EXPLORING THE SPEAKING STRATEGIES ADOPTED BY FEMALE UNDERGRADUATE LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES FOR GIRLS, WADI @ PSAU

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Abstract

English is taught and learned as Foreign Language (EFL), Second Language (ESL), Specific Purposes (ESP), Academic Purposes (EAP), Technical Purposes (EST), Business (Business English) globally including the Middle East countries. In accordance with the vision 2030, a key priority of the Saudi Kingdom is employing women and increasing their proportion of the labor market from the current 22 percent to 30 percent. (Fadia Jiffry) The labour market in turn demands oral competence among the female graduates focusing on communication, presentation skills, discussions, facing interviews and several aspects involving speaking proficiency. Yet, the Arabic speakers learning ESL seem to lack these oral skills in demand. The researcher has observed that the students find difficulty in expressing their thoughts in a second language classroom during the eight semester experience in teaching English Course at College of Arts & Science for Girls, Wadi Aldwasir, Saudi Arabia. They either prefer speaking in their mother tongue, Arabic or remain silent.

Therefore, the present study attempts to find difficulties faced by the students in learning the language and also their efforts in developing the language skills through both qualitative and quantitative research; a Likert 4 point scale questionnaire and interviews. It focuses largely on the productive skills of English language, speaking and the findings of the study reveal that majority of the girls prefer group and pair work speaking strategies in learning language.

Key Words: Language Learning (LL); English as a Foreign Language (EFL); Second Language Learning (SLL); Language Learning strategies (LLS); speaking strategies; mixed research survey
1. Introduction

Language performance can be improved by training students to use particular learning strategies (Chamot, 1990). Good language learners find a learning strategy that suits them, involve themselves in language learning process, and develop an awareness of language both as a system and as communication (Cook, 1991).

Learning strategies are helpful in enhancing comprehension and learning a language. Students are expected to learn taught them about learning. Therefore, it is high time to develop the general ideologies of learning, remember and solve problems and develop practical courses, and commence the position of these methods in academic curriculum (Norman, 1980).

1.1. Factors Influencing Strategies Choice

Oxford (1990-13) opines that the factors such as degree of awareness, stage of learning, task requirements, teacher expectations, age, sex, nationality, learning style, personality traits, motivation level and purpose of learning the language influence the choice of strategies. Generally, strategies are divided into two major classes—direct and indirect. These two are subdivided into a total of six groups---memory, cognitive, and compensation under the direct group and Meta-cognitive, affective and social under the indirect group of strategy.

The language learning strategies can be classified into the following five categories: Behavioural, psychological, linguistic, oral and various types of learners.

Rubin (1987) states that social and affective strategies are often classified into the same set of strategies thus, forming the socio-affective group of strategies. While Cognitive strategies concern mental steps or actions that are employed in learning or problem solving, and that require direct analysis, transformation or synthesis of learning material. They include processing language in the human mind and constitute mental processes directly concerned with obtaining, storage, retrieval and use of information in order to teach.

2. Statement of the Research Problem

The intention of the present study is to evaluate the speaking strategies adopted by the female undergraduates in the three colleges affiliated to PSAU. It discusses two basic questions-

1) What are factors that hinder their speaking competence?

2) What are the speaking strategies adopted by the target students?

3. Literature Review

Speaking is as essential as any other language skills; in fact, it is giving life to the language learning. Speaking proficiency depends upon several factors on the students’-medium of instruction, exposure, usage of English language at home and in the classrooms, interest, vocabulary limit, and finally their attempts in improving their speaking skills.
3.1. Medium of Instruction

English within Saudi Arabia has recently fueled a rapid increase in the numbers of local English language providers and has incentivized the government to support teaching English within Saudi schools from an earlier age (Moe, 2008). To support the declaration of English and improve the quality of general education, the government has also introduced a number of educational enterprises. Academic and economic zones have been established to allow for more foreign direct investment in education and training along with investor-oriented market regulations that are, nonetheless, highly restrictive by international standards (The Parthenon Group, 2011) – and incentives and funding to encourage the expansion and growth of the educational market (SAGIA, 2012).

The participants of the present study are Arabic speakers and exposed to ESL at a later stage of their secondary education. It greatly affects their second language learning as the previous studies indicate the influence of English Medium Instruction in the development of second language learning. The nature of instruction affects the learning and retention of a second language. (Bardovi-Harlig and Stringer, 2010) An investigation conducted by Huang (2015) and many other studies reveal that majority of the participants preferred English Medium Instruction of studies strengthen their English ability to a greater extent.

