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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## Enhancing Speaking Proficiency for “Master Science” Students: Challenges and Strategies

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**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study is to examine the speaking needs and effective learning strategies of first-year Master's students at the Faculty of Science, Dhar El-Mahraz, Fez, Morocco. With a lack of focus on speaking skills in the Moroccan formal education system, the research goal is to address the gap in oral vocabulary proficiency. 30 students participated in the experimental study. The objectives of the paper were to: (1) identify the speaking needs of the Master's students, (2) determine the effectiveness of current learning strategies for improving oral vocabulary use and pronunciation, and (3) suggest strategies for improving intercultural competence. To achieve these objectives, research questions were formulated, and a methodology was designed to collect and analyze data from the participants. The findings of the study revealed that speaking skills are often neglected in Moroccan formal education, especially in the teaching and learning process leading to difficulties in using relevant oral vocabulary and accurate pronunciation. The results suggest the need for specific communication courses to adopt amplified strategies and improve students' ability to communicate effectively and proficiently with English speakers from different cultures. Based on these findings, some strategies will be suggested for teachers in similar contexts to implement for successful results and enhance students' speaking competencies.

**KEYWORDS**

Speaking Skills, Learning Strategies, Competency, Pronunciation, ESP Science Students

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### 1. Introduction

English has become a global language, the language of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that is widely spoken and understood around the world. In tertiary education, it is often used as a language of instruction and communication. Thus, "English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI)" is a term that has been around for several decades and used by various scholars and educators in different contexts for non-English speaking countries. This is proven in many academic fields and disciplines, particularly in science and technology, where there is a strong international presence and a significant amount of research and publications conducted in English. In addition, many universities and educational institutions around the world require a high level of English language proficiency as a prerequisite for admission. This has led to an increased emphasis on the teaching and learning of English in order to adapt and respond to the ever-changing demands of the current society.

In light of this, it is no longer sufficient for individuals to simply possess the ability to communicate in English, as fluency and accuracy in speaking and listening have become essential tools for assessment in the selection process for various employment opportunities, both within and outside of one's country of origin. The development of language proficiency is now considered a prerequisite in the modern workforce. Therefore, it is imperative that students enhance their speaking and listening skills in order to improve their employability in the context of globalization. To achieve this, both teachers and students of ESP must adopt effective strategies for language learning. Actually, strategies are gears for self-directed involvement that are crucial for the development of communicative ability. This study focuses on the examination of learning strategies that aid students in effectively

completing tasks in the classroom. To evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies, a sample of 30 students from (SMBA) University located in Fez, Morocco, was utilized in an experimental study.

In today's interconnected world, proficiency in English has become a crucial aspect of the job selection process and a necessary skill for both personal and professional growth and advancement. Yet, despite its importance, speaking is often a neglected skill in formal education settings, particularly for students who have limited exposure to the language. With this in mind, and in order to address this issue, it is essential for language teachers, particularly those specializing in English for Specific Purposes (ESP), to implement strategies that focus on developing and improving students' speaking skills. This includes providing ample opportunities for practice, fostering active participation in class discussions, and offering feedback on pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar usage. By doing so, students will be better equipped to express themselves clearly, participate actively in conversations and discussions, and improve their overall language proficiency. Additionally, with the growing demand for English proficiency, it is crucial for educators to prioritize the teaching of oral language skills to meet the expectations of the corporate world. Alongside traditional classroom instruction, it is important for students to develop additional skills to prepare for the challenges they may face in their future careers. Unfortunately, in the Moroccan educational curricula, many students are not exposed to language skills during their schooling, with the majority of their academic focus being on subjects such as science, physics, chemistry and mathematics. Consequently, teaching English to these students is often a challenging task. To overcome this hurdle, the key is to teach language learning strategies, which play a crucial role in helping students acquire the language with ease.

### **1.1 Objectives of the study**

The main objectives of the study are: firstly, to identify the speaking needs of first-year Master's students at the Faculty of Science in Dhar El-Mahraz, Fez, Morocco; secondly, to highlight and determine the effectiveness of current learning/teaching speaking strategies used to alleviate these difficulties and to provide recommendations for boosting the teaching-learning process. In addition, the study proposes functional strategies that can be implemented by other ESP teachers in similar contexts.

### **1.2 Research questions**

Based on the objectives mentioned above, the following research questions were formulated:

- 1-What are the challenges that tertiary education teachers encounter in teaching speaking skills?
- 2-What strategies do teachers apply to make the teaching of speaking effective and constructive?

