

# Obstacles Encountered by Saudi Cadets in English Speaking Skill Competence

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**Abstract**—This study aimed to investigate the obstacles faced by Saudi cadets in developing their speaking skills and to identify the difficulties that may hinder their ability to speak fluently. Data for this study were collected through field observations of students' classes and semi-structured survey interviews with English instructors. The participants in this study were Saudi cadets enrolled at King Abdulaziz Military Academy during the academic year (2023-2024). The results of the study revealed several challenges faced by cadets, including limited opportunities to practice speaking, a lack of motivation, insufficient self-confidence, and a fear of criticism. Furthermore, some cadets exhibited weaknesses in vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. Additionally, the teaching of speaking skills was predominantly instructor-centered, the allocated time for practicing speaking skills was inadequate, and the assessment of speaking skills in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course was not tested.

**Index Terms**—EFL cadets, obstacles, speaking competence

## I. INTRODUCTION

The English language is considered an international language widely used in various fields, including science, business, politics, and media around the world (Tram, 2020). It is true because it is used in many different fields to represent the cornerstone. According to Anil (2016) English is crucial to be taught in classrooms in most developing and third-world countries. Consequently, it is currently taught and learned for various reasons and in different styles. Proficiency in the English language plays a vital role in improving students' standards in English. English instructors make significant efforts to help their students overcome many difficulties while learning. Thornbury (1997) states that the instructor's primary role is to simplify comprehension and provide the necessary input. English language instructors play an essential role in helping their students communicate effectively in English. According to Khatoony and Rahmani (2020) speaking skills are regarded as challenging for learners of the language, especially (EFL) non-native learners, namely university students who face numerous complications and difficulties in developing and improving their speaking skills. Farooqui (2007) asserts that the globalization of English and the increasing demand for better English-speaking skills in the labor market have led to a significant focus on speaking skills worldwide. This is true because effective communication skills are becoming increasingly essential nowadays. With the rapid development of new technology and businesses, the demand for teaching English to specific groups for specific purposes has grown significantly.

As Saudi Arabia advances toward achieving its 2030 economic vision, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has gained influential importance because it provides access to information related to specific fields and numerous knowledge resources. In Saudi Arabia, (ESP) is designed and taught at universities and colleges for adult students with intermediate or advanced levels of English to prepare them for the promising job market that offers numerous opportunities. Consequently, (ESP) has become a crucial part of English language teaching, whether in an (ESL) or (EFL) context. Despite the substantial budget allocated by (KAMA) for English teaching, Saudi cadets' ability to communicate effectively in English falls below expectations. In other words, the lack of speaking proficiency is still a challenge. Therefore, it is important to address the obstacles that Saudi cadets encounter in developing their English-speaking skills. In conclusion, this study will focus on the obstacles that Saudi cadets face in speaking proficiency, as these difficulties significantly impact the overall learning process. The research will investigate the challenges of developing speaking skills among students and specify the difficulties that hinder cadets from speaking fluently.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Previous Studies

Palmer (2014) asserts that listening and speaking are fundamental skills. He also presents the distribution percentages of language skills as follows: writing at 9%, reading at 16%, speaking at 30%, and listening at 45%. Hedge (2000, p. 46) reflects that linguistic competence is concerned with knowledge of the language itself, its form and meaning. It includes a knowledge of spelling, pronunciation, vocabulary, word formation, grammatical and sentence structure and linguistic semantics. She also adds that an essential point for the teacher to note is that linguistic competency is an integral amount of communicative competency. Such types of competences are pragmatic competence, discourse competence

and strategic competence. According to Hudson (2007) speaking and listening matters are important in all contexts for practitioners and learners for a number of reasons; spoken language is at the heart of much human interaction, good oral communication skills are important in other aspects of learners' wider lives, learners need to use, develop their speaking and listening skills to maximize learning gains. So, practitioners need well-developed speaking and listening skills to help maximize learners' progress.

Folse (2006) proposes five factors for teachers to consider when planning a speaking class: the learner (including age, proficiency level, and goals), the program, the topic of discussion, the use of two languages (in the task and for the task), and the diversity of tasks that serve as vehicles for conversation. Folse (2006) distinguishes between speaking activities categorized as fluency or accuracy. Fluency denotes to the quantity of language produced in an activity, while accuracy pertains to the linguistic precision of the content. Goth and Burns (2012) also introduce the concept of complexity, which encompasses both meaning and form.

