

How to Cite:

Suliman, W. M. M. (2021). Psychological factors affecting the speaking performance of EFL Saudi students. *Linguistics and Culture Review*, 5(S4), 2575-2583. Retrieved from <https://lingcure.org/index.php/journal/article/view/2277>

Psychological Factors Affecting the Speaking Performance of EFL Saudi Students

Wijdan Mohieldeen Mohammed Suliman

Department of English Language and Translation, College of Science and Arts at Al Asyah, Qassim University, Buraydah, Saudi Arabia

Abstract---This research delves into the intricate web of psychological factors influencing Saudi female students' English as a Foreign Language (EFL) performance. Since this study is qualitative, direct observation was conducted to document every incident in the speaking class in its natural environment. The researcher also performs interviews to learn more about the psychological elements affecting students' oral class presentations. This research presents a concise overview of key psychological factors, their impact on speaking performance, and potential implications for language instruction. Also, it highlights the significance of self-esteem and self-efficacy in the EFL speaking context. It explores how students' perceptions of their abilities, confidence levels, and beliefs about language learning can either empower or impede their spoken language output. Furthermore, the role of anxiety and fear in EFL speaking is discussed, focusing on how these emotions can create a hostile environment for effective communication. It concludes by highlighting the intricate interplay of psychological factors that shape the speaking performance of EFL students. Finally, it underscores the need for further research to understand better and address the unique psychological challenges EFL learners face, ultimately enhancing their speaking proficiency and overall language acquisition experience.

Keywords---anxiety, emotions, psychological factors, self-esteem, speaking performance.

Introduction

Speaking is a critical ancient: expert opinion on the dawn of complex language varies from 60,000 to 100,000 years ago (Treasure 2017). According to linguists and language experts, speaking skills encompass a range of abilities related to oral communication and language production. These skills are crucial for effective

communication in everyday and formal conversations. Linguists often categorize speaking skills into several key components, which can include:

- **Pronunciation:** Pronunciation refers to the way words and sounds are articulated. Precise and accurate pronunciation is essential for effective communication. Linguists study the phonetics and phonology of a language to understand how sounds are produced and perceived.
- **Intonation:** Intonation describes the rising and falling of pitch in speech. It plays a significant role in conveying meaning, mood, and emphasis in spoken language. Linguists examine intonation patterns within a language and how they affect communication.
- **Fluency:** involves speaking smoothly and coherently without hesitations, pauses, or interruptions. It reflects a speaker's comfort and proficiency in using a language. Linguists analyze factors that influence fluency, such as speech rate and rhythm.
- **Vocabulary:** A strong speech is crucial for effective speaking. Linguists study the lexicon of a language, including word meanings, synonyms, antonyms, and idiomatic expressions, to understand how speakers use words to convey meaning.
- **Grammar** refers to the rules and structures governing a language's sentence formation and word order. Linguists examine the syntax and morphology of a language to understand how sentences are constructed and how grammatical rules are applied in speech.
- **Pragmatics:** Pragmatics deals with the use of language in context and how speakers convey meaning beyond the literal interpretation of words. This includes understanding implicatures, indirect speech acts, and conversational norms. Linguists study how speakers use language to achieve their communicative goals.
- **Sociolinguistics:** Sociolinguistics explores how language varies across different social contexts and among various groups of speakers. Linguists examine dialects, accents, and language variation to understand how speakers adapt their speech to different situations and audiences.
- **Discourse analysis:** Discourse analysis highlights the structure and organization of longer stretches of spoken language, such as conversations, speeches, or narratives. Linguists analyze how speakers use discourse markers, cohesion, and coherence to convey meaning effectively.
- **Communication strategies:** Linguists also study the processes that speakers employ to overcome communication barriers, such as using paraphrasing, gestures, or visual aids to enhance their message's clarity.
- **Articulatory and phonological features:** Linguists may investigate the physical aspects of speech production, such as the movements of the vocal organization and the acoustic properties of speech sounds.

Practical speaking skills involve integrating these components to convey thoughts, ideas, and emotions clearly and appropriately in different contexts. Linguists and language educators work to understand how these skills develop in individuals and how they can be improved through language instruction and practice.

Literature Review

Importance of speaking skill

According to Richards (2008), students frequently base their assessment of their language learning achievement and the success of their English course on how much they believe their spoken language competency has improved. Speaking skills are essential in virtually every aspect of life. They enable effective communication, facilitate personal and professional growth, and open doors to many opportunities. Individuals who invest in developing their speaking skills are better equipped to navigate and succeed in today's interconnected and communicative world.