## **2. Review of the literature**

Speaking is a fundamental skill in second language acquisition, as it allows learners to express their thoughts and ideas and to participate in conversations and discussions. Research has shown that speaking is often a neglected skill in formal education contexts, with a focus on reading and writing instead. This is particularly true for students who have limited exposure to the language, making it a challenging task for educators to teach.

One study by Macaro (2007) found that providing ample opportunities for practice, encouraging active participation in class discussions, and providing feedback on pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar usage were effective strategies for improving students' speaking skills. Additionally, the study found that incorporating task-based language teaching and using authentic materials can also enhance students' speaking abilities.

Another study by Yildirim and Simsek (2013) examined the use of strategy instruction in improving speaking skills and found that teaching learning strategies can lead to significant improvement in the speaking proficiency of students. The study suggests that learners who are taught strategies are more likely to be successful in their language learning.

Furthermore, research has shown that the use of technology, such as computer-assisted language learning (CALL), can also have a positive impact on students' speaking abilities. For instance, studies by Lee and Huang (2018) and Suwantarathip and Wichadee (2020) found that using CALL in language classrooms can improve students' speaking fluency and accuracy.

Other studies have also emphasized the importance of using communicative activities, providing corrective feedback, and using authentic materials in developing students' speaking skills. For example, a study by Mousavi and Zabihi (2021) found that using authentic materials, such as TV programs and films, can significantly improve Iranian EFL learners' speaking proficiency.

To conclude, it is crucial for language teachers to implement effective strategies in order to support students in their language acquisition journey. Providing ample opportunities for practice, encouraging active participation, providing feedback, and using

authentic materials are effective strategies for improving students' speaking skills. Additionally, the use of technology and teaching/learning strategies can also enhance students' speaking proficiency.

### **3. Methodology**

The present study aims to fill a gap in the literature by examining the challenges that teachers encounter in teaching speaking skills to a diverse group of students in a classroom setting. The study also investigates the strategies that teachers use to overcome these challenges and create a more constructive teaching-learning environment.

This research is important as it will provide insights into how teachers can effectively teach speaking skills to a diverse group of students, which is crucial for the success of English language learners in a classroom setting. The study will also contribute to the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) by shedding light on the specific challenges and strategies for teaching speaking skills in this context.

It is worth noting that, depending on the context, the teacher should adapt the methodology to the students' needs, the curriculum, and the resources available. Moreover, it's important to evaluate the results and make adjustments if necessary. To achieve an eventual result, the study likely involves a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to gather data and evaluate the effectiveness of the learning strategies.

### **4. Data Analysis**

The analysis of the data collected during the study is divided into three parts. The first part focuses on the students' perception of their speaking skills and their prior experience studying speaking. This includes an examination of their self-reported level of proficiency, their confidence in speaking, and any previous language learning experiences they have had.

The second part of the analysis focuses on identifying the specific difficulties that the students encountered when speaking. This may include difficulties with vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and fluency.

The final part of the analysis focuses on understanding the specific needs of the students when it comes to speaking. This may include a need for more opportunities to practice speaking, specific feedback on their language use, or strategies to improve their confidence and fluency.

Through this multi-faceted analysis, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the students' speaking abilities, difficulties, and needs and to use this information to inform the development of effective teaching/learning strategies.

### **5. Results and Discussion.**

The study, conducted at Dhar El-Mahraz University in Fès, aimed to assess the English language proficiency of first-year Master's students with diverse backgrounds. A diagnostic test was administered to 20 students from various Master's programs, which required them to give oral presentations on topics of their choice, such as education, environment, science and technology, tradition, or politics, within 15 minutes of preparation time.

Topics	Very difficult	Difficult	Easy	Very easy
Sentence-structure	73%	30%	5%	0%
Grammar & Vocabulary	60%	30%	7%	2%
Organizing ideas	50%	20%	4%	0%
Convey a message	55%	35%	10%	0%