Nation and Newton (2009) suggest three approaches to developing fluency in speaking: the repetition of tasks, known as the "well-beaten path approach"; creating many connections and associations with known items, known as the "richness approach"; and combining the two approaches into the "well-ordered system approach." They also recommend techniques for developing speaking fluency, including learners creating their best recordings, the ask-and-answer technique, and rehearsed talks. Popp (2005) explains that students' speaking skills improve with increased opportunities to practice in various contexts and for various purposes. These skills encompass discussions about ideas and information related to content areas, creative projects that allow students to showcase their talents, and situations that require the appropriate use of language to engage gracefully in social occasions.

Hedge (2000) presents several reasons for requesting students to rehearse speaking skill inside the class. For numerous students, learning to speak proficiently in English is a primacy. Learners want to use this skill for various bases, including building rapport in relationships, influencing people, and succeeding in negotiations. Goh and Burns (2012) assert that speaking is influenced by affective factors such as anxiety and lack of motivation. They further emphasize that output, in addition to input, is crucial for helping learners become proficient in the language. Jamshidnejad (2020) identifies several speaking problems, including experience, expectations, attitudes towards language learning, gender, willingness to communicate, self-efficacy, fear of making mistakes, fear of evaluation, and lack of confidence.

Goh and Burns (2012) elaborate on the characteristics of a second language speaker, emphasizing good pronunciation, fluency with minimal grammatical mistakes, native-like speech, confidence when addressing large audiences, effective communication with native speakers, and the ability to be easily understood. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) recommend strategies for maintaining and protecting motivation, including making learning encouraging and pleasant, giving tasks in a rousing manner, setting precise learner aims, preserving learners' self-respect, increasing their self-assurance, permitting them to preserve an affirmative social image, promoting cooperation among learners, fostering learner autonomy, and encouraging self-motivating strategies. Harmer (2007) mentions that the wish to accomplish some aim is the foundation of motivation; if it is strong enough it enflames a judgement to performance. He also adds such types of motivations that are extrinsic and intrinsic. Extrinsic motivation is that learners bring into the class from outdoor. Intrinsic motivation, on the other hand, is the sort of motivation that is made by what occurs in the class. Thornbury (2005) provides tips for managing talk, including interaction, turn-taking, discourse markers, and paralinguistics such as eye gaze and gestures.

Burns and Siegel (2008) emphasize that learning to speak another language is complex and involves various sub-skills related to content, morphosyntax, lexis, discourse, information structuring, the sound system, prosody, appropriate register, and pragmatic linguistic features. Hughes (2011) also underscores the importance of acquiring aspects beyond grammar and vocabulary for successful communication, including culture, social interaction, and politeness norms. Hatfield and Hatfield (1999) describe a speaking lesson as a bridge for learners between the classroom and the outside world. To build this bridge effectively, speaking activities must fulfill three key features: providing learners with purposeful communication opportunities in meaningful situations, ensuring clarity of instructions when learners work in pairs or small groups, and utilizing various techniques to create meaningful contexts for speaking practice, such as asking and answering, describing and drawing, discussion, guessing, remembering, miming, ordering, and completing forms/questionnaires. Thornbury (2002) recommends additional techniques such as dialogue, both open and closed pair work, the use of picture and word cues, and follow-up diagram conversations. Jamshidnejad (2020) asserts that the primary aspiration motivating a large percentage of language learners to take language courses is to become fluent speakers of a new language. Nonetheless, many language learners perceive communication skills, particularly speaking, as the most challenging to master.

Alhuqbani (2014) conducted an evaluation of teaching English to Saudi police cadets at King Fahd Security College in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The results revealed that teaching and the ESP course were ineffective and unsuitable due to several administrative and methodological factors. The course failed to meet the learners' needs concerning course timing and duration. Khatoony and Rahmani (2020) disclosed that learners of applied linguistics faced numerous linguistic problems in learning pronunciation, intonation, vocabulary, and grammar. Additionally, learners confronted psychological challenges such as self-confidence, shyness, and anxiety. They also reported dissatisfaction with their

teachers and courses. Mandel (2000) suggests some tips for reducing anxiety such as organize, visualize, practice, breathe, focus on relaxing, release tension, move and make eye contact with audience.

