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A. Suleimenova .¹, Zh .Zhylytyrova.T.²

¹Suleyman Demirel University, Kazakhstan, Kaskelen

²Kazakh National Agrarian Research University

SPEAKING CHALLENGES FACED BY BACHELOR DEGREE STUDENTS IN KAZAKHSTAN

Abstract. In the context of Kazakhstani university of Narxoz, the current study tried to explore the difficulties faced by Bachelor Degree students and the possible causal factors of these difficulties while speaking English as a foreign language. In this study, the researcher applied two qualitative approaches: open-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interview as a research tool to collect data. 10 students from the Faculty of Digital Engineering at the University of Narxoz were invited to participate for both interview and questionnaire. The collected data were analyzed through thematic analysis in terms of two major categories: challenges and causes which were divided into four sub-categories of broad terms. Moreover, the study attempted to reveal some ideas and ways of solving these speaking difficulties suggested by students themselves. The findings found out the most common speaking difficulties which were divided into linguistic, personal and social problems, while teacher and teaching, course content, poor schooling and classroom environment were found to be the primary causes of speaking deficiency. The most common ideas to improve speaking skills and to overcome their language barriers, students were advised to attend language courses or to be actively involved in classes at the university as well as to do more self-study work. As regards suggestions for teachers, they were recommended to change their current methods to more effective and to more practical ways of teaching. Also, students wished that their educators focus on more practice of oral production which can be provided in form of different competitive games and activities.

Keywords: speaking challenges, English language learners, university students, speaking fluency.

Аңдатпа. Қазақстан Нархоз университетінің контекстінде, бұл зерттеу бакалавриат студенттерінің және ағылшын тілін шет тілі ретінде сөйлеу кезінде кездесетін қиындықтары мен осы қиындықтардың ықтимал себептік факторларын зерттеуге тырысты. Бұл зерттеуде зерттеуші екі сапалы тәсілді қолданды: ашық сауалнама және деректерді жинау құралы ретінде жартылай құрылымдалған сұхбат. Нархоз Университетінің цифрлық инженерия факультетінің 10 студенті сұхбатқа

да, сауалнамаға да қатысуға шақырылды. Жиналған деректер екі негізгі категория бойынша тақырыптық талдау арқылы талданды: мәселелер мен себептер тағы да кең тақырыптар негізде іштей төрт санатқа бөлінді. Зерттеу нәтижелері сөйлеу кезінде ең көп кездесетін қиындықтар ретінде лингвистикалық, жеке, экологиялық және әлеуметтік мәселелерін айқындады, ал мұғалім мен оқыту, курстың мазмұны, мектептегі нашар білім және сыныптағы орта еркін сөйлей алмау тапшылығының негізгі себептері ретінде танылды.

Түйін сөздер: ауызекі сөйлеу қиындықтары, ағылшын тілін үйренушілері, жоғары оқу орындарының студенттері, еркін сөйлеу.

Аннотация. В контексте Казахского университета Нархоз в настоящем исследовании была предпринята попытка изучить трудности, с которыми сталкиваются студенты бакалавриата, и возможные причинные факторы этих трудностей при говорении на английском языке как иностранный язык. В этом исследовании исследователь применил два качественных подхода: открытую анкету и полу структурированное интервью в качестве инструментов исследования для сбора данных. 10 студентов факультета цифровой инженерии Университета Нархоз были приглашены для участия как в интервью, так и в анкетировании. Собранные данные были проанализированы посредством тематического анализа с точки зрения двух основных категорий: проблемы и причины были раздеоены с четырьмя подкатегориями широких тем. Результаты выявили наиболее распространенные трудности с речью, которые были разделены на лингвистические, личные, экологические и социальные проблемы, в то время как учитель и преподавание, содержание курса, плохое школьное образование и среда в классе были признаны основными причинами дефицита разговорной речи.

Ключевые слова: трудности разговорной речи, изучающие английского языка, студенты вузов, беглость речи.