3.2. Exposure to English Language

Another major factor affecting their learning ESL is to consider their exposure to it. The study finds that the target students are hardly exposed to the language outside the classroom. Moreover, they start learning the language in the seventh grade. They learn major subjects in Arabic language at elementary and primary education and join English courses at undergraduate level. Their knowledge is very limited related to the basics of grammar, vocabulary, and elements of SLL. Learning a second language in an earlier age is more effective than that of later stages. A study conducted by Gawi (2012) found that age to a large extent affects EFL learning since early exposure to language instructions constantly results in enhancing the skills of English language learners. The introduction of English in the primary education in Saudi schools helps improving their speaking proficiency. Since the students get a maximum limit of exposure to the language at an early stages of learning a second language.

3.3. Usage of English language at home

The present study feels it necessary to discover the learners’ exposure of English usage at home. The Saudi girls rarely speak English at home with their family members. They neither regard it necessary to learn English because they rarely need to use it in their daily activities in or outside their family gatherings. They are comfortable in and around with the Arabic speakers. The target students seem to lack interest and motivation in using English for the same reason. Their only motive is to score grades in the EFL courses at the university level. Therefore, the environment plays an important role in improving the language proficiency.

3.4. Usage of English language in the classrooms
The present study reveals that the female undergraduate students feel convenient at using their mother language FL, Arabic in the classrooms. They respond to the queries of the instructors only in their FL in spite of being queried by the SL, English. It affects the growth of language proficiency largely. The government of Saudi Arabia was initially against teaching English at elementary schools because of the belief that learning English may affect a student’s learning of Arabic. However, because of the importance of English, the education system evolved in 2010, and English is now taught in lower levels of schooling as well (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015)

English teachers spend the majority of the lesson talking and rarely allow students a chance to speak or ask questions; thus, classes are usually quiet as students take a passive role in the learning process (Alkubaidi, 2014).

The absence of authentic language learning situations outside the classroom in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts, presents a significant challenge to improving students' English communication skills. Specific obstacles in the learning environment can also result in students' limited use of English inside the classroom. These issues ultimately affect students' English speaking capacity. (Alharbi, 2015)

3.5. Students’ interest in Learning English

Learning a SL largely depends on the interest among the learners. It greatly affects their progress of learning process. Thus, language learning can be hindered due to their lack of interest in learning the language. The researcher has noticed the similar attitude among the target girls who are least interested in learning the language. A survey concludes that intrinsic motivation, or a genuine interest in the language itself, is more effective over the long term than extrinsic motivation, as in learning a language for a reward such as high grades or praise (Ellis, 2002).

3.6. Students’ Vocabulary Limit

Language constitutes the vehicle on which both oral communication travel. It forms the foundation stone of education. The reason of language is to carry out the everyday jobs that speech does. In other words it is like an axe, a tool with which things are done. Words are tools with which people communicate. The more words students know, the better they can think, communicate and observe knowledge. Thus, it is essential to possess greater vocabulary limit for oral performance since it is a part of learning language process.(Tsai & Chang, 2009)

3.7. Students’ attempts in improving their speaking skills

The present study focuses on one of the important aspects of learning a SL, the attempts made by the students in improving their communicative skills. The attitude of learners in improving their speaking skills speaks volume. They should realize their intentions of learning the language and improving it by adopting various strategies.

The present study attempts to find the factors that hinder their speaking skills among the Saudi girls and their attitude in learning the language a Likert scale questionnaire.
4. Participants

The samples selected for the survey are 82 girl students of three colleges namely; College of Arts & Science for Girls (32), College of Education (24) and College of Nursing and Medicine (26) affiliated to PSAU in Wadi Aldwasir. The purpose behind selecting the three colleges from Wadi is to make the sample accurately representative.

5. Methodology

The methodology adopted in the present study is done with the help of two tools ---Likert Scale based questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The draft versions of the questionnaires are given to experts in the field in order to standardize the questionnaires before administering to the students. Necessary modifications and additions are done following the suggestions of the experts.

Likert scale based questionnaires are administered among the sample. The information is elicited with the help of interviews also, which in turn serves as support and supplements the information obtained through the questionnaires. The students’ questionnaire consists of 19 questions that comprises of five different parts to seek information and opinion of the students. The first section of the questionnaire helps in arriving at a profile of the students studying in the colleges under the present study. The proficiency in English language among the members of the sample varied widely. Besides administering the questionnaire to the students of the three college @ PSAU, an attempt is made to elicit information through the interviews.