Tram (2020) found that students encountered linguistic difficulties that made the learning process very challenging. Also, Henna Paakki (2013) observed that both Finns and Japanese considered speaking English to be challenging. This was attributed to the prevalence of grammar-focused courses, traditional teaching methods, fear of making errors, lack of experience, and insufficient practice. Elbashir (2023) discovered that there were many difficulties which hindered fluency of English learning in the universities and among them include: under-qualified instructors, inappropriate teaching resources and the techniques used in teaching which were regarded as poor. The other problem was the psychological factor which made student lacked motivation while learning English. Hussain (2016) declared that mastering English requires a great command of the four language skills, both oral and written. Speaking English, in particular, posed difficulties related to vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and fluency. Students also grappled with shyness and a lack of self-confidence. Al Hosni (2014) stated that the main challenge in learning communication was speaking. The problem was attributed to the neglect of oral language use inside classes, often overlooked by teachers.

Yahaya et al. (2021) showed that the respondents practiced interfering of the first language while they face trouble in the skill of speaking. They also expected their teacher to correct the errors they said and wanted him to use a diversity of techniques and latest methods in order to teach speaking skills to improve their attention. Their study also suggested that English as a second language learners needed to be more to be given more enthusiasm to improve their self-confidence in using the English language and teachers needed to be more innovative in applying plans that arouse learners' attention to speak in English language.

According to Chand (2021) mostly learners got four main speaking problems such as personal difficulties, linguistic complications, social problems, and environmental problems. Absence of self-confidence, poor vocabulary power, unwillingness, anxiety towards speaking, fear of making mistakes, not having a suitable environment to rehearse English, no strong motivation from instructors were some common difficulties that students encountered while speaking English language.

#### *B. Teaching ESP at (KAMA)*

It is evident that English is widely used globally in various fields, including business, aviation, and social media. Consequently, the Saudi Ministry of Education has incorporated English learning from the 3rd grade (at 9 years of age). (KAMA) is also committed to educating its cadets in this widely used language to align with global trends and equip the new generation with the necessary workplace skills. Specifically, English is taught at (KAMA) as a compulsory subject that all cadets must complete during their three-year study in order to graduate from the academy. Despite the demanding nature of military training, high school graduate cadets, aged 18 years, begin learning English from the primary level. At this level, each cadet is exposed to (ESP) for 16 sessions a week. In the second level, they have 14 sessions weekly, which increase to 16 in the third level. The duration of each session is 45 minutes.

All classrooms are equipped with TV screens, and there are labs equipped with projectors and speakers. Cadets are taught a comprehensive curriculum designed by the Ministry of US Defense that focuses on the four language skills. All cadets are required to complete the assigned 16 textbooks over the course of their three-year study. These textbooks consist of four units that cover military topics and vocabulary. English is taught by both Saudi and non-Saudi teachers who have obtained at least a (BA) degree in English. Instructors must adhere strictly to the textbook plans.

### III. DATA COLLECTION

To obtain reliable information for the study, a mixed-method approach was employed. The first tool involved conducting interviews with five instructors. Semi-structured survey interviews were used as the primary method of data collection, directly aligned with the research objectives. Interviews served as valuable tools for exploring and identifying significant issues related to the study's subject matter. The five participants chosen for the interviews had a minimum of five years of experience in teaching the current ESP textbooks at (KAMA).

The second tool employed in this study was classroom observations. These observations aimed to assess the cadets' comfort levels, fluency, and the delivery of information within the classroom. Five teachers willingly allowed their classrooms and language labs to be observed, with detailed notes taken regarding the cadets' reactions to their instructors. Additionally, attention was given to how cadets engaged with their textbooks, as well as their motivation and concerns. Both tools underwent validation and modification with input from English language experts specializing in applied linguistics.

### IV. ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEWS AND CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS

#### *A. The Status and Importance of Speaking Skill*

Interview respondents emphasized the significance of speaking skills in learning English, highlighting its role in effective communication, confidence-building, problem-solving, and personal and professional development. As one teacher noted, "Speaking skill is vital for both personal and professional life, enabling individuals to express thoughts, ideas, and emotions effectively, fostering relationships, resolving issues, and achieving goals." Additionally, speaking

was deemed essential for oral communication, conveying messages, interacting with non-native speakers, and language acquisition. All participants recognized the importance of speaking skills, with one remarking, "Speaking enables cadets to engage in meaningful conversations, debates, and discussions, promoting understanding, trust, and informed decision-making." However, despite these positive merits, several obstacles hindered the development of speaking skills within the classroom, including unsatisfactory teachers and courses, reflecting the pivotal role instructors and courses play in the learning process.

