

## ESP TEACHERS AND LEARNER'S VIEWS ABOUT SPEAKING DIFFICULTIES: A VIEW THROUGH A CRITICAL LENS

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**Abstract.** *It seems axiomatic that EFL learners at schools or universities have major challenges to overcome. Over the years, there has been a specific focus on the teaching of students the academic literacy skills which they would need in their higher education. Though the rush of these studies surrounding the literacy skills have been very helpful to teachers, few have looked beyond the reading and writing skills to the issues of concern to academic speaking and listening skills and their possible difficulties for students and teachers. In addition, there has been few if any research to look at both ESP and general English (GE) language teacher's thoughts about the speaking difficulties and course requirements. In the present study, there was also an attempt to compare the difficulty perceptions of teachers and learners with regard to the speaking skill in the classroom. The study also aimed at providing suggestions for equipping learners to better cope with the communication problems. Differences between ESP and GE teacher's perceptions of speaking difficulties and those between teachers and learners were investigated using independent samples T-test. Differences were found only between the teachers and learners' perceptions; there were no differences between ESP and GE teachers' positions regarding the speaking skill. Pedagogical implications of the study are further discussed.*

**Key words:** *Speaking skill, ESP teachers, GE teachers, learners*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In every academic year, thousands of learners begin learning English or any other additional language as a means of pursuing their education. The majority of these learners are from countries in Asia. While second or foreign language learners are welcomed for their attempts to learn another language, it is recognized that in order for them to succeed in their academic study and for the language centers to continue to attract learners, the difficulties and problems facing language learners must be addressed.

Indeed, many language learners experience difficulties at the beginning stages, and they must adapt quickly to the learning context in order to succeed in their academic study. Of all the problems being notified, such as language shock, culture shock, lack of study skills and proficiency, and so forth (e.g., Marr, 2005; Sakthivel, 2003), language difficulties in the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing are the major and most urgent challenges encountered by the foreign language (FL) learners. These challenges that are faced by foreign language learners are also likely to occur with second language (SL) learners too. The four skills of language would be also essential in the social and academic life of international learners (e.g., Robertson, Line, Jones, & Thomas, 2000). This similarity in the major difficulties faced by both FL and SL learners

was clearly pinpointed by Jordan in 1977, employing a survey study to determine language problems of international learners in two British universities. The results of this survey showed that more than 70% of the informants marked the speaking and listening skills as the most bothersome skills. This finding was advocated by studies conducted over the next 30 years, which identified the enormous amount of difficulties experienced by learners in terms of the language skills (e.g., Bradley & Bradley, 1984; Bretag, Horrocks, & Smith, 2002; Hellsten & Prescott, 2004; Robertson et al., 2000; Sakthivel, 2003).

Considering the fact that this situation has been enduring to the present time, the question is raised about the inadequacy of the language institutions and universities. One solution is that language institutes and universities can resolve these language-related challenges by determining an appropriate language proficiency level for admission. But if language requirements are set below the standard scores by the institutes and universities, FL or SL learners would inevitably face problems comprehending the target language, taking part in free discussions, writing essays and articles, reading course books and designated papers, and interacting with lecturers, professors and peers. Moreover, these study problems often lead to criticisms of the education system, education culture, and instructional practices of the learners' institutes and universities in an attempt to investigate the possible underlying reasons (e.g., Hellsten & Prescott, 2004; Sawir, 2005; Wong, 2004).

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

EFL learners are frightened by the academic speaking tasks, including both formal presentation tasks and small- or large-group class discussions. The reason for this intimidation seems to result from the lack of sufficient linguistic competence or the differences between the native and the target culture with regard to the classroom discourse. Another reason for the occurrence of difficulties in the practice and involvement of speaking skill in EFL classrooms might be due to the lack of adequate speaking activities and tasks. Johns (1981) conducted a study in this regard and found that the reason for the popularity of the receptive skills (reading and listening) over the productive skills (speaking and writing) is that the activities used in ESL/EFL classes were not specific and practical enough to prepare students for their academic purposes.

