, and year of study.

RQ1: What are the specific spoken English difficulties encountered by Saudi undergraduates?

Regarding the first research question, both quantitative and the qualitative findings indicate that overall, students face considerable challenges in speaking English in personal and professional settings. The greatest challenge was the scant use of spoken English in everyday personal and professional situations, followed by the lack of linguistic competence and speaking anxiety (Megawati & Mandarani, 2016).

Of the three abovementioned factors, the most serious issue for the students was the scant use of English in everyday personal communication, as indicated by the mean value of 2.71 for context-centered statements in the questionnaire. The findings revealed that students did not find substantial opportunities to hone their speaking skills due to the prevalence of monolingualism in the classrooms. Most classes, other than English, we assume, are not conducted in English (Islam & Stapa, 2021). This affects students' oral English competence. Instructors' proficiency in spoken English helps students become more fluent because they receive credible input from their teachers (Chambless, 2012). Accordingly, the delivery of lectures in English by all subject teachers will have two advantages for the students. First, the teachers will be able to contribute to the students' subject knowledge; and second, they will provide students an opportunity to discuss their respective subjects in English. Our findings, regarding the link between the instructors' spoken English proficiency and students' English proficiency, lend support to the assertion made by Sadeghi and Richards (2015), that the students' progress in spoken English depends, to a great extent, on instructors' level of proficiency. Infrequent interactions in English among the students in the classrooms may prevent them from gaining communicative competence in the language.

Another major finding was that the learners did not use spoken English in routine conversations with family members, friends, neighbors, and acquaintances. There are several reasons for this. First, they have a poor input environment in their surroundings: markets, cafeterias, restaurants, cinema halls, shopping malls, hospitals, airports, or government organizations. Even if students wish to communicate in English with their fellow citizens, they do not often find individuals with the ability to speak English. Second, a majority of Saudis prefer communicating in their native tongue because they believe, and rightly so, that it will be difficult for them to sustain the same level of eloquence in L2 as in L1. This is consistent with the conclusions reached by Seraj et al. (2021), whose study found that the learners could not improve their spoken English because they were inadequately exposed to the language. For them, as for others, the exchange of information in their mother tongue is quick, smooth, and spontaneous. Third, in some cases, students' learning process was hindered by peers mocking, which led to many students avoiding speaking in English when communicating with their friends. This finding echoes the results of Lin (2013). Finally, as indicated by the participants'

responses, disadvantageous family backgrounds impeded students' development as proficient users of English. This finding is in line with Forey et al.'s (2016) argument that parents' education level, involvement in their children's education, and socioeconomic standing impact their children's development as language learners.

The next most serious issue encountered by students was the lack of linguistic mastery. This was clearly observed in faculty interviews and class observation. The survey findings too hinted at linguistic issues with the students, as suggested by the mean value (M = 3.0) for student-centered issues. This implies that according to the questionnaire responses, many students were unsure about the level of their spoken English proficiency. For example, many students struggled with spoken English due to limited vocabulary, scant content knowledge, and grammatical incompetence. Many failed to produce grammatically correct sentences in genuine communication situations due to limited vocabulary. In a study on Chinese EFL learners, Liu and Jackson (2008) found that inadequate stock of English words impeded learners' development of spoken English. Another noticeable problem was students' inadequate content knowledge. They would often begin to stutter and take recurrent pauses when were short of ideas on any given topic. Bachman and Palmer (1996) argued that learners discontinue talking on a given topic as soon as they fall short of words. The learners' inability to put words together to produce grammatical sentences hampers their learning process. Xie (2020) argued that learners grapple with grammar issues when they face a spontaneous communication situation. Moreover, with regard to the teachers' evaluation of their students' spoken English, the instructors expressed dissatisfaction with the undergraduates' current level of proficiency. The instructors assume that if the students cannot ask their questions, share their views, and assimilate information in the classroom, they will be deprived of in-depth knowledge of various subjects. They added that in classroom discussions, without adequate communicative competence, the undergraduates may not be able to attain the desired learning outcomes of the courses.

The third major impediment to learning spoken English was performance anxiety. When asked to articulate their thoughts in front of others, learners often experienced fear, increased heart rate, low confidence, and a sense of losing face. Bhattacharjee (2008) identified these problems as barriers to honing speaking skills. However, in certain situations, one positive aspect of anxiety was that it helped learners prepare well in advance to avoid nervousness in public. We argue that learning anxiety, in certain cases, affects the performance of EFL learners with good grammatical competence too. This psychological problem, at times, lowers students' confidence in their spoken English abilities

RQ2: What specific remedies can be offered for the Saudi undergraduates' spoken English insufficiencies?

As for the second research question, the solutions include increasing classroom communication opportunities, adopting task-based learning (Namaziandost et al., 2019), incorporating ICT applications, training learners in pronunciation (Cai & Liu, 2018), teaching English through collocation, listening to others and observing, and promoting self-regulated learning (Sambath & Sethuraman, 2017).

The researchers and the teacher participants proposed increasing communication opportunities in class, which may significantly improve EFL learners' spoken English (Li, 2015; Lv, 2014; Wang, 2013). The three activities (group discussions, debates, and role-play) adopt a collaborative learning approach aiming to bring together diverse groups of individuals to form a community of practice that endeavors to elevate the academic capability of the group. When the learners participate in GDs, debates, or role-play, each of them generates ideas and uses various expressions. Such exchange of information contributes to the knowledge of all learners (Kagan & Kagan, 1994).