Introduction

The main success of learning English as a foreign or second language tend to be measured by students' proficient speaking abilities and good communication skills. However, the problem is that speaking is not always accepted as an easy experience for most learners of the English language, due to some speaking difficulties that students encounter in their day-to-day English classes. As Ur (2002) stated, compared with other skills of English language, speaking plays an essential role and at same time it is considered to be a difficult skill to acquire. In Kazakhstan, as in most countries in the world, English plays an important role in many spheres and it is taught as a foreign language. Even

though, the education system of Kazakhstan has been showing the considerable interest in the improvement of the English language from school ages till university level, learners still seem to have challenges in learning, especially in speaking skills. Therefore, the main aims of the current paper was to identify the most common speaking challenges experienced by Narxoz university undergraduate students and also to discover some causes of these challenges of speaking in English as well as to elicit the possible solutions to eliminate these speaking difficulties from students.

The significance of the study.

Working as an EFL teacher at the university of Narxoz, what the researcher observed from students' attitudes to speaking exams was that they tend to prefer written tests to oral ones, as they find them highly stressful and they believe that there are more probability to fail their exam. On the basis of such observation results, the researcher found it necessary to reveal the possible reasons and causes of any difficulties that arise during students' speaking practices or tests. Furthermore, the findings of the study may certainly provide some help other EFL teachers to build better relationship and mainly to create a positive atmosphere where students might face fewer challenges and get more motivated to achieve better results in their studies.

Speaking skill in the English language

As Masduqi (2016) stated there are four types of skills in English language, such as receptive (reading and listening) and productive skills (speaking and writing). As the main goal of learning any foreign language is the ability to speak, to communicate effectively and to be understood by other, speaking is regarded to be the most important skill among other skills of English language.

This can be confirmed by the fact that speaking enables learners to hold successful conversation and manage interaction. [Dieuha, 2020]. According to Nazara (2011), learners feel the need of improving their speaking skills in English, as they believe that their language proficiency is measured by speaking. Brown and Yule (2001) also emphasized the fact that success of learning foreign language can be measured by the capability of making a conversation and exchange of information in that language which reinforces the importance of speaking skill development. Despite the vital role of speaking skills in English, speaking has been overlooked in many schools and universities, where the possible reasons outlined by Dieuha, T.N. (2020) outlined could be 'emphasis on grammar and unfavorable teacher-student proportions'. Due to other different reasons behind the speaking issues, speaking is still found as a difficult skill to learn. Many learners claimed that they have spent so many years studying English language but they still cannot speak properly and understandably. [Bueno, Madrid, McLaren, 2006].

Speaking challenges faced by EFL or ESL learners

Speaking is one of the most important skills for learners as a tool for communication. It is also vital to develop this skill in English language, as Nunan (1991) emphasized the vitality of speaking development in learning English as learners' success can be assessed by the ability to communicate in English. Brown (1987) reported in his study most foreign language learners find speaking in FL, especially in public, due its 'anxiety-provoking character in nature' which in its turn might lead to the failure in talking to the interlocutors, especially with native speakers. Even though the main goal of teaching speaking is to foster students' communicative efficiency, they often face such challenges as hesitation, repetition and too many pauses. These issues might be due to lack of interest in subject, lack of confidence and so on. Ur (1991) outlined common problems in mastering speaking in their EFL classes which are: inhibition, nothing to say, low or uneven participation and mother tongue. By the problem of inhibition, it can be inferred that learners often feel inhibited and lack of confidence to speak up in front of their classmates, due to the fear of making mistakes and criticism. Even they are not worried about their speech, learners often say that they have nothing to say which may be explained by their lack of motivation and little preparation for the task. The third speaking issue of learners is little or unbalanced participation in the classroom. As teachers do not always design their lessons using appropriate teaching materials, methods and strategies that improve their learners' oral skills, such as grouping them properly in pairs or in small groups, talkative and active students may dominate the class, by leaving little or no time for others to talk. The last speaking challenge is the used of students' L1. This is because learners tend to feel more comfortable and easy to speak in their native language especially, in monolingual classes where everyone including teacher speaks in their language. Hammer (2001) stressed out the fact the use of mother tongue is natural and we all use translations in our head during learning process. However, he confirmed that it is not only learners' responsibility, teachers should also control their use of L1 and encourage their students to practice foreign language more often than L1 as this hinders the improvement of speaking skills. As regards the problem of audio medium, Ur (1991) proved in his study that listening plays a crucial role in promoting speaking skill. He reinforced the correlation of speaking and listening, by saying that listening feeds speaking, by getting appropriate exposure from listening, learners will apply them into their oral production. Many researchers pointed out the role of the affective factors in speaking challenges. According to Oxford (1990), they were 'self-esteem, empathy, anxiety, attitude, motivation'. 'The feeling of uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt and apprehension' by Brown (1994) played an important part in making learners' speech slower.