5.1. Procedure used for Students’ interview:

Altogether 35 students are interviewed, 20 Arts & Sciences for Girls, 10 Medical and 5 Nursing students from the three colleges under the study. It is a purposeful attempt made by the researchers to interview the students belonging to different branches as it helped the researchers to know the communication skills requirements, needs and opinion of the students from different branches. This information is used by way of reinforcement of the information obtained through the questionnaire. The students are proven cooperative and showed interest in participation and in answering the questions.

5.2. Summary of the interview questions:

The questions asked to the first and final level students under the present study in the semi-structured interviews can be sum up as follows:

The query is focused on eliciting response on the students’ awareness, opinion and suggestions towards the need for good communication skills for better placements. The first level students are asked if they are aware of the importance of speaking skills. The probe is based on the first year students’ expectations from the prescribed English course books and their effectiveness in
catering to their communicative needs. They are enquired whether they are satisfied with content they are taught in the language classroom.

The Level-8 students are asked if they feel the need for a course in communication skills after they are explained the components that comprises in such a course, such as seminars, group discussions, pair work activities, group activities and a few sessions on interview skills and so on.

After obtaining a positive response to the questions the researchers have felt that there, is a scope for more information and an interrogation is finished further by seeking their opinion on introducing a communication skills course in the Eighth semester of B-A.

The final level students’ attitude towards English classrooms and the suggestions for introducing a course in communication skills in all the levels help them, meet their professional needs and so on formed a part of the semi-structured interview. These questions are developed to furnish information that cannot be elicited through the questionnaire. Moreover, this is done to ensure that the study is comprehensive and complete.

5.3. Objectives of the questionnaire

The Likert Scale questionnaire consists of 19 questions. The first three questions seek information on students’ name, class, branch and name of their college. This helped to build a profile of a cross section of students studying in the three colleges affiliated to PSAU. The data analysis is done both qualitatively and quantitatively. It is separated into three different phases based on the question patterns. The first phase is from 1-6 questions, while the second is from 7-14, the third is from 15-16, the fourth from 17-18 and the final section 19 covers an open ended question seeking their suggestions. (Annexure-1)

The survey covers several aspects related to finding the students’ speaking proficiency level, their interest in learning English language, usage of English in the lectures, prescribed course helps them improve their oral skills, their efforts in improving their speaking skills, their views on the significance of language learning strategies, their medium of instruction in school, their introduction to English Language learning, aims of the significance of learning and speaking English, their exposure to English language at home, their choice of the most important language skills, their difficulty in learning a particular language skill, their choice of people to converse in English, their vocabulary word list, their usage of English in the classrooms, their frequency in using English, best strategy necessary for improving speaking skills, strategies adopted by the students in improving speaking skills and the final question is an attempt to find out their suggestions to improve speaking skills.

6. Data Analysis

The study adopts the following rating to analyze the Likert scale data

Strongly Agree=4    Agree=3    Sometimes True =2    Never=1
The statistical analysis of the first four questions of three colleges is depicted in the below table. The average mean of the 1-6 questions is at 2.6 and 2.48 while that of mode is at 2.8, standard deviation is at 0.95, and the standard error value is at 0.1 significantly.

Table 1: Statistic Data Analysis of 1-6 Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1. Are you proficient in speaking English?</th>
<th>2. Learning English is enjoyable</th>
<th>3. Your instructors teach in English.</th>
<th>4. Your course syllabus is sufficient for improving your speaking.</th>
<th>5. You make attempts to improve your speaking skills</th>
<th>6. Strategies are helpful in improving oral skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MEAN</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>2.47</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>2.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MODE</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Dev</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Err</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second phase of questions from 7-14 depicts the quantitative analysis of the data collected from the 82 students belong to College of Arts & Science, College of Education and College of Medical and Nursing in the below table

Table 2: Quantitative Analysis of 7-14 Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q7. What was your medium of instruction in the School?</th>
<th>Arabic</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Both</th>
<th>Any other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>46</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q8. When did you start learning English?</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>Any other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q9. Speaking English is necessary to Pass exams</td>
<td>Pass</td>
<td>Interviews/jobs</td>
<td>Status</td>
<td>Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q10. Who else speaks English in your family?</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Husband</td>
<td>Siblings</td>
<td>Any other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q11. Which of the English language skills is essential according to you?</td>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td>Listening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q12. You face difficulty in Writing</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q13. With whom do you converse in English?</td>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Strangers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>36</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>35</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The purpose of the seventh question is to find out their medium of instruction in their early stages of learning a second language.

In all the three colleges, a large percentage 46% of the students completed their schooling in Arabic mode of instruction, while 22% English, and 16% Both English and Arabic and None of them studied in any other mode of instruction.

Thus, majority of them are educated in Arabic medium of instruction in their schooling. It obviously affects their English proficiency in higher education. Apart from Arabic and English, they are unaware of other languages.