Furthermore, the teacher participants recommended the use of task-based learning, which could help learners hone their speaking skills. While task-based language teaching is heavily grounded in theory and research, it is also an approach to classroom practice (Adams & Newton, 2009). Safitri et al. (2020) and Zusuki (2018) opined that task-based learning is highly effective in enhancing EFL learners' speaking ability. A task-based approach provides opportunities for language acquisition, both speaking and writing, via learning activities designed to enable learners to use the language naturally, practically, and functionally (Lin, 2009). Namaziandost et al. (2019) reported that when learners were engaged in cooperative learning in a class conducive to learning, their level of confidence increased and their level of anxiety decreased.

Additionally, the researchers and teacher participants supported the integration of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in spoken English plans. Today, ICT has made learning easier. Most items related to learning spoken English, such as pronunciation, word meaning, synonyms, and usage, can be found on one platform. Various applications of personal and professional conversations, dictionaries, and thesauruses have contributed to the enhancement of spoken English of innumerable learners globally (Alsaleem, 2013; Godzicki et al., 2013).

Furthermore, the participants stressed that the EFL learners' training in pronunciation is vital to their enhancement of spoken English. When pronunciation hampers understanding of any English word, a native speaker can make out the meaning of the word using contextual cues, in contrast to a non-native speaker, who may face communication breakdown (Zulqarnain & Muhammad, 2015). Hughes (2005), Goh and Burns (2012), and Luoma (2004) argued that pronunciation is one of the six common components (fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, content information, grammar use, and relevant responses to a conversation partner) of any spoken language.

Additionally, the researchers and participants believed that non-native learners can improve their speaking ability using English collocations. Non-native learners of spoken English use collocation more frequently. In any communication situation, when they are short of words, they prefer to use collocations due to their ready-made

grammatical structure. Hsu (2002) demonstrated that EFL learners' frequent use of collocations sharpened their spoken English.

Moreover, the participants recommended that the EFL learners listen to fluent speakers and observe their use of words, pronunciation, voice modulation, and grammatical structures. The improvement in one's speaking ability depends upon how consciously one listens to the routine or professional conversations of people around them (Abdalla, 2014). Baleghizadeh and Derakhshesh (2012) found that listening to different conversations can help learners internalize the correct pronunciation of words, their contextual use, and a variety of expressions.

The researchers also proposed that learners adopt a self-regulated learning (SRL) approach. This will expedite their learning of spoken English because SRL gives learners the freedom of regulating their learning habits, managing their schedules, monitoring their training, and setting goals (El-Sakka, 2016). Regulating the self is significant because education, among other things, is supposed to develop the self (Zimmerman, 2002). Ciesielkiewicz and Munoz (2015) recognized SRL as one of the basic pillars of pedagogy.

Finally, researchers stated that communicative language teaching will be highly effective in solving learners' speaking problems. Using CLT techniques in the classroom will reduce learners' anxiety and enhance their language competence (Richards, 2005). An instructor should provide students with more opportunities to learn to speak out because the more the EFL learners communicate, the more fluent they will become. The goal of spoken English is to be fluent and accurate in using English, although making mistakes while speaking out is the initial reward of learning. However, being fluent in speaking does not mean being inaccurate. Richards (2005) stated that language learning is a gradual process that involves the creative use of language and trial and error. Finally, the ultimate goal of learning is to use a new language both fluently and accurately.

RQ3: Are there any statistical differences between undergraduate students' responses based on their gender, major, and year of study?

Considering the third research question, a one-way ANOVA revealed no statistically significant difference in students' responses to the questionnaire in terms of their gender, major, or year of study. This implies that on the whole, students' responses did not vary considerably across these factors. This is consistent with the results obtained by Ali et al. (2019). This lack of significant difference has to do with the similar school experience of the students and the overall place of English in different majors. At school, because both male and female students study the same curriculum, their proficiency in English at the time of their entry into college is largely the same. At college too, the level of English taught does not differ much between the majors and the year of study. Therefore, it is reasonable that students' average responses did not vary according to their gender, major, or year of study.

Recommendations

Because we found speaking anxiety to be a barrier to spoken English performance, there is a clear need to help students control their anxiety and elevate their confidence level. Accordingly, instructors should spend time with students explaining to them that making mistakes in the classroom is a fear shared by almost all students and therefore, is not unusual. By learning more about and practicing spoken English, learners will improve. Another recommendation is that the classrooms should be made communicative by including various tasks (such as debates, group discussions, presentations, and role-plays).

We also recommend that the curriculum design committees consider modifying the existing spoken English syllabi in light of the insights from this study. In the modification process, the committee should involve EFL instructors because of their first-hand information about students' level of understanding, their issues, and pedagogical suggestions to enhance their learning and overcome their problems (Shawer, 2010). This will lead to more productive learning and teaching of spoken English.

Concerning future research on the spoken English challenges confronting Saudi college students, we recommend that more studies focus on pronunciation as the angle of inquiry. This is because in the Saudi Arabian context, there has been considerable research on anxiety, English vocabulary, and oral communication drills. A richer understanding of pronunciation-related issues with EFL learners will eventually lead to gains in spoken English.

VI. CONCLUSION

Globally, communicative competence in English has been a major requirement for those aspiring for academic or professional excellence. However, this poses various challenges to EFL/ESL students. This study investigated the challenges faced by Saudi undergraduates when speaking English. Both the quantitative and the qualitative findings revealed that most students reported scant use of English in personal and academic settings to be the biggest obstacle to speaking English. Poor linguistic competence emerged as the second main challenge for the students. Finally, speaking anxiety was found to be the third main challenge for EFL learners. In addition to bringing to the fore students' English-speaking issues, this study also suggested the following strategies: increasing communication opportunities, applying CLT techniques, active listening, pronunciation training, collaborative learning, use of ICT, and endorsing self-regulated learning. The suggested remedial measures, if implemented, can contribute to the enhancement of the EFL learners' spoken English.

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