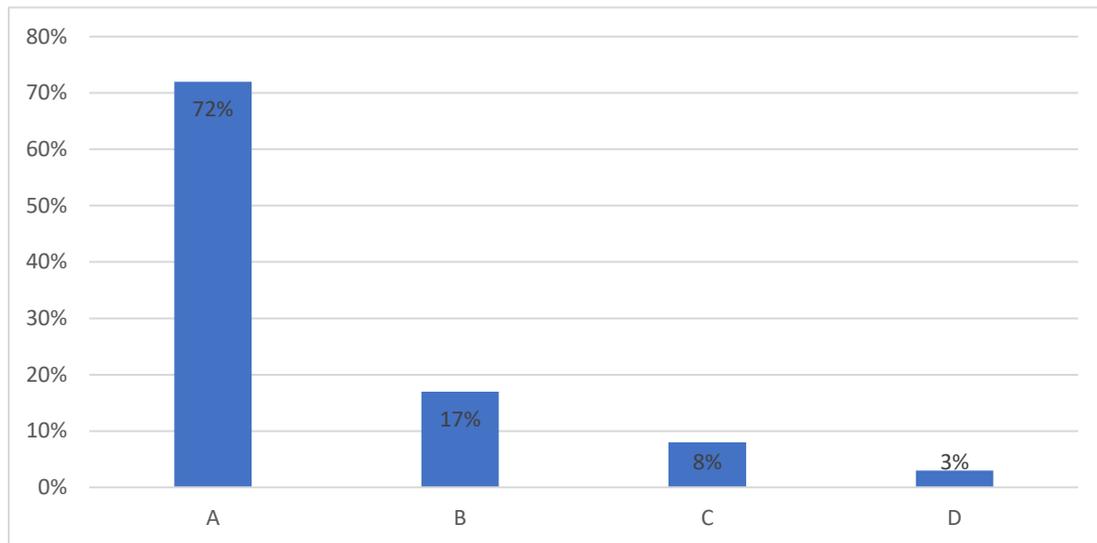
**Bar chart 1: Difficulty of the speaking skill**

73% of the participants showed a high degree of difficulty as they considered speaking a “very difficult” skill, 30% perceived it as “difficult”, and only 5% viewed it as “easy”. However, none claimed it to be “very easy”.

The results indicated that most of the students had inadequate opportunities to develop their language skills during their schooling and limited opportunities to use the language both in and outside of the classroom. Additionally, the majority of the students struggled with oral communication, expressing opinions, raising discussions, or conveying messages to a satisfactory extent.

It is important to note that listening and speaking are interconnected. Effective participation in conversation requires the ability to listen and comprehend speech. As a result, students' primary needs center on developing their listening and speaking abilities.

The chart below depicts the students under investigation's listening/speaking learning experiences during their middle and/or high school years.



**Chart 2: Students' experience in studying Speaking skills**

72% of the participants admitted that they had never been taught listening/speaking skills, and only 17% of the participants claimed that they had studied listening/speaking skills. 8% can speak and understand a conversation, and 3% are fluent in both listening and speaking.

### **5.1. Findings**

The findings of the study indicate that of the 20 students selected for the diagnostic test, 15 were unable to complete the task. The observations revealed that these students had difficulties with finding context-specific vocabulary, connecting and organizing their ideas, and lacked confidence when speaking. Even when they had ideas and thoughts about a particular topic, they were unable to express them appropriately. These findings suggest that there is a need to provide support and strategies to help students improve their oral presentation and group discussion skills. The strategies offered to address these issues are described in the next section of the report.

#### **5.1.1. Assessment and Feedback**

All the respondents in the survey emphasized the difficulty of effectively communicating their ideas and delivering engaging speeches. They acknowledged that they often struggled to maintain a clear and concise topic for more than 5 minutes, frequently running out of the necessary vocabulary and appropriate expressions to fully convey their thoughts. This challenge appears to be a common obstacle for many students and highlights the importance of ongoing language learning and practice in order to improve verbal communication skills.

This suggests that the students may benefit from additional practice and instruction in oral communication skills, including expressing opinions, participating in discussions, and effectively conveying messages. This could include opportunities for group discussions and debates, presentations, and other interactive activities that require students to actively use and develop their oral communication skills. Additionally, providing feedback and coaching on specific areas for improvement can also be strategic in helping students to refine their oral communication skills.

#### **5.1.2. Challenges**

Teaching speaking to tertiary students of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) can be a challenging task for educators due to the diverse backgrounds and language proficiency levels of the students. Additionally, the specific language needs of the students'

field of study can also present challenges. However, there are also many prospects for successful teaching of speaking skills in this context.