The recent growing of attention paid to the aural/oral skills by scholars is evident in some of the surveys carried out. In an ethnographic research, Mason (1995) concluded that most of the university students agreed that listening/speaking skills are assuming much more significance and complexity than mere traditional note-taking and formal speaking skills. This attribution of importance to the aural skills often leads to unwanted anxiety and stress on the part of learners. Shomoossi and Kassaian (2009) investigated the anxiety of learners with regard to two major skills of listening and speaking. They also examined if the anxiety level of learners changed before and after the listening comprehension test. For this purpose, 74 freshmen students of English participated in the study. Three intact groups were selected in such a way as to implement different test conditions. The first group was administered the anxiety scale before the final exam and was in form of an oral interview. The second group was administered the questionnaire before the exam which was in the form of a listening comprehension test. The third group took the test after the final exam in form of a listening comprehension form. The comparison of the results showed that learners had a higher degree of anxiety in oral interview exam than in the listening comprehension test. But there were no differences found between the learners' degree of anxiety before and

after the test. The results of this study should be interpreted with caution since one of the important limitations of it was the use of anxiety questionnaire in the foreign language. It was observed that students had difficulty understanding the language of the questionnaire.

In another study carried out by Lucas, Miraflores, and Go (2011), the causes that might contribute to the anxiety of foreign language learners of English were evaluated. The study also examined the language strategies used by these types of learners to cope with their anxieties in learning the English language. 250 participants took part in the study. It should be mentioned that, communication anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, test anxiety, and English classroom anxiety were among the causes of language anxiety. Also, the strategies that students used to deal with the anxiety were the listening strategy, vocabulary strategy, speaking strategy, reading strategy, writing strategy, and the translation strategy. Results of analyses showed that students were anxious in learning the English language mostly with regard to test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation anxiety. Thus, they solicited different strategies to deal with the generated anxiety. For example, vocabulary strategy was significantly employed with coping in English class anxiety. Speaking and translation strategies were used with all learning strategies except for English class anxiety. Reading and writing strategy did not significantly increase with any of the coping strategies for anxiety. Listening and vocabulary strategies significantly predict coping in English class anxiety. However, listening strategy decreased coping in English class anxiety. All strategies combined significantly predict coping in English class anxiety.

In addition to the learners' beliefs and expectations, teachers' expectations and requirements for their students' oral skills vary across institution, class type, and academic discipline (Ferris & Tagg, 1996a). Teachers with crowded classes are likely to face several problems when teaching speaking tasks. These problems can include losing control of the classroom, the timing of speaking activities, choosing the right level of task difficulty, and ascertaining that the activities are attractive to the learners. Although the importance of the teachers' communicative skills in teaching a language seems evident, there has been little research studies on the nature of academic aural skills required by language teachers which are most problematic for FL and SL learners. These and other studies point to the undeniable importance of speaking abilities along with other three macro-skills of listening, reading, and writing. Consequently, in the present study the perception of ESP and general English (GE) language teachers of speaking challenges faced by learners are examined. In addition, the study aimed to investigate the differences between ESP and GE teachers in general and learners' perceptions of speaking difficulties. Thus, the study was guided by three research questions:

1. Is there any significant difference between the speaking difficulty perception of ESP and GE language teachers?
2. Is there any significant difference between the speaking difficulty perception of language teachers and learners?
3. What could university teachers do to better prepare their learners for the speaking tasks they will face in their college and university classes?

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1. Participants

The participants of this study were from different campuses in the University of Tehran who were accessed in a convenient and unobstructed way. The target participants

identified for investigation were 45 ESP teachers and 42 GE teachers. The ESP teachers included teachers who taught to a variety of education majors since the study did not intend to investigate the differences between different major teachers. For the purpose of the second research question, 70 language learners were included.

### 3.2. Instrument

The questionnaire survey developed by Ferris and Tagg (1996a) was used as the major instrument in the present study. The survey includes 6 sections. Section A is about demographic information, section B refers to specific course or student information, section C relates to the aural skills needed by students, section D is about students' difficulties in oral skills, section E is on the oral skills that students need to work on, section F includes summary comments and the final section, i.e., section G is about the assignments. In the current study, two forms of the same questionnaire were administered to teachers and learners, such that teachers were given the questionnaire written in the third person, whereas learners were given the questionnaire written in the first person.

### 3.3. Procedure

Data collection began in December 2013. The questionnaire by Ferris and Tagg (1996a) was administered to both teachers and learners. The results of the questionnaire were analyzed through descriptive and inferential statistics including the independent samples T-test using statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) version 20.