Previous studies

There were numerous similar studies conducted in different areas around the world. One of the them was by Chand, G.B. (2021). The study was aimed to explore the speaking difficulties that university students faced and also to

identify causal factors to these problems. The findings of the study showed that speaking difficulties were divided into sub-categories such as social, personal, environmental, and linguistic problems. While classroom environment, teacher and teaching methods, overuse of L1, the content of course and poor learning were considered to be main causes of speaking problems. In the same line, Wandu. S et al (2019) conducted a research in Indonesia which investigated Bachelor Degree students' perceptions and their difficulties encountered in both private and public universities. The study found that shyness, lack of vocabulary and learning environment, dealing with mistakes and lectures' reaction during English speaking classes. The researcher found some differences in causal factors perceived by students from public and private universities. Another similar study conducted was by Al-Esaifer & Alshareef (2018) which was aimed to discover speaking challenges that encounter 2nd and 3rd year EFL university students. The study results revealed the some problems related to classroom conditions and methods that teachers use in their teaching. Ratnasari, A.G (2020) carried out a case in an Mechanical Engineering Department so as to find out EFL students speaking challenges at the university. Along with that, the study found out the main strategies used by students to overcome speaking difficulties such as using google for translations, building a good rapport with a teacher, supporting and stimulating yourself and code-switching and so on. Furthermore, another local study done by Batyrova, A (2020) explored Kazakhstani school pupils' challenges on speaking skills and their strategies to eliminate these speaking problems, through the use of phenomenography study. It found out that students' speaking challenges were mainly ascribed to psychological and linguistic unpreparedness. The results of the studies previously conducted were almost similar and some of them focused on the problems and solutions of EFL speaking practices, while others tried to elicit some strategies or more causal factors affecting these speaking difficulties in English classroom.

Research Questions:

- 1 What challenges do undergraduate level students encounter in speaking English?
- 2 What are the possible causes of their speaking issues?
- 3 How can learners deal with speaking challenges? (from students' perspectives)

Research Methodology.

The present research was carried out at the University of Narxoz, in Almaty using a qualitative research design. The participants of the study were second-year students (2022-2023 academic year) from Digital Engineering faculty of Narxoz University, speaking Kazakh as a native language and approximately showing pre-intermediate-level proficiency of English. 10 students were sampled applying purposive sampling procedures, who could not speak fluently according to their previous speaking assessment results and presentation skills. Being an English teacher of this group, the researcher observed their presentation

skill and oral performances many times. Therefore, the researcher selected students who were having problems in oral speech. To obtain the needed data, the researcher employed two research tools: open-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interviews for the participants. Firstly, students had gone through open-ended questionnaire and then later they were asked to have an individual, face-to-face interview based on semi-structured interview protocols.

Findings.

The data gathered from the interview and questionnaire were categorized into three main groups: Problems of speaking, causes of speaking challenges and student's suggestions to solve out the speaking problems.

Problems of Speaking

In both questionnaire and interview, students responded to the question of what challenges they encountered during their speaking in English classroom. As a result, students' speaking difficulties were highly repetitive mentioning one and same problems almost in everyone's experiences. So, the most striking problems that majority of students described were: feeling shy and nervous, lack of vocabulary and grammar knowledge, fear of criticism from peers as well as fear of making mistakes. The responses from both interview and questionnaire were grouped into three categories: Individual, Social and Linguistic problems.