According to Jafarpour (2015), "the main challenge in teaching speaking in ESP context is to meet the specific needs of the learners in terms of both language and content." 142, Al-Seghayer (2012) also notes that "the diversity of students' backgrounds, cultures, and language proficiency levels can pose a challenge for ESP teachers." 149-147. However, Al-Saleh (2015) suggests that "awareness of the students' needs and effective planning and implementation of speaking activities can overcome these challenges. 79

Li (2011) emphasizes the importance of providing opportunities for students to practice speaking in real-life situations, stating that "ESP speaking instruction should provide opportunities for learners to use the language in meaningful and authentic ways." 138 Tan (2008) also suggests incorporating authentic materials and tasks into speaking instruction, stating that "the use of authentic materials and tasks can create a more meaningful and engaging learning experience for ESP students." 106

In conclusion, teaching speaking to tertiary ESP students presents a range of challenges, including diversity in students' backgrounds and language proficiency levels and the specific language needs of the students' field of study. However, effective planning and implementation of speaking activities using authentic materials and tasks can provide opportunities for students to use the language in meaningful and authentic ways, thereby overcoming these challenges.

## **5.2. Learning Strategies**

The students interviewed agreed that speaking in a diverse class can be challenging, as it is seen as a major obstacle to achieving successful learning outcomes. To effectively teach speaking as a skill, strategies are needed to address these challenges. ESP teachers have implemented various strategies to accommodate the diverse abilities of their students. Analysis of the data revealed the main approaches that can be used to enhance students' speaking skills. Some of these include:

### **5.2.1. Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT):**

TBLT is a communicative approach to language teaching that focuses on providing learners with authentic, real-life tasks that they can engage in. By engaging in these tasks, learners can practice their speaking skills in a natural and meaningful way.

One of the key advantages of TBLT is that it provides learners with opportunities to use language in real-life situations and contexts. This means that learners can develop the skills they need to communicate effectively in the target language, including fluency and accuracy. Tasks in TBLT may include activities such as role-plays, debates, and problem-solving activities.

TBLT also places a strong emphasis on collaboration and interaction between learners. By working together to complete tasks, learners can practice their speaking skills in a supportive and collaborative environment. This can also help them develop their confidence and fluency in the target language, as well as their ability to interact effectively with others.

Another advantage of TBLT is that it is highly adaptable to learners' needs and interests. Teachers can tailor tasks to the needs and interests of their learners, which can help to keep learners motivated and engaged in the learning process.

All in all, TBLT is an effective approach to language teaching that can help learners to develop their speaking skills in a natural and meaningful way. By providing learners with authentic, communicative tasks that they can engage in, TBLT allows them to practice their speaking skills in real-life situations and contexts, leading to more natural and fluent speech.

### **5.2.2. Communicative activities:**

Communicative activities such as role-plays, debates, and discussions are widely used in language teaching to provide learners with opportunities to practice and develop their speaking skills. These activities are designed to simulate real-life communication situations, allowing learners to interact with each other in the target language.

One significant benefit of communicative activities is that they create a safe and supportive environment for learners to express their thoughts and ideas. This environment encourages learners to experiment with the language, take risks, and ultimately become more confident and effective communicators.

Through role-plays, learners can practice using specific vocabulary and expressions in context. Debates provide opportunities for learners to express their opinions and argue their points of view in a structured way, while discussions allow for more informal conversation and exchange of ideas.

Overall, the use of communicative activities in language teaching can help learners to become more proficient in speaking the target language. By creating a safe and supportive environment for learners to practice, teachers can help to improve their students' confidence and ability to communicate effectively.

### **5.2.3. Corrective feedback**

Corrective feedback is an essential component of language teaching, particularly when it comes to speaking skills. Providing feedback on a student's pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar usage can help to identify areas for improvement and ultimately improve their speaking skills.

Corrective feedback can take various forms, including verbal feedback, written feedback, or technology-based feedback. Verbal feedback involves the teacher providing feedback to the student through direct correction or by highlighting areas that need improvement. Written feedback is a written comment on a student's work, providing suggestions on how to improve their language usage.

Technology can also be a useful tool in providing corrective feedback. For example, speech recognition software can help students to identify pronunciation errors and receive instant feedback on their speech. This technology can be particularly useful for learners who do not have access to a native speaker for practice.

It is important to note that feedback should be provided in a constructive and supportive manner. Teachers should highlight what the student is doing well while also identifying areas for improvement. Additionally, feedback should be targeted towards specific areas that the student needs to work on rather than overwhelming them with too much feedback at once.

Overall, providing corrective feedback to students can be a valuable tool in improving their speaking skills. Through various methods, such as verbal and written feedback or technology, teachers can help their students to identify areas for improvement and become more confident and effective speakers in the target language.