### 3.4. Results

The descriptive statistics for the differences in the perception of speaking difficulties among ESP teachers and GE teachers are reported in table 1.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for Perception of Speaking Difficulties among ESP and GE Teachers

|          |     | N  | Mean   | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|----------|-----|----|--------|----------------|-----------------|
| Teachers | ESP | 45 | 1.6439 | .78134         | .03356          |
|          | GE  | 42 | 1.6042 | .74158         | .03243          |

Table 2 Independent Samples T-test Results for Perception of Speaking Difficulties among ESP and GE Teachers

|          |                             | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances |      | t-test for Equality of Means |     |                 |                 |                       |   |       |
|----------|-----------------------------|---|------|------------------------------|-----|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------------|---|-------|
|          |                             | F                                       | Sig. | t                            | df  | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference |       |
|          |                             |   |      |                              |     |                 |                 |                       | Lower                                     | Upper |
| Teachers | Equal variances assumed     | 3.45                                    | .06  | .85                          | 106 | .39             | 0.39            | .046                  | -.051                                     | .131  |
|          | Equal variances not assumed |   |      | .85                          | 106 | .39             | .039            | .046                  | -.051                                     | .131  |

The results show that the significance level of Levene's test is  $p = 0.064$ , which means that the variances for the two groups (ESP and GE) are the same. The results of T-test shows that there is not a significant difference in the perception of speaking difficulties by the teachers ( $t(1063) = 0.850, p = 0.396$ ). This means that both the ESP teachers and GE teachers had similar views towards the place of speaking skill in learning English as a foreign language.

In order to find an answer to the second research question of the present study, first the descriptive statistics have been conducted, results of which are reported in table 3.

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics for Perception of Speaking Difficulties among Teachers and Learners

|          |          | N  | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|----------|----------|----|------|----------------|-----------------|
| Speaking | Learners | 70 | 1.78 | .86            | .051            |
|          | Teachers | 87 | 1.64 | .73            | .044            |

Table 4 Independent Samples T-test Results for Perception of Speaking Difficulties among Teachers and Learners

|          |                             | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances |      | t-test for Equality of Means |      |                 |                 |                       |   |       |
|----------|-----------------------------|---|------|------------------------------|------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------------|---|-------|
|          |                             | F                                       | Sig. | t                            | df   | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference |       |
|          |                             |   |      |                              |      |                 |                 |                       | Lower                                     | Upper |
| Teachers | Equal variances assumed     | 18.70                                   | .000 | 2.02                         | 54   | .04             | 0.138           | .068                  | .004                                      | .273  |
|          | Equal variances not assumed |   |      | 2.02                         | 5.37 | .04             | .138            | .068                  | .004                                      | .273  |

The results show that the significance level of Levene's test is  $p = 0.000$ , which means that the variances for the two groups (teachers and learners) are *not* the same. The results of the t-test shows that there is a significant difference in the perception of speaking difficulties by teachers and learners ( $t(5.377) = 2.027, p = 0.043$ ). This means that the teacher and learner participants differed significantly in their perceptions of speaking difficulties. The exact item-based examination of these differences is presented in the table 5.

The learners' and teachers' responses to the 20 items in sections C and D were compared according to the mean scores. As is observed in the above table, there were differences and little agreement between the teachers and learners in terms of their patterns of responses to the items. The teachers ranked the speaking and pronunciation skills lower than learners. These differences can be ascribed to the participants' different perceptions and knowledge of the various items on the questionnaire. Teachers might not always be the best judges of the ways in which their learners are struggling. As an example, teachers may not reach to correct judgments about the learners' lecture notes based on the evaluation of only their examination performances. Rather, they should regularly gather and examine their learners' lecture notes. Moreover, the teachers might not be the most

appropriate source of information on the actual reasons their learners are struggling. And, in the same way, learners may not be the most accurate informants about what the teachers do require.

Table 5 Item-level Results for Differences among Teachers and Learners

| Item                                   | Subgroup Mean |          |
|--|---------------|----------|
|  | Learners      | Teachers |
| <b>Requirements</b>                    |               |          |
| Class participation                    | 2.80          | 3.06     |
| Small-group work                       | 3.9           | 3.5      |
| Group projects                         | 3.38          | 2.88     |
| Formal speeches                        | 3.64          | 3.11     |
| Student-led discussions                | 3.57          | 3.65     |
| Class debates                          | 3.35          | 3.29     |
| Interview with native English speakers | 2.01          | 1.73     |
| Note-taking skills                     | 1.72          | 1.66     |
| In-class questions                     | 2.13          | 1.79     |
| Attendance at office hours             |               |          |
| <b>Problem areas</b>                   |               |          |
| Class participation                    | 3.77          | 3.89     |
| Small-group work                       | 3.62          | 3.91     |
| Group projects                         | 3.76          | 3.94     |
| Formal speeches                        | 3.01          | 3.74     |
| Discussions leading                    | 3.02          | 3.83     |
| Debates                                | 3.7           | 3.76     |
| Interview with native English speakers | 3.60          | 3.97     |
| Note-taking                            | 2.97          | 2.75     |
| Questions asking                       | 2.66          | 2.30     |
| Office hours                           | 2.93          | 2.33     |

Note. Respondents rated the items in Parts C and D of the survey 1 (always), 2 (often), 3 (sometimes) or 4 (never).