Table 1. Problems of Speaking

Themes generated	Specific problems
Personal problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nervousness; • Hesitation; • Shyness; • Anxiety about personal accents;
Linguistic problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problems in selecting a right word; • Problems in fluency; • Problems in using grammar structures properly; • Mother tongue interference; • Relying on memorized speeches during exams;
Social problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear of criticism from peers; Fear of making mistakes

Personal Problems.

Even though students' speaking difficulties can be largely affected by their environmental and some other external factors, the participants of the study mentioned that feeling of nervousness, hesitation, long pauses, shyness and

worries about their accents were mainly what often hindered their oral communication. Most of respondents shared the most common problem was nervousness. One of students pointed out that “I start feeling nervous and worried when I make long pauses because for me it is hard to express my opinions.” (S5). Another participant noted that “I find it so stressful to speak up in public at length, especially spontaneously, if I did not memorize my speech very well.” (S2). Apart from that, students focused much on their personal accents, and thus they often felt anxious and fearful of others’ criticizing them. “I know that I have a Kazakh accent and I often feel less anxious about it, because I believe it does not sound natural or beautiful.”(S10).

Linguistic Problems.

These are the most widely experienced challenges of speaking English as FL. The lack of vocabulary or inability of choosing appropriate words or forgetting the words was the problem stated by most students of the target university. One of the students noted that “I think that I can’t speak English fluently because I take too much time to choose the right words and I often forget or get confused which words suit best in certain cases’. Another apparent problem was that the participants reported that they did not know grammar structures and did not understand how to use them in both practice and production as followed. The next speaking challenges that impede speaking fluency was mother tongue interference, and this is because students often practiced switching to their own language quickly especially during group work activities in the classroom.

Social Problems.

Due to various reasons and cultural influences, majority of students from the study outlined that the fear of being criticized or insulted in front of other students when they express their ideas with improper grammar or vocabulary use. Similarly, students are also afraid of making mistakes in their speech, especially if it is an open class discussions. One of participants of the study said that “it is Kazakh people’s mentality to laugh at someone if the person mispronounces the words or misuses the structures in their speech. I always pay attention to others’ reactions because it is very important for me what others say about my speaking. Because of it, I always get nervous while speaking in English .” While another student pointed out that “I felt so stressed to speak freely even within small groups, as there students who had more fluent speech than me and they were always dominant in speaking, whereas other lower leveled students like me, kept silent all the time.” (S6). Due to the disbalanced proportion of speaking time among peers, where more active and more proficient students dominate other passive students with their speaking abilities.

Causes of Speaking Difficulties.

In the second part of data collection, students were asked to list the possible casual factors of their speaking difficulties and they were presented in the table 2 and later they were described in detail in this section. The main factors caused

speaking challenges were divided into four categories: Teacher/teaching methods, classroom environment, poor schooling and course content.

Table 2. Causes of speaking problems

Themes generated	Specific problems
Teacher and teaching methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Old fashioned teaching methods; • Mixed ability classes; • Large class sizes; • Lack of motivation to speak English;
Classroom environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unfavorable classroom atmosphere; • Relying on memorized speeches during exams; • Disbalance of presentation and practice of new materials;
Poor schooling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students from poor background knowledge from school;
Course content factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Courses focused more on written tasks not in speaking; • Insufficiency of classroom activities for speaking fluency;

Course content:

Teacher and Teaching Factors

In this research, many students highlighted the important role of teachers in their English classes. They can be a motivator, a facilitator and a creator of positive atmosphere and various speaking activities. One of the student mentioned that “This semester, I became more stimulated to study English compared to the previous year, as this year we had a new teacher who was always friendly and supportive. Mainly, she could keep the variety of activities in the lessons, so we could do different interactive activities and games.”(S1). The causal factors that were revealed as a result of the questionnaires and interview were mostly interrelated. For instance, teachers at the university still seemed to use conventional methods, making more teacher-centered classes where they waste huge time on explanations of new language items in front of class and thus leaving little time for students to practice target language orally.