Psychological Effects on Students' Speaking Skills

There are many reasons why students may find learning and using English difficult. According to *, there are two kinds of problems that most learners are confronted with: psychological issues and linguistic difficulties. This can lead to natural communication barriers and contribute to poor motivation in learning (Baker & Westrup 2003). Students' speaking skills can have various psychological effects, both positive and negative. These effects can significantly influence their academic performance, self-esteem, and well-being. Here are some of the psychological effects on students' speaking skills:

Positive Effects

- **Confidence:** Developing strong speaking skills can boost a student's self-confidence. As they become more proficient in expressing themselves orally, they gain confidence in their abilities, which can extend to other areas of their academic and personal lives. Some students lack the confidence to speak up because they worry about being made fun of for their errors and lack of lexical and grammatical ability.
- **Self-esteem:** Success in speaking activities, such as presentations or debates, can contribute to higher self-esteem among students. Feeling capable of articulating their thoughts and ideas can positively impact their self-worth.
- **Effective Communication:** Developing speaking skills helps students become better communicators. They can send their thoughts and feelings more clearly and persuasively, which improves their interpersonal relationships and reduces communication-related anxiety.
- **Critical Thinking:** Preparing for speeches or debates often demands students to engage in critical thinking and research. This can stimulate their intellectual growth and enhance their problem-solving abilities.
- **Public Speaking Skills:** Mastering these skills can lead to feelings of accomplishment and competence for students who engage in public speaking or presentations. These positive emotions can carry over to other aspects of their academic and personal lives.
- **Leadership Development:** Effective speaking skills are often associated with leadership qualities. Students who excel in public speaking may be more

likely to take on leadership roles in clubs, organizations, or student government, which can boost their self-esteem and sense of purpose.

Negative Effects

- **Anxiety:** For some students, the fear of public speaking can lead to significant anxiety. This fear, known as gloss phobia, can hinder academic success and negatively impact their self-esteem. Language anxiety is a feeling of disquiet, tension, or even panic arising from a person's perception when learning or using a second language. It is a linguistic way of expressing anxiety, unease, or emotional turmoil in a particular scenario. Numerous students have language anxiety for a variety of reasons. Horwitz et al. (1986) define it as a unique complex of self-perceptions, attitudes, sentiments, and behaviours associated with language instruction in the classroom that result from the unique nature of the language learning process. MacIntyre (1991) states that language anxiety is the concern and unfavourable emotional response elicited by learning or utilizing a second language.
- **Performance Pressure:** High expectations for speaking performance, such as grades or competition, can lead to performance pressure and stress. This pressure can be particularly intense for students who struggle with speaking skills.
- **Fear of Failure:** Students who have had negative experiences with speaking in public may develop a fear of failure, which can inhibit their willingness to participate in speaking activities or seek opportunities for improvement.
- **Social Pressure:** Peer judgment and social pressure can affect students' willingness to speak in front of their classmates. The fear of embarrassment or ridicule can be a significant psychological barrier.
- **Self-criticism:** Students may be highly self-critical when evaluating their speaking performance. This self-criticism can lead to feelings of inadequacy and reduce their confidence in their abilities.
- **Avoidance Behavior:** Some students may avoid speaking activities altogether due to anxiety or fear. This avoidance can limit their academic and personal growth.
- It's essential to recognize that students' experiences with speaking skills can vary widely. While some students may naturally excel and thrive in speaking situations, others may struggle and require support and guidance. Teachers and educators can play a critical role in generating a supportive and inclusive classroom environment that encourages all students to develop their speaking skills while addressing any adverse psychological effects, such as anxiety or fear, through effective teaching techniques and counselling support.

Methodology

Participants

Students of the English Department (approximately 120) aged between 19 and 24 in the academic year 2020 at the College of Science and Arts at Alasyah, Qassim University, Saudi Arabia, are the focus of this study. Since the researcher is the

head of the English department and teaches students from different levels, all students come to her office for various topics. So, the researcher believes she may satisfy the goal of qualitative sampling, where purposive sampling is used to choose participants who may supply specific information pertinent to the study's objectives.

Instruments and Procedure

The researcher applied the qualitative method in this study. One of the critical components of the researcher's analysis of the participants to obtain the data she needs for her study is the research instrument. In this instance, the researcher serves as the primary tool for examining the phenomena that emerged during the speaking exercises the students completed in the classroom. According to Punch (2009), the interview is the most important method for gathering data for qualitative research. It is valuable for learning about people's interpretations, meanings, and definitions of events and reality constructs.

Doing interviews is frequently a reliable and effective method of learning about someone's viewpoint; observation can help make conclusions you couldn't get from using interview data alone (Patton 2015). The process of obtaining open-ended, first-hand information through seeing people and places at a research site is what Creswell (2012) defines as observation. Regarding this, the researcher watched the students as they presented their speech to the class and attempted to use English, which they don't usually do, in their interactions. Apart from the information gathered through the observations, the researcher also interviewed some students. There was no framework for the interviews.