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The present study aimed at the investigation of the speaking difficulties and problems from the perspective of EFL learners and teachers in Iran. The results showed that teachers and students had little agreement about the significance of the items of the questionnaire. According to Lumley and O'Sullivan (2005), many factors are in work that have the potential to influence the speaking success and ability of learners. They hypothesizes that "there may be effects on performance attributable to an interaction of variables such as the task topic, the gender of the person presenting the topic and the gender of the candidate" (p. 415). The results of the present research are in line with the suggestion of Lumley and O'Sullivan (2005). First, among learners of this study, it was found that the majority of learners agreed with the fact that the activities for speaking should be selected with adequate care, specially the group-based conduction of the tasks.

Cooperative learning as a sort of learner-centered discipline is assumed to carry certain advantages in the learning of different language skills, specially the speaking skill which requires active participation. One of the important areas which can be certainly prone to the definite advantages of the application of the cooperative learning principles is the speaking ability or oral proficiency. Next, the majority of learners of the study agreed that learning style of the individuals are also a determining issue since most of learners identified formal speeches as a problematic area. Obviously, the personality factors of the participants affect their performance in either negative or positive ways. For example, introverts are reluctant to take part in group discussions and formal activities and prefer to have their ideas individually, whereas extroverts are more likely to engage in classroom speaking activities more vigorously.

Another factor which was found to have a significant influence on the speaking skills of learners is the language knowledge of the students (identified as influential by most learners in section F of the questionnaire). There are two contradictory theories with this respect. Although the theories are stated originally for the reading comprehension skill, they can also be applied to the other skills in foreign language learning. One theory is the short circuit hypothesis which states that the language learner needs to first have a minimal language proficiency in the target language in order to be able to transfer the first language skills and strategies. In contrast to the short circuit hypothesis, the linguistic independence hypothesis argues that there is skill acquisition only one. It means that second language skill acquisition is not dependent on the first language proficiency. The fact that the learners of this study agreed that linguistic knowledge is an important factor in the speaking ability of the learners is more in line with the short circuit hypothesis than the linguistic independence theory. Language teachers of the present study also agreed with this fact. Overall, the findings of the present study show that for the learners to be successful in their speaking skill, a variety of factors should be considered including topic, linguistic knowledge, peer influence, personality factors, environment and so many other factors.

In addition to the above mentioned facts, the present study also revealed that the ESP teachers and GE teachers' perceptions of speaking difficulties were the same. In other words, they did not differ in their opinions about the factors that could influence their learners' speaking skills.

With regard to the second research question, the findings of the study showed that teachers had less agreement with most of the issues raised by the learners. The responses of the two groups of informants overlapped very little both in their responses to the 20 items in sections C and D of the questionnaire and in their ratings of the relative importance of the skills in section E.

## 5. LOOKING FORWARD

There are a variety of factors that teachers can take into account in order to remove some of the challenges that learners face when taking part in the speaking activities. First, teachers can create a comfortable classroom environment by strengthening the confidence of English language learners. In fact, students want to be understood and accepted socially, but this can be difficult as they face the language barrier. Therefore, teachers should not try to correct the local errors of students when they struggle to get their meanings across. Instructors can also speak to the students privately to eliminate any embarrassment.

Students are able to assimilate the language in a more relaxed setting. Role-play situations are one of the most comfortable situations for learners to learn and to speak.

Materials developers can also include a part in the course book for the communication and speaking activities. These activities may be either those based on the other skills previously talked about, or might consist of a variety of tasks. With a little imagination, teachers can provide creative lessons that integrate conversation skills and tasks no matter what the content is and what level the class is. Through trial, error, and determination, many of the basic conversation games and activities that both ESP and GE teachers use can be adapted to fit the needs of content courses. Basically, it is a matter of adjusting content into tasks commonly used in conversation classes.

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