The responses from the student 8 and 4 can confirm these issues mentioned above. "We usually have little time to practice speaking in pairs or in groups, what we mostly do is to listen to the teacher's explanations and after that we do a lot of written exercises ." Another issue related to Narxoz university was the size of the groups which was too large for language classes (20-28 students in one group), and also the time devoted to English classes was only 70 minutes, which seemed too little time to control everyone's contributions. Moreover, student number 7 commented that they studied at mixed ability group in the first year of Bachelor Degree where she often felt nervous and shy to speak out in front of more proficient students who expressed themselves more freely. This means that a mixed ability classes may also cause some speaking difficulties such as anxiety or frustration when there are students with more fluent speech.

Classroom environment.

Most of the participants confirmed that there are lack of practice on speaking skills in English classes and that they mostly accomplish more written tasks. Moreover, teachers do not always try to bring some more interactive and collaborative tasks which make them discuss some issues in a group, do role-plays and other different games and activities. "We do not have much time for speaking tasks, and teachers also do not attempt to change their methods to more communicative" (S2). Therefore, as teachers were often less desired to create more encouraging and more friendly atmosphere in the classroom, students tend to lose interest in speaking English and they seemed to perceive speaking as something unattainable and difficult to learn. Moreover, what students reported that teachers do not devote enough time to do more productive oral tasks, which make learners prepare longer speech or some presentations.

Poor schooling.

From the data, it was found that students saw the reason of their current difficulties in speaking in their background knowledge at school, where they had little or no speaking practice at all. Student 8 and 5 pointed out "I think that I have a fear of speaking English in front of class is that we almost never had such experience of speaking in pairs, in groups or in front of the whole class." (S8 and S5). So, it was clear that if they could get good knowledge at school, students could speak more fluently at the university period.

Course content and Intuitional system.

During the interview, some of the students also pointed out that the content of course do not include a lot of speaking activities, despite some pair discussions. Therefore, students did not have much chance to develop their oral production. The activities that the students had to do were to read some texts, to answer some questions in pairs and to learn some new words from there. Furthermore, they were always listening teacher's long explanations on grammar/vocabulary on the board which made them again become passive. One of the students argued that "I and my groupmates find speaking exam really stressful and in order not fail we always try to memorize texts prepared by

ourselves. This is because, we do not practice speaking skills much and instead of preparation for speaking, we do lot of tests on use of English.”

Students' suggestions to students and teachers on how to develop speaking skills

The most common ideas that participants advocated were to rely more on yourself, by doing a lot of home tasks, revision of previous materials and doing self-study as well as to try to speak a lot both in and out of classroom paying less attention on accuracy. As regards the ideas for teachers, they mostly wished that their teachers changed their old methods to more effective ones and to motivate their students to practice speaking more. Furthermore, they suggested EFL teachers to organize more competitive games and activities in small groups as they found it both entertaining and team building activity.

Conclusion

From the analysis of results outline above, it can be said that speaking is regarded as the most significant skill among other skills in the English language. Speaking was also found to be the toughest skill to master by EFL students of Narxoz University, Almaty. The study revealed four major speaking difficulties such as personal problems, linguistic problems, social problems and environmental problems. On the basis of participants' answers, the primary causes of speaking difficulties were categorized into four main groups such as teacher/teaching methods, classroom environment, poor schooling and the course content factors. As a result of interviews, students' ideas to overcome these difficulties were mainly to rely on more on self-study in enlarging vocabulary word stock and to actively participate in classroom as well as out of classroom activities. As regards their suggestions for EFL teachers, they were mainly to make the learning atmosphere more fun and positive by bringing more effective teaching methods to their speaking classes as well as to make more interactive oral practices in the classroom. Along with students' ideas and suggestions, the study also suggested creating English-speaking atmosphere in the classroom, changing existing English teaching methods and the course content to more learner-centered and more communicative way of teaching.

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