Data Analysis

It is crucial that the researcher describes how she analyzed the data after gathering it using the methods mentioned above. She started by systematically collecting and organizing the data into a coherent structure. For the interview, the researcher created transcripts; for observations, she maintained a detailed record of what had been observed. In the classroom, the researcher gave her students some topics to discuss, while outside the classroom, she tended to talk to them in English instead of Arabic, their mother tongue.

Findings and Discussion

Preliminary findings suggest that self-esteem and self-efficacy significantly influence EFL students' speaking performance, with higher levels of confidence correlating positively with improved verbal expression. Additionally, anxiety emerges as a prominent barrier to effective speaking, with various manifestations and triggers identified among participants. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation appear to be critical drivers of speaking performance, as students who are more intrinsically motivated tend to exhibit greater fluency and accuracy in their spoken English.

The second instance involves the speaking class pupils displaying low self-esteem. Given its strong link with students' speaking performance, this psychological

component may make it more difficult for them to talk Adelaide (1979). Moreover, it is closely linked to their incapacity in English and their view of English as a foreign language.

Additionally, the results above indicate a psychological component related to the student's lack of motivation. This becomes the psychological component that influences their decision to talk in English, in addition to anxiety and self-esteem. Since motivation is thought to be one of the most important factors in determining whether students succeed or fail in acquiring a language, teachers must be aware of motivation's significant impact on students' achievement in language learning (Ali & Savas, 2013).

Furthermore, shyness seems to prevent students from participating in the speaking class. In connection with this, it's fascinating to learn that shyness may contribute to low self-esteem (Elhadi, 2015). This finding suggests that if students wish to perform better when speaking, they need to put in a lot of effort to identify or, at the very least, reduce this component. Fear is a significant factor that might impact students' language acquisition, especially in speaking (Elhadi, 2015).

Regarding the above research findings, the outcome indicates that most students experience anxiety when speaking in front of an audience. This is undeniable since many classroom activities, mainly speaking, elicit Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) (Ziaurahman & Norrihan, 2015). Finally, intercultural competence plays a crucial role in cross-cultural communication, affecting the quality of EFL students' interactions.

The aforementioned psychological factors may result from students using their mother tongue excessively, which naturally has different patterns from English in terms of pronunciation, stress patterns, and intonation, leading to confusion among students when using the foreign language they have learned (Latha, 2012).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the intricate web of psychological factors explored in this research has shed light on the multifaceted nature of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' speaking performance. Through a comprehensive investigation into self-esteem, self-efficacy, anxiety, motivation, and intercultural competence, it is evident that these factors play substantial roles in shaping the oral communication abilities of EFL learners.

Self-esteem and self-efficacy emerged as crucial determinants of success in EFL speaking. Students with higher self-esteem and self-efficacy tend to exhibit greater confidence in their speaking abilities, leading to more fluent and effective communication. These findings underscore the importance of nurturing students' self-belief and self-perception as capable language users.

As a prominent psychological factor, anxiety substantially challenges EFL students' speaking performance. The diverse manifestations and triggers of anxiety, ranging from fear of making mistakes to apprehensions about judgment from peers or instructors, highlight the need for tailored interventions to address

anxiety-related issues in language learning contexts. Creating a supportive, low-anxiety classroom environment is paramount in facilitating students' progress in spoken English.

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation was identified as a driving force behind EFL students' speaking proficiency. Those intrinsically motivated and driven by personal interest and curiosity demonstrated higher fluency and accuracy in spoken English. This underscores the importance of fostering intrinsic motivation by making language learning engaging and personally meaningful to students.

Furthermore, intercultural competence emerged as a critical factor in globalized communication. EFL students with intercultural competence are better equipped to navigate cross-cultural interactions, which are increasingly common in our interconnected world. Developing intercultural competence should be integrated into language instruction to prepare students for effective communication in diverse cultural contexts.

In light of these findings, educators and language instructors have a crucial role in addressing these psychological factors in EFL teaching. Creating a supportive and motivating learning environment, boosting self-esteem and self-efficacy, and offering strategies to manage anxiety can significantly enhance students' speaking performance. Additionally, incorporating intercultural communication skills into the curriculum can better prepare EFL learners for real-world communication scenarios.

Recognizing the dynamic nature of these psychological factors and their potential changes over time is essential. Longitudinal studies and ongoing research will be valuable in refining our understanding of these factors and their evolving influence on EFL students' speaking performance. Ultimately, a holistic approach that considers the psychological well-being of learners alongside language proficiency is essential in nurturing confident, effective, and culturally competent EFL speakers.