### **5.2.4. Authentic Materials:**

Authentic materials, such as news articles, audio recordings, and videos, can be a powerful tool in language teaching, especially for improving speaking skills. These materials provide learners with opportunities to encounter real-life language usage and help them develop their speaking skills by providing them with examples of natural speech.

Authentic materials can be particularly effective in exposing learners to the nuances of the target language, including idioms, slang, and cultural references. By using authentic materials in the classroom, learners can develop their ability to communicate in real-life situations and become more confident in their speaking abilities.

News articles, for example, can help learners to develop their vocabulary, comprehension, and critical thinking skills. Audio recordings and videos can also provide learners with exposure to different accents and speaking styles, helping to improve their listening and speaking skills.

It's worth noting that using authentic materials in the classroom requires careful selection and adaptation to the level and needs of the learners. Teachers should ensure that the materials are appropriate for the learners' level of proficiency and that they are presented in a way that supports learners' engagement and understanding.

In summary, the use of authentic materials in language teaching can expose learners to real-life language usage, help them develop their speaking skills, and improve their confidence and ability to communicate effectively in the target language. Teachers who incorporate authentic materials into their lessons can provide their students with valuable opportunities for exposure to the language in context.

### **5.2.5. Technology-Assisted Language Learning (TALL):**

Technology-Assisted Language Learning (TALL) is becoming increasingly popular in language teaching, and it can be a highly effective tool for enhancing students' speaking skills. One of the key benefits of TALL is that it provides students with opportunities to practice their speaking in a safe and supportive environment.

Speech recognition software is one of the most popular TALL tools used to improve speaking skills. This software can analyze a student's pronunciation and provide feedback on areas that need improvement. This can help learners to identify specific pronunciation errors and work on correcting them, leading to improved accuracy and confidence in speaking.

Interactive activities are another way that TALL can be used to enhance speaking skills. These activities can be designed to provide learners with opportunities to practice speaking in a variety of contexts, such as role-plays or simulated conversations. By participating in these activities, learners can develop their fluency, learn new vocabulary, and improve their ability to communicate effectively in the target language.

It's important to note that while TALL can be an effective tool for improving speaking skills, it should not replace face-to-face interaction between learners and teachers. Instead, TALL should be used as a complementary tool to traditional classroom teaching.

In conclusion, TALL can be a valuable tool for language teachers seeking to enhance their students' speaking skills. By providing opportunities for students to practice their pronunciation and fluency through speech recognition software and interactive activities, TALL can help learners to become more confident and effective speakers in the target language.

### ***5.2.6. Strategy Instruction:***

Strategy instruction is an essential component of language learning, and it can be particularly effective in improving learners' speaking skills. By teaching and encouraging learners to use language learning strategies, such as monitoring their own speech, self-correcting, and seeking feedback, language teachers can help learners to become more effective and efficient in their speaking.

One of the most important strategies for improving speaking skills is self-monitoring. Learners who are able to monitor their own speech are better able to identify areas of weakness and work on correcting them. Self-monitoring can be encouraged by providing learners with clear criteria for assessing their own speaking, such as accuracy, fluency, and appropriacy.

Another important strategy for improving speaking skills is self-correction. Learners who are able to recognize their own errors and correct them are more likely to develop greater accuracy and fluency in their speaking. Teachers can encourage self-correction by providing learners with feedback on their speaking and encouraging them to review and correct their own errors.

Seeking feedback is another key strategy for improving speaking skills. Learners who are able to seek feedback from their peers and teachers are more likely to identify areas of weakness and work on improving them. Teachers can encourage feedback by providing learners with opportunities to engage in pair and group activities, such as role-plays and debates.

In summary, strategy instruction is an important component of language teaching, and it can be highly effective in improving learners' speaking skills. By teaching learners to use language learning strategies such as self-monitoring, self-correction, and seeking feedback, language teachers can help learners to become more effective and efficient in their speaking.

## ***5.3. Theory vs. Practice***

### ***5.3.1. Team Work***

Group work is an effective strategy in speaking classes as it allows students to collaborate and practice the language in a supportive environment. It also enables teachers to provide immediate feedback to each group, encouraging them to improve their language skills. Examples of group work activities include writing and presenting paragraphs on assigned topics and discussing the validity of each other's work. Overall, group work is a convenient method for promoting language practice and development in the classroom.