#### *B. The Appropriateness of the Curriculum and Learning Environment*

Observations indicated that the syllabus and speaking-related activities were appropriate and relevant to (ESP) courses, and audio resources were readily available. Nevertheless, despite the curriculum's inclusion of practical speaking exercises, classroom observations revealed underutilization by instructors. It was evident that some instructors struggled to complete the syllabus within the allotted time, often skipping speaking activities because they were not part of the assessment. This aligned with Al Hosni's (2014) assertion that the negligence of oral language use in class was a significant challenge in communication learning, largely due to instructors' oversight.

#### *C. The Instructors' Teaching Efforts*

It was apparent from observations that cadets were not provided sufficient opportunities to practice oral speaking, primarily due to time constraints imposed by overcrowded syllabi. Burns and Siegel (2008) highlighted that learning to speak in a new language is complex, and classroom observations indicated that speaking practice was limited in favor of more easily assessed literacy skills. Instructors' reluctance to allocate time to speaking was compounded by issues of motivation, which were often overlooked in the classroom and had a detrimental impact on cadets' speaking proficiency. Observations revealed that the majority of cadets required more speaking tasks and activities to boost their confidence and encourage more fluent communication. Unfortunately, a lack of motivation led to passive participation in class and reluctance to engage fully. Teachers attributed this lack of motivation to limited vocabulary and grammar knowledge, fear of making mistakes, and the demands of military training.

#### *D. The Enhancement of Speaking Activities Inside Classes*

The neglect of speaking skills within the classroom became evident due to a lack of pair and group work, influenced by tight schedules, military training demands, the use of Arabic by instructors, insufficient visual aids, and teaching methods that disregarded cadet engagement. Cadets also hesitated to speak due to fear of making mistakes, as one teacher noted, "Cadets appear uncomfortable speaking freely in English, reinforcing the need for confidence-building through a variety of speaking tasks and activities." Another teacher highlighted cadets' anxiety about making errors in class, primarily stemming from limited vocabulary and pronunciation challenges. These factors aligned with Goh and Burns's (2012) assertion that speaking skills are influenced by affective factors such as anxiety and lack of motivation, which can pose significant classroom obstacles.

#### *E. The Obstacles to Speaking Skill Development*

In summary, the interviews and classroom observations revealed that cadets faced challenges related to vocabulary limitations, lack of self-confidence, fluency, motivation, fear of criticism, and insufficient speaking practice time. It became evident that adjustments were needed in the allocation of time for speaking practice to suit the individual needs and progress of students, as suggested by one teacher. Additionally, four teachers noted that some cadets struggled with pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary use. The challenges observed in organizing thoughts, pronunciation accuracy, intonation, fear of mistakes, and the lack of speaking opportunities made it difficult for cadets to communicate effectively. The researcher concluded that cadets should have ample opportunities to practice speaking skills in the classroom, including activities such as group discussions, role-playing, storytelling, presentations, debates, and peer-to-peer interactions, all aimed at providing constructive feedback to help students improve their speaking abilities. Nation and Newton (2009) suggested various approaches to develop speaking skills to attain proficiency. The study highlighted that numerous obstacles hindered cadets' performance in speaking skills, largely attributed to their weak English language proficiency.

## V. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study align with the research conducted by Khatoony and Rahmani (2020), Tram (2020), and Hussain (2016) indicating that EFL learners in applied linguistics may encounter challenges in various linguistic aspects, such as communication, grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Additionally, they often grapple with psychological issues, including self-confidence and fear of criticism. Unsatisfactory teaching practices and the neglect of oral language use within classrooms, primarily by instructors, were common themes in these studies. There is also a parallel with the present study and Al Hosni's (2014) research, which revealed that instructors tend to dominate oral communication in class. Similarly, Alhuqbani's (2014) study highlighted that the allocated time for learning needed adjustment, echoing the findings of the current research.

The researcher identified several obstacles that hindered cadets from effectively practicing their speaking skills. These challenges included a lack of motivation, weak vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation skills among some

students. Furthermore, insufficient emphasis on listening input, a predominant focus on teaching reading and writing skills, and an instructor-centered approach to teaching speaking all contributed to the difficulty in enhancing speaking competence among students. Additionally, many students lacked self-confidence, fluency, and feared criticism. Finally, inadequate time was allocated to developing speaking skills in (ESP) courses at King Abdulaziz Military Academy, and the evaluation of speaking skills within these courses was lacking.

In summary, the study underscores the need for a more comprehensive approach to teaching speaking skills in (ESP) courses, addressing the identified challenges and providing students with the necessary support and motivation to develop their speaking competence effectively.

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