Recommendations

Psychological features can significantly impact English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' speech implementation. Realizing and addressing these factors can be crucial for both educators and students. Here are some recommendations for addressing psychological factors that affect EFL students' speaking performance:

- **Build Confidence:** Encourage a supportive and non-judgmental classroom environment where students feel safe to express themselves. Praise and positive reinforcement can boost students' confidence. Acknowledge their progress and effort in speaking.
- **Reduce Anxiety:** Address speaking anxiety through relaxation techniques, deep breathing exercises, and mindfulness practices. Gradually increase the complexity of speaking tasks to help students become more comfortable over time.

- **Set Realistic Expectations:** Help students understand that making mistakes is a natural part of language learning. Encourage them to view errors as opportunities for improvement.
- **Avoid overloading students with complex vocabulary and grammar before they have mastered the basics.**
- **Promote Motivation:** Connect language learning to students' interests and goals. Show them the practical benefits of improving their speaking skills. Use engaging and relevant materials to maintain their interest and motivation.
- **Effective Feedback:** Provide positive feedback that focuses on specific areas for improvement rather than simply pointing out mistakes. Encourage self-assessment and self-correction, empowering students to take control of their learning.
- **Cultural Sensitivity:** Be aware of the cultural backgrounds of your students. Respect their cultural norms and values related to communication. Help students understand cultural differences in communication styles to avoid misunderstandings.
- **Peer Interaction:** Encourage students to practice speaking with their peers. Group discussions, debates, and collaborative projects can help them gain confidence and improve their fluency.
- **Pairing students with similar proficiency levels can reduce anxiety about speaking in front of more advanced speakers.**
- **Goal Setting:** Work with students to set specific, achievable speaking goals. Breaking down language learning into smaller, manageable steps can make the process less daunting. Celebrate their achievements as they reach milestones on their language-learning journey.
- **Mindset:** Foster a growth mindset by emphasizing that language proficiency is not fixed and improvement is possible with effort and persistence. Encourage students to view challenges as opportunities to learn and grow.
- **Seek Professional Help:** Consider involving a counsellor or therapist specializing in language learning issues for students with severe anxiety or psychological barriers to speaking.
- **Ensure that your institution has resources to support students' mental well-being.**
- **Incorporate Technology:** Use language learning apps, online resources, and virtual reality tools to create interactive and engaging speaking practice opportunities. These technologies can also offer students a degree of anonymity, reducing anxiety.
- **Regular Assessment:** Implement regular speaking assessments that are fair and transparent. Communicate assessment criteria to students so they know what to expect. Use formative assessment techniques to track their progress and offer guidance.

By addressing these psychological factors, educators can create a more conducive environment for EFL students to improve their speaking skills and language proficiency.

References

- Adelaide.H. (1979). The Relationship Between Self-Esteem and the Oral Production of a Second Language. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Michigan.
- Ali. D & Savas. Y (2013). Pre-Service English Teachers' Beliefs on Speaking Skill Based on Motivational Orientations. English Language Teaching Vol 6 No. 7. ISSN 1916-4742. Published by Canadian Center of Science and Education.
- Baker. J,`& Westrup. H.(2003)`Essential Speaking Skill. Voluntary Service Overseas.
- Creswell, John W. (2012). Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research (4th ed.). Nebraska: Pearson Education.
- Elhadi. M. (2015). Psychological Factors Affecting Sudanese EFL Learners' Oral Performance. A Case Study of Sudan University of Science and Technology. A thesis of M.A. Degree. Sudan University of Science and Technology
- Horwitz, E.K.,(2001) "Language Anxiety and Achievement", Annual Review of Applied Linguistics 21, 112-26.
- Latha, B. Madhavi. (2012). Teaching English as a Second Language: Factors Affecting Learning Speaking Skills. International Journal of Engineering Research & Technology (IJERT) Vol. 1 Issue 7. ISSN: 2278-0181.
- MacIntyre, P. D., and Gardner, R. C. (1991) "Methods and results in the study of anxiety and language learning: A review of the literature", Language Learning, 41(1), 85-117.
- Punch. K. F. (2009). Introduction to Research Methods in Education. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE
- Richards. J. C. (2008). Teaching Listening and Speaking. From Theory to Practice. New York: Cambridge University Press
- Treasure. J, How to Be Heard: Secrets for Powerful Speaking and Listening (2017). Mango Publishing Group. USA
- Zaremba, A. J. (2006). Speaking Professionally. Thompson South-Western.
- Ziaurahman. Z & Norrihan.S. (2015). EFL Learners' Levels of Classroom Performance Anxieties and Their Causes in Classroom Speaking Activities in Afganistan. International Journal of English and Education Vol. 2 Issue 1. ISSN: 2278-4012.