### ***5.3.2. Lesson Planning***

Lesson planning is an important aspect of teaching speaking as it ensures that content, resources and assessment are aligned with the objectives and outcomes of the lesson. Effective lesson planning takes into account the level of the students and designs tasks to suit the different levels of the class. The teacher's aim is to optimise learning and make the most of class time by creating a well-structured and engaging lesson. This can be achieved by taking into account factors such as students' needs, interests and learning styles, as well as the resources available. Overall, careful lesson planning is essential to the success of the class.

### ***5.3.3. The task-based approach***

Another strategy that can improve results is the task-based approach. It is a method of language teaching that focuses on real-world tasks and activities to develop language proficiency. It is designed to engage students and make them approach language learning as a concrete test of the skills they need to practice. The approach centers around a main task and does not prescribe specific language for students to use, allowing them to use the language they know and encouraging them to communicate effectively. This approach is believed to be more effective than traditional methods that focus on grammar rules and memorization.

## 6. Discussion and recommendations

The study found that having a diverse range of abilities within the same class is not beneficial for effective learning and teaching. Respondents reported that it leads to a number of challenges for both teachers and students. The learners do not receive enough individual attention, and the teacher is unable to interact with all students, only those at an advanced level. This makes it difficult for teachers to conduct a needs analysis for all students and create appropriate teaching and learning styles. Additionally, the students' learning capacity is challenged by the need for close attention, direct instruction, individual instruction time, and minimal distractions. These goals are difficult to achieve in a diverse classroom setting, making it difficult to achieve equity among learners. Classroom management also becomes a challenge in a diverse setting, limiting the availability of the teacher in the classroom.

A diverse classroom can lead to challenges for both teachers and students. As noted in the reference provided, Locastro (2001) suggests that diverse classrooms can lead to an anxious environment due to problems of non-comprehension among some students. The words of one of the interviewees highlight the difficulty teachers may have in providing the appropriate instruction to meet the diverse needs of students. In addition, the lack of motivation and involvement of students with diverse abilities can also contribute to difficulties in the classroom.

Adopting a strategy means pursuing a procedure or technique to achieve a given goal. According to Oxford (1990), language learning strategies are specific actions or techniques that learners use to make the learning process easier, faster, more enjoyable, self-directed, effective, and transferable to new situations. These strategies may include such things as goal setting, self-monitoring, and feedback seeking. Galal (1993) also emphasizes the importance of teachers and students being aware of the learning strategies that are applied in the classroom, as this can significantly improve the effectiveness of language learning. In addition, it is recommended that students learn the types of strategies used by their teachers in the classroom in order to improve their own language learning. It is important for teachers to know the different language learning strategies and apply them appropriately in the teaching process in order to support students in their language acquisition journey.

To reap an optimal performance, some ESP teachers suggested incorporating the strategy of "building a wall", which is an effective approach to helping students express their thoughts in an engaging and natural way. The goal of this strategy is to teach students how to construct their ideas using storytelling, anecdotes, and real-life situations. To achieve this, students are given a series of topics and asked to associate them with real-life scenarios that they know or have experienced. These scenarios can be related to happy feelings, sad feelings, memorable incidents, etc. The role of the teacher is to encourage students to express themselves on topics that are related to their personal lives, which stimulates a natural exchange of words. This means inviting students to connect these different moments and communicate them in an appropriate way.

An important aspect of this strategy is to help students place these ideas in the order of events that happened to them. This can be done by providing tips on how to open and close the topic, such as starting with an interesting hook or a personal story and ending with a reflection or a call to action. Additionally, students can be taught to use appropriate vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structures to effectively convey their ideas.

This strategy can be used in a variety of classroom settings, including conversation classes, speaking workshops, and oral presentations. It allows students to speak about their personal experiences, which can help to build their confidence and fluency, as well as to develop their storytelling abilities.

## 7. Conclusion and limitations

Teaching speaking to students of mixed ability in the same classroom can be a challenge for teachers and students. To meet this challenge, teachers can use interactive strategies such as group work, project-based teaching and task-based teaching. These strategies can help to actively involve students and motivate them to participate. In addition, peer monitoring and group oral monitoring can be used to provide constructive feedback to students within the classroom. This can help to create a more inclusive and engaging learning environment for all students.

This study is primarily a qualitative examination of the teaching of speaking in a specific university in Morocco, USMBA, Fez, and the results cannot be generalised to other contexts or courses. The results may also differ if different research methods were used or if students' perspectives were taken into account. The study suggests that further research is needed to validate the results and develop effective strategies for teaching speaking in higher education.

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