The eighth question seeks information on how long they have been learning English as second language.

Thus, out of 82 respondents from the three different colleges, 14% students started learning English since primary classes, 33% secondary classes, 35% students have been learning since their college admission and none of them learned it in any other courses.

It can be assumed that only 14% of the students are exposed to English from the beginning. While, most of them are compelled to learn the language at undergraduate level as there is no other alternative. This reveals that majority of the students completed schooling in their vernacular language.

The ninth question aims to explore their awareness on the necessity of learning English language. The present study feels it necessary to let the learners be conscience of the purpose of learning a second language. Out of 82 students 11% of them it is necessary to learn speaking English to pass the examination while 21% to attend interviews and obtain jobs, 18% to show off their status in the society ad 32% are aware that that it is essential to communicate with others.

The tenth question targets at discovering their exposure to English language at home, where the first step of learning takes place. 20% of the girls speak in English with their fathers, while 16% with their husbands, 10% with their siblings and only 2% of them with other members of the family.

The eleventh question elicits students’ information on the important skill among all the four languages of English language listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Speaking has received highest importance among the entire language skills 43% followed by Listening in second place 14% and Writing in the third place 17% (%). Only 8% of the students regard Reading as an important skill of English. Therefore, it can be assumed that speaking is the core skill of English language.

The present study tries to explore the main factor affecting their speaking proficiency and the twelfth question is directed towards it. Out of 82 respondents, 13% of them expressed their
difficulty in Writing skills, while 34% in Reading, 10% in Speaking and 25% of them in Listening.

The next question aims to discover their usage of English outside the classroom. The study probes with whom they converse in English through the thirteenth question. They converse mostly 36% with their faculty, while others 15% with friends, 16% with family and 15% with strangers. It is obvious that their usage in English is more with the instructors and education need.

The fourteenth question targets at their vocabulary limit in regards of lexical terms that they are aware of in their daily conversation. Surprisingly, only 9% possess above 2000 vocabulary knowledge, while maximum of them below 500 words, 27% between 500 and 1000 and 11% possess 1000 to 2000 vocabulary limits. This indicates one of the factors that hinder the speaking proficiency of the students is lack of sufficient vocabulary knowledge.

The next two questions focus on the maximum usage of English by the Arabic learners in and outside the classroom. The responses are discussed in the below table.

**Table-3 Analysis of 15 & 16 Questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Always</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q.15. Do you ask questions in English to clarify your doubts in the subjects?</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Out of 82 respondents to the fifteenth question only 14% of the students clarify their doubts in the classroom, while 33% sometimes, 10% rarely and 25% never.

Only 9% of them frequently use English, while 23% sometimes, 20% rarely and majority of them 30% never.

Therefore, it is evident that their usage of second language is limited in and outside the classroom.

The next set of two questions throw light on their reflection on the speaking strategies. Majority of the respondents 40% prefer group activities in improving their speaking proficiency while 13% Self-Learning, 14% Reading Aloud and 15% presentations.

The quantitative analysis of the questions 17 & 18 is presented in the below table.

**Table-4 Quantitative Analysis of 17&18 Questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Group Activities</th>
<th>Self-Learning</th>
<th>Reading Aloud</th>
<th>Presentations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q.17. What according to you is the</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The final question is an open ended question that aims to elicit their suggestions to improve their speaking proficiency. The responses are as follows:

- Group Activities
- Reading Aloud
- Self-learning
- Translation
- Presentations
- Watching T.V
- Listening to News
- Spoken English Courses
- Speaking with family members
- Reading books
- Silent method
- Task-based and Audio-lingual Method
- Listening to songs
- Learn grammar at basic levels
- Watch videos
- Try speaking daily
- Create English clubs in the campus
- Improve vocabulary
- Language games
- Error analysis
- CDs along with text books
- Use of technology

Thus, the last three questions explore the students’ efforts on improving their speaking skills. It can be assumed that students apply unconsciously strategies in learning English language.

7. Conclusion

The investigation reveals students’ attitudes towards language learning, especially speaking skills activities such as like pair work, group work, individual or group presentation, as well as general discussions have become quite familiar and often-used ways. Terms like teacher-centered, student-centered, students’ participation, confidence, motivation, interest, relaxed atmospheres, encouragement, creativity, etc., were often heard at the discussion meetings. The current action research conducted may be helpful for teachers in exploring the new concepts.
After obtaining a positive response to the questions the researcher has felt that there is a scope for more information and recommend on introducing a communication skills course, Multimedia lab and focus on pair-work and group-work activities at all the levels of